Examination Orientation and the Opportunity Structure in Chinese Education: Case Studies of Kunming High Schools

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Statement

I hereby declare that this dissertation has never previously been submitted for any degree, and is the result of my own original work. The thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the dissertation itself.

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20 November 2000
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Abstract

This dissertation examines the nature of education at the senior high school level in Kunming, China, through a participant observation study in four high schools. It discusses Ronald Dore’s theory of a “diploma disease” in the context of the four schools, and the variants which affect it at the level of participants. The dissertation illustrates that the “backwash effects” which are generated by the National University Entrance Examination are entrenched in the education system and have significant adverse effects on students and teachers. The academic and vocational streams of education are compared and contrasted as providing different paths through the opportunity structure and different outcomes for social mobility. The dissertation analyzes the selective and social distributive functions of senior high school education in Kunming, and suggests that informal methods outside of entrance examinations, such as the use of guanxi and monetary payments, are gaining influence in these realms. As these methods become more widely utilized in the face of increasing competition to enter university, expressions of discontent from those educational participants who are adversely affected are also becoming more apparent.
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Chapter One

Introduction: The State of Schools and the State of the Field

My parents paid a 2500 yuan one-off fee to get me into this school, plus at least 1200 yuan in tuition fees each year and other costs. They do this so I can study in this school, which is the best in Kunming and gets the most students into university. It is really important to get into university in China these days, or you won’t get a good job. China has too many people, so we must get the most advantages we can in order to be competitive. The cut-off mark on the Senior Secondary Entrance Examination for this school is so high [around 700 out of 795]. My mark was not far below this, so I was allowed to enrol providing my parents paid the extra money. I am not a bad student, so I shouldn’t have to go to a low quality school. On the other hand, some poor students with very low marks are allowed to pay a lot of money to enter this school. Those of us who are here with good marks don’t think this is fair to us. After all, we worked hard to get where we are, and some of them are just here because of their parents’ desires. They don’t want to study and can cause problems in class.

- student at Elite Affiliated Middle School in Kunming city

It is well-known that Chinese education is dominated by entrance examinations. As the Chinese themselves are fond of saying, these entrance examinations have become the “baton” by which teachers and students are “conducted.” Ronald Dore’s theory of a “diploma disease” appears to provide a base from which Chinese education can be understood, and this dissertation addresses the question “to what extent is the diploma disease manifest in China today?” More specifically, this dissertation will examine the effects of this examination-orientation and the variants which affect it at the level of individual participants at four different senior high schools in Kunming, Yunnan Province.

In order to address these issues, during 1998 I became a teacher at three academic schools and an observer at a vocational school. By teaching in the schools and becoming actively involved in the lives of my students and the teachers who were my colleagues, I was able to become a participant-observer. The reason for choosing senior secondary schools as my focus of study was that entry to one is a significant milestone in a child's educational life. The senior high school that a student enters and how well the student performs in that school affects his or her future job opportunities and social mobility. It is at this stage of education that students are prepared for entry into tertiary education or the workforce, and the pressures on students and teachers to achieve their aims and goals are intensified. Senior high schools are the most hierarchically stratified and diverse level of education in China, at least officially (primary and junior high schools are meant to be “egalitarian”), and this too has an effect on the participants within the education system. Students in senior secondary school are also at a formative stage in their emotional, physical and mental development, which makes a study of their lives and perceptions all the more interesting and informative. As the government of China is engaged at the senior secondary stage with curriculum and examination reform, the senior secondary school is, finally, the locus at which to gauge perceptions, reactions, and implications of such reforms.

The quotation above from a student whom I taught in 1998 illustrates that while entrance examinations are the official way by which students are selected and distributed within the education system in China, there is also a realm of informal behaviour which circumvents the official process and produces both desired and undesired effects for educational participants and the education system. This dissertation addresses the extent to which such informal practices have an impact upon
the links between education and the opportunity structure in urban China. The reactions of educational participants towards some of these informal practices suggest that they have the capacity to create instability and unrest, which could have significant effects on the relationship between society and authority.

Academic education is not the only education stream in China today. A variety of vocational education options have been promoted as an alternative to attaining academic-stream credentials. Across China, vocational education suffers from a number of problems which alter the way it is perceived and accepted by Chinese high school students and their families. For students in Kunming schools, these perceptions also vary according to the nature of the job opportunity structure within the province, their own family background and their academic abilities.

The Chinese government, and Chinese educators, are well aware of the variety of problems facing the education system today, and have proposed and implemented a number of reforms in an effort to counter the negative effects. The most significant of these are the move towards “quality education” and changes to the National University Entrance Examination system. This dissertation will examine the potential of these reforms to facilitate change and to rectify the perceived problems.
1.1 The Diploma Disease and China

Ronald Dore’s thesis of a “diploma disease” provides an apt framework through which to come to terms with what is occurring in China’s urban high schools. Dore’s main thesis is that problems originating in Western education systems became exacerbated when developing countries tried to adapt Western educational models to their own circumstances. Dore discusses the nature of the diploma disease with regard to a number of countries, including China. Development in poor countries, he states, was seen to be a matter of building and then expanding a ‘modern sector’. A ‘modern sector’ is essentially industrialized, with factories, government offices, hospitals, financial institutions and other elements of infrastructure that the ‘traditional sector’ lacks.

Secondary schools and universities were established to run as an ‘immigration service’ for the modern sector bridgehead: “They decided who was to be let into the modern sector bridgehead and provided the necessary orientation for a productive life within it.”

Dore’s work centres on the premise that education in many countries has become the key to upward social mobility and the stepping stone into desirable jobs offering attractive returns such as high salaries, social status and other benefits. He notes that as more people become educated to a certain level, the more competition there is to get the kinds of jobs which have been associated with that level of qualification. The pressure to progress higher up the education ladder is thus intensified.

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Even success in getting enrolled at higher levels of the school system does not guarantee a modern sector job, Dore observes. The ‘educated unemployed’ refers to those who have attained the right ‘visa’ to enter the modern sector, but are unable to find employment in it. This leads to ‘qualification escalation’. If a junior secondary certificate no longer gets a person a job, then that person will press on to get a senior secondary qualification, and if that still does not work, goes on to university. The assumption is that the higher the educational qualification one gets, the better one’s chances of getting some kind of good job. Employers contribute to this effect, for as the numbers of graduates at a certain level grows, some of those graduates decide that a job at a level previously occupied by a lower-level graduate is better than no job at all. Faced with this increasingly educated pool of candidates, employers use educational qualifications to determine who gets the job. A job that previously required a junior school certificate might then become one requiring a senior school certificate, and onwards until even a university bachelor’s degree becomes the requirement.\(^5\) The pressure to progress higher up the education ladder is intensified, and at the same time, pressure is put upon the government to expand the education sector to allow more children to compete to get higher up the ladder. Expectations are almost always greater than outcomes. Dore notes that it takes time for people to realize that because a certain level of schooling secured a certain job five years ago, “that is no good reason for expecting it to do so now.”\(^6\) Even if this reality is appreciated, there is a sense of having a \textit{right} to a job within the system, which leads to potential frustration and unrest among graduating students who see unemployment as all they have to look forward to.\(^7\)

\(^5\) \textit{Ibid}, pp. 5-6.
\(^6\) \textit{Ibid}, p. 7.
\(^7\) \textit{Ibid}, p. 7.
The post-compulsory education sector in developing countries, however, is neither developed enough nor large enough to accommodate the numbers of students vying for enrolment. As a result, many countries use entrance examinations as the means by which students are selected for successive levels of post-compulsory education. Students’ success or failure in these entrance examinations largely determines how they are distributed within the education system and opportunity structure. Entrance examinations are seen by governments as a meritocratic method of selection, as they theoretically allow the most knowledgeable, intelligent students needed for white collar jobs to progress higher up the educational ladder. This leads to what Dore describes as a “backwash effect”, where schooling becomes increasingly oriented towards preparing students to sit entrance examinations and enter successive levels of schooling. Education per se no longer engages students’, parents’ and teachers’ interest, nor the enhancement of their learning skills or development as human beings. Instead, energies get concentrated on the effort to attain an ever higher certification. Entrance examinations are used to select those who will progress to successive stages of education, and gradually all teaching and ‘learning’ become oriented to preparing for these examinations. Schools become “places where one gets certificates ... passports to such and such jobs, hurdles over which one leaps to go on to more schools for more certificates as passports to even better jobs.”

Dore states that countries which start their development later face a deeper and more serious backwash effect. The later development starts, he writes:

a) the more that jobs depend on qualifications,
b) the faster the rate of qualification inflation, and

c) the more that schooling equals exam-taking.\(^9\)

Dore outlines the reason for this tendency as being a need to catch up fast by importing knowledge and skills in formal educational packages, and, more importantly, the general tendency to import the latest technology (social as well as machine) from metropolitan models, which has included making use of educational certificates for job allocation.\(^10\) In countries where big organizations have dominated the industrialization/modernization process from the beginning and where small-scale entrepreneurs are lacking or discouraged, there is a sharper division between the traditional and modern sector, and the importance of educational qualifications is correspondingly greater.\(^11\) Finally, in some countries the informal sector (by which Dore mostly means small family businesses which operate to provide a variety of services to the community, such as roadside repairs) is small and insignificant and does not offer a route out of the traditional sector into the modern sector. This is because those in the informal sector are often there because they have failed to get jobs in the modern sector and have less chance of getting such jobs since others who are educationally better qualified get them.\(^12\)

In developing countries, with school enrolments growing faster than job opportunities, the greater becomes the need for credentials to secure a job, and the more the schools become the only major channel of upward mobility. Dore believes that the later a country’s development, the more entrenched the idea that the function of the state

\(^9\) Ibid., pp. 72-83.
\(^10\) Ibid., p. 72.
\(^11\) Ibid., p. 73.
\(^12\) Ibid., pp. 74-75.
is to provide for its citizens’ education. In late developing countries, dualism will be worse because the gap between the traditional and modern sectors in terms of income, power and prestige is wider, and the attractions (or necessity, if conditions in the traditional sector have worsened) of entering the modern sector are correspondingly great. The attractions of the modern sector are more likely to be widely propagated and known to all due to better means of communication. Access to the modern sector is seen not just as desirable but also as feasible because of the meritocratic ideal of equality of opportunity, which provides the means by which poor children can reach the top. The greater a country’s ‘sense of backwardness’, the greater the desire to catch up and the greater the emphasis placed on efficiency, leading to arguments for meritocracy as a means of mobilizing all available talent. Dore notes that the last four points combine to produce a greater intensity of popular demand for education, particularly at levels which are thought to produce valid job certificates. Despite the seeming pervasiveness of these factors in states’ development, Dore acknowledges a few variables which affect the role of qualifications. The first is that some governments, at least for a time, can resist popular demands to expand access to education beyond a certain level. The second variable is the degree and type of social stratification, and the third are cultural differences which may override the ‘late-development effect’ and can also affect the extent to which people begin to pursue qualifications in the modern sector.  

If the reason people attend school is the desire for certificates rather than knowledge, then evidently the schooling will increasingly equal exam-taking and credentialism. This leads to an increase in competition, with primary schools geared more and more towards preparing children to compete to enter secondary education, and

\[13 \text{Ibid, pp. 77-80.}\]
secondary schools similarly geared towards preparing children for entry into tertiary institutions. As the schools’ and teachers’ performance is measured by their proportion of ‘successful’ entrants to the next level, the more the teachers’ emphasis will be on teaching for the examination, which in turn reinforces the qualification-orientation, in a vicious cycle. Creativity, problem solving and encouraging a child’s own learning initiatives are blunted and overwhelmed by this backwash from the competition to qualify.\textsuperscript{14}

Dore’s thesis of a diploma disease continues to raise considerable controversy. Some writers have taken issue with what they perceive to be Dore’s inveighing against \textit{all} examinations and his advocacy of a rather utopian system.\textsuperscript{15} Others have disliked the fact that Dore discussed the processes of the diploma disease as having worse consequences in late developing countries.\textsuperscript{16} They see an arrogant message - that those in developed countries have schools which truly educate people, while developing countries have inferior schools which only engage in the pursuit of qualifications, and at the end produce employees with a ritualistic attitude towards their work. Lee and Ninnes argue against what they perceive to be Dore’s insistence that education is a “good thing”, a vital element in the development of a country.\textsuperscript{17} They attempt to examine the diploma disease theory by way of four levels of analysis, concentrating primarily on Dore’s arguments about the purpose and form of education in a developing country. In the preface to the second edition of \textit{The Diploma Disease}, Dore addresses

\textsuperscript{14} \textit{Ibid}, p. 33.
and counters such criticisms, acknowledging that developments within countries and
globally since the book was written have altered some of the details of the theory, but he
notes that further research has also been done that supports some of the causal
connections first asserted.\textsuperscript{18}

No change within one country has been greater than that in China. Dore wrote his
chapter on China in the mid-1970s, when the excesses and failures of the Cultural
Revolution were little publicized and little known. At the time, many commentators,
Dore included, applauded China for its efforts to reduce inequalities, provide mass
education and break the links between academic achievement and careers. Other
developing countries were urged to follow China’s lead, as it was seen to have provided
an ‘antidote’ to the diploma disease. It was only later that Dore and others appreciated
some of the problems that had emerged in China’s education system, by which time
China’s educational policies had swung back towards the diploma disease path.

By interviewing a large number of Cultural Revolution generation teachers and
students who had migrated to Hong Kong, Jonathan Unger demonstrated that the
apparent success of the Cultural Revolution reforms in addressing the diploma disease
were illusory.\textsuperscript{19} In the early 1970s, Maoist reforms led to the collapse of real learning in
primary and secondary schools. The reforms reduced the academic part of the
curriculum and made practical training and labour compulsory prior to job allocation.

\textsuperscript{18} Ronald Dore, \textit{The Diploma Disease: Education, Qualification and Development} (London: George
Allen and Unwin, 1997), pp. vii-xxxii. Examples of further research can be seen in Keith Lewin, “The Sea
of Items Returns to China: backwash, selection and the diploma disease revisited”, \textit{Assessment in
in a More Affluent Japan”, \textit{Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy and Practice}, Vol. 4, No. 1
effects of ethnicity, political patronage and youth insurgency”, \textit{Assessment in Education: principles,

York: Columbia University Press, 1982).
Academic educational qualifications had no bearing on students’ job allocations. Discipline problems, truancy, boredom and a complete loss of interest were rife. Most students saw no use in studying, because they could see no connection between it and their futures, given that they would most likely end up in the countryside or a factory regardless of how they achieved at school. This gave rise to the phrase “studying is useless” (dúshū wúyòng 读书无用). Unger quotes one high school teacher from Yunnan province as saying that the final year of senior middle school was “the worst to try to control....When kids are imminently facing settlement in the countryside, sometimes on purpose they’ll sabotage the class period.”

Unger notes that there were also other disincentives to studying. When sent-down urban youths had the chance of being recalled to urban areas, there was great dissatisfaction, as they saw the children of officials receiving unfair priority due to their parents’ influence. With regard to the practice of recommendation to schools, particularly to university, objections were raised that cadres’ children exploited their good-class backgrounds and parental connections in order to gain preference in admission to the best schools, usurping the places which should have been reserved for children of workers and peasants. As a result, many students no longer considered further education as attainable. Faced with the choice between becoming a worker or a peasant, many students, even from intellectual class backgrounds, preferred to choose blue-collar jobs, because workers held a relatively high political status and enjoyed secure incomes. Some blue-collar jobs (such as those connected with modern mechanical crafts like radio-building) were seen as more interesting and became highly

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desirable. Students accordingly only had interest in skills which prepared them to enter these jobs. Agriculture and farmwork remained (as it had since Imperial times) at the bottom of this hierarchy, and this perception of peasant work was reinforced by the program of forced resettlement to the countryside.\textsuperscript{21} In the preface of a new edition of \textit{The Diploma Disease}, Dore acknowledges that the solution he perceived in the Chinese system at the time was not ever likely to work successfully, due primarily to the inability to find a “substitute for the personal ‘getting on’ ambition which had provided the traditional motivator for study”.\textsuperscript{22}

Chinese education is now dominated once again by entrance examinations and qualifications, and the education system as a whole exhibits many signs of the diploma disease and resultant backwash effects.

Reforms to the education system (which re-introduced entrance examinations) were inaugurated in 1978, and were consolidated and extended in a 1985 Chinese Communist Party (CCP) policy document. Keith Lewin and others explore the impact of the 1985 reforms, and discuss the problems and issues which they attempted to address at all levels of education.\textsuperscript{23} The authors make several points of relevance to this dissertation. They note that the urban one-child policy has focussed parental aspirations and resources on a single student, and hypothesized that this “may change the calculus of motivation and participation amongst school students and increase the importance attributed to selection.”\textsuperscript{24} Furthermore, the authors predicted that if further education is

\textsuperscript{21} \textit{Ibid}, pp. 181-185.
\textsuperscript{22} Ronald Dore, \textit{The Diploma Disease: Education, Qualification and Development} (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1997), pp. xvii, xviii.
\textsuperscript{24} \textit{Ibid}, p. 223.
advantageous to gaining access to desirable jobs, the widespread implementation of nine-year compulsory education would mean that an increasing proportion of students would wish to continue their schooling above that level, and the popularity of vocational schools which do not offer such desirable employment opportunities would decline.\textsuperscript{25}

This dissertation will illustrate the extent to which these hypotheses have been borne out in Kunming and their consequences.

In a more recent article which seeks to assess the validity of the diploma disease theory and reviews developments within China, Lewin asserts that educational qualifications have indeed “returned to their role as the ‘baton’ which conducts the education system”, and he details the diploma disease backwash effects which have resulted.\textsuperscript{26} At the same time, he notes that new developments have occurred to alter the nature of the competition, such as fee paying as a way of rationing access to desirable schools and the emergence of private schools which capitalize on “parents’ wishes to give their children a competitive edge in selection.”\textsuperscript{27}

The theory of the diploma disease is a macro-level theory. Manifestations of the diploma disease at a micro-level within regions, individual schools and among individual educational participants are not explored in Dore’s work, nor indeed in any of the works on education in China. There are, however, variations which have the potential to affect the manifestation of the diploma disease at the micro-level, and serve to alter the perceptions of educational participants towards the education system.

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid, pp. 220, 223.
\textsuperscript{26} Keith Lewin, \textit{op.cit.}, p. 137.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid, pp. 137-138.
The first variant which can alter the nature and extent of the diploma disease is that of region. It is a truism to state that China is not a homogeneous country, yet much of the literature on urban education in China has concentrated on the eastern, highly developed provinces and cities, even though generalizations about the rest of the country cannot be made exclusively from such evidence. The economy and social structure of these areas is quite different to that of inland urban areas which have not developed as quickly. This is important because the speed and extent to which the economy of individual cities has progressed changes the nature of the opportunity structure, and the perceptions of the need to gain various levels of qualification in order to maximize chances of social mobility within that opportunity structure. In areas of rapid growth, a greater number and variety of jobs are available, thus the opportunities for upward social mobility for those less well-educated are correspondingly great. The manifestation of the diploma disease in such an area may therefore be quite different from that in a city with fewer opportunities outside the education system for even getting a job, let alone one which provides the benefits sought. Writing in the latter part of the 1980s, Stig Thogersen foreshadowed that the path China was following of increasing openness to market forces might provide a solution to symptoms of the diploma disease, because it would increase the number of attractive career opportunities for students without university degrees. This dissertation will address Thogersen’s prediction in the light of changes within China during the 1990s, specifically with regard to student job aspirations in Kunming. It shows that these job aspirations contribute to students’ perceptions of the necessity of a “good” education, and the competition which exists as a result.

The perceptions of educational participants towards employment and education are also affected by the social and economic climate in which they live. Furthermore, factors such as the school attended, academic achievements, family background (including parents’ education and occupation) and gender also combine to influence the perceptions of educational participants and their subsequent decisions. An article by C. Montgomery Broaded and Liu Chongshun addresses the selective and social distributive functions of education in the light of students’ family background and gender.29

Through surveys, the two authors compared the educational and occupational aspirations and attainments of students from a variety of junior high schools in Wuhan who were about to enter senior high schools. The authors identified several factors which have the greatest influence on the distribution of junior high school graduates across the range of alternatives available at the senior high school level. The very nature of the senior secondary education system, with its two “streams” of schooling (academic and vocational), and the use of entrance examination scores as the primary selection mechanism were identified as external factors outside of the students’ control. Within that structural context, students make decisions based on a calculation of relative costs and benefits of pursuing academic or vocational education at the senior high school level.30 Influencing these decisions were the students’ academic achievements in junior high school, family background (including parents’ education and occupation), and gender.31

The diploma disease theory is largely a formal account of how the education system and its participants are affected by the competition to enter ever higher levels of

education in order to gain employment. The formal way of entering a senior high school or university in China is by passing a set of entrance examinations and being selected on the basis of marks received. The system is promoted as meritocratic, with the “best” students purportedly achieving the highest scores and reaping the greatest rewards in terms of entering university and being employed in desirable jobs.

Stig Thogersen details three key social functions of the education system: the qualifying function, the selective function and the social distributive function. The qualifying function serves to qualify students for “future participation in society in general and in production in particular.”³² Both ideological and technical qualifications have in the past been important – students were to be both ‘red’ and ‘expert’ (yòu hóng yòu zhűan) – though the emphasis placed on each has changed with the political tide. Technical qualifications include both general and specific skills that enable students to take part in social and political processes as well as perform their individual jobs. Ideological qualifications are defined as a set of moral and political norms and values which prepare students for citizenry in Chinese society. Formal ideological education is often in conflict with the ‘hidden curriculum’, which Thogersen defines as norms and values inherent in the education system, such as teaching methods, but which are not specified in official curriculum guidelines.³³ Educational policies have a direct impact on social distribution and can be used to generate changes in the balance between social classes. This is the social distributive function of education.

The education system also plays a major role in selecting students for different career paths, hence its selective function. As Thogersen acknowledges and I shall

³³ Ibid, p. 15.
illustrate, however, it is possible for some to get jobs through other means, but in general, access to education plays a crucial role in the selection of individuals for different jobs. The selection process is most prominent at the junior to senior high school level and between senior high and university. Thogersen points out that one important role of the selective function is to

provide justification for the social division of labour and the privileges enjoyed by those at the top of the job hierarchy. Those who are placed in subordinate jobs must be made to feel that they have had their chance and that their fate has been justly determined. Therefore, it is essential for the leadership to design a selection system which is legitimate in the eyes of the ordinary citizen.\(^{34}\)

This is a critical observation to which this study will return, as I will contend that the very legitimacy that the government has depended upon is now in question. In an article about the examination system in China, Thogersen discusses the issue of selection in more detail, and concludes that although there is much discontent with the negative effects of the examination system and many proposals for reform,

the social privileges connected with attaining a higher education are so important and university space so scare that any set of selection criteria, whether academic, moral or political, whether subjective or objective, will inevitably create an instrumental attitude towards education among students, teachers, parents and cadres, who will always tend to see selection as more important than learning.\(^{35}\)

This dissertation illustrates the validity of Thogersen’s conclusion, and shows that the effects of the ‘diploma disease’ will remain prominent in Chinese education as long as the links between education and social privilege remain.

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\(^{34}\) Ibid, p. 16.

The formal account of how an education system operates and the nature of its social functions, however, is not complete, for it does not take into consideration the fact that people do not always behave in a way that is commensurate either with what they say or with how the system officially works. Thus, there is an informal level of organization encompassing unofficial, and often unacknowledged behaviours. Informal behaviour covers a wide range of activities which range from the illegal through to the tacitly acknowledged but unspoken, and behaviours which are almost sub-conscious. Individuals’ behaviour follows on from their beliefs, and perceptions of and reactions to particular situations. In China, this informal realm of behaviour includes the use of *guanxi* (关系, loosely translated as “connections”) to circumvent formal procedures and secure a favourable outcome. This dissertation examines the way in which informal behaviour influences the links between education and opportunity and affects the nature of the diploma disease in Kunming.

The use of money and/or *guanxi* to get students into certain types of schools at the senior high school and tertiary levels is one of the distinguishing characteristics of the diploma disease backwash effect in China. The student account at the start of this chapter provides some idea of the way in which the use of both can affect which schools students attend. The use of money for access to education, in particular, has become a defining characteristic of Chinese education in the present, both on a formal level and, as the student account shows, an informal one. Through the changing reality of education in China today, an uncharacteristic openness is being observed in participant accounts, with some participants beginning to question the legitimacy of the current system as they witness a widening gap between those who benefit from it and those who do not.
My research, as has been noted, is based upon in-depth observations in the classrooms of four urban Chinese high schools. A similar observational study of high schools elsewhere in Asia is Thomas Rohlen’s *Japan’s High Schools*. In 1974, Rohlen spent a year in Kobe conducting an in-depth study of five different high schools ranging from the elite to the vocational. No similar work has been attempted in any other Asian country, and as such, Rohlen’s study is a model for my own. Although his work does not refer specifically to the diploma disease, it clearly illustrates the effects of the diploma disease on the five schools and their participants. One commentator has perceived China’s education system as becoming more like that of Japan and other East Asian countries. While the basic nature of the diploma disease may be similar across these countries, there are also significant differences in the way the education system and examinations are viewed, the social and economic boundaries in which the system operates, and the responses of educational participants to the formal education organization.

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37 Keith Lewin, *op.cit.*, p. 158.
Chapter Two

Historical Background

An examination of the history of China’s education system reveals that many of the symptoms of the diploma disease which are currently identifiable also appeared in the past, and problems which are now faced have their roots in traditions going back to the imperial civil service examinations. It is in the provision of technical and ideological qualifications that education policies have fluctuated most, particularly since the Communists came to power in 1949. This history of fluctuations is relevant to the ‘red versus expert’ debate that I discussed in the previous chapter.

The imperial civil service examinations, which selected candidates for work in the imperial bureaucracy, were held on a number of qualification levels. For most of the past millenium, these became the main route to official positions, and quotas determined how many students were admitted to each level. Such official positions were greatly desired, as they gave successful candidates wealth, status and power. As a result, competition for the available positions increased. This in turn altered the focus of traditional academies (shǐyuàn 歷院), which instead of remaining centres of learning as an end in itself, became completely oriented towards providing students with the skills needed to pass the examinations. Teacher-centred education methods, rote memorization and recitation became the norm. Suzanne Pepper asserts that this could be called the first documented occurrence in history of the diploma disease.¹ As happens

now with senior secondary schools, individual academies acquired fame and recognition according to the degrees their students won.

Although the examination route was officially open to all male Chinese, the costs imposed on a family by having its sons studying for examinations rather than working meant that only those with a certain amount of wealth could afford such pursuits. As a result, literary achievement and official appointment were in reality dependent upon and facilitated by wealth in addition to ability. The vast majority of the common populace remained illiterate or semiliterate if they had received basic elementary training through private tutors (sǐshū 私塾). The imperial examinations thus helped determine the form of social distribution.

During the 1800s, there was an awareness among Chinese government officials that China could not compete militarily with the Western nations that were threatening China, and the idea of ‘self-strengthening’ (zìqìng 自强) was promoted. The way to achieve this, it was argued, was through Western learning, science and technology. Western learning, however, was a threat to the power, prestige and position of the traditional ruling class, and no real reform of the imperial examination system was undertaken. It was not until China’s defeat by Japan, which was viewed to be an “inferior” neighbouring country, that a desire and perceived need for Western learning really took hold. Between 1901 and 1905, the imperial government thus issued reforms aimed at creating a three-tier system of elementary, secondary and tertiary schools modeled along Western lines, and in 1905 the imperial examination system was abolished. The new Republican government believed that the solution to China’s poverty was to industrialize through the development of modern education in the sciences and by learning to use foreign capital. Many changes to the education system
were introduced, borrowing from German, Japanese and American models of education. Changes included seeking to include practical courses in general schools in order to meet the needs of society and industrial demands, the adoption of an American-style structure of six years of primary school, three years of junior high school and three years of senior high school, as well as the formalization of separate academic and vocational education and the introduction of unified secondary school graduation examinations (biyè huìkǎo 毕业会考).\(^2\)

During this period, a dual system evolved which reflected regional and social divisions, and which did not alter the balance in social distribution between classes. Elites on the whole sent their children to modern schools, which were created from the old facilities used for preparing civil service examination candidates. On the other hand, most of the populace continued to receive either no schooling or a few years of unreformed traditional instruction from the private tutor schools. Admission to all schools from kindergarten upwards was governed by examinations. Other developments were reminiscent of the imperial past. Just as academies had generated prestige through their student bodies, so did “famous” elementary and middle schools, where the number of applicants was always greater than the places available. Thus the competition tended to produce higher-scoring student bodies at these institutions, which in turn reinforced their prestige. Admission to schools with the best reputations was also based on connections, a practice which again favoured those from better-off families. Most students in academic schools aimed for a career in government or an official position, as these were viewed as the “modern-sector” offering social mobility and a range of

benefits, in contrast with the “traditional sector” whose jobs gave little in the way of status, power or wealth.³

In order to counteract some of the negative effects of this competition, and to provide another means of qualifying students for participation in society, vocational education was introduced. As has been seen in many countries which have offered vocational education as an alternative, it failed to be a viable alternative to regular academic schooling which set the standard both for learning and for subsequent job opportunities. Vocational schools also struggled with inadequate teaching materials, narrow specialties, the inability to match education with employment, and the need for (but inability to purchase) expensive equipment.⁴

Meanwhile, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was trying out its own educational policies and innovations. In the Yan’an period between 1938 and 1947, the CCP introduced two sets of education reforms, the first of which looks remarkably like the system in place today. Reforms introduced between 1938 and 1942 were concerned with improving quality, particularly at an elementary school level, as existing schools (mostly traditional tutor-style schools) had no standards for curriculum, and teachers were generally not adequately qualified. Resources (financial, material and personnel) were concentrated in a few good schools which were to be forerunners of the later key-point schools. Problems persisted, however, with too many illiterates, too few intellectuals and too many material difficulties. The education department thus issued a set of strict standards and investigators decided which schools and teachers deserved to pass and which did not. Those who passed were to be given government support in the

form of materials to become model institutions. Strict examinations were established at
points of admission, semester ends, year ends and graduation, along with other rules and
regulations about class attendance, report writing, meetings and so forth. Similar drives
for quality and regularity were carried out at a secondary level. Age limits were fixed,
as were admission requirements that favoured a formal school background over work
experience.⁵

In 1943, this system was terminated in favour of one designed to be neither
preparatory nor attached to the next level above. The new Communist system had two
main goals: cadre training for the needs of an expanding administration, and mass
education for peasants. Primary and adult education and literacy training were
emphasized, and were to be implemented through various forms of schooling. These
included ‘people-run’ (mínbàn 民 办) schools, night schools and half-day schools. Mass
elementary schooling was to be focussed at a village level, and was to address the
perceived needs of the local community.⁶ The problems with people-run schools,
however, were the financial burden they placed on village communities, the scarcity of
good teachers, and the lack of resources. Reform at the secondary level meant that a
college-preparatory system was rejected as inappropriate and more emphasis was placed
on training students to enter the workforce. Schools were also to adapt their curriculums
to local needs and conditions. Regular secondary and teacher training schools were
given more responsibility for in-service training, and rules that the majority of the
student body should be elementary school graduates were relaxed to give the children of
workers and peasants a greater opportunity to enter school. Higher-level tertiary schools
in Yan’an were to train high, senior and middle-ranking cadres, and many of these

⁶ Ruth Hayhoe, Contemporary Chinese Education (Sydney: Croom Helm, 1984), pp. 33-34.
mostly offered short courses to enable the quick transfer of students to assignments in the field.\(^7\)

Following the Communist victory in 1949, the education system borrowed texts, teaching methods and structures from the Soviet Union. Higher education was restructured to emphasize science and technology (meaning a proliferation of specialized colleges), and job assignments for tertiary graduates were introduced. The basic division of secondary schooling into two separate streams, ordinary (pūtōng 普通 academic) and specialized (zhōngzhuān 中专, including technical and teacher training schools) was retained so that students would be qualified for different career paths. Workers and peasants were encouraged to enrol in short-course middle schools, spare-time schools and other technical schools, but by the mid-1950s the focus had again shifted away from technical education to ordinary education. Even as early as 1952, key-point (zhòngdiǎn 重点) schools were announced, arising from middle schools with better conditions. In policies harking back to the Imperial and Republican times, these schools were assigned better teachers and resources to enable them to lead the way in research and teaching methods. Once again, the number of applicants to schools with the best reputations was always greater than the number of places available, so the competition to enter them tended to produce higher-scoring students bodies at these institutions. Despite the examinations, admission to such schools was also based on guanxi.\(^8\)

In 1953, the First Five Year Plan was unveiled. Efforts to absorb more workers and peasants into the academic curriculum met with failure, as these students could not

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\(^7\) Suzanne Pepper, *op.cit.*, p. 151.
keep up with the coursework and many failed their entrance examinations to university. Specialized schools were drawn into the regular system and all students had to sit for entrance examinations. Only when such students attained required scores on the entrance examinations would they be given priority in admission to tertiary level study. Senior secondary college preparation was to be the new primary task in order to meet planned college enrolment quotas. Worker-peasant short course schools were abolished, and people-run schools were burdened with so many restrictions that some were closed and many were no longer encouraged to develop.9

Throughout 1953-1955, as a consequence of expanding elementary school enrolments, the numbers in junior secondary schools also began to increase. This caused great problems as most junior elementary graduates wanted to advance to the next level, and senior elementary level graduates demanded access to junior middle school. Popular expectations had been so aroused by the official commitment to eradicate illiteracy that this culminated in a popular urban demand for universal schooling through the junior secondary level. This relates to Dore’s assertion that access to the modern sector is seen not just as desirable but also feasible because of the meritocratic ideal of equality of opportunity.10 Increasing numbers of students aspired to jobs and study opportunities that did not exist, creating the potential for unrest. In 1957, Zhou Enlai emphasized the need for forms of secondary schooling that would be college-preparatory for some, but terminal and work-oriented for the majority, as tertiary level expansion could not continue to match that at the secondary level. This illustrated the government’s desire that the education system carry out a selective function. More and more graduates at

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9 Ibid., p. 197.
elementary and secondary levels would have to resign themselves to “productive labour” in agriculture and other undesirable “traditional sectors”.

During the Great Leap Forward which followed, three trends appeared that influenced the social functions of Chinese secondary education. The expansion of enrolment in secondary education was accelerated, particularly in urban areas, in order to reach political and economic targets set for the Leap. Student numbers in general middle schools increased from 6.3 million in 1957 to 9.2 million in 1959. Part-time “half-work – half-study” schools were established in the countryside which required fewer resources than full-time schools, and their curriculum was more easily adapted to suit local needs.11 Thirdly, physical labour was introduced as an important part of the curriculum.

The multi-track system, which became known as “walking on two legs”, was developed and formalized throughout the first half of the 1960s, and the selective function of secondary education became more obvious since the kind of middle school attended decided future career opportunities. Academically oriented urban schools trained students for higher education and white-collar jobs; agricultural middle schools and work-study schools in villages trained personnel for the agricultural sector; and vocational and specialized middle schools trained skilled workers and middle level technicians for the industrial and service sectors.12 The CCP took three criteria into account in enrolment policies: class background, political performance, and academic accomplishment, but the relative weight given to each of these changed with the

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political wind throughout the late 1950s and into the 1960s. Children of cadre and intellectual middle class backgrounds benefitted more than others from the combination of academic and political criteria used to select students for the key-point middle schools. Getting into a key-point school at a junior high school level was advantageous because of the better preparation they provided for the senior high school and university entrance examinations.

In interviews with former teachers and students from Canton, Jonathan Unger was told that most working-class parents wanted their children to become industrial workers rather than compete for white-collar professions through tertiary education.\(^\text{13}\) This was because to be an industrial worker of good-class background gave a good social status. Workers also received reasonable incomes with almost certain lifetime tenure in their jobs, compared with a far less assured career after further education. Education continued to be highly admired even among working families, however, but the realities of their children’s lack of academic foundations made higher aspirations unrealistic. In general, a worker/peasant class background was not sufficient to make up for average or poor results on selection examinations. For those who did achieve academically, there were great costs to bear in the form of tuition fees, textbook fees and other expenses which also greatly disadvantaged working class children. Thus, working-class children who continued into senior high school were concentrated at the third-rate schools, which generally reflected the populations of the districts in which they were located. This again influenced social recruitment to higher education.

The success of key-point high schools was judged on the basis of how many students from each school were admitted to university. Schools thus tried to attract students with both high academic achievement and a respectable class background, but these were already being accepted by the very best high schools. Some schools already had good initial reputations which meant they could attract students of sufficiently high quality to assure continued high rates of university acceptances. Key school students were aware that studying hard was necessary for success, and as grades were indicative of their prospects in entrance examinations, a concern with grades became linked to the competition to climb the ladder. This was not, however, why memorization became so important at the time. Teachers, particularly at key schools, wanted to see their own and their school’s reputation upheld or advanced, but they agreed with arguments against blind cramming and for effective learning. It was other factors within the high school system which were conducive to memorized learning. These included tradition, as many educators felt that properly conducted memorization enabled students to understand course materials more systematically, and the fact that students had been taught to memorize since primary school and felt comfortable with rote learning – for weaker students, correct answers were correct regardless of how they were derived.14

Key-point junior high school students were not assured of entry into their school’s senior high school section because of the influence that class background played at different points throughout the 1960s. This resulted in some degree of bitterness among graduates who had been refused admittance to their own and other key schools and who regarded the selection criteria as unfair. Students who failed to enter university did have other opportunities to pursue their dreams, however. One was to remain at home and

14 Ibid, pp. 75-76.
prepare to retake the annual examinations. That way, they might be able to get into a third-rate university even if their class background was not ideal, as a third-rate school might favour a candidate whose scores were higher than the average enrollee.\(^{15}\) A student who failed to get into a senior high school could apply to a self-financing people-run high school. The drawback with both these options was financial, as the first meant being a burden on parents rather than finding paid employment and the second also meant tuition fees and was regarded as an inferior option to state-run academic schools.

As an alternative to the academic track of schooling, a variety of vocational schools provided training for specific careers following junior secondary education. These offered a practical means for obtaining modern sector employment, as the schools had direct links to industry and factories, which meant they could assign their graduates to specific jobs. This was attractive in a climate where academic graduates had to find their own jobs. Most vocational students were ineligible to take the university entrance examinations. During the 1960s three types of vocational schools existed: teacher training schools (shìfàn xuéxiào 师范学校), technical (zhōngji 中技) schools whose students were trained for skilled manual careers, and specialized schools whose graduates were employed in white-collar staff positions (such as laboratory assistants and medical aides). The use of guanxi to enter factories directly upon junior high school graduation was a way to bypass technical training and earn money more immediately, but training in a technical school would ultimately give students more opportunities to further their careers at more senior levels and get a higher skill ranking and better salaries. These schools were thus very popular with working-class students. Students

\(^{15}\) Ibid, p. 31.
from other classes, however, rarely chose technical schools if they were not continuing with their academic studies. These students opted instead for specialized vocational schools which were more prestigious and harder to enter as they took a student’s academic performance into account and used the same entrance examinations as academic senior high schools. Specialized vocational school students who achieved well in their studies benefitted through assignment to a better initial job in their chosen profession but did not gain upward mobility into a better occupation, unlike those who succeeded in the academic arena.\textsuperscript{16}

Unger describes the situation of education and employment in Canton after the Great Leap Forward when the economy was in depression and unable to absorb the number of graduates being turned out. University enrolments dropped sharply after 1960, and less than 30\% of senior high school graduates were getting into university. Despite this, many students stepped up their competitive efforts to succeed in the entrance examinations, partly because of unrealistic beliefs about their personal chances of success, and partly because if they did not get into university they faced a serious crisis within Canton’s job market. Junior high school in Canton (and no doubt in many other urban areas) had been nearly universalized, but there were not enough jobs to absorb the growth in high school graduates. High achievers at school often looked down on the unskilled manual occupations, leading Liu Shaoqi to comment that “generally, those who have graduated from a junior high school despise the peasants; those who graduated from a senior high school despise the workers; those who graduated from a university despise all of them.”\textsuperscript{17} Facing unemployment, however, many graduates had little choice but to seek jobs at levels they despised.

\textsuperscript{16} \textit{Ibid}, pp. 34-35.
\textsuperscript{17} \textit{Ibid}, pp. 38-39.
By the mid-1960s, more junior high school graduates were entering vocational track schools. As this occurred, in some areas entrance requirements were altered to favour Communist Youth League (CYL) members and those from worker and peasant backgrounds, regardless of their academic ability. A campaign to relocate unemployed urban youth to the countryside was stepped up, and was also affected by a greater emphasis upon political and class criteria in job recruitment. Senior high schools began to reject bad-class youths (those with families denounced as counter-revolutionary, “Rightist” or capitalistic), a large proportion of whom were then targetted to be sent to work in the countryside. This created great resentment in over-crowded village communities, and the notion that these youths were discarded “failures” of the cities became prevalent, even in the minds of the students themselves. Unger quotes a group of these students as later saying “schools at a higher level selected and accepted students who were ‘excellent in [political] conduct and [academic] study’ and the to-the-countryside movement accepted the dregs.”

With the onset of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, the education system ceased to function, because it did not conform with the egalitarian views of Mao Zedong and others. New enrolments at tertiary and senior high school level were suspended, and all levels of education were to be integrated with productive labour. Entrance examinations were abolished as bourgeois, and schooling largely ground to a halt as youths became caught up in the Red Guard movement. Teachers and school authorities were targetted in a campaign known as the ‘red terror’, and students began travelling around the country to “exchange revolutionary experiences.” Relative order in primary and secondary schools was only established by the autumn of 1968, marking the end of the

18 Ibid, p. 44.
19 Suzanne Pepper, op.cit., p. 365.
more chaotic period of the Cultural Revolution. At that time, most Red Guards were told to consider themselves as graduates of junior or senior high school, and only a few were permitted to renew their schooling for one final year. Most of the rest were told they would have to settle in the countryside for life, as few factory jobs were available, and Mao had instructed all educated youth to engage in manual labour.

From 1968 until his death eight years later, Mao presided over a radical set of education reforms which were to catch “the eye and imagination of the international development community.” Party leaders no longer saw as much need to use senior high schools to help sort and prepare a corps of higher-trained personnel, because they wanted economic development to rely more on smaller, less technically sophisticated factories. To this end, students needed knowledge geared towards practice, not theory. This meant the academic part of the curriculum was markedly reduced, and education through senior high school was shortened to only eight or nine years. The curriculum, no longer to be nationally unified, “...was to be pitched at a level and pace where almost everyone who tried could do almost equally well.” This was to ensure that workers’ and peasants’ children would have an equal chance of joining cadre and intellectual children at the tertiary level. Key-point schools and special schools such as those for cadres’ or military children and university attached middle schools were abolished.

Students were assigned to neighbourhood high schools in order to prevent competition to win entry to a “good” school and to produce a greater class mix within schools. A difficulty with this was that different social classes tended to concentrate in different

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22 Suzanne Pepper, *op. cit.*, p. 381.
neighbourhoods. Secondary school graduates were to be assigned directly to jobs, and their on-the-job performance would decide whether they were to go on to higher learning. Given this new requirement of one or two years’ labour between high school and university, tertiary institutions did not begin enrolling new students until 1970. All these changes were aimed at divorcing academic achievements from career prospects and removing the concepts of “higher” and “lower” vocations so that students would no longer hold individualistic and careerist values. The problems that emerged under this system have been discussed in the previous chapter.

After Mao Zedong’s death, the overthrow of the ‘Gang of Four’, and Deng Xiaoping’s reform and modernization plans, education changed enormously once again, in large part returning to the forms and structures of the early 1960s, which was now seen as a “golden age” of education. China sought to catch up with the most advanced countries in the world, and the first priority was economic development. “Quality” was once again to be pursued, and the restored key-point stream was to absorb the best students, teachers and resources at all levels. Strict examinations were re-introduced for this. Admission to key schools became the desire of all those with aspirations to enter tertiary level institutions, as these schools were perceived to have the “quality” which would enable students to pass the university entrance examinations. As junior middle schooling was universal in cities, this meant unprecedented numbers vied for admission to a few key-point senior high schools.

At all schools, students were streamed into fast, average and slow classes. As schools wanted to maintain their funding through obtaining better records on higher-

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level entrance examinations, better qualified teachers were assigned to teach the ‘fast’
classes, which essentially became classes for examination preparation.\textsuperscript{26} Students in the
fast classes became preoccupied with examination preparation, leading to after-school
private tutoring, “cramming” sessions on weekends, extra homework and a
concentration by teachers exclusively on examination materials.\textsuperscript{27} In contrast, the
majority of students who were in average and slow classes were neglected and much
resentment was created among them. At ordinary and neighbourhood schools, students
in these classes had few expectations of getting ahead through their academic
performance, and most caused discipline problems.

A demand for “younger, better educated, and more specialized” leading cadres led
to a plan that college education was to become a pre-requisite for all leading cadres by
1990, once again linking learning to bureaucratic power.\textsuperscript{28} Class background was no
longer a great influence in university recruitment. A decision taken in 1978 to discount
class origins and political activism unless the applicant first scored above a minimum
cut-off point on the entrance examinations (high for national key-point universities, and
lower for provincial institutions) was touted as being a “fair” way to select students for
tertiary study. In fact, it increased the prospects of children of intellectuals while
decreasing those of working-class children who did not have as conducive a home
environment for learning. Cadre children (and their parents) who did not achieve the
required marks on their examinations, however, did not regard the system as fair at all,
and the use of \textit{guanxi} became prevalent. Candidates who had achieved the required

\textsuperscript{26} \textit{Ibid}, p. 211.
\textsuperscript{27} \textit{Ibid}, p. 212.
\textsuperscript{28} Suzanne Pepper, \textit{op.cit.}, p. 489.
scores were angry that they were not admitted to universities due to such favouritism, and even staged protest demonstrations in Beijing in 1979.29

Vocational education was also expanded after 1978, as China was seen to need skilled workers and middle level technicians. Furthermore, due to low transition rates from senior secondary school to university, it was considered a waste to keep so many students in general secondary schools. It was also felt that the youth unemployment problem which China was facing could be solved in part if more students received vocational training before leaving school.30 Some senior high schools which were no longer required were converted into specialist and technical schools, and vocational courses were made optional additions at general schools. Enrolments in all types of vocational schools expanded rapidly after 1981, and in 1983, the Ministries of Education, Labour and Personnel and Finance together with the State Planning Commission called for a reform in the employment system which would make enterprises give preference in employment to those with relevant vocational training.

Since the early 1980s, there have been a number of major documents detailing education policies and reforms. In 1985, the first major document regarding the direction and future of China’s education system was released, entitled “Decision of the CCP Central Committee on the Reform of China’s Educational System”.31 The main features of this document included a commitment to nine years of compulsory schooling

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31 中共中央，<中共中央关于教育体制改革的决定>，家教委政策法规司编，<<中华人民共和国教育法实施条例>1949-1996>>(广东：广东教育出版社，1996年)，第351-364页。

nationwide, the increased development and promotion of vocational and technical education (regarded as the weakest link in the chain of China’s education due to poor quality resulting from insufficient funds and resources), reform of the graduate job assignment system, an extension of university decision-making power, and the expansion and improvement in quality and numbers of teachers at all levels.32

In 1993, the CCP Central Committee and the State Council released an “Outline of Education Reform and Development in China”, which proposed a comprehensive program for extending and deepening the reforms of the 1980s.33 The focus of the document is that education plays a strategic role in raising the ideological and technical level of the nation in order to facilitate modernization. Despite these two reform documents, education in China continues to face the very problems the documents sought to address. The attainment of universal compulsory schooling for nine years continues to face numerous problems such as inadequate funding and drop-outs. Failure to attain universal basic education occurs primarily in rural areas, and promotion rates from primary to junior high school vary greatly between provinces and counties. While vocational education has been developed and expanded, it too continues to face great problems with poor quality, inadequate funding, a lack of teacher training and the traditional social bias against it. Recent re-structuring within the economy has not helped to promote vocational education as a viable alternative to academic education.

With regard to the promised reforms of teacher quality and numbers, again there has

33 中共中央、国务院，《中国教育改革和发展纲要》，教育部政策法规司编，《中华人民共和国教育法规实用要览1949-1996》（广东：广东教育出版社，1996年），第365-387页。
been little improvement. Teachers struggle with low salaries compared with those of other white-collar professions, poor placements and a lack of opportunities to transfer to other schools, and pressures brought about by the system itself, thus making teaching a less desirable job option for many students. Many schools, even in urban areas, cannot get high quality staff, as the best teachers are absorbed by key schools, and the percentage of teachers qualified to teach remains low across all levels.

An area which has seen change in recent years is that of graduate job assignments. These have now been abolished for university graduates, though some vocational schools at the secondary level continue the practice. This abolition has created even more competition as graduates vie for job opportunities in the most popular sectors of the economy. The extension of university decision-making is also in the process of change, with trials of an alternative examination system which involves more autonomy for universities to administer entrance examinations and admit students.

Other laws and regulations have been introduced, covering vocational education, teachers, curriculum reform, moral and political education, and finance and administrative details, plus a new Education Law released in 1995.34 In 1996, the State Education Commission published “The Ninth Five-Year Plan for National Educational Undertaking and the Development Program to the Year 2010”35, and most recently in

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June 1999, the CCP Central Committee and the State Council released a decision on “Deepening Education Reform and Promoting Quality Education in an All-Round Way.” These documents will also be discussed later, as they aim to counteract the effects of a system oriented toward entrance examinations, and are meant to promote “quality” in the form of a more holistic education for students that nurtures their creative talents.

2.1 Structure of Urban Secondary Education at Present

Compulsory education in urban China comprises six years of primary school and three years of junior high school, after which students can do three further years of study at senior high school before entering a tertiary institution or the workforce. Entry to senior high schools rests on marks gained in the Senior Secondary Entrance Examination (zhōngkāo 考, SSEE) out of a total of 795. Provincial education bureaus determine how many students each school is permitted to enrol each year, and schools select their students according to the SSEE marks of those applicants. The better the school, the higher the cut-off mark for selection. Most high schools in Kunming have junior high school sections which prepare students for entry into senior high schools. Entrance into these junior high schools is officially on a neighbourhood basis.

There are a number of different types of senior high schools in China. As noted earlier, academic senior high schools have traditionally been divided into “key”

(zhòngdiǎn 重点) or “ordinary” (pǔtōng 普通), terms which are still used by the majority of people, because although the term “key school” has officially been abolished, the distinction remains. In Yunnan, academic schools are officially divided into main levels (jí 級) from one to three, and within these levels three ranks (dēng 等).

Key schools are first level schools, and ordinary schools fall into the second and third levels. Key school goals and aims centre around preparing students for the National University Entrance Examination (gāokǎo 高考, NUEE), and their prestige arises from having large numbers of students succeed in these exams. Key schools were intended to act as models for the non-key high schools, and were to assist them with teaching ideas and resources in order to improve the overall teaching quality within these schools, an ideal which is still officially encouraged today. In practice, however, this happened very rarely, and key schools have come to be seen as the top of a hierarchy of secondary schools. They receive the best teachers, the best students (recruited by entrance exams), the best resources, and the most government funding. Non-key academic schools have the same aims, but their transition rates are lower. They are often disadvantaged in the system, as the best students and teachers are liable to be siphoned off into key schools, and their resources are much more limited.

In Yunnan, academic schools are officially allocated to levels and ranks by provincial education bureau inspectors who visit the schools and give them marks in a wide variety of areas, including numbers of teachers and students, quality of resources, size of school buildings, hygiene and the quality in areas such as education in morality and physical education. First level (key) schools have the highest marks overall, and

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37 Cui Ning, “Schools urged to raise quality”, China Daily, 17 December 1998. Details of China Daily and other English language newspaper articles contained within the footnotes are not re-listed in the bibliography.
they are placed into ranks on the basis of the number of marks received in each major
category. Schools are allowed to apply to change their level and rank, though it is
doubtful whether many are actually ever able to move up due to the favoured place of
key schools which ensures they receive more of what is needed to reach higher
inspection marks. In addition, most teachers and outside observers state that a large
proportion of the decision is, unofficially, based more on each school’s transition rates
to university. In Kunming, there are ten first level, 68 second level and 16 third level
schools.

Aside from the stream of academic schools, there are also a variety of vocational
schools (zhǐyè xùxiào 职业学校), which also vary greatly in the types of students
they attract, the quality of the teachers, the amount of resources, and the graduation
prospects of the students. Specialized vocational middle schools (zhōngděng zhǔányè
xuéxiào 中等专业学校 or zhōngzhǎn 中专) are seen to be the most prestigious, and
the rest occupy a complicated and not necessarily clear-cut hierarchy below that.
Specialized courses include nursing, postage and telecommunications, and tourism, and
graduates, I was told, are accorded the lowest level of “intellectual” status (Lewin also
mentions that these graduates are classified as “cadres” at the lowest entry point). Teacher training schools (shīfān xuéxiào 师范学校) and technical schools (jíshù
xuéxiào 技术学校) come under the category of specialized vocational schools. There
is also a category of technical schools (jīgōng xuéxiào 工学校) which are not
specialized schools, and are known as skilled-worker schools. These, together with

38 Stig Thogersen, Secondary Education in China after Mao: Reform and Social Conflict (Denmark:
agricultural schools (nóngyè xuéxiào 农业学校) are less prestigious options, as they tend to have the lowest entry cut-off marks, are oriented more towards rural and/or ethnic minority students, have graduates who are accorded the status of ‘worker’, and the quality of education received is not of a very high level. Vocational courses and levels in schools also vary. Some vocational schools are exclusively at a junior high school level, and others are either two year or three year senior secondary schools. In Yunnan as of 1996, there were 335 senior vocational schools of all types.40

A difficulty in terminology arises when “vocational school” can mean vocational schools of all levels and standards as opposed to academic schools, or when it can apply to certain schools within vocational education as a whole. Unless otherwise specified, academic schools are referred to as such, while all other schools regardless of standard are termed “vocational” schools.

All students at a senior high school are required to sit for Graduate Competency Examinations (bìyē huìkǎo 毕业会考, GCEs), a set of examinations in each subject (Maths, Politics, Chinese, History, English, Physics, Chemistry, Geography, Biology) introduced in 1991 following a State Education Commission directive.41 The GCEs were established in response to the perception of officials in China that a move towards greater all-round “quality” in education was required and that developed countries such

as the United States and the United Kingdom had graduation examinations which were not linked with university entrance examinations. All students who pass receive a graduation certificate. The examinations are spread across the first two and a half years of senior high school. Vocational school students may not be required to sit the full complement of examinations, and normally take practical and theoretical examinations in their own specialties in addition. The GCEs are now also used to select students from academic schools to sit for the NUEE. If a student fails a GCE subject he or she is not permitted to sit for the NUEE, though it is rare for a student to fail, as the examinations are designed to enable a maximum number of students to gain their graduation certificates.

At the tertiary level, there is a hierarchy of institutions ranging from key national universities, to tertiary-level specialized vocational schools (dàzhīăn 大 中). The administration of universities varies from those run by ministries to those run provincially. In total in 1995, there were 1054 tertiary institutions in China, of which 358 were run by central ministries and agencies. Provincial government administered institutions are not considered to be very good: for example, Kunming University, a provincial government-run institution, has a poor reputation within Yunnan, while Yunnan University, which is under the auspices of the national government, is a key university. In 1995, Yunnan had 26 tertiary institutions (a more recent publication listed only 24), on a par with other large but relatively backward provinces such as Guangxi with 27 institutions and Guizhou with 22, but well behind more developed provinces.

42 中华人民共和国国家教育委员会（编），《中国教育综合统计年鉴1996》（北京：高等教育出版社，1998年），第56页。
43 张彦仲（编）, 《中国百校》 (北京: 中国文联出版公司, 1998年)。
and areas – Beijing alone had 65.\textsuperscript{44} Students from senior secondary vocational schools do not have the option of attending a tertiary institution, although in exceptional cases I was told they may be permitted to enrol in a tertiary level specialized vocational school.

The process of application and entry to university is quite complex, as there are many factors students must take into account when considering where to apply. Midway through the final year of high school, provincial education bureaus release handbooks on university enrolment to all NUEE applicants. These handbooks detail the procedures students must go through to apply for university, the previous year’s cut-off marks required to enter universities and courses nationwide, the numbers of students accepted to each university and course from the province, and other important information on fees and how to make wise decisions on universities and courses. The university application form has three levels of choice. The first level are bachelor degree courses (dàxiù běnkē 大学本科) of four years or more; the second are tertiary specialized courses (dàxiù zhīfānkē 大学专科) of three years or less; and the third are secondary level specialized vocational courses of two to three years undertaken in a specialized vocational middle school (meaning the student is actually not progressing into tertiary level study and is in effect repeating the years of senior high school, just in the vocational, not academic stream). Within each level, students choose four courses in four institutions. Students must carefully consider their capabilities, previous academic record, numbers potentially applying to each university and course, previous year’s cut-offs, and numbers who will be accepted from the province, as well as including their

\textsuperscript{44} \textsuperscript{44} [State Education Commission of the People’s Republic of China (ed.), \textit{The 1996 Comprehensive Statistical Yearbook of Chinese Education} (Beijing: Higher Education Publishing House, 1998), p. 62.}
own (and often their parents’) desires. Teachers shoulder the burden of responsibility in advising students about their chances.

After the examinations, the National Education Examination Authority (NEEA, part of the Ministry of Education) takes the numbers of students who have passed and assigns certain numbers to each province. The province can only enrol that number of students into various institutions. This number can come from the home province or other provinces, and again, the NEEA decides how many from each, though the provinces themselves dictate which students move from their province to another. The provinces then assign students to institutions. A hypothetical example would be that a total of 100,000 students pass the NUEE. Guangzhou is assigned 30,000 students; 25,000 from Guangzhou, and 5000 from other provinces. 20 of the 5000 out-of-province students are assigned to Guangzhou from Beijing. Universities decide how many students from their home province and other provinces they want to enrol into each course. The universities choose their candidates primarily from among those who put them first on their list of choices. Problems can arise when a student fails to enter his or her first choice and is then subsequently rejected by his or her following choices.

As a hypothetical example of what can happen, a student writes Beijing University English Department as her first choice on her application paper. She scores 590 on the NUEE, but the pass mark required for her first choice is 600, so she fails to be admitted. Her second choice is Beijing Foreign Languages Institute, whose pass mark is 588. She has passed this mark, but BFLI is apt to first take candidates who have listed it first on the application and who have the required marks. If there are any spaces left after this allocation, it will take the highest scorers from those who listed it as second choice. Depending on the ranking of each university and course, and the
popularity of each, this can happen down the line until the student is accepted into one of her second level, tertiary specialized courses or at worst, only a third level, secondary specialized course. Of course, students can increase their chances of success by putting a less popular subject as their first choice in an out-of-area university. For example, a Yunnan student decides on history at Zhongshan University in Guangzhou. Zhongshan University will only take 5 Yunnan students into that department, but the course is not popular in Yunnan, so the student, if she or he gets the marks, has a good chance of being accepted.

Even if a student fails to enter all four of his or her undergraduate choices, there is another chance to enter university. If a student’s score in the NUEE is as high at the cut-off mark for undergraduate degree courses, but he or she is not chosen by the schools nominated in the first level or the marks are not quite high enough for the particular courses and schools chosen, the student is then put in a pool of candidates called a fúcóng diàojié. If a university has not filled all of its assigned places in a particular course, then the student can be chosen from the pool to go there. Students would very rarely refuse such an offer, even if they disliked the course or the university is not prestigious, as people would think they were “mad” for turning down any opportunity to enter a university.
Chapter Three

The Fieldwork Setting

There were several reasons for selecting Kunming as the basis for my fieldwork, not the least of which were personal contacts in that city. These contacts made it possible for me to have access to and dealings with many schools and individuals I would otherwise have found extremely difficult to arrange.

Kunming in particular and Yunnan in general are also interesting and important in their own right as a site for research on education. Yunnan is quite unlike the richer, more developed provinces that are most commonly studied. It is poor, geographically isolated, and lacks efficient transport and communication networks. Kunming has a population of about 3 million, but it also attracts many rural migrants, particularly from Sichuan, who not only alter the job opportunity structure but also congregate in certain areas, sending their children to local schools and generating a variety of perceptions among the urban population about those schools and suburbs. The city is gradually developing but one does not have to travel far from the city centre to find poor, semi-rural suburbs whose schools are counted as belonging to the city of Kunming. Yunnan hosts the largest number of ethnic-minority groups within China, who are widely regarded as backward, “slow in learning”, and lazy by the Han population. In addition, Yunnan has three international borders, with Vietnam, Laos, and Burma, as well as bordering Tibet and Sichuan province. These areas, with the exception of parts of Sichuan, are also isolated, under-developed, and have significant minority groups. Many of the teachers I talked with placed Yunnan in the “backward province” category along
with Qinghai and Tibet. In 1998, Yunnan’s population over the age of 6 was 3% of the total national population. Only 5.5% were educated to a senior high school level (as opposed to 25% in Beijing and 10.6% nationally), and only 1% were educated to a tertiary level (compared with 15.7% in Beijing and 2.7% nationally).\(^1\)

In contrast to Yunnan, the regions in the east of China have a comparatively good infrastructure, a higher density of scientific and technological talents, more rapid economic development with more prosperous village and township enterprises leading to a greater demand for all kinds of skills, and their average level of education is also relatively high.\(^2\) They are also more homogeneous in the ethnicity of their populations, and are well-supplied in transport and communication. The Chinese government has divided China into three geographically distinct regions: eastern, central and western. Yunnan is in the western region. In order to show the inequalities that exist among them, Li Yixian showed that the proportion of GNP in the western region is much smaller than that for the other two regions. The east produces 59.57% of China’s industrial production value, while the west produces only 7.31%.\(^3\) This inequality manifests itself in education as well, with a lower proportion of students within the western region in secondary and tertiary institutions.\(^4\)

Previous studies of the secondary (and even tertiary) education system in China have tended to focus on the eastern region, which in a country as diverse as China omits

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\(^2\) Li Yixian, “Modernisation and Educational Development in China”, in Gerard A. Postiglione and Lee Wing On, *Social Change and Educational Development: Mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Centre of Asian Studies, University of Hong Kong, 1995), p. 105.

\(^3\) *Ibid*, p. 105.

large areas with a very different economic make-up. Together with other significant variables, this affects the outcomes of education, social aspirations, the job opportunity structure and so on. Some studies have been conducted on inland rural education, but there has not, to date, been a study of senior secondary schools in a city away from the east. While caution is needed before making generalizations, especially with regard to a country that is so large and diverse, I was told by a number of lecturers and academics in China that Kunming would be reasonably representative of a wide area of China away from the eastern region.

3.1 Snapshots from Four Kunming Senior High Schools

The four Kunming senior high schools in which I conducted research in 1998 are representative of the types of school that can be found in Kunming and in China in general. Due to a lack of contacts only one was a vocational school, which is unfortunate given the wide variety of such schools and the subsequent differences in how students view them. Two of the four schools are ordinary academic schools and the fourth is one of the top key schools in the city. I was based at two schools per semester. All of the schools had junior high school sections, though these are outside the scope of this dissertation.

Humanities Middle School

The school I became primarily involved in was Humanities Middle School. This was the only school in which I was permitted to teach classes within the regular curriculum as opposed to being an after-hours extra-curricular teacher. The school is situated in the east of Kunming city on the main east-west city road and was formed in 1995 as an amalgamation of two ordinary academic schools. At the time the school was
established, provincial education bureaus were amalgamating many small schools with low transition rates across the country in order to raise educational standards and efficiency. In this particular instance, with faster economic development and opening to the outside world, English was becoming increasingly important, and a school specializing in the teaching of English was viewed as desirable for Kunming. School leaders describe the school as “a special school, set up as a full-time ordinary secondary school with foreign language learning specialties.” It is a second level, first rank (therefore non-key) school.

In the 1997-1998 school year, Humanities Middle had approximately 110 students in each of its three senior high school years. There were more female students than male, a factor related to the humanities orientation of the school. The cut-off entry mark to the school in the scores from the Senior Secondary Entrance Examination (SSEE) varies each year, but is around 600 out of 795, meaning that the standard of students officially recruited is reasonably high. The average percentage of students passing the National University Entrance Examination (NUEE) is about 65% to 70%, although in 1999 just over 80% passed. Each senior year is divided into four classes, with some 27 students in each, though these classes combine into two for most subjects. In addition, there are two classes majoring in Thai which do not undertake the NUEE and whose students graduate and find work, often in Thailand, after their Graduate Competency Examinations (GCEs) are completed. These students have not been counted in statistics from the school. As a school concentrating on the humanities, Humanities Middle does not enrol students wanting to do the science stream for the NUEE, and this is seen as holding back the school’s development, as humanities students are widely regarded as less capable than those doing science.
Students in the school largely come from lower middle or working class backgrounds, and are often there because they do not like and are not good at science subjects, or because they have a particular interest in learning English. The quality of their clothes and other belongings tended to fall somewhere between those of students at NorthWest Ordinary and Elite Affiliated – not of poor quality but not of the best either.

I taught each senior 1 and 2 class once a week. At the beginning of 1998, classes were 40 minutes long, but this changed in the new school year to 45 minutes to bring the school into line with most other schools in the country. While I was at the school I saw very little evidence of any extra-curricular activity, although the school assured me there was an ‘English corner’ when I was there (I was originally supposed to go to this, but it was always cancelled and eventually nothing further was mentioned about it). There was also some evidence of basketball as an extra activity in preparation for inter-class matches held after school. The extra time allocated is more often, particularly with senior 3 students, used for extra lessons. Classes are held on Saturday mornings, and often in the afternoon as well. The amount of homework students have to do varies, but by senior 3 they are often studying well into the night to revise old lessons, prepare new lessons and complete homework exercises. Most students in senior 1 and 2 do not have private lessons or tutoring at home, though some attend extra classes of English (and there may be similar extra classes for other subjects) held at universities on Saturdays and taught by experienced teachers from around the city. Senior 3 students often attend other university-run NUEE preparation courses held on the weekends or on week nights, for which they pay a fee. Schools have agreements with the universities to send their students to such classes.
Physically, the school is not very big, with only two teaching blocks and one administration block. An apartment block for teachers is located behind the school. There is also a basketball court and a playing field, and some effort had been made to brighten up a courtyard with flowers and bushes. The canteen is very small, dark and damp, and few students ever used it. Students often complained that the school is “too small”. When I asked why this was such a problem, they said that because of a lack of classrooms they had to shift rooms and merge with other classes for some lessons. They found this disruptive and annoying. Students compared the size of Humanities Middle with other schools, particularly the top key school in the province, which had extensive and beautiful grounds. They felt that such an environment was more conducive to study, and that in some way they did not get such great benefits.

As an “additional” English teacher, I was assigned a room which was not currently in use, and the students had to come to me for their lessons – unusual, as normally the teachers go to them. On a couple of occasions, students would forget to bring their exercise books and would scrounge around for bits of paper on which to write. This indicated the lack of importance they placed on my class in general. Many of them initially believed that it would not be part of their assessment, and were caught off-guard when they realized otherwise.

Most classrooms were quite bare, with the normal whitewashed walls painted green half-way up and concrete floors. The furniture was of a reasonable quality. There was a little bit of graffiti (in both English and Chinese) on some of the desks, and I even caught one of my students carving something into his desk one lesson. While teaching, teachers stood at the front of the room, moving up the rows while emphasizing points or asking questions. Sometimes they stood on the raised dais in front of the blackboard,
behind their desk. Students sat in pairs, generally of the same sex though not exclusively, and the pairs often changed when they moved rooms for different lessons. Teachers were grouped in subject-oriented offices up until the senior 3 year, when all the senior 3 teachers were put together in one office. The offices were in the administration block and the classroom block joining it, and were relatively spacious and bright, though there was a singular lack of cupboard or shelf space. Student workbooks and textbooks were piled up on teachers’ desks.

**Technical Middle School**

The second school I attended during the first half of the year was Technical Middle, an agricultural technical school (nóngyè jìshù zhōngxué 农业技术中学) on the outskirts of Kunming in a rural area. This school was a skilled worker training school (despite the jìshù 技术 in its name, it was not a specialized technical school). I did not undertake any teaching duties at this school, as students do not study English past senior 1 level and their English was not at a stage where they would benefit from my instruction.

There were 162 students in six classes in senior 1, and 115 students across four classes in senior 2. There were far more boys in the school than girls, and only the dressmaking class was dominated (numerically) by girls. Students graduate from the school after two and a half years and commence work, and so the final-year students were not in school when I was there. The specialties studied in the school are dressmaking, building and construction, electrical engineering and automotive repair. Students are required to pass GCEs in politics, Chinese and maths, plus both practical and theoretical examinations in their specialties. Many of the students come from farming families in poor areas of Yunnan (many are from ethnic minorities) or from the outer suburbs of Kunming (farming or working class families), and most board at the school. The students pay about 100 yuan yearly in tuition fees. The SSEE cut-off entry mark is about 400 out of
795 each year. Throughout their time at the school, the students have practical training at factories in and around Kunming. There was no particular uniform, even tracksuits, and the students had battered, dog-eared books which were often not even covered (students in other schools tended to cover at least their textbooks) and ink-leaking pens. Very few even possessed a bicycle, and the school was the only one where there was not a plethora of bikes jammed into the bicycle parking area.

There were no classes on the weekends, and the only extra-curricular activities were those organized by students themselves for play after school. I gained the impression that sometimes on weekends the resident teachers would organize outings for the boarders. Homework tended to be done quickly, in the classroom, and did not seem to take up much time after class. It did not appear that any of the students were receiving extra tuition. The students tended to speak in dialects rather than in Mandarin, and even some teachers had thick Kunming accents which strongly influenced their Mandarin pronunciation.

Most teachers commute to the school from Kunming city, many via a school minibus, but dormitory rooms are available at the school so they can rest over the lunch break. Many of the teachers also use these as their office, though there are a couple of offices in the junior school block. The dormitory rooms are also used when teachers are on duty to look after the boarders overnight or on weekends. Some teachers board at the school permanently because their homes are too far away, and they simply use their small apartments as their offices.

A new teaching block had recently been built when I arrived, and a large canteen block was under construction, with the result that lunches were served on trestle tables
set up outside. The new teaching block was reserved for senior students, as the leaders did not think junior students would take very good care of it. It was bright and airy, though bare, and the furniture did not match the newness of the rooms, with a fair amount broken and a bit of graffiti on the desks. Already, a window or two and some lights were broken. The junior school block was run-down, in disrepair, dark and cold. The grounds were very large, accommodating teacher and student dormitories which were also quite old, though not as run-down as the junior classrooms. There was a huge playing field, and basketball courts, and a lot of effort was taken to keep flowers, shrubs, and a number of large trees growing well. Despite this, the air and grounds were always dusty, and the “greenery” never looked very green. In the classrooms, students sat singly in rows, the only school in which they did so. There was no raised dais for teachers in front of the blackboard, unlike in other schools, and some teachers simply sat at a desk in front of the class to read through the lesson.

**Elite Affiliated Middle School**

Elite Affiliated is a first level, second rank school, meaning it is a key school. It is considered one of the best schools in Kunming, if not the province, and vies for the prestige of being the best primarily with only one other key school. The school is located in a central area of the city near the main universities. Each senior high school grade has eight classes: a total of about 500 in each grade, and the ratio of boys to girls was about equal. In senior 2, students are divided into a science or humanities stream. There are usually three humanities and five science classes in each year.

The cut-off mark for entry to the school on the SSEE is around 700 out of 795. The percentage of students passing the NUEE is in the 80s, though the school officially releases and emphasizes the number of non-fee paying students who pass, which is over
90%. Most of the students in the school come from middle-class, intellectual or high-ranking cadre families, and many were obviously well-off. A number were dropped off at school and picked up again by parents in cars, and several had been overseas for trips or even extended periods with their families. Their clothing and accessories tended to be expensive-looking and they had gadgets like electronic dictionaries.

I taught two extra-curricular classes per week, one each for senior 1 and 2. These students were hand-picked for their English abilities, and were some of the brightest students in each year. In Elite Affiliated, as in the other schools, the extra-curricular time is often used for extra classes when examinations draw near or when lesson times are insufficient, though on a number of occasions extra time at this school was used for extra-curricular sporting activities such as inter-class basketball competitions. My English classes frequently had few students when some other class-organized activity took precedence – if the class basketball team was in the final of the competition, it was guaranteed that most students would prefer to watch that than attend another class, though the year coordinators would grumble about this. The fluctuating numbers in my classes meant that guaranteed contact with the same students on a weekly basis was less than assured, and this hampered the distribution and return of questionnaires.

Every year, the senior 1, 2 and even senior 3 students go on a trip somewhere for a few days to a week. I did not hear of this happening at any of the other schools; indeed at Humanities Middle, the students complained about the lack of such activities. Teachers also go on school-organized trips together (a group went to Thailand in the summer break), and English teachers had the opportunity to go to Australia on an exchange program for a few months to a school in Melbourne. When I left, plans were
being made for a group of senior students to go to the same school in Melbourne and other places in Australia.

Classes can go on into the evening and although no-one would officially acknowledge it, classes are also held on Saturday mornings, and even Saturday afternoons if required, particularly for senior 3 students. Homework, revision and preparation are a great burden, and seem to take most students up until at least midnight to complete, though senior 3 students would probably be up most of the night. With regard to private tuition, the consensus was that few senior 1 students would take any, more senior 2 students would, and most senior 3 students certainly would. Senior 3 students usually also attend the university-run NUEE preparation classes.

Elite Affiliated is a small school, with no playing field, though it has basketball courts and more buildings than the other schools. The quality of the school was evident in the comparative newness of the buildings and the size and brightness of the classrooms and offices. Furniture was very new, with no graffiti on it, and there was a light above each front blackboard to make sure it was properly visible to all. This was the only school in which I saw pictures put up by students themselves - often of soccer players or other sports stars, as many young Chinese are fanatical about sports and it was around the time of the World Cup soccer matches. Teachers had large, bright offices, and although they lacked cupboards or shelf space, the offices were much nicer than those in other schools. Teachers were grouped into year levels, but they also had subject offices in the administration block which were hardly ever used except for faculty meetings. The administration block also housed language and science laboratories, the leaders’ offices, and at least one large conference room, which was decked out rather lavishly with pictures, carpet, comfortable chairs, and a long, oval
In the classroom, as in the other academic schools, students mainly sat in same sex pairs, and they maintained their pairing and seating positions throughout the year.

An outward appearance of control and order within the school was reinforced by the use of two uniformed guards at the gate, who would stop all unknown people wishing to enter (including myself initially) and question their business, then either refuse entry or allow them to fill in a visitor’s book. These guards were also there to stop students from leaving the school between classes, though I witnessed four young girls successfully persuade one of the guards to let them run to a small shop to buy drinks after a hot P.E. lesson. Although all the other schools had “gate keepers”, I did not see anyone stopped by them, nor was I stopped myself.

NorthWest Ordinary Middle School

NorthWest Ordinary is a second level, second rank school. It is situated in the northwest of Kunming, in an outer-lying suburb surrounded by many factories. The school has both humanities and science streams commencing in senior 2, with one class for each. There is also a special GCE and NUEE preparation class for ethnic-minority students majoring in painting at the Art Institute Affiliated Middle School, and a vocational class in computing at the senior 3 level for students not wishing to enter university. There were 107 students in two classes in senior 1, 96 students in senior 2, and only about 40 senior 3 students studying for the NUEE. There were slightly more boys in the school than girls. The cut-off marks for the school have risen during the 1990s, from in the 300s early in the decade up to 560 for the 1998 intake of senior 1 students. In the 1999 National University Entrance Examinations, the school had a 50% transition rate, with an average in previous years of around 40%. The students were predominantly from working class backgrounds, and their clothes, accessories and belongings were clearly
not as good or extensive in number as those of the students in Humanities Middle or Elite Affiliated. Although many of their books looked quite tatty, they were in better repair, and more often covered, than those of Technical Middle students.

My teaching duties were extra-curricular, with one session per week for each senior year. In contrast to Elite Affiliated, I was required to teach all of the students in senior 1, 2 and 3, because the school did not feel it fair to select students on the basis of academic ability to attend my classes. This meant classes in seniors 1 and 2 of about 100 students each, making it almost impossible to form relationships with students, to give research-related homework, or to have in-class discussions.

Most extra-curricular time slots were used for study and extra lessons (my English classes were an example), especially for senior 3 students. There were classes on Saturday mornings and sometimes on Saturday afternoons as well. Students sometimes worked up until about midnight to complete homework, though this varied depending on the motivation of the student. Very few students had private tuition, even in senior 3, and the senior 3 students did not attend university-run NUEE preparation classes because the school did not have an agreement with any of the universities.

NorthWest Ordinary was physically the largest school I attended in terms of grounds. It had a large playing field, basketball courts, tennis courts, and a courtyard with a pond and small gardens on either side. The students liked this aspect of the school, and almost all boasted about it as something that made them “one-up” over other schools. As at Technical Middle, there was a newer classroom block for the senior students and those in the final year of junior school. The old block housed the junior school classes, and many senior students told me they thought it was very unsafe. Even
in the “new” block, the classrooms were showing signs of wear, with small windows in some of the classrooms broken and patched with newspaper. The rooms were also quite small, giving a cramped and almost claustrophobic feeling. The furniture was in fairly poor condition, although there was an effort at one stage to remove the most broken pieces from the classrooms. There was some graffiti on the desks, and on the roof of the building next to the classroom block were shoes and other bits and pieces which had been thrown there by students. Other than that, the grounds were kept reasonably clean by student patrols which went out at each break time. The canteen was quite large, though few students used it, preferring to return home or to take the meal away to eat in their classrooms. As the school is quite small, there were only two offices for all of the senior teachers. One of these was tiny and incredibly cramped - made worse by the piles of books and materials on and under the desks and on the floor.

**General School Information**

Each senior year within all the schools was organized into class groups (bān 班) with a class master or head teacher (bānzhūrén 班主任) in charge of each. These classes stayed together throughout the senior years with the same class master. The class master had multifaceted responsibilities towards the students, and was expected to oversee their program, their homework, their physical, mental and emotional well-being, and to liaise with the students’ parents as well as teach one of the students’ subject areas. Students were to write diary entries every day, hand the diary in each week and even continue this over the holidays so that the classmasters could guide and correct each student’s thinking.

A member of each class was expected to clean the blackboard after each lesson, and if no-one had done so by the time the next teacher arrived, that teacher would
tersely make mention of the fact, sending students scurrying to complete the task. Each week, a few students were appointed to these kinds of tasks, and their names were written in a corner of the blackboard. At the end of the day, the students in each class would clean their classroom, emptying the bins, wiping the blackboard, and sweeping. Once a week, classes took it in turns to clean not only their room but other allocated parts of the school as well. If the cleaning duties were not done to a satisfactory standard, the class would drop on the “hygiene standards” scale, which was written up on a large blackboard at the front of the school. This amounted to a form of interclass competition, as points were allocated or taken away according to the class performance.

At Elite Affiliated, the conversation among teachers one lunchtime centered almost entirely around their classes’ performance in the school competition for the “best” classroom. The class which won and was given a special commendation by the principal had put up pretty curtains, a cover for the teacher’s desk, added a couple of plants, and was always clean and tidy.

One student from each class was elected to be the class monitor, and other students were elected by the students to undertake various subject-specific monitoring duties. Being a monitor meant keeping tabs on fellow students’ homework and lateness records, organizing the cleaning of the classroom each day after school and, on one day per week the corridors and whole school grounds, reporting incidents to the class master, liaising with other teachers, the class master and the students and helping fellow students with subjects when they were having difficulty. The class monitor was also responsible for the orders to stand at the beginning and end of each lesson, a process meant to show respect for the teacher. Bowing often accompanied this little routine, though the extent of this, and the enthusiasm with which students chanted “good morning teacher” or “good-bye teacher” often indicated the respect with which the
teacher and his or her lesson was viewed. There were also differences at different schools. Elite Affiliated students almost always bowed and spoke with some degree of respect. At Humanities Middle the bowing often became scrappy and irregular at the end of lessons. Sometimes, students would be packing up and talking so much they would almost miss the whole ending, barely managing to stand up, let alone bow and speak. The responses of NorthWest Ordinary students were similar. Technical Middle students often “put on” funny voices and exaggerated the greetings. Students who sat at the back of classrooms in all of the schools were less likely to bow properly, if at all. These students also tended to be those who concentrated least in the lessons. In my experience as a teacher, the students of Humanities Middle School with whom I became the most friendly were the most likely to stand at the end, though never at the beginning, of my lessons. Interestingly, in one particular lesson period in which students had played up to a point where I was visibly annoyed, the class monitor was prompted to angrily demand the students stand when they were unused to doing so, catching many of them completely unawares. The only time when students of another school stood at the end of a lesson was at NorthWest Ordinary when my senior 3 students had, for once in my view, enjoyed their time with me.

In all the schools, classes commenced at about 7.40am with a period of self-study. There were four lessons each morning, and three in the afternoons. Students have no “free periods”, unlike in Australian senior high schools. Before the morning periods and after lunch, students arrive at the school, often on bicycles, and are ‘greeted’ by student representatives (classes rotate and are on duty a week at a time) and some of the leaders, including the principal. This welcoming committee is supposed to make sure that all junior students are wearing their Young Pioneer scarves and, in the case of Humanities Middle, that all students are wearing their uniforms. The leaders make sure that all the
teachers arrive on time. During the breaks between lessons, students rush off to the toilet, go into other rooms to visit friends, or stand around in corridors or in the classroom looking at magazines or just chatting. Once at Elite Affiliated, I saw the monitor go to get the mail, and students huddled around her desk hoping for a letter. They said they often write to former classmates, even if they live in the same city. Students at NorthWest Ordinary were the most lively during the short breaks, playing with balls in the classroom or running around chasing each other and mock fighting. Some students in all of the schools sat at their desks to revise or to catch up on the homework they had failed to complete. If I was in the room a few would come to chat with me, though the novelty of this wore off after a while.

Between the second and third morning periods, all schools have a school-wide exercise session, apart from Mondays, when there are flag-raising ceremonies. For the exercises, students stand in their class lines on the basketball courts, with their class masters in front of them and other teachers scattered at the back. Exercise music is played over the loudspeakers. In the flag-raising ceremonies, students again stand in class lines with their class masters. The other teachers assemble into lines. All turn to face the flagpole on command, and are expected to stand straight and quietly while nominated students, wearing red scarves, march the flag to the pole and attach it. Other nominated students line up on either side of the flagpole and salute. The National Anthem is then played over the loudspeakers and the flag raised. Students and teachers are not permitted to wear hats, or even sunglasses during this ceremony. Once finished, another command brings the assembly around to face the building again, where the leaders make announcements from a balcony. In the afternoon, there is a short break for eye exercises, which are done in class under the guidance of the previous lesson’s teacher. Music and instructions for this are played over classroom speakers.
Students who live near the schools go home for the lunch period, and those who live further away eat at the canteen or in nearby small restaurants, then study or sleep in their classrooms. Technical Middle senior students are mostly boarders, and they spend lunch time in their dormitories. Only Humanities Middle School students were required to wear any kind of set uniform, although they disliked it and senior students often did not comply with the rule or wore only part of the uniform, such as the jacket. They also had a school tracksuit, as did Elite Affiliated students, which students could and did wear when they liked. This situation was to change as of April 1999. The education authorities decided to make a set uniform compulsory across all schools in Kunming city (probably not applying to Technical Middle School) for the sake of appearances during the World Horticultural Exposition that was held in the city from May to October 1999.¹

All the schools had outside blackboards on which colourful notices were chalked up about a wide variety of rules, regulations, the latest competition results (such as those to do with hygiene), donations received for ‘Project Hope’ (a charity program aimed at providing funds to enable poor, mainly rural, children to attend school), photos of school activities and other school notices. The corridors and classrooms usually contain pictures of famous people (including Chinese leaders, but also internationally renowned scientists and other academics) with their quotations on learning and studying. NorthWest Ordinary had by far the most politically-oriented posters in their rooms and corridors, and Elite Affiliated the least. NorthWest Ordinary also had more notices on its outside boards about semi-political campaigns such as the “Speak in Mandarin”

campaign, perhaps because most of its students often refused to (or could not) speak in standard Mandarin, even to me. Inside the classrooms, there were two blackboards. The one at the front was used for teaching, and the one at the back posted classroom notices, pictures, and poems sometimes along the lines of a particular theme (for example the World Horticultural Exposition). In Elite Affiliated, these boards were used in an inter-class competition, with the best design winning each week. Above the front blackboards were slogans about studying hard and doing one’s best.

All the schools have libraries, but the opening hours are more restricted than those in Australian schools, and this contributed to the feeling that the library, regardless of size and quality, was not an important part of the school. The libraries were only open during class hours, not over lunch or after school, so students generally were not able to go there, and I never heard of a class going to the library to do a research project or similar activity. Students are required to purchase their own textbooks for each subject each term, and rarely, if ever, need to deviate from the content in them for homework or examination preparation. Teachers of senior 3 classes look through piles of books containing practice papers for the NUEE and choose some to recommend or make compulsory for senior 3 students. Boarding students at Technical Middle occasionally borrowed books to read for pleasure when their library was open on Saturday mornings. I gained the impression that the libraries were primarily for teacher use – indeed, some of the books in them seemed to be irrelevant to or of too complex a nature for the students. A Technical Middle English teacher actually stated that the English language books in the school library were there for the English teachers to read, not the students, and given the poor standard of the students’ English, I could see why. A library is one of the aspects of a school which is judged when assessing the level of the school, so if nothing else, schools have libraries for appearances and to comply with requirements.
My Humanities Middle senior 3 students said that many of them go to the public library to study on weekends or after school, though they felt it was not a suitable place to study because of the noise of all the other students there.

The picture that I have painted of each school provides some indication of their place in the hierarchy of schools in Kunming. While there are differences between them that make them stand out as belonging to a particular level within that hierarchy, there are also similarities common to all.

Teaching in the schools gave me insights into how each school functioned and enabled me to develop relationships with students and teachers. I did encounter various difficulties in my research, however. My ability to become a participant in each of the schools was largely dictated by the amount of time I spent teaching there. This meant that at Humanities Middle, where I taught 8 classes a week, I became a regular member of staff and integrated in a much deeper way than at the other schools, where my duties were of an extra-curricular or purely observational nature. At Technical Middle School, it was difficult to form relationships with the students as I did not teach them in any classes, and also because of their almost total inability to speak in standard Mandarin. They were also not willing to speak freely with a foreigner, unlike most of my city students, and rarely gave much depth in their answers. NorthWest Ordinary students were somewhat similar, particularly the senior 3 students, who tended to be uncooperative and unforthcoming on issues discussed in this dissertation and showed no interest in forming friendships or relationships with me. In all the schools, leaders and teachers made it clear that no time was to be set aside for me to formally interview students outside of lunchtimes or after classes. As a result, I tended not to interview students and teachers formally, but many were willing to discuss issues in individual
conversations or in groups over lunch or after school. As I could not speak with all of
the students during this limited time and because of the problems just described at
NorthWest Ordinary and Technical Middle, I distributed two sets of questionnaires
among all the classes I had contact with. These questionnaires were not designed as a
statistically unbiased survey, but rather to give a very general overview of students’
impressions and ideas on a variety of subjects to do with their education and future. The
questionnaires differed slightly to make them relevant to each school, and were
formulated with the assistance of a local university lecturer. One set was completely
translated by two other university lecturers, both involved in education, and the second
set was read through by the first lecturer who had helped formulate them. All three
lecturers provided feedback and observations on the answers, and clarified, elaborated
on and analyzed the content with me.

I have attempted to be discerning in how I interpret and present the written and
oral feedback from students. From a young age, students are conditioned to write and
say what they think the teacher wants to hear, and also what is politically and socially
‘correct’ at the time. This does not make my findings less valid, but means I have had to
carefully cross-check and weigh up all the information provided. This was possible
through observation, discussions with a wide variety of people, official school statistics
and through a variety of print materials.

Elite Affiliated was the least co-operative of all the schools in terms of what it
would allow me to do, see, and acquire. Initially, the leaders of the school stated that I
was not permitted to listen in on classes in the senior years, ostensibly because the
teachers would not like it or would feel pressured, although individual teachers I spoke
with in the school and those in charge of each year thought this was unreasonable since
I had specifically stated I was not looking at teacher performance. I was ultimately allowed, with the agreement of the year co-ordinators, to listen in on classes, providing I asked permission of them well beforehand so that they could advise the teachers. This hampered my ability to freely drop in on classes, and contact with senior 3 classes and students was definitely not permitted, because I “was not teaching them”. At all the other schools, I was permitted, and indeed welcome, to attend any classes I wished.

My access to statistics from Elite Affiliated on such things as fee-paying student numbers and transition rates was also very limited. I had to submit a table with the categories I wanted filled, and it was returned with apologies that much of it was “not available” or “couldn’t be found”. A teacher explained that the school did not want to give some of the information to me because they do not want people knowing, for example, the lowest SSEE score to enter the school, as it can be quite low, maybe only 200-300 for students who had entered through a special payment and/or guanxi. North-West Ordinary also took a table of categories I wanted filled and filled it in for me, and although I was unable to meet with the teacher in charge of that to discuss it, it seemed complete and I was able to ask some questions of other teachers at different times. Statistics from Chinese official sources should always be regarded with some caution, and the ones I gathered are only meant to facilitate a picture of each of the schools I portray.

In Humanities Middle, I was allowed to attend some teachers meetings, though in no school was I given the chance to attend weekly teachers political meetings or activities of the Communist Youth League. Humanities Middle let me attend Monday afternoon class discussion times, which were basically the ‘moral’ component of the week, when the class master and students discussed a particular topic such as
‘politeness’, and monitors reported on the class performance as a whole as well as on misdemeanours by individual students and on organizational matters.

In addition to participating in the schools, I was fortunate to have many in-depth discussions about education with one particular university lecturer, as well as several other university teachers, all of whom have children in some part of the education system and could speak as parents as well as researchers or interested onlookers. I talked with a number of academics whose focus is on Chinese education, and interviewed two education officials, one a research official from the National Education Examination Authority (jiàoyùbù kǎoshì zhōngxīn 教育部考试中心), part of the Ministry of Education (the former State Education Commission) and the other the vice-head of the office in charge of the GCEs in the Yunnan Provincial Education Bureau. The Bureau was unforthcoming with many of the statistics I requested, as the lady I had to deal with said they were not publicly available and that as she was new within the area she did not have access to them. The senior high school student edition of the *Yunnan Education Newspaper* (Yúnnán jiàoyùbào: 云南教育报: 高中生) provided numerous reports of interest and relevance, as did television and radio programs. All of these served to confirm or elaborate upon my findings, and I used much of the information gathered from these sources to question the students about their veracity and to give an additional platform for discussions with them.
Chapter Four

Why Undergo “Examination Hell”?

“Thousands upon thousands of horses and soldiers to cross a single lane wooden bridge”

The month of July, when the National University Entrance Examination is held, is popularly known as “black July”. Over the few days of “examination hell”, through rain, hail or shine, parents and even grandparents or other family members accompany their child to the examination halls for each session and then congregate outside until he or she emerges. Passersby comment on the crowd size each year, newspapers print photographs, reporters stop to ask questions, and some reports are published to illustrate the pressures and anxieties among the waiting family members, carrying the message that these anxieties can equal or surpass those of the students themselves. When the students do finally come out, they are grilled about their performance and chances of passing the exam, and are then whisked home where they scour the subject textbooks to see if they answered correctly or not. In the case of the morning sessions, students also gulp down some lunch and set about a quick final cram of the afternoon subject. In the evening, they might ring up friends and classmates to compare notes. During this time, media broadcasts request neighbours to turn down loud televisions and radios (a particular concern in 1998 was that students might be distracted by enthusiastic World Cup Soccer viewers), construction work is halted or limited in scope and noise, the use

1 For example: "学生轻松，家长紧张"，"文汇报"，1997年7月8日。 “Students are relaxed, while parents worry”, Wenhuibao, 8 July 1997.
of automobile horns is restricted, and all efforts are made to give the students a peaceful, relaxing, stress-reducing environment in which to do their examinations. Most of these efforts are negated with pre-examination identification checks, bag checks and the sight of an ambulance waiting for those who collapse under the pressure only increasing students’ tension. After three days of such intense and focussed activity, it is all over and the nail-biting waiting period begins. By the end of the month, students should know their total score and the breakdown of scores in each subject, which will give them some idea of whether they stand a chance of being admitted to any of their tertiary institution choices, but they will have to wait a few weeks longer to learn exactly where they have been placed. Those who succeed in entering one of their first choice tertiary institutions are elated, and receive gifts from their parents and family members, accolades from the wider community, and envious glances from those who did not do so well. For the students who enter a lesser choice of institution, there is relief that they actually got in somewhere, but disappointment at their ‘failure’ to enter somewhere more prestigious. Depending on how well they expected to do, such disappointment can be intense, and the family can suffer as much of a ‘loss of face’ as if the student failed to enter any institution at all. For those who fail completely, there are tears, regrets, family displeasure (sometimes to the extent of parents refusing to speak to their child or physically abusing them), humiliation, and if pushed to the very extreme, suicide. Many students who fail, together with their families, try to find alternative ways to get into a tertiary institution. Some enrol in ‘self-study’ courses, others enrol in a year long revision classes (búxíbān 幂 xã) in order to re-take the examinations the

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2 The State Environmental Protection Administration issued a circular to local governments for the tightening of noise pollution control. Those violating the stipulations “will be punished in accordance with State regulations on noise control.” Zhu Baoxia, “Silence! Exams in progress”, China Daily, 9 May 1998.
following year, and still others try to find a way into bachelor degree courses by means other than examinations.

Given these two months of intense stress which has followed three years of pressure and preparation in senior high school, why are more and more urban students and their parents competing to continue their education beyond the nine compulsory years of primary and secondary schooling?

**Upward Mobility**

As Dore explains, the gap between the traditional and modern sectors in a developing country becomes greater as the attractions of entering the modern sector grow. Urban residents increasingly seek upward mobility away from what they perceive to be “low status” jobs into higher status modern sector jobs, via the education system. Features of the new modern sector are an increase in private enterprises and joint ventures, an influx of products from both the domestic and international market, the expansion and upgrading of communications and transportation networks and a mass building boom which has seen the near total elimination of traditional buildings within some cities. Living standards for many urban Chinese have risen as a result of the growth in the economy, and they have quickly become accustomed to the new consumer, capitalist culture. Kunming, while behind the east coast cities, is also following the same trends in development. Great competition exists amongst the urban populace to “keep up with the Wangs” not only in terms of material possessions which are used as indicators of status, but also in terms of children’s educational accomplishments. In a 1993 survey about consumer desires in China, respondents listed eight categories of desires, one of

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which was education – specifically payment for children’s extra courses such as music or painting, and payment of tuition fees for superior high schools or university. Those I spoke with said that most Chinese measure their living standards in terms of income level, standard of housing and their child’s education, though not necessarily in that order.

**Pride and “Face”**

Education also becomes a major social divider where one family can obtain ‘face’ and prestige through virtue of their child’s educational achievements. Many people in Kunming felt that the ‘one-child policy’ has, as Lewin et al. predicted, exacerbated the competitive nature of Chinese families, with all parents desiring that their only son “become a dragon” (wàngzǐ chénglóng 望子成龙) or their only daughter “become a phoenix” (wàngnǚ chéngfēng 望女成凤). Behind those parents are grandparents and a large number of family members, all of whom are intensely interested in that one child’s progress, successes and failures. A number of Humanities Middle students thought that an advantage of going to university would be that their parents and other relatives would be proud of them.

A factor which intensifies the desire of Chinese parents to have well-educated children is that most of the parents of senior high school students were among the youths sent to the countryside for “re-education” during the Cultural Revolution. Following that, many were assigned to factory jobs in the city and did not have the opportunity to complete what study they may have begun. With the political reversal

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5 Also see Stig Thogersen, *Secondary Education in China after Mao: Reform and Social Conflict* (Denmark: Aarhus University Press, 1990), p. 16.
away from upholding manual labour as “glorious” and “for the good of the country”, to be undertaken by those requiring thought “re-education”, it again came to be viewed as for the lower classes of society. Intellectual achievement is again prized as it was in Imperial China. I was told by many people (and newspaper reports confirm this, as does the rapid increase in enrolments at academic schools) that parents from all walks of life now pin their hopes on their children to realize the dreams they did not fulfill and to receive benefits they missed out on, and thus want them to be educated in academic schools and have the chance to enter university. Students themselves are very aware of their parents’ lost opportunities and desires:

Because of some social reasons [by which she means the Cultural Revolution], my parents couldn’t go to university. They love studying and they hope I can realize their dream.

In their day, my parents had little opportunity to study, so they now want me to study hard.

**Status Measured by “Knowledge”**

The concept of “culture” (wēnhuà 文化) is one which I perceived to be very important in Kunming during the year I was there, and it adds to the impetus for individuals to receive an education. “Culture” primarily refers to intellectual knowledge which, for the person possessing it, leads to a knowledge of how to conduct oneself in society. This is seen to be a very important attribute in social mobility. The general consensus among teachers, students and others with whom I spoke is that without education a person has no prospects, and that students who do not continue their education past the compulsory stages have very little chance of finding “good” work (work in the modern sector) unless their parents have money and/or guanxi. Taxi drivers frequently asserted they had no “culture” – if they had, they said, they would not be driving taxis. People I talked
with often implied that manual labourers, peasants, and minorities have no “culture” because they do not dress well, are seen as being “dirty”, spit in the street, urinate in public places, speak with thick accents or in dialects, and a host of other things which, the implication went, they would not do if they had been properly educated. Some students said that those in the lowest jobs, such as peasants, service people and workers in particular, have no knowledge and are rude. They felt that without knowledge, a person will not have quality, and without quality, that person will not be able to work well. One Humanities Middle student said that “if I have a lot of knowledge, I can’t be looked down upon by others.”

Moral education that is imparted in schools through weekly class meetings might play a part in the perceived acquisition of knowledge and “culture”. A group of Australian high school students from Victoria visited Humanities Middle while I was there and behaved inappropriately. After they left, a teacher used the next available class meeting to discuss the rudeness and disrespectfulness of the Australians, attributing it to the lack of class meetings in Australian schools in which to educate the students about morality, manners and so forth. She also hypothesized that the students might not have come from “well-educated backgrounds”, implying that a lack of education and an uneducated family background were at fault. In another class meeting, the same teacher, discussing the topic of good manners, told the class that parents who are not well-educated do not have good manners, which means they cannot educate their children well. She used the example of villagers who come to the city to work and whose children do not have a good education, saying that if educated urban residents can display good manners and good conduct, they will be able to educate others not to litter, spit, and let their children “pee in the street”. These attitudes contribute to the belief that education is the path to upward social mobility.
**Job Uncertainty and Unemployment**

1998 was the first year in which students had to rely completely on themselves to find jobs, as the practice of job assignment for graduates has been gradually phased out since the early 1990s. The ‘iron rice bowl’, where workers were guaranteed lifetime employment, inexpensive accommodation and other benefits in a work unit has largely been broken. Furthermore, as state-owned enterprises have been re-structured and many closed, the numbers of unemployed (xiàgāng 下岗) workers have soared, leading to great insecurity. A number of students, mainly from NorthWest Ordinary, mentioned that one or both of their parents had or were about to lose their jobs. All this has meant greater importance has been placed on getting the right job via the ‘right’ education. Most people would assert that those who have been to university are less likely to lose their jobs, and almost without exception, teachers, parents, students and others I spoke with in Yunnan were of the firm opinion that to get a “good” job these days, students have to graduate from university. Even students at Elite Affiliated expressed a slight concern that they would not be able to find a job upon graduation.

All of the above reasons combine to ensure that, regardless of the pressures and stresses in the education system, students and parents increasingly desire to follow the education path as a major route towards social mobility and jobs in the modern sector. What are students’ aspirations and what do they see as the attractions in modern sector jobs? This question is addressed in the next section.
4.1 Job Aspirations

“Going to foreign countries and to big companies offering high salaries”
(Chinese maxim parodying one from the 1950s-60s: “Going to rural and frontier places badly in need of talents”)

Dore states that the attractions of the modern sector lie in income, power and prestige. Are these the attractions perceived by students in Kunming, and do they differ between schools? I believe that student perceptions of job status and desirability are affected by their family background as well as the school they are in, and the chance they see of getting into such jobs.

Many Chinese commentators and government spokespeople have voiced concerns over high job aspirations amongst graduates, who are unwilling to start from the bottom and work their way up and who decline jobs that they see are ‘beneath them’ or that simply do not live up to their expectations. The authorities have been reported in newspapers as making comments such as: “If graduates lower their expectations, they will have no problem in finding work”\(^7\), “it is time graduates abandoned utopian dreams in favour of realistic expectations: cosy working conditions, a secure income and no risk of being laid off are not part of reality”\(^8\) and “graduates’ requirements for higher salaries, comfortable working conditions and better-known work units pose major limitations for the graduating job-seekers.”\(^9\) A Chinese academic I spoke with thought that the problem with students (and people in general) is that they are lazy: “They want to make the most money with the least work and effort, because they have seen others get rich very quickly and without much effort.” Most of my students certainly voiced

opinions in line with those already causing concern amongst authorities. One NorthWest Ordinary student stated that “our hopes of course are to find a leisurely and high salaried job.” She went on to say, however, that “of course this is impossible”, showing a degree of realism not always evident among the students as a whole. The reasons behind student hopes for jobs are often affected by the realities they see around them and their backgrounds. They desire “free” and “leisurely/relaxing” jobs in reaction to the pressures and constraints they find themselves under in their studies, for example.

In order to ascertain student job aspirations and the reasons for these, I not only talked with students at length but also included a question about this topic on the written questionnaire I administered. Unfortunately, the numbers of students from Elite Affiliated who completed the survey question on job aspirations was not large enough to give a clear statistical picture of their ideal jobs, but I can be confident that trends are accurate due to verbal comments and discussions I had with many students and others. Initially, I divided responses into “monetary” and “non-monetary”, then roughly categorized the “non-monetary” reasons, though students did not necessarily limit themselves to one reason, and many “non-monetary” responses involved an unspoken desire for monetary or other material gains. It was also sometimes hard to ascertain whether student responses were genuine or just what they thought a teacher would like to hear.

There is some disagreement among students about what benefits jobs provide. This is partly because of the nature of some jobs, and partly because of differing student expectations depending on their backgrounds. One Elite Affiliated student said that she wanted to be an ophthalmologist, and said that as a doctor “you can’t become unemployed, and it has material benefits.” In contrast, another Elite Affiliated student
thought that while being a doctor “is a fairly stable vocation and the salary for a doctor overseas is quite good, the salary in China for a doctor is not very high.” This difference in perceptions could be due to ignorance, or to the variety of doctors and their work units which exist in China. Some doctors are still minimally qualified and are only basic general practitioners, perhaps working in street clinics or other work units not highly regarded, while those specialists and surgeons who are highly qualified work in more prestigious units and earn correspondingly greater salaries. With regard to teaching, a number of Humanities Middle and NorthWest Ordinary students said that they wished to become a teacher to gain respect, esteem, and even high status. This contrasts with the way they treat some of their teachers and their verbal comments about certain teachers, leading me to surmise that students wish to become teachers with the attributes they admire in their own teachers, rather than feeling that teaching as a whole leads automatically to respect. Students mentioned that teachers are important because they pass on knowledge to students, knowledge that is necessary for the future. In doing this, teachers gain respect from their students, and conversely, those teachers who are seen as not passing on knowledge are not respected. One student felt that a particular teacher of hers was not a good model for the teaching profession, and wanted to be a “good” teacher in order to counteract negative views of teachers.

4.2 “Non-Monetary” Reasons for Job Choices

Table 1 shows that non-monetary reasons for aspiring to jobs were dominant among students at NorthWest Ordinary; were also greater but not by such a difference at Humanities Middle; and were outnumbered by monetary reasons at Elite Affiliated. There are also gender differences [see tables 2 and 3]. In total, more female than male students cited non-monetary reasons for liking particular jobs, but when broken down
Table 1: “Monetary” and “non-monetary” reasons given by students for their job aspirations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Monetary</th>
<th>Non-Monetary</th>
<th>Total number of clear answers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Humanities Middle</td>
<td>74 (45%)</td>
<td>90 (55%)</td>
<td>164 (70%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NorthWest Ordinary</td>
<td>21 (38%)</td>
<td>34 (62%)</td>
<td>55 (24%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elite Affiliated</td>
<td>8 (57%)</td>
<td>6 (43%)</td>
<td>14 (6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Students</td>
<td>103 (44%)</td>
<td>130 (56%)</td>
<td>233 (100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: “Monetary” and “non-monetary” reasons given by female students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Monetary</th>
<th>Non-Monetary</th>
<th>Total number of answers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Humanities Middle</td>
<td>54 (41%)</td>
<td>77 (59%)</td>
<td>131 (75%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NorthWest Ordinary</td>
<td>11 (32%)</td>
<td>23 (68%)</td>
<td>34 (19%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elite Affiliated</td>
<td>7 (70%)</td>
<td>3 (30%)</td>
<td>10 (6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Females</td>
<td>72 (41%)</td>
<td>103 (59%)</td>
<td>175 (100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: “Monetary” and “non-monetary” reasons given by male students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Monetary</th>
<th>Non-Monetary</th>
<th>Total number of answers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Humanities Middle</td>
<td>20 (61%)</td>
<td>13 (39%)</td>
<td>33 (57%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NorthWest Ordinary</td>
<td>10 (48%)</td>
<td>11 (52%)</td>
<td>21 (36%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elite Affiliated</td>
<td>1 (25%)</td>
<td>3 (75%)</td>
<td>4 (7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Males</td>
<td>31 (53%)</td>
<td>27 (47%)</td>
<td>58 (100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
into schools, the small numbers at Elite Affiliated showed more males than females stating non-monetary reasons. Males at NorthWest Ordinary were also less likely to state a monetary reason for wanting a job, but the greatest difference there was in the numbers of female students who wrote a non-monetary reason. At Humanities Middle, the percentage of male students stating a monetary reason for wanting certain jobs was quite large, whereas the difference between both reasons amongst the female students was not as pronounced.

**Status**

Perceptions of job status in society also affect which occupations students like and which they do not. I asked a number of students to rank a variety of jobs from high to low status in the order they believe society ranks them, then discussed what it was about the jobs which led them to do so. The results differed somewhat between Humanities Middle and Elite Affiliated students, and NorthWest Ordinary students. Among Humanities Middle and Elite Affiliated students, the top occupations were, with some variation, entrepreneurs, lawyers, doctors, engineers and cadres. In the middle were jobs such as teacher, policeman, secretary, army officer and nurse. At the bottom, without fail, were peasants, workers, service personnel and drivers. Those at the bottom were seen to have low salaries, no power, long hours of work, boring and/or dirty work, done by people with a lack of education – as such, these people do not receive respect. One student commented that “you don’t have to have much skill to do the lowest jobs; why respect a person with little skill?” Another said that “most workers just have graduated from junior high school, so they are not very interesting to talk to – they talk about boring things.” A couple of students said that service people and peasants are rude, and thus not respected. Jobs with high status are those which are seen to give good salaries, other benefits such as cars and housing or travel opportunities, power (such as cadres:
“cadres have more rights in the government, they can order people around”), and are done by people with a good education and knowledge, which means others respect them. Knowledge is linked to the quality of work done. One student thought that “if people have no knowledge, they will not have quality. If they don’t have quality, they can’t do work well.” A student who aspired to be an entrepreneur thought that even entrepreneurs need to get further education because “those who haven’t been to university may have abilities but no knowledge, so they may make mistakes.” Another student asserted that “in China, if you want to judge a person’s status, look at their education – whether they can graduate from university or not.”

Two girls at NorthWest Ordinary put the military and police in the high status job category, along with teachers and doctors. Peasants and workers came in the middle, and low status jobs included secretary, driver and entrepreneur. The two girls felt that the low status jobs are of little use to society. One said that entrepreneurs just want to work and get rich for themselves and not the country. High status jobs, in contrast, make great contributions to society. “If there were no workers and peasants, then there would be nothing at a higher level, as they are the foundation of the rest.” These responses suggest that their own perception of the jobs they are likely to get affects how they view the status of those jobs within society. These students were also more likely to internalize, or at least be prepared to regurgitate, the rhetoric that is fed to them by the government through various media. The fact that many NorthWest Ordinary students found it extremely difficult to undertake class tasks I set which involved a degree of individual thought highlights their conditioning to accept without question what they are told by authorities. A further factor could be the continued idea that the army serves the people. This was enhanced during 1998 by reports praising army members who assisted
with relief efforts in the areas hit by devastating floods that primarily affected the
average peasant/worker.

“Interest”

When broken down into rough categories, students across all schools cited “interest” as
their main requirement in a job. As students are no longer assigned work following
graduation, many now see the chance to have a job they are genuinely interested in and
that relates to their studies. In a different context, several students (though not those
from Elite Affiliated) mentioned that their parents were unable to pursue their interests
due to their job assignments, and this undoubtedly influences what students now desire.

To students, “interesting” means many things, and interest in a particular job can
be coloured by what it offers in the way of other benefits. To illustrate this, a student in
Humanities Middle stated that “I want an enjoyable and cushy job. It’s good to be able
to maintain comfort and happiness, because then life will be more interesting.” A
NorthWest Ordinary student said that “liking a job is important for doing it well, and
everyone hopes for a job which pays well.” Elite Affiliated students told me that a
“good” job in their eyes is one which is not only interesting, but also gives money and
other benefits. Most of the Elite Affiliated students I talked with want jobs which they
will enjoy, but almost all of them meant a job in the mid to high status range, meaning
the job will come with a certain level of salary and power. The proportion of students
from NorthWest Ordinary whose stated desires were for interesting jobs was higher than
that of the other schools. This may be due to the fact their parents are largely workers,
with boring, repetitive or hard labour jobs that the students wish to avoid. Students from
other schools also mentioned that they dislike what they see to be “boring” jobs, which
largely consist of those they also see to be low status jobs in society - peasants, workers,
drivers, service people (like shop assistants, cleaners, waitresses etc). Although quite a large proportion of students from Humanities Middle mentioned they would like an interesting job, their answers were in contrast to answers given in a written homework exercise about their “hopes for the future”, in which almost all desired monetary gain above all else.

‘Journalism’ as a category of jobs aspired to by many Humanities Middle and NorthWest Ordinary students is a case in point about what “interest” in a job can mean. Most students who wanted to be journalists said they thought the job would be interesting, without further details, but I was intrigued as to why it should be so popular, and followed it up with a sociology lecturer from Beijing University. She pointed out firstly that the category of journalism is very wide, and includes reporters for both television and print media, and editors. Many young people today see journalism as interesting because of what it offers, not only intrinsically, but materially. Journalists receive a high income, and have benefits such as the use (or ownership) of a work unit car, and travel at the unit’s expense. Due to the huge increase in the numbers and variety of magazines, newspapers and television programs, there are relatively great opportunities to get a job in journalism. Despite controls placed on the media in China, the lecturer said young people see involvement in the media as a chance to have an influence on society and bring about change. Their perception may perhaps be idealistic and naive, but the media in some areas has opened up considerably over the last ten years. Students also know that if they are working for a well-known and widely distributed publication that their names will also become well-known – the attraction of a type of “fame”, and they will get to meet many people, cultivating their guanxi.
Stability

The next major category of responses came in the area of stability. A number of students raised this issue with me, and said that it was becoming an increasingly important consideration. This is related to monetary concerns, as it involves being guaranteed a regular income and benefits after retirement as well, concerns that are strengthened by the fact that unemployment in China is growing. Students are concerned that they will be laid off at some stage in their lives, or find it hard to get a job in the first place, particularly if their parents have been laid off or are facing that possibility. The small sample of students from Elite Affiliated skews the answers somewhat in showing that almost half would like a stable job, but this may indicate that even these students view the economic situation as potentially threatening to their future. Students at NorthWest Ordinary were the next most likely to cite stability, and even though only 12% mentioned it specifically, many types of jobs they are attracted to are inherently stable – teachers, police, and the military. These students have direct experience of unemployment of one or both parents due to lay-offs within state-owned factories and thus wish to avoid the possibility themselves. One NorthWest Ordinary student said that “in all areas, unemployment is a danger. If you are a teacher, it is hard to become unemployed.” A teacher at Elite Affiliated agreed that teaching is more popular now because of its stability, and the few students at Humanities Middle who cited reasons of stability as attractive wanted to become teachers. Two Elite Affiliated students wished to become doctors, and see that as also giving stability.

“Serving the Motherland”

A response primarily from students at NorthWest Ordinary was that of wanting to serve (or develop) the country or the people through their work, which is also seen in the types of jobs they chose [see table 4]. 17% of students cited this as a reason for
Table 4: Student Job Aspirations by School

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Humanities</th>
<th>NorthWest</th>
<th>Elite</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>Ordinary</td>
<td>Affiliated</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International work,</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business, economic related</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tourism</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reporter, journalist,</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>editor</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lawyer</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manager</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medicine</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Military and Police</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arts (fine and performing)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpreter, translator</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computing</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secretary</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Number</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>233</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
choosing a job, and it is significant in that NorthWest Ordinary is one of the oldest
schools in Kunming and it was the one which displayed the most patriotic, pro-serve-
the-people, proletariat revolutionary slogans and posters. Students at the school are also
generally less willing to respond to questions with anything other than the rhetoric they
are taught at school, home and through the media. In homework writing which they
assumed other teachers could view, Humanities Middle students also talked about
developing and serving the country, and that to do this effectively they need knowledge
and a good education; but in their questionnaires, which I assured them would not be
seen by other teachers, very few mentioned this as a reason for getting a job.

**Travel Opportunities**

A prominent difference between the aspirations of Humanities Middle students and
those of the other schools came out in the area of travel opportunities [see table 4].
Many students from this school want to become involved in the tourist industry, giving
them the chance to travel and expand their knowledge about foreigners and foreign
countries. Given the emphasis Humanities Middle places on English language
proficiency, and the fact that many students chose to attend the school for that reason,
such desires to use their English and see the world are not surprising. Through
homework compositions, many more Humanities Middle students mentioned their
desire to travel and see the world. Other jobs, such as interpreting and translating,
foreign affairs and trade, and other government work were also noted as desirable. No
Elite Affiliated student ever told me they wanted to work in government or tourism, and
only two NorthWest Ordinary students thought they would go into
interpreting/translating or tourism, yet a number of Humanities Middle students
appeared to be heading in these directions.
Gender Differences

A few female students perceive a gender bias in the employment market, and pitched their choices of job accordingly [see table 5]. One Humanities Middle student said that being a secretary is “best for a girl”, and another thought that joining the police force would give “good pay for a girl”. Through written compositions, other Humanities Middle female students expressed frustration at job inequalities, with one girl stating that “if I were a boy, I may have more chances to find a job, because girls are not treated as well as boys” and another asserting that “if I were a boy, I would find a job easily.”

In their study of Wuhan junior high school students, Broaded and Liu found that a far higher percentage of girls than boys wanted to become teachers and doctors.\textsuperscript{10} In Kunming, however, the margin between numbers of males to females desiring to be teachers was not as great (9% compared with 15%), while more males than females wished to become doctors. Another category appearing in my own study and mentioned by Broaded and Liu was that of journalists, writers and translators. They found that more girls than boys mentioned these kinds of job, and my own findings agree with this, though the difference is very slight.

The greatest difference between my results and those of Broaded and Liu is in the area of military and police jobs, which show a high proportion (in comparison to their other job aspirations, at 12%) of males desiring such jobs\textsuperscript{11}, while mine show that the results are fairly even. In the area of desires to become businessmen and managers, the Kunming students showed similar results to those from Wuhan, with a higher

\textsuperscript{10} C. Montgomery Broaded and Liu Chongshun, \textit{op.cit.}, pp. 67-69.
\textsuperscript{11} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 68.
Table 5: Student Job Aspirations by Gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Job Category</th>
<th>Males</th>
<th>Females</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Teaching</strong></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>International work, Government</strong></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Business, economic related</strong></td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tourism</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reporter, journalist, editor</strong></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lawyer</strong></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Manager</strong></td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Music, arts, fine and performing</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interpreter, translator</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Computing</strong></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Secretary</strong></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Science</strong></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Other</strong></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Don’t know</strong></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Number</strong></td>
<td>58</td>
<td>175</td>
<td>233</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
percentage of males expressing these aspirations.

### 4.3 “Monetary” Reasons for Job Choices

Desire for monetary gain, as I have shown, is a significant, if sometimes masked, reason for students to choose certain jobs above others. A great number of senior 2 students from Humanities Middle, for instance, felt that a good income would enable them to buy things for their parents, to repay them somewhat for the hardships they have endured while supporting their child through school. In particular, students want to buy houses, clothes, and even cars for their parents:

- **I must study hard now and gain lots of knowledge. Only in this way can I earn a lot of money and repay my parents.**
- **I want to have a good job and earn much money. This is because my parents always work hard. They are very tired. They gave me a lot of things, so they became poor and live in a small house. When I earn money, I will buy a big, beautiful house for them.**
- **I will buy a big house for my parents and travel with them, because they have given me so much.**

Other students felt the need to support their parents and care for them in their old age:

- **I want a job with a high salary because I hope my family will be prosperous and I want to take good care of my parents.**
- **When I finish my studies, I can get a good job in a big company. As a result, I will get a lot of money and can employ someone to take care of my parents.**

In contrast to students from Humanities Middle who were planning to buy what are still considered luxury items such as houses (by which they often mean what Westerners mean, rather than a unit or apartment, as many students would love their own garden) and cars, NorthWest Ordinary students focussed on the need for money in order to get the basics of life:
If you have a high salary, your life will be comparatively rich. With money you can buy lots of things you need, like books and food, a bicycle etc.

I think money is important. Money isn’t all-powerful, but having no money is out of the question.

These responses from NorthWest Ordinary students are similar to those from a sociological study undertaken in a school in North-East England, which found that for working class boys, work did not contain anything intrinsically attractive. Rather it was the immediate rewards of work they desired (such as income), because they knew that without income they would find it difficult to obtain even the necessities of life.¹² That 16% [see table 4] of NorthWest Ordinary students wished to enter into business and commercial activities suggests that they are influenced by the government and media attention on individuals and households who have become rich from their enterprises.

Elite Affiliated students rarely elaborated on their reasons for desiring high salaries, which illustrates that they do not see their families as requiring such extra income and repayment for the outlay towards their education. Given their generally well-off backgrounds, they may also take for granted some of the luxuries in life such as overseas travel and cars.

### 4.4 Realism in Job Aspirations

Most students appear to be realistic in their job aspirations. By “realistic”, I mean that their ambitions are commensurate with the school they are in and the chances they have of realizing their goals of attending university and getting certain jobs. This corresponds

with Corrigan’s finding that working-class boys in North-East England “tend actually to expect to get jobs which represent very closely the jobs that they will get.”13 Among those whose job aspirations are clear, slightly more realism is found in Humanities Middle than NorthWest Ordinary, particularly among female students, but overall the results are fairly even [see table 4 for student job aspirations by school].

Students at NorthWest Ordinary tend to realize they are not going to become doctors or work in government, but they see jobs such as teaching as achievable. One girl said that if she did not get into university, then she would be a worker, and she thought this was more likely than getting into a tertiary institution. The findings by Broaded and Liu showed that students who aspire to jobs as police or military personnel are concentrated in average or low academic ability groups. This corresponds with my finding that students aspiring to such jobs are concentrated in NorthWest Ordinary, which has the greater number of students with average to low academic ability. Thogersen also notes that in Yantai, students from intellectual families (who tend to congregate in the key and better ordinary schools) are much less interested than other groups in joining the army.14 Humanities Middle students tended to aspire towards professions in the humanities, as they know that their weaknesses lie in science and mathematics. The exception to this was a few students who wished to be doctors.

Although the numbers were small, it was significant that several Elite Affiliated students want to do scientific research, suggesting that they enjoy and are good at science, whereas only two students from the other schools mentioned research as a goal.

Again, this is in accord with Broaded and Liu’s findings that those who wish to become scientists, engineers and doctors were predominately from higher academic ability groups.\textsuperscript{15} Although in general academic work does not attract high salaries, the increasing emphasis placed on scientific and technological development within China may mean that areas of scientific research may attract enough prestige to counteract any salary deficiencies.

4.5 University Study Commensurate with Job Aspirations?

What universities and majors do students end up in, and are their majors at university close to their job aspirations? I have limited data on this, as schools were either unwilling to say or did not know where their graduates had gone. In 1999, for the first time, the \textit{Yunnan Education Newspaper} published a full list of those Yunnan students who were successful in entering tertiary institutions, the tertiary institution they entered and, if in an institution in Yunnan, their department as well. This indicates that the schools are very aware of which institutions their students have entered, but were unwilling to tell me probably because their reputations could be influenced by a wide knowledge about what kinds of universities their graduates are attending. Despite the publishing of student names and institutions, I was not able to find out much more about which institutions my former students were accepted into without going through thousands and thousands of names. An additional problem was that even if I thought I had found their names by chance, I could not know for sure if it was them or someone else with the same name. Although students told me what universities and majors they aspired to in questionnaires, I had no way of knowing which universities they actually

\textsuperscript{15} C. Montgomery Broaded and Liu Chongshun, \textit{op.cit.}, p. 68.
applied for, or if they did enter their preferred major, which university it was in.

Through contacts I have kept, I know for certain that three girls from among those surveyed and interviewed at Humanities Middle have gone into a provincial key foreign language university outside of Yunnan, Eco-Tourism and Forestry Protection in a Forestry Institute in Kunming, and Hotel Management in a Kunming tertiary vocational institution respectively. One boy just passed the minimum score required to enter a tertiary institution, but did not like what he was offered (it was probably his third choice of major) and decided to enter a revision class in order to take the NUEE again next year. Two other girls may have entered the English department of Yunnan University, as their names were listed in the *Yunnan Education Newspaper* under this category. These majors fit closely with their job aspirations and those of Humanities Middle students overall, emphasizing the realistic nature of most student choices as early as their first senior year.

### 4.6 Qualification Escalation

The trend towards getting a tertiary education is fuelled by the Chinese government itself, which is anxious to improve the quality of personnel in the workforce through education. Dore suggests that late developing countries are more likely to use meritocracy as a means of mobilizing talent because of a greater desire to “catch up” with the developed world. The Chinese Vice-Minister of Education, Zhou Yuanqing, was quoted as saying that “college students are essential for implementing the policy of “revitalizing the nation through science and education”, and stated that “economic sectors should employ college graduates first when recruiting new staff.”

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increasing numbers of people become educated at higher levels, employers give greater preference to candidates with qualifications when hiring employees. Students themselves recognize this, making statements such as “factories and companies always judge a person by his or her degree. After university, I will get a job more easily than others who didn’t study at university” and “if I can go to university, I’ll be likely to get a good job, because many companies need university students.” At some point, the job market for jobs offering what are seen to be the best rewards becomes saturated, forcing graduates to find work which previously they would not have considered. Dore’s example of this centres on graduates finding that they can no longer get $7 a week clerk positions in a bus company, and instead apply for less desirable (but better than nothing) positions as bus conductors earning $5 per week. The bus company, faced with an influx of applicants and no alternate method of sorting them, employs those with the higher qualifications. Gradually, the higher qualification becomes necessary for those jobs which previously had only required a lower level of qualification.17

“Educated Unemployed”

Graduates who do not find work become “educated unemployed”; they have obtained the right qualifications but are still unable to find work in the modern sector. This is a particular problem in Japan, where “secondary education has become universal and tertiary education a mass phenomenon”, making it “hard to obtain a white-collar job from high school and even graduation from university is in itself no guarantee of a ‘good job’.”18 In China, it is widely publicized that a bachelor’s degree is a prerequisite for most positions in government departments and institutions and joint ventures19, and

18 Ikuo Amano, *op.cit.*, p. 57.
the NEEA official with whom I spoke admitted that companies will choose those with higher qualifications first and that students who do not go to university may end up as labourers. A China Daily report stated that “students with bachelor degrees are finding it more difficult to get jobs, as employers, including big companies and government institutions, prefer those with master’s and doctoral degrees.” Although education at the secondary level has by no means become universal in China as it has in Japan, this report suggests that the problem of an educated unemployed group of people has already emerged to a certain extent. At this stage, though, while some fears and uncertainties about job opportunities are expressed by educational participants, in general they are not enough to alter the view that higher qualifications equal better jobs and social mobility.

**Increasing Competition**

As a result of this continued emphasis on the benefits of qualifications and the difficulty of attaining university entrance in China, the competition to get higher up the educational ladder is becoming more intense. Without exception, those I spoke with from all sorts of backgrounds said that “there are too many people in China”. Despite the one-child policy, enrolment ratios in urban areas continue to rise (no doubt as a result of the widespread implementation of compulsory basic education in urban areas, which Lewin et al. predicted would occur), and people at large believe that for youths to get an edge over their peers and have a chance of finding a desirable job, they must go to university. People I spoke with asserted that there are not enough “good” jobs to go around, and those without the academic upper hand will miss out. This increases the competition to enter university, causing students to lament that “because of our

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21 Keith M. Lewin, Angela W. Little, et al., op.cit., p. 223.
population, Chinese students have high competition. The more people there are, the fewer good jobs there are” and “China has a large population, which forces Chinese students to study hard to go to university in order to find a good job.” A Humanities Middle student said that

in China, there are many people. They want to find good jobs and live well, so they must compete. In order to become more capable, they begin to study hard like us. If we pass the examination, we can go to university. If we don’t pass it, we cannot go to university and from then on, we will not be able to find a good job.

The popular saying quoted at the top of this chapter also illustrates the perception that there are vast numbers of students all vying to sit for and pass the National University Entrance Examination to gain entry to university. Although only about 6% of each age cohort will even get to that stage, in 1998 that still meant 3.2 million students sat the NUEE, of whom only 1.1 million passed and entered tertiary institutions. Out of 73,430 Yunnan students who sat the NUEE that year, approximately 7586 (10%) were admitted into bachelor degree programs in key institutions, 9911 (13%) entered bachelor degrees in ordinary institutions, and 11455 (15.5%) went into tertiary vocational courses, a total of 39%.22

4.7 University Choice

In Japan, the level of qualification a graduate gains is seen as important, but even more important is the particular institution that graduate attends. The quality of Japanese job candidates is presumed to lie in the ranking of the university they had been able to get into.23 The rankings of universities in Japan (both public and private) are so well-known

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22 子越，〈腾腾万马各归槽〉，《云南教育报：高中生》, 1999年8月21日。
23 Thomas P. Rohlen, op.cit., p. 90.
that even slight variations in the perceived difficulty of entry into a tertiary institution can have major implications for job opportunities.\textsuperscript{24} Large corporations, government ministries and other large public organizations who are lifetime employers (most Japanese, once recruited into a company, expect to stay there for their working life) are more interested in general intellectual ability than specific area skills, and use the university entrance examination as a form of initial selection, taking those graduates from universities with the highest ‘standard deviation entry scores’ (which “serves to rank both individuals on the one hand and, by average scores of entering classes, universities and high schools on the other”).\textsuperscript{25} Students from Tokyo, Kyoto, Hitotsubashi, Keio and Waseda Universities are best placed to achieve their goals of finding the most secure jobs, with the best promotion prospects and the best fringe benefits.\textsuperscript{26}

This happens to a lesser extent in China. The NEEA official I spoke with asserted that students from famous universities such as Beijing and Qinghua Universities would have no problems finding a job, and that they simply need to go to work units after they graduate and ask about what vacancies are available. If the work unit has vacancies, those students will often be hired, regardless of what the vacancy is and whether their studies relate to the work or not. A Humanities Middle student thought that “if you are in a good university, many companies may want you to work for them.” One of the major policy decisions announced in the 1993 “Outline of Education Reform and

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid, p. 92.
\textsuperscript{25} Ikuo Amano, \textit{op.cit.}, p. 56.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid, p. 56.
“Development” was a program to identify the top 100 universities in the country and increase their resources. In 1998, this goal was realized with the publication of a book titled “China’s Top 100 Tertiary Institutions”, detailing the best universities and vocational tertiary institutions in the country. While this could be seen as entrenching already existing social perceptions of the tertiary institutions to the detriment of those not included in the list, most people I spoke with did not think it would alter them much, as “everyone knows the best universities anyway, with or without a book.”

In the complex considerations of university ranking and subsequent job opportunities, Yunnan graduates have to face hurdles others may not face. There are no nationally recognized universities in Yunnan, although Yunnan University is a provincial key university. A female student at Humanities Middle said that universities in Yunnan are not considered to be very good when ranking China’s universities. Yunnan is also widely regarded as “backward” (the same female student said Yunnan is seen as a place for criminals), and the NUEE marks required by students to enter university are significantly lower than in other parts of the country. For example, in 1999, the Yunnan cut-off marks for bachelor courses were 475 for humanities and 440 for science at key institutions; and 445 for humanities and 375 for science at ordinary institutions. The cut-off marks for tertiary vocational courses were 425 for humanities and 360 for science. In Jiangxi, in contrast, the cut-off marks for bachelor courses

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27 中共中央、国务院，《中国教育改革和发展纲要》，国家教委政策法规司编，《中华人民共和国教育法规实用要览1949-1996》（广东：广东教育出版社，1996年），第371页。
28 张彦中编，《中国百强》，《中国青年》（北京：中国文联出版社，1998年）。
were 542 for humanities and 542 for science at key institutions; and 525 for humanities and 506 for science at ordinary institutions. Jiangxi’s cut-off marks for tertiary vocational courses were 510 for humanities and 490 for science. Some provinces have even higher marks than these.

On the one hand, this means Yunnan’s students have a better chance of entering university. An Elite Affiliated student told me that she has come to Kunming from Jilin, and said that the education system is easier in Kunming than in Jilin, where it is more developed and competitive. A male classmate agreed with her, and concurred that education in the east is more developed and of better quality, making it harder to get into university. An English teacher in the school completed her senior high school education in Kunming, having moved from Jiangxi, and she also believed the move gave her a better chance of passing the NUEE. On the other hand, the lower marks disadvantage students. If a graduate of a university in Yunnan wishes to leave the province to find a job in a more economically advanced province, he or she has to compete with graduates from universities much more likely to be nationally recognized, key institutions. Although not all employers would discriminate on the basis of which institution a student had attended, when faced with different candidates many are likely to choose the one from a top university over one from Yunnan. A reason put forward for such discrimination was that employers might feel the quality of candidates from Yunnan is not very high given such lower NUEE marks. Another suggestion was that the employers’ ‘face’ and the face of their company or department depends on having employees who are seen as worthy, and others would view the decision to hire a Yunnan university graduate over, say, a Beijing University graduate, as strange.

30 “NUEE entrance marks for each locality”, China Youth Daily, 29 July 1999.
The perceptions of which provinces offer the “best” or “easiest” chance of entering a tertiary institution are influenced by the complicated way in which the NUEE system operates, with differing cut-off marks for each province (or autonomous administrative cities like Beijing). The reason that provinces are assigned different cut-off marks is purportedly to ensure a consistent proportion of applicants nationally have the opportunity to enter a tertiary institution. This system has given rise to the phenomenon of student “immigrants” who move from their home provinces with high NUEE cut-off marks to others with low cut-off marks in order to improve their chances of entering university.

Perceptions of the importance of which tertiary institution to attend vary among Kunming high school students depending on what high school they attend. They also depend on the students’ job aspirations and whether they wish to improve their prospects by moving to another province. A number of students stated that “better schools are all outside the province”, although actually achieving the aim of entering such institutions is quite difficult. In 1997, 75% of Yunnan students enrolled in tertiary institutions within the province, with only 25% entering institutions in other provinces. Teachers told me that nationwide, those in more developed cities would

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31 The rational is that areas with more tertiary institutions will, obviously, enrol more students. Those provinces with numerous tertiary institutions also tend to have larger numbers of junior and senior high schools, thus making the numbers of NUEE applicants much higher than in other areas. So the more NUEE applicants and the more tertiary places a province has available, the lower the cut-off marks will be to ensure that a relative proportion of applicants pass and fill the available tertiary places. Thus, although Beijing and Shanghai are highly developed cities, their NUEE cut-off marks are lower than those of provinces such as Anhui, Hubei and Hunan.

32 谢念, <分数差逼出“高考移民”>, <<中国青年报>>, 2000年2月24日。

aspire to enter the best university they could, because the competition for good jobs in
developed cities is greater. A university lecturer sent to Wuhan to recruit students for
her university in Kunming said that all the applicants to the university were from the
countryside. The reason, she explained, is that for rural students, any major city is a step
up in their lives. Wuhan’s students, on the other hand, would not desire to go to a city
they see as a step down from their own.

In order to assist students, teachers and parents make decisions about which
universities to apply for, enrolment guide booklets are handed out each year, detailing
the previous years’ statistics on enrolments and NUEE marks for Yunnan graduates.
Each tertiary institution in the country is listed, with their planned intake of Yunnan
students, actual intake and the highest and lowest NUEE marks admitted for that
particular year. Students can then see what kinds of chances they have and can choose
universities accordingly. The figures for Yunnan student entrance into tertiary
institutions in 1999 quoted earlier show that more students are likely to be admitted to
tertiary vocational institutions than to others, but for most these will be the institutions
they have ranked in the third and lowest category on their university admission
preference.

Key school students are “expected” to enter good universities, given that they are
in the best high schools with the highest transition rates. Teachers at Elite Affiliated said
that most of their students would seek to enter universities in other provinces and that
their chances of succeeding in this goal were high. On the questionnaire I gave them, all
the Elite Affiliated students who answered stated their wish to enter some of the top
universities in China. Many wrote that if they graduate from a famous university they
will “find work easily.” A student at Humanities Middle had two friends at Elite
Affiliated who took the NUEE in July 1998. She later told me that both had been accepted at universities outside of Yunnan, one into a key institution. With an air of resignation and regret, she commented that she was not surprised, given that “they went to the best school, and students in top schools have so much greater a chance to enter such universities.”

As I was unable to interview graduating senior 3 students in any of the schools in order to ascertain the outcome of their examinations and university applications, some senior 2 Humanities Middle students and I discussed their impressions of a program shown on China Central Television which followed the life of senior 3 students in a key school in Dalian, Liaoning Province. The students felt that the program was generally realistic and that the issues that students in the television program faced in their senior 3 year would be ones which they too would face. In particular, they sympathized with the student narrator on the program who, being the top student in his senior class, applied to enter Fudan University in Shanghai, a famous key university. When he failed to achieve the required score on the NUEE, he was, in his words, “relegated” to a university in Dalian itself. He commented that his parents never thought he could do so badly, and that he himself was ashamed of his failure. The students who viewed the program with me thought that getting into a low level university would be similarly shameful for themselves, their parents and teachers, but that the expectations placed on key school students are such that failure for them would be even more pronounced.

In 1999, a year after the students had watched the program with me, one of them did do badly on the NUEE. Her only option was to enrol in a tertiary vocational course at Kunming University, which is considered to be of poor quality. She felt a degree of disappointment and failure, but also felt that any tertiary education is better than none.
This attitude was also seen among other Humanities Middle students, who were the most likely to feel they had good chances of getting jobs even if they did not get into university, because of their foreign language skills. This expectation is borne out by the experiences of previous graduates who have found work in tourist hotels.

Student expectations for entry into universities also rest on the way university places are allocated, as I detailed in Chapter Two. As a result of this system, the chances for Yunnan students to enter good universities outside of Yunnan, especially famous ones, are slim unless they perform exceptionally well on the NUEE. It is therefore safer for non-key school students to apply to institutions within Yunnan in order to maximize their chances of success.

Humanities Middle students thought that their contemporaries at lower-rated senior high schools such as NorthWest Ordinary would not face the problem of failed expectations in the same way, as they would not even dare to apply to top universities. Teachers at NorthWest Ordinary concurred with this assessment, and said their students aim more to enter any level tertiary institution and that they are applauded if they achieve that goal. The students at NorthWest Ordinary were more likely to cite Yunnan University or Yunnan Normal University as those they wished to enter rather than famous universities, although one student did point out that Beijing and Qinghua Universities are schools which “every hardworking student aspires to.” That student, however, was in senior 1, and students in that year still had quite high, probably unrealistic, aspirations. Students in senior 3, however, were much more realistic in assuming that their chances entering a famous university were small. When the time actually arrives for these students to write their university choices on their NUEE application forms, they are more likely to choose ‘safer’ options, particularly within
Yunnan, as entry into any level university will mean they are competitive within the Kunming job market. A similar kind of attitude towards choosing which universities to apply for could also be seen in students at the other schools, even Elite Affiliated. A university lecturer pointed out that because entry into the most famous universities is so difficult, only the most confident and brightest students would ever dare to apply. Most Humanities Middle and Elite Affiliated students would prefer to choose “safe” options, although for many, such options would still be a level above those aspired to by NorthWest Ordinary students. Rohlen also notes that this is the case in Japan, resulting in competition which “clusters towards the middle, especially the higher end of the middle.”\(^{34}\) For the majority of key school students and the top students in ordinary high schools in Kunming, competition for them is in the same realm.

**Which Subject Major?**

Not only can the institution matter - the major undertaken is also important. If a student undertakes a major at a university for which that university is famous (such as English at Beijing Foreign Language Institute), then they are well-placed to find a job. If, however, they study a major for which the university is not well-known (such as English at the Kunming College of Science and Engineering), they could have great difficulty finding a job. High job expectations, and the ranking of universities and majors, have lead to competition not only just to enter a university, but also to enter a small number of university courses. Students are not far-sighted, and tend to choose majors which appeal because of their own current perceptions of opportunities within that job sector. These highly competitive courses, such as international finance, international trade, insurance, accounting and business, are called “hot” subjects (rêmén

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\(^{34}\) Thomas P. Rohlen, *op.cit.*, p. 84.
In my discussions with students and teachers, they felt that “hot” courses included law, computing, economics, medicine and business, and these were certainly the ones most mentioned as student choices. With the majority of senior high school students applying to enter such desirable majors, many other departments at universities find it hard to fulfill their quotas, and consequently these areas of the job market are also undersupplied. Graduates specializing in teacher training, English, computing, communications, machinery, electronics, and other more vocational majors are said to have no worries about finding a job on graduation. However, although the information technology sector is also growing and more people will be needed for it, one of my senior 3 students at NorthWest Ordinary who wanted to get into a computing major mentioned that it is a “hot” subject, and she was concerned about the possibility of there being too many graduates in the area and not enough jobs.

In 1997, 28.96% of Yunnan senior high school graduates enrolled in the humanities, 58.08% in the sciences, 6.70% in foreign languages, 1.65% in physical education and 4.64% in the fine arts. That more than half the graduates enrol in science related subjects (which include subjects such as economics and business) is partly due to the fact that the Chinese government wishes to expand these areas for the modernization drive. The NUEE pass marks for science subjects are therefore always lower than those for the humanities, meaning that students in the science stream at senior high school have a greater chance of entering a tertiary institution than those in the humanities, even though humanities is viewed as the “easier” course to take. This

was the explanation provided to me by Elite Affiliated teachers to show why they had more students enrolled in the science stream.

This chapter has discussed the reasons behind the intense desire students and their parents have to receive an education, and more specifically, a “good” education which will lead to desirable jobs. Student perceptions of what is a desirable job differ according to the high school they attend, their family background, and to some extent their gender. Stability and upward social mobility are seen to be important and attainable through the right choices in education. Educational participants believe that in order to achieve their goals, the right choices need to be made in university and subject major selection, but these choices are also affected by institutional factors such as the way students are selected and allocated to university places. The competition to become educated at the tertiary level is fuelled by government rhetoric, economic and employment conditions, and social pressures. The “qualification escalation” which results from the combination of all these factors gives rise to a number of “backwash effects” which filter down through the education system. How these backwash effects are manifested in different ways and how they affect educational participants is the subject of the following chapter.
Chapter Five

Backwash Effects of the Diploma Disease

A consequence of people attending school in order to obtain qualifications rather than knowledge is, Dore states, a “backwash effect” whereby schooling increasingly equals exam-taking, leading to an increase in competition back down the line of schools into primary school or kindergarten. Schools become oriented around preparing students to enter the next level of school up and into university. Such intense competition means that students become burdened with more homework, pressures to succeed, supplementary classes, study aids and practice examinations. They are not encouraged to be creative or solve problems, but rather to rote learn and memorize formulas and lengthy texts. Teachers are obliged to teach towards the entrance examinations, and orient their classes around what the students need to know in order to succeed in them. Their performance, and that of the schools, is measured by the success of their students in the next-higher-level entrance examinations.1

In Japan, such competition is well-known. Many studies have been done and much concern has been raised in the Japanese media and government about the adverse effects of pressures on Japanese students to succeed, even when they are still very young. Some of the problems discussed have been the prevalence of entrance examinations for children to get into popular schools from kindergarten upwards, the lack of creativity amongst students which is then translated into the workforce, a rising

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youth suicide rate, and the lack of leisure and relaxation time for students even during holidays.

### 5.1 Hierarchy and Evaluation of Schools

One of the most significant backwash effects of the diploma disease in Japan is centred around getting into the “best” schools in order to have the “best” chance of proceeding to the next level of schooling. Graduation from senior secondary school is almost universal, at 96% of the age cohort, so that does not in itself differentiate Japanese students. Instead, “it is the nature and ranking of high schools that strongly influence students’ future life chances.”\(^2\) Schools are differentiated within the hierarchy by their relative difficulty of admission, and they “hold distinctive missions in relation to preparation for their students’ post-school destinations.”\(^3\) As in China, therefore, Japan has both elite and non-elite academic senior secondary schools, which not only have varying transition rates to university, but also differ in the types of universities their graduates enter. This means that the choice of senior high school and subsequent senior secondary entrance examination is one of the most important junctures of differentiation for Japanese youth.\(^4\)

The Senior Secondary Entrance Examination (SSEE) is similarly an important determinant in Chinese education. The type of senior secondary school a student enters largely determines their future education and job opportunities. The perception is that if an average student enters a key senior school, then their chances of entering a university

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\(^3\) *Ibid*, p. 63.

(which is also more likely to be a key university) are comparatively higher than if the same student entered an ordinary senior school with a lower transition rate to university. There are many suggestions that the SSEE is growing in its importance. In 1998 and 1999, newspapers across the country ran numerous articles about the increase in students vying for entry into academic senior high schools, calling it “academic school fever” (pùgāo rè 高熱). An article in the *Yunnan Education Newspaper* at the start of the 1998 school year asserted that “this year, key senior schools are filled to capacity and ordinary senior schools are over-enrolled, but specialized and vocational schools don’t have enough students.” While there is no doubt that there is a “fever” to enter academic senior high schools, some teachers I spoke with believed that the SSEE is not as important in Kunming as in Beijing and other more developed areas. They said that very developed provinces and cities have larger populations and more children from better educated backgrounds. The competition is thus correspondingly greater and it is much more important to go to a key senior high school, because there would be little chance of entering any university from an ordinary senior school. Famous universities are also concentrated in such developed areas, which means the pressure to enter them is greater and employers would be more concerned with which universities graduates have qualifications from. In contrast, the teachers said that the chances of going to university from an ordinary school in Kunming are still reasonable and there is not as much pressure to enter the very best schools. This relates to the previous chapter’s discussion about Yunnan’s lower standard of education and cut-off marks to enter university.

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Regardless of how severe the ‘academic school fever’ is in Kunming itself, the fact remains that it is growing across the whole of China, and that there is a strict hierarchy of secondary schools, both at the junior and senior secondary school levels. At the senior level, this hierarchy is, as in Japan, based on the schools’ transition rates to university. Hu Deqiu, Vice-Head of the office in charge of the Graduate Competency Examinations (GCEs) at the Yunnan Provincial Education Bureau, said that key schools focus on getting most or all students into university. Ordinary schools have two foci. One is getting students into university, and the other is enabling the students to pass GCEs so they can go out and find employment. Among the schools there is also a distinction between those schools which have high transition rates to key universities as opposed to ordinary ones. One Beijing academic’s wife whom I interviewed, a teacher at a senior high school in Beijing, protested that her school is not really very high up in terms of key schools, because although the transition rate is almost 100%, it is largely to ordinary universities, not key ones. In Kunming, as I detailed in Chapter Two, schools are officially ranked according to a complex evaluation of their size, facilities, qualities of their students and teachers, management and a myriad other things listed on a special form used by inspectors. What is not specified but is widely known is that the transition rate of a school is also very influential in its ranking.

5.2 What Makes for a “Good” School: Participant Views

For students and their parents, the transition rate is the most important factor in choosing a senior high school. Schools with high transition rates are thought to be “better” than others, as they offer entrants a greater chance of success in the National University Entrance Examination. After the NUEE results come out in Yunnan, newspapers are not allowed to publish “rankings” of senior secondary schools based on
their transition rates. But parents who ring to inquire about admission to individual schools can request the transition rate information, and key schools indeed brag about their rates to each other and to prospective parents and students. Teachers are also acutely aware of the transition rates, and there was no difficulty in obtaining personal opinions on the rankings. A leader at Humanities Middle, for example, was strident in his views that his school was “much better” than NorthWest Ordinary, while teachers at Elite Affiliated boasted that their school was “one of the top, if not the best” in Yunnan. All of the teachers whom I spoke to, regardless of which school they were at, cited Elite Affiliated and two other top key schools as those they regarded as the “best”.

Students are also aware of where their school ranks, and are articulate about what aspects of a school would give the school a high transition rate and ranking. It must be pointed out, however, that not all students thought there were differences between schools, let alone ones which might disadvantage them in the competition, with some commenting that “all students are equal and start from the same starting line” and “God is just to every student and school.” In total, only 36% of all students6 surveyed thought school factors were unrelated to success or that it did not matter which school they were in, while 64% thought that key schools would assist them to achieve their goals, with some ordinary school students openly discontented about their own disadvantaged positions. 77% of the students surveyed in Elite Affiliated were proud of their school and thought that it offered them the best chance of getting into university. None felt that another school would have given them a better chance, and only 8% believed that what the school offers is unrelated to success and that the key lies rather in their own hard work. At Humanities Middle, only 11% of students felt that their school would give

6 The total number of students who responded to this question was 203, with 35 from Elite Affiliated, 51 from Humanities Middle, and 79 from NorthWest Ordinary.
them the maximum chance of getting into university. 77% instead cited Elite Affiliated
and a couple of other key schools as the best sites for university preparation. 22% felt
that school attributes were unrelated to success. NorthWest Ordinary students were the
least likely to feel that their school was the best path to university, at only 9%, but 38%
argued that school factors do not influence success anyway. The remaining 53%
believed that key schools such as Elite Affiliated had the desirable attributes needed for
success. That a relatively large percentage of NorthWest Ordinary students believe it is
their own “hard work” which affects their study success illustrates that teachers have
been successful in transmitting this value to their students in order to encourage them in
their studying.

Teachers
The first quality of a good school was seen by students to be its teachers. Students felt
that “good teachers give rise to good students”, and a number thought that having good
teachers was the most important determinant of students’ success. Teachers in key
schools are thought to have a high quality of teaching, better methods and greater
experience than those in ordinary schools. A NorthWest Ordinary student stated that
“bad teaching is an ordinary school student’s biggest obstacle.” This view has some
validity, as the best graduates from teaching colleges and universities are often assigned
to key city schools, with those who are average or below-average are destined for
ordinary or even vocational schools. Students know that “teachers have been strictly
selected” in key schools. Key schools may also have more teachers at a higher level
than ordinary schools. A teacher’s level is determined by how long they have been a
teacher and their students’ results. Teachers who excel in their subjects in ordinary
schools and who become well-known for their achievements may be recruited by key
schools, leading to the idea that key schools have “many famous teachers.”
A university lecturer told me that key schools have experienced teachers who know which parts of the NUEE are important. They research the NUEE questions every year and build up knowledge and experience in predicting what questions will be asked in the next year’s examination. This is called “speculating on the NUEE” (gāo tóujī 高投机). The teachers then tell the students how to study and which types of problems will be on the examination. This, the lecturer intimated to me, was one of the reasons I was not allowed to listen to senior 3 classes at Elite Affiliated, because “key schools have many secrets they do not want other key schools to know.” One Elite Affiliated student mentioned that his school has “rich revision materials for the NUEE”, and another thought that 80% of the teachers at the school “have rich teaching experience.” Such “speculation” can also be seen in key schools in Japan. In his comparative study of five Kobe high schools, Rohlen notes that the history teacher at the most prestigious school, Nada, took care to point out key details of the topic which could make a difference in the university entrance examination. In preparation for this, the teacher “regularly reviews his substantial collection of past questions on the subject given by the top universities, and he knows those that have been particularly difficult for his students.”

A problem for Humanities Middle students is that they are in a school which specializes in the humanities. They feel that their science teachers are therefore of poor quality, and do not help them to pass the compulsory science subjects in the Graduation Competency Examinations.

Facilities and Equipment

Students felt that another key component of a good school is the extent and quality of its facilities and equipment. Key schools were again seen to have facilities that are superior to ordinary schools. From my own observations, I would agree that this was the case. Elite Affiliated had by far the most facilities and equipment of the three schools, with modern libraries, computer rooms, language laboratories, science laboratories, and video rooms, all with new equipment. While Humanities Middle had some of these facilities, their general condition was not as good. NorthWest Ordinary did not have a language laboratory or video room, and was far behind the others in the quality of its equipment, with the exception of its computers.

One NorthWest Ordinary student thought that one of the top key schools in Kunming would be a good school to study in because of its facilities, and made particular mention of its language laboratory, as he felt disadvantaged without one in the school. Another NorthWest Ordinary student pointed out that key schools have more and better facilities and equipment because they have greater financial resources. He said that parents “who want to get their child into a key school will offer the school lots of money. This means key schools have more money to spend, and so their facilities and equipment are better.”

Students did not only consider academic facilities in their assessment of schools, but leisure ones as well. Along with attributes such as good teaching, one NorthWest Ordinary student made much of a particular key school’s indoor basketball court to illustrate how good that school would be in preparing students for the NUEE! A few NorthWest Ordinary students were the only ones who mentioned the physical environment of a school as being important to their study. This was mainly in the
context of defending the attributes (such as space, fresh air, and greenery) of their own school, although some favourably mentioned the key school which competes for top position in the hierarchy with Elite Affiliated. That particular school is renowned for its beautiful and spacious grounds which are quite unlike those of any other Kunming school.

The irony of the students’ perceptions that facilities and equipment are important to their success is that prevalent Chinese teaching methods emphasizing memorization and the content of textbooks are largely unrelenting on any facilities and equipment which schools may supply. Facilities and equipment, even those used for occasional practical science demonstrations or computing lessons, have a marginal influence on students’ success in the NUEE, which tests theoretical knowledge.

**Study Atmosphere**

Much more important to students in all the schools was the study atmosphere and environment of a school. Part of this rests on the quality of students received at different schools. Key schools are seen to “have the pick of the students”, which leads to the perception that students in key schools “all work hard and no-one falls behind.” Key school students are described as “studious and intense, which makes you keep your mind on study and can boost your self-confidence.” An Elite Affiliated student thought that having over 50% of the best students from Kunming in the school means that an excellent study environment is created where “everyone’s marks will improve.”

Another thought that she could learn from and be motivated by her classmates who were studying hard. The competition which results from having such “quality students” in a key school was seen by most students to have a positive effect. One Elite Affiliated
student thought that the intense competition “encourages us to get good study methods and fosters our own talent.”

The alternative, in ordinary schools, are students who are not so studious nor academically capable, which leads to the feeling that students in an ordinary school who are serious about their studies are disadvantaged. One NorthWest Ordinary student wrote that “I am third in this school, and there are only two classes, with the lowest entry marks almost down to 200, so it is easy for me to feel better than others and slack off.” Others said their attention is easily diverted and influenced by other students, and as such they find it hard to concentrate on their study and make progress, whereas in a key school they would be spurred on by the competition to succeed. A university lecturer confirmed these students’ feelings, explaining that in key schools there is pressure to be a good student because you got into such a good school. Therefore you see around you students who are better than you and this generates competition, as all want to be better than each other. But in ordinary schools, there is no such incentive. All around you are mediocre students, and there’s no incentive to be better than them or compete with them.

A factor in the study atmosphere of a school is discipline, with one NorthWest Ordinary student complaining that

the classroom discipline [in Elite Affiliated] is good compared with our school – even though we sit in the first row, those behind talk and we can’t hear the teacher talking. So it’s hard to succeed in this environment, and we’d rather go to Elite Affiliated.

A couple of girls at Humanities Middle said that students who are academically poor, disrupt classes and do little studying in their school would actually be considered the “good students” in far worse ordinary schools. They cited several “bad” schools where “lots of girls smoke” and where students lie to their parents and go out dancing or to parties instead of studying. Key schools, they asserted, are “good because they don’t have these kinds of students, and all that the key school students do is study.”
Teachers made similar distinctions. A teacher at Humanities Middle grumbled that the hierarchy of schools is self-perpetuating. Good students go to a particular school, more pass the NUEE, the government rewards that school with better resources, equipment and so on, more students then want to go to that school, the school then selects better and better students and so forth. This teacher felt a keen sense of unfairness in this, and complained that “no matter what I do, if the students’ quality is not good there will not be as many who go to university, so the government will not consider Humanities Middle to be a top school.” She did, however, tell me that the quality of students at Humanities Middle is improving, in part due to the school offering money to attract better students. Students who score above 650 (out of 795) on the SSEE receive 500 yuan (A$100)\(^8\) if they enrol in the school. There is a hitch, however, and that is that the school attracts many students who dislike and are not good at science subjects. While they may excel in the humanities, they still have to pass GCEs in science subjects in which they generally perform poorly. Teachers worried greatly about this, particularly in regard to mathematics, as it can mean students do not do as well as they could on the NUEE. Teachers gave the impression they felt it was unfair that their students would be disadvantaged in this way even though they excelled in the humanities subjects. One teacher mentioned that for a school to be considered “good” by leaders and officials, the average student marks have to be high across all subjects. A school which is not strong in the sciences is widely viewed as a school of lesser quality. Science, which is promoted by the government as necessary for modernization and development, holds a much higher status than humanities.

\(^8\) All conversions throughout this dissertation are done at a rate of 5 yuan per Australian dollar.
Teachers at NorthWest Ordinary admitted that their students were only “poor to average” and that the school is not as good as Humanities Middle. They told me that most of the students are from working class backgrounds, and that many parents want their children to go on to university to get a good job. Many students in the school do not want to study, however. In each class there are usually one or two students a day who skip classes to play in electronic games parlours and the teachers regularly go to bring these students back to school. NorthWest Ordinary teachers felt that key school students tend to act and think as though they are better than everyone else, while their students are more down-to-earth. Like the Humanities Middle teachers, those at NorthWest Ordinary assured me that the quality of their students is improving, though they did not detail why, except to say that more parents want an academic education for their children and are thus sending them to whatever school they can get into regardless of the school’s reputation. Recent statistics for the school appear to support the assertion that the quality of students is improving, with the SSEE cut-off mark rising from 468 in 1995 to 560 in 1998, and though the percentage of university entrants from the school has fluctuated over those years, in 1999 it topped 50%.

From my own observations I largely agreed with the teachers’ assessments of their students. For the most part, Elite Affiliated students were bright, eager and quick to learn, as well as being assertive, competitive and self-confident. Humanities Middle students were more of a mixed group, but were on the whole fairly self-confident and studied hard. They were not as naturally bright, having to work hard to improve, and I did not think they were as quick to correct mistakes and learn. NorthWest Ordinary students were obviously far below in academic standards. In class they did not self-correct when making mistakes, and some had difficulty understanding instructions and completing even simple tasks. Upon reading these students’ answers to questionnaires, a
university lecturer commented that their writing (in Chinese) was very poor, showing a lack of thought, bad expression (writing like speaking), and errors in grammar and characters (some of which even I could identify). The majority of these students had little self-confidence, were not competitive and preferred to ‘play’ rather than study if given the option.

5.3 Streaming

The practice of streaming students within each school into different classes based on academic aptitude was a feature of the education system which emerged following Mao’s death. Stig Thogersen suggests that streaming originated as a way of ensuring at least some of each school’s students qualified for the next level of schooling, but that it was not official policy.9 There was much opposition to this method, and although central authorities have discouraged it since 1982, Thogersen contends that the number of articles and complaints appearing in the press about the negative effects of streaming indicates its continued practice at least until the late 1980s.10 In a 1997 journal article, Keith Lewin mentions that the practice of streaming still exists in key schools, though he notes that the curriculum content is largely unchanged despite different streams.11 There is a contradiction in that while streaming within schools is not official, the streaming of students of different abilities into different schools is policy.

From my own observations, I could not discern whether the practice of streaming within schools still exists or not. Certainly teachers in all of the schools were adamant

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10 Ibid, p. 87.
11 Keith Lewin, op.cit., p. 147.
that it does not exist. A Humanities Middle classmaster told me that it was unfair to divide students into different classes along the lines of academic ability, and that for poor students, it was good that they could be encouraged and helped by the brighter students in their class. In terms of teaching, however, she thought that it was hard to have such a mix of academic abilities in the class. Nonetheless, as a result of teaching so many classes at Humanities Middle as part of their regular timetable, I formed the opinion that although the classes might not have been officially streamed there were distinctions between each year’s classes in terms of their overall academic abilities and enthusiasm for study. Some classes seemed to have more enthusiastic, bright and motivated students, while others seemed to have far fewer of these students in them, though I knew from individual student marks that all classes had students who were struggling to keep up with the work. In fact, the class which I found to be the most rewarding was not the one which got the highest average marks overall on the NUEE when they took the examination in July of 1999 as senior 3 students. Instead, the marks related to the class number, with Class One receiving the highest marks, and so on down to Class Four with the lowest. While I could not confirm the reasons for this, and no teacher would have told me that the classes were intentionally numbered with the quality of the students in mind, it seemed more than coincidental that the marks averaged out in that way.

5.4 In-Class Ranking

The hierarchies in education do not just occur between schools. Within each school and each class there is always a hierarchy of students, organized along the lines of who gets the best marks. Although the local government in Kunming has expressly forbidden teachers and schools to rank their students in order to take some pressure off the
competition, the practice remains and is known as páidui (排队). There is disagreement among authorities, educators and school communities as to the validity of this practice, with some provincial authorities banning it in January 2000 on the grounds that it shames students and parents and does not encourage struggling students to make progress in their study.\(^\text{12}\) A university lecturer in Kunming with whom I spoke related a story which illustrates the negative effects of publicly announcing rankings. She attended a parent-teacher meeting at her son’s primary school where all the parents were gathered together. As the teachers read out the name of each child, the parents had to stand up. The names were read in rank order, from the top student down, so everyone knew what rank each child had attained. The parents of the top achieving students were applauded, while those of children at the bottom of the class were made to feel humiliated and lost a great deal of face. It is no wonder, therefore, that parents seek to ensure their children are progressing in their studies so that all might avoid the loss of face if the student fails.

Others believe that making grades and ranks public within the school community promotes healthy competition which should shame weaker students into performing better.\(^\text{13}\) My observations at Elite Affiliated suggested that teachers may have had that goal in mind. Although no individual grades or rankings were posted publicly on notice boards at Elite Affiliated, the teachers were the most likely among the three schools to inform all the students of the class rankings and how they compared with the students in other classes as well. The teachers rank students for each subject, based on mid-


\(^{13}\) The *China Daily* reported the vice-director of the Jiangsu Under Age Protection Bureau, Ma Lianmei as stating: “If we didn’t post grades in public, students could not compare themselves to each other and a good competitive atmosphere could not be built. If we keep the grades of students a secret, it will make no difference to whether the students get good grades or not and I fear that they would lose their spirit to strive and progress.” Mao Ning, “Can publishing grade lists help students improve?”, *China Daily*, 31 January 2000.
semester and end of semester grades. They report the rankings to the class as a whole or just tell the individual students what rank they are in each subject. Either way, all the students end up knowing their rank in relation to their classmates. The students felt that those classmates who were at the bottom of the rankings would naturally feel bad about it but those at the top or in reach of the top would feel proud and motivated to retain or claim top positions. In contrast, Martin Schoenhals asserts that in the key school where he was teaching no examination results were made known publicly within the school but that the practice did occur in ordinary schools.\textsuperscript{14} A teacher at the key school said this was because the key school students were all good students, so if the score of a student not doing well was publicized, that student “would be more embarrassed than would an average student without a reputation to uphold.”\textsuperscript{15}

While the method of informing students and their parents of grades and ranks is in question, there is no doubt that parents, teachers and students firmly believe that the nearer to the top of the rankings a student is, the better the student’s chances of passing the NUEE and entering university. As a result of this belief, great pressure is placed on students to move up the rankings or to retain their top position regardless of whether those ranks are widely publicized or not.

Students in key schools feel under more pressure given that the students surrounding them are of a higher calibre than that found in ordinary schools. One Elite Affiliated student told me that

because this school is famous in Kunming, there are many excellent students here and I have gone from being a top student in junior high school


\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 69.
to being an average student here. In order to improve, I must give myself pressure.

However, those at ordinary schools can also feel the pressure of a drop in the rankings. At Humanities Middle, only the names of those at the top of the class are read to the class. Students have to ask the teacher in person for their individual marks, but everyone quickly finds out where they are in relation to their classmates. The end of first semester is often a time for students to reflect on their rankings in each subject and overall. Many senior 2 students wrote about their feelings in their holiday diaries and made resolutions to improve in the new term. Some of the extracts from these diaries illustrate this:

In the last half of the year, I was second in the class. Now I have fallen behind. In the whole grade, there are many students who are ahead of me, and among all the schools in Kunming, there are more. But I won’t lose heart. This will be my source of energy next term.

I know there is a long distance between myself and others. I should try my best to study more. I’ll give up my old attitudes towards study. I won’t be lazy and too fond of play.

I must catch up on some study or I will be passed by other classmates.

Although the majority of students in NorthWest Ordinary did not face the same amount of competition among classmates, they still had the goal of entering university and would still face the judgement of others if they failed. One student commented that if you do badly and get low marks, in other people’s eyes you have low ability. If you do well, and your marks are high, in your teachers’ eyes you are a good student, in your parents’ eyes you are a good child, and in others’ eyes you are a person with prospects.

Students across all the schools fear the reactions from their parents towards poor test results and rankings. “We have parent-teacher meetings. I hate this. If the teacher tells my parents something bad, they will not be pleased.” NorthWest Ordinary students often said they lack self-confidence, and that pressure from parents and teachers ultimately does not help them to do better. One stated that
my greatest obstacle is a lack of self-confidence. My parents want me to be
talented, but if I can’t do the exam well, they will curse me. This doesn’t help my study, and puts me under great pressure and fear of failure.

Another felt that

teachers and parents place us under much pressure, and this is our greatest obstacle. After exams, teachers rank us, and if we aren’t ranked well, our parents will criticize us. Then our hearts bear a heavy burden.

Parents are not the only ones who are concerned with the study efforts of their children. Relatives also weigh in with their comments, criticisms and encouragement. One student at Humanities Middle wrote about his uncle, who, having no children of his own, treats the student as his own son and is very strict with him about his studies.

Schoenhals observed that if a student was not performing well academically, the teachers would encourage him or her to develop their talents in other areas. For example, if a student failed the NUEE, the teacher might say “that’s okay. Maybe you can still become a famous singer.”\(^{16}\) I was not aware of this occurring in the three schools, and although the students with whom I interacted felt that the principle espoused in the words “maybe you are not good at study, but that doesn’t mean that you are a bad student” is good, ultimately they point out that “in China, if your school records are not satisfactory, your schoolmates, teachers, relatives and even your parents will look down on you.” Rather than encouraging students to develop talents in other areas, I was more aware of students being offered rewards to study harder and get better marks. Rewards can come from parents, other relatives or the school. One student believed that “if I do well in my study, my parents will give me some reward, such as money or other things”, while another asserted that “if we study hard, we can get some prizes from the school.”

\(^{16}\) Ibid, p. 21.
One of the Humanities Middle classmasters told me that the top ten students in final examinations in each senior year get a substantial monetary prize from the school. She mentioned with pride how one of her students has twice received the top prize of 800 yuan (A$160). Four other students in her class have received 500 yuan (A$100). There are also city and provincial-wide competitions which students enter for subjects such as English, mathematics, and the sciences. In February 1999 the Ministry of Education banned national academic competitions in order to reduce the study burden on students, though regional competitions would still be permitted. Teachers said that success in competitions enhanced the reputations of schools and teachers and is taken into consideration for university entrance. Rewards can also be given to classes as a whole, though these are not all on an academic basis. For example, classes can be rewarded for having the cleanest classroom or for having the best discipline, not just for averaging top in any particular subject or overall. The aim of class rewards is to make all the students responsible for the performance of their classmates, so that they will help each other and work together as a group.

5.5 Feelings of Superiority/Inferiority Among Students

With such distinctions being made between schools and their students, it would be natural for a sense of pride to form among students at key schools, and a sense of failure or inadequacy to appear among those in ordinary schools. This is very hard to measure among students who are raised by parents and teachers to say what is expected of them rather than what they genuinely feel. If quizzed directly about their feelings many students answered as they would have been expected to, but others did not and revealed

true emotions about their self-image and the way they think others see them. While observing students in different schools, it was apparent that those in key schools genuinely felt they were somewhat better than others, though they often asserted this was only in the area of academic marks:

NorthWest Ordinary is not a good school. Generally, poor students go there. Students are channelled by the SSEE. Poor students go to poor schools, and good students to good schools.

I sometimes feel a little better than others, because key school students are mostly excellent and non-key students are mostly average.

Students are proud they can get into a key school, because the school spirit is good, the teaching quality is strong and the students’ excellence is famous. Non-key school students can’t reach this excellent standard.

Key students have better marks than non-key students, but that doesn’t mean in every area they are better than non-key students.

One key school student drew on the concept of “culture” (which I described as important in Chapter Four) to illustrate that she at least sees non-key students as “below her”, stating that

I am not saying that non-key schools don’t have good students, but when comparing the dress and speech of non-key students with students in key schools, we can see that their cultural level is comparatively low. So key school students are a bit better.

Students in non-key schools asserted that the only differences between themselves and key school students were marks, though some felt this was more a reflection on themselves as individuals than others. Expressions of inferiority mostly came from NorthWest Ordinary students. Many expressed shame and feelings of inferiority, particularly when compared with ex-junior high school classmates who had entered key senior high schools. One said that “I see key school classmates and in my heart have a feeling of inferiority”, and another articulated that she has “a feeling of inferiority
because I came here from a key junior high school. In the beginning, I did not want to be here, and I was also afraid of meeting former classmates.”

Some felt that it was now hard to relate to friends in key schools because of the differences between them, and that their key school friends might look down on them because their marks were not as good. A couple of students even thought that their parents and families made them feel inferior, stating that “in the eyes of most people, I am inferior, because they don’t understand non-key schools”, and “infront of the classmaster, parents and siblings, I feel inferior. My two older brothers went to key schools. I can’t face them.”

Two students detailed what they feel to be the reasons for the differences between themselves and key school students, with the latter suggesting a positive solution to the imbalance:

I have this feeling [of inferiority] because when I look at key school students, I feel totally ashamed. Why is it that others study well and I study so poorly when receiving the same education at the same time? It’s because I am not hardworking and like to play too much. There are many reasons why I feel inferior to key school students.

Key school student numbers are finite. Most people enter ordinary schools. We can’t deny that key school students’ grades and attitudes are better than ours, but this should make us work harder and get more competitive with them.

It is important to note that the perceived problem and perceived solution in these quotes rest on the amount of “effort” a student puts into his or her study. Many Asian cultures attribute success to effort rather than ability, and certainly much of what I

18 A fact noted by authors such as John Biggs, “Western Misperceptions of the Confucian-Heritage Learning Culture”, in David A. Watkins and John B. Biggs (eds.), The Chinese Learner: Cultural, Psychological and Contextual Influences (Hong Kong: Comparative Education Research Centre, 1996), p. 59.
observed leads to that conclusion. Teachers and parents were constantly exhorting students to study harder and to make a greater effort in order to succeed, and for their part students also accepted the import of such messages. This attitude explains to some extent why key schools are seen as so important to get into (because they promote and stimulate student effort), why parents of students who do not academically excel persist in trying to enter their child into a key school, and why students and parents generally have hopes of success in the NUEE. Yet much of the discussion in this dissertation about the differences between schools and their students has so far rested on the “quality” of students. Ordinary school teachers admitted that their students are “poor to average” and bemoaned the lack of “quality students” in their schools, while students themselves have made similar distinctions between the bright in key schools and the “poor” in others. These comments were not referring to students who made “efforts”, but rather to those who were naturally bright and academically capable. Chen, Lee and Stevenson note that a belief in the importance of hard work persists even though at least some high school students “must have found that some classmates did well without studying hard and others maintained a mediocre record in spite of studying hard.”19 It appears as though the desirable (and therefore publicly promoted) attitude is that “effort equals success”, while in reality all are very aware that in the end ability also plays a part.

5.6 Backwash Effects on Teaching and Learning

The overall result of ranking students in their classes and schools, coupled with each student’s desire (and/or their parents’ and teachers’ desires) to succeed in the

competition to get into a university leads to great pressures and negative backwash effects on teaching and learning. There are many sayings which students quote to illustrate the emphasis that teachers and others place on making progress in study. Students frequently complained that they are pressured to “study hard and make progress every day” (hǎohǎo xuéxí, tiāntiān xiàngshàng, 好好学习，天天向上) and that they should study to “get the best marks” (fēnshù diyi, 分数第一). One student remarked that “every day, everyone studies for the goal of good marks, but after we’ve done the exam, what do we really know? The whole day is spent memorizing books and formulas.” The complaint about memorization is a valid one. I never saw students ask questions in class, and all their revision centred around reading the textbooks repeatedly and testing each other on various facts and figures. For some subjects, such as English, all that the senior 3 students at NorthWest Ordinary and Humanities Middle did in class was to practise NUEE examinations. The teacher would then go through the papers in class discussing some points to be aware of, but generally not explaining why an answer was correct or not. Students admit, however, that they have little choice but to copy and memorize because of the amount of information in each subject they are expected to know for the exams.

Teachers also feel trapped by the system, particularly younger ones who are seeking change. The dissatisfaction of teachers was most obvious in a meeting I attended at Elite Affiliated, which was also attended by the school’s leaders, where I gave an introduction to Australian high school education for the English Department teachers. In the discussion afterwards, one of the young senior 1 teachers was quite vehement in his condemnation and criticism of how he has to teach, disliking how the examination-centred curriculum forces teachers to concentrate solely on the textbooks to the detriment of the students’ creativity and, in the case of English, oral skills. That
this teacher was so outspoken in front of the department head and school leaders illustrates the extent of discontent some teachers feel. During one lesson that I observed, a young NorthWest Ordinary politics teacher deviated from the textbook to give a better introduction and background to different political systems around the world. She said afterwards that she does not like the way she has to teach with the pressure to finish the textbooks on time, and likes to add interesting or more thought-provoking examples to her lessons if she can. She complained that “students don’t have to think for themselves because everything is told to them, including what to remember and take note of.”

At the end of the 1997-1998 school year, I experienced first hand exactly what is expected of teachers in preparing students to sit major examinations. The senior 2 classmasters, who were also the English teachers, asked me to provide the students with extra lessons in written composition in preparation for their English Graduation Competency Examination. They gave me the preparation booklets, which had model compositions written in them for five different topics, and expected me to teach the students how to write similar compositions. When I asked a student how she thought I should approach the task, she tactfully suggested that what I should do was write a model composition for them and point out the important ideas they should include. They would pass the composition section of the exam by rote-learning at least the main points and then regurgitating it verbatim in the exam. Teachers had little faith in their students passing the composition section if they had not prepared for it in that way. One teacher said that many teachers believed that the topic in that year’s English GCE would be “The School Library”. She was concerned, because “the students have never had to write about this topic before, and if they haven’t done so, how will they be able to write about it in the exam?”
Like all high school students across the world, Chinese high school students do not always see that what they are doing at school will be useful when they graduate and find jobs. Students rightly feel that marks on examinations do not present a full picture of their talents and attributes, and most would like to have a more practical education which prepares them more completely for life. The complaint that an examination-centred curriculum leads to the under-development of talents, creativity, and the ability to solve problems is an old one. In the initial edition of *The Diploma Disease*, Dore argued that the effects of exam-oriented schooling turn education “into mere qualification-earning, ritualistic, tedious, suffused with anxiety and boredom, destructive of curiosity and imagination.”\(^{20}\) In the second edition of his work, however, Dore recognizes that the effects are not the same for all students, and refers to Rohlen’s discovery that the most prestigious high school in Kobe, which had a high proportion of pupils entering top-rank universities, also had the most extra-curricular club activity and the most evidence of intellectual excitement and challenge. Both Dore and Rohlen’s explanation was that the school, Nada, accepted only exceptionally talented students who had the ability to achieve their goals, and as a result were the most self-confident and assured of success. Dore states that in general, “it is not the most able children whose intellectual and personal development is likely to suffer most from high qualification-oriented schooling”, because creativity and pleasure in learning and problem-solving is kept alive most readily in those to whom such activities come easily.\(^{21}\)

In my experience, the majority of my students at both Elite Affiliated and Humanities Middle were highly creative and imaginative. Several of my Humanities


Middle students wrote English compositions that were among the most creative I have seen coming from any student, in China or Australia. My Elite Affiliated students, too, were creative and thoroughly enjoyed the conversation lessons in which they were able to display that talent. Like Rohlen and Dore, I believe that an examination-dominated curriculum does not destroy a bright student’s ability to be creative and imaginative. Such talents will surface when given the opportunity to do so, but are largely not required in order to pass the entrance examinations and therefore stimulating students’ creative talents is not a primary task of most teachers. This is demonstrated by an incident at Humanities Middle, when a new deputy principal arrived at the school in the middle of the semester and attended some of my classes. At the time, I was teaching the classes about poetry and took them outside to stimulate their creative thinking skills and let them write some short, simple poems. The deputy principal stated quite firmly and almost critically that “students in China do not do this. They sit in the classroom to learn.” With such an attitude from a school leader, it is no wonder that teachers in the classroom do not attempt to stimulate their students outside the usual boundaries of learning.

While the talents of students at Elite Affiliated and Humanities Middle may be suppressed by the nature of teaching and learning in their schools, the students at NorthWest Ordinary were not as academically capable as those in the other schools, and did not display much creative ability at all despite my giving them opportunities to do so. There is nothing to suggest, however, that given a more varied and interesting environment and encouragement some of them too could demonstrate much imagination and creativity, but in general it would have required more cultivation. At the same time, it must also be remembered that not all students in Australia, or any other country for
that matter, are naturally creative, even if they are academically capable in other ways and are given maximum incentive and opportunity.

While Dore lays the blame for a lack of problem-solving skills and critical thinking at the door of an examination-centred curriculum, I would contend that, for the Chinese at least, this deficiency is a product of history and society which is reinforced by the curriculum. Chinese have learnt to survive by not questioning and not criticizing (at least in public) what is done by the authorities and their superiors, as they know that those who do suffer negative consequences. Students are taught in kindergarten that the teacher is always right, even when wrong, and parents train their children from a young age not to criticize. This means that unlike the Nada students whom Rohlen observed engaging in a discussion of the relative merits of one argument over another, none of my students, even those at Elite Affiliated, were good at thinking critically and engaging in topical debates. They tended to only see one side of an issue, the one they believed or had been told was right, while being completely unable to argue against it, even when presented with hints and suggestions to assist them.

One aspect of education in China which is a product of the emphasis on examinations is the lack of extra curricular activities in most schools. As at Nada, however, Elite Affiliated had the most evidence of extra curricular activity, but this was not evidenced in the same way as at Nada with clubs for different sports and hobbies. In fact, the major difference between Elite Affiliated and the other schools were the annual student outings. Humanities Middle students first brought these outings to my attention, complaining bitterly that their school was letting them down by not having annual trips.

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I inquired about such trips at Elite Affiliated, and the students there told me that yes, they took an annual trip somewhere within the province as a year group. They said that even the senior 3 students have this kind of outing, and when I expressed surprise, they offered no other explanation than it was “traditional” to do so. Sporting competitions played an important part at all the schools, but were not allowed to encroach on classes. Just as in Australian schools, annual sports days were held and enjoyed by all, though students were often compelled to compete in events as part of their physical education assessment rather than of their own volition.

Student Attitudes Towards Lessons and Teachers

Schoenhals notes that students at the key school in which he taught did not pay as much attention to or attach the same importance to subjects which were not going to be tested in the NUEE.23 This was particularly true of his English conversation class, as oral English is not an examinable subject unless a student applies to study it at university, in which case the university runs its own oral examination. The only oral conversation classes I taught were at Elite Affiliated, and my students were both interested in and capable at speaking English. As a result, I did not face the same diffidence Schoenhals faced from some of his students, though attendance in the class varied according to other academic commitments. At the other schools where I taught an examinable subject in written English, I found that the students who did not pay attention in my classes were those who did not like and were generally not good at English. As there are normally no subjects taught at the schools which are not in the NUEE, I could not ascertain whether students on the whole attached less importance to the classes or not.

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23 Martin Schoenhals, *op.cit.*, p. 98.
Just because a subject is examinable does not necessarily ensure even the brightest students’ undivided attention for the lesson, as Schoenhals also discovered.²⁴ Chatting during lessons is common. The worst cases I witnessed were at Humanities Middle, where the senior 2 students would, without fail, grow increasingly noisy and restless during their Chinese lessons, to the extent where I could barely hear the teacher speak. The students said they thought the Chinese lessons were boring, and also laughed at their teacher’s accent. In contrast, I did not observe any lesson at Elite Affiliated or NorthWest Ordinary in which students talked so much, though my own senior 1 and 2 classes at NorthWest Ordinary were always full of chattering noisy students – a fact I in part attributed to the large numbers of students in the room (nearly 100 for each class), their lack of ability and lack of interest in English, and an inability to see the blackboard. Schoenhals attributed in-class chatting to boring lessons²⁵, and certainly my Humanities Middle senior 1 students were the most quiet and attentive during their history lessons where their teacher, a youthful male, kept them on their toes with a blend of strictness and fascinating stories which made them laugh. But the lessons at Elite Affiliated and NorthWest Ordinary were no more or less boring or interesting than those at Humanities Middle. Students at these schools just showed their inattentiveness more often in other ways; for example I observed a couple of senior 1 Elite Affiliated students throwing small pellets of paper around the room in a history lesson. Other students would fall asleep, read books or magazines under their desks, pass notes to each other, or do homework from another subject – activities which Humanities Middle students also occasionally engaged in.

²⁴ Ibid, pp. 96-98.
²⁵ Ibid, p. 97.
I would suggest, therefore, that there is more to the behaviour of students in a class than simply boredom or a notion that the class is not important because it is not examinable. I noticed that my senior 1 students at NorthWest Ordinary were always particularly quiet during their history class and found out that their strict teacher was also their classmaster. A university lecturer informed me that while students will often chat in class if they cannot hear, do not understand, or dislike the subject, they would generally not do so in those classes taught by influential teachers. The most influential are their classmasters and those who have positions of authority or influence within the school, or those who have good *guanxi* with those in authority. Classmasters are particularly important because they write the students’ evaluations (jiāndìng 鉴定).

Schoenhals suggests that it is often young teachers who are the targets of student disrespect and criticism in class.26 I believe that this is related more to the influence and *guanxi* of teachers rather than their age alone. In fact, I was unaware of a difference in behaviour towards younger teachers, even female ones (who Schoenhals also thought were targetted by students). Indeed all the students I spoke with preferred young teachers over older ones, suggesting that older teachers are out of touch with the youth of today and are “boring” and “too traditional”. They liked the younger teachers because they felt they could relate better to them. However, I did hear about an incident related to a young male politics teacher at Humanities Middle, who I shall call Teacher W. This teacher was rather brash and particularly confident of his own abilities, coming across as quite arrogant. He would often write words in English on the board in the politics lessons and try to make jokes, but he often made mistakes in his English and his jokes fell flat, and there would be uproar in the class as students laughed and taunted him.

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26 Ibid, pp. 131-133.
Later in the year, some of my former senior 2 students told me that Teacher W was no longer teaching them politics in senior 3, although teachers usually continue with the classes right through senior high school. An incident had apparently occurred whereby a student got out his textbook in an exam to cheat on an answer. Teacher W had upbraided the student who refused to put the book away, whereupon the situation escalated into a physical brawl between teacher and student. The students who told me of this event said that their classmates had been complaining to the principal about Teacher W’s teaching abilities, and thought that this was because they did not like him cracking jokes in class and that he was too young. A university lecturer who heard the story said that it would be very rare for such an incident to occur, and surmised that it was not just because Teacher W was young, but that he did not have much influence or guanxi behind him. It turned out that the student involved was the son of an older, more senior history teacher in the school, who would have had much more guanxi than Teacher W. Thus the student involved would not have been afraid of getting into a fight with Teacher W, because Teacher W was not well supported within the school. This suggests that it is the status of a teacher within the school which is the determining factor in how students treat their teachers, and that young teachers can be more vulnerable if they do not have the right connections.

The causal connection between students’ respect and attention in class and the influence of the teacher is still not the whole picture, however. Students at Elite Affiliated and NorthWest Ordinary were much better behaved in all their classes than were students at Humanities Middle. Teachers at both these schools would have varied in their influence just as those at Humanities Middle did, so the question has to be asked as to why there was such a marked difference in student behaviour at Humanities Middle. From the impressions I gained, teachers at Elite Affiliated are generally highly
respected by students because of their experience and knowledge, and students would therefore be more discrete about showing their boredom in class. They would certainly not complain to school authorities about their teachers, laugh at them or get into verbal or physical fights with them. Students at NorthWest Ordinary are largely from working class backgrounds, and have been taught to respect teachers and others who possess “culture”. Even NorthWest Ordinary teachers whose knowledge is limited and whose teaching ability is poor would still be considered to know more than most of their students – thus they are still able to command respect from their students. Humanities Middle students, on the other hand, would be more confident in their own abilities and knowledge than students at NorthWest Ordinary, and would thus be more critical of teachers they see as lacking teaching ability.

**Homework**

The burden of homework that students face has been one of the major issues in education for many years, and has been discussed at great length in the media and in educational research. Numerous official pronouncements have promoted efforts to reduce the homework burden on students, exhortations which remain largely in the realm of rhetoric rather than practice.

When I first arrived at Humanities Middle, I attended the day-long teacher meeting at the beginning of the semester. At this meeting, the vice-principal announced the requirements for homework, exhorting teachers not to give too much. The regulations stipulated that a total of only two and a half hours of homework was to be given each day. Some subjects were allowed to demand more homework than others, with the main courses of Chinese, maths and English to give half an hour per day and the rest only twenty minutes. In a rather contradictory statement, some subjects were
criticized for rarely giving homework. These subjects, geography, history and politics, were to give homework no less than three times per term. While this might sound reasonable on paper, such restrictions fail to take into account the sheer volume of material students are required to memorize for the GCEs and NUEE. The word ‘homework’ encompasses much more than just lesson by lesson teacher-set exercises, although these still amount to a great deal.

Teachers at Elite Affiliated told me that because each lesson contains a large volume of information, students have to prepare the lessons before class or they will not be able to keep up. All teachers, regardless of the school they are in and the ability of their students, have to get through all the required content each semester, meaning that they give their lessons at a rapid pace and do not have time to explain concepts further even if students do not understand. This reinforces the need to memorize rather than understand the material, and also disadvantages those students who are not as bright. On top of the preparation and set homework comes the revision of old material to ensure that everything is firmly committed to memory. The structure of the GCEs and NUEE means that students must review what they have learnt in each subject since the time they began that subject. Subjects which are required for the NUEE, therefore, typically consist of three full years of material, at approximately one to two textbooks per semester.

Homework in its broadest meaning was seen by students to be the major burden during their senior years. Humanities Middle students in both senior 1 and 2 classes frequently complained about how tired they were and that they had too much homework to do. One student articulated it for all:
School days are monotonous, particularly in senior high school in China. In order to get into a university, we have a lot of homework and we feel very tired. We have no time to do other things besides study and more study.

Students at Humanities Middle expressed relief when I did not add my own homework to the rest. Teachers told me that many students do not go to bed before midnight. Students facing major examinations said they would go to bed late and then ask their mothers to wake them in the early hours of the morning to do some more studying. A Humanities Middle student said that sometimes she is so tired after dinner that she goes to bed straight away, but gets her mother to wake her later to study. Some Humanities Middle students said that even if they had no homework, their parents would never tell them they had done enough, but would rather encourage them to revise and prepare lessons instead of letting them relax for a while. Many senior 3 students at NorthWest Ordinary felt that compared to the pressures of study they faced in their junior 3 year prior to entering senior high school, their first year of senior high was not as difficult. They said that during their first year they still had a lot of time to play, without a huge amount of homework, but that homework increased during their second year. Senior 1 students at the school concurred that they did not feel such a great burden of homework. Elite Affiliated students were rarely vocal in complaining about homework, and seemed to accept it as a fact of life.

**Extra Classes**

A direct result of the need to constantly revise such an amount of information and the lack of time teachers have to present the necessary material are the extra classes characteristic of examination-centred Asian education systems. Parents’ desires to see children achieve success in education also fuel the need and provision of such classes. Rohlen discusses the lucrative business of cram schools (*juku*) in Japan which offer
supplementary education after school, and argues that although there is no proof that such cramming helps, parents fear their children will lose out in the competition without the extra lessons.\(^\text{27}\) The competition therefore fuels the market for such schools and classes. In China, there are no special schools for supplementary education, but there are supplementary classes which come in a variety of forms.

In Kunming, such classes can be categorized as school-run, those run within other educational institutions outside the school, and private. A quote from a senior 2 Elite Affiliated student illustrates the forms extra classes can take:

On Saturday morning we come to class, and in the afternoon there are extension classes (提高班) outside of school. So there’s only Sunday morning in which to do homework and revise, because Sunday afternoons are spent at coaching (辅导班) classes, which are also run outside of school.

This student does not mention the fact that in addition to the normal timetable at school, extra/supplementary classes are also added into the day whenever possible. “Extension classes” are those which go beyond what the students have been studying in their textbooks, while “supplementary classes” are those which revise and go over the students’ current subjects.

Supplementary classes are most often held within the school. The most common way teachers schedule these classes is to have them after the timetabled classes each afternoon and on into the evening. Students in Elite Affiliated would frequently miss my non-compulsory lessons due to teachers conducting extra classes in various subjects. While this happened mostly at exam times, such classes could also be called if a teacher had not covered the required amount of material in a lesson. The students could be

\(^{27}\) Thomas P. Rohlen, \textit{op.cit.}, p.106.
asked to stay back at school for extra classes during the week at least until 7pm, which was much later than at other schools.

Humanities Middle students complained that they also had to attend many extra classes, and when asked why, they said teachers have to schedule them because “there is too much to learn and not enough time to teach it all within the timetabled lessons”. The senior 3 teachers at Humanities Middle had great arguments over the timetables in the staffroom one day. All of the teachers wanted more time to teach their individual subjects because there was too much material to cover in the normal school day, and none were willing to give up any extra time they had. Any opportunity to have an extra lesson can be taken. When the physical education teacher was away one day at Humanities Middle, I met some of my senior 2 students heading back to their classroom in a desultory fashion. They complained that because their P.E. teacher was away they had to have an extra English lesson. Although P.E. is a required part of the curriculum, and is one of the three official main areas of all-round education (along with academics and morals – 德智体), the girls said that it is not considered as important and can easily be left out in the push to study examination subjects.

An important factor in the decision to have an extra English class like this is that there are no relief/substitute teachers in the Chinese education system. If a teacher is away, other teachers must take the class, either in the same or in a different subject. When my senior 2 students at Humanities Middle entered senior 3 during the middle of 1998, their extra classes increased dramatically. While all the schools held classes on Saturday mornings, these students suddenly found themselves at school all day Saturday. The students also complained that they did not get Teacher’s Day as a holiday, and that even National Day as a holiday for them was in doubt. Senior 3
students at NorthWest Ordinary said that their workload was not so bad. The only extra classes at NorthWest Ordinary that I was aware of for senior 1 and 2 students were those I was teaching. Senior 3 students there had one extra class per weekday, and consequently their lessons finished at 5.40pm, but apart from that, those students told me they did not have to attend school in the evenings or in the holidays.

A number of girls at Humanities Middle told me they attended extra lessons held at universities and other schools on the weekends. Such lessons would be “extension classes”. These lessons are taught by “famous” teachers from various schools in Kunming and are open to all interested senior students. One of the best English teachers at Humanities Middle was apparently conducting such classes for students who wanted to learn and practice their English more. Teachers are attracted to teach such lessons as they get extra pay for them – unconfirmed student reports suggested that each period taught would pay 45-50 yuan (A$10). School principals are generally unable to stop their teachers from taking extra classes, even if they believe in principle that the practice interferes with the teachers’ normal duties. At Humanities Middle, however, teachers were specifically banned by the school principal from providing private home tutoring lessons for profit. The principal’s reasoning was that all of the students needed help with their subjects and that it was not fair some could get extra lessons because they could afford it, while others were disadvantaged through lack of money. Teachers and students across the three schools said that in general, senior 1 and 2 students do not have private home tutoring. The few students I found who were taking private lessons were only having them in subjects in which they were particularly weak.

In addition to the extra classes run by the schools themselves for senior 3 students, there are also NUEE preparation classes run at universities for which senior 3 students
pay about 100 yuan (A$20) to attend for a few months. These classes are held in the evenings and on weekends. For example, in their first semester of senior 3, two of my former Humanities Middle students began attending classes in Chinese and Maths on Saturday evenings at the Yunnan Polytechnic University with students from schools throughout Kunming. The classes alternated between the two subjects and ran for two hours each session. The girls said that the maths class was particularly difficult, and that it was taught by a university lecturer. A classmate of theirs instead went to Yunnan Normal University on Sunday afternoons for two hour classes in politics and history taught by key school teachers. The students thought that most students in senior 3 would attend such classes, and said that students “should attend if they want to get into university”. NorthWest Ordinary senior 3 students, however, did not appear to be attending any of these types of classes. Their classmaster told me that while other schools do organize classes at universities, NorthWest Ordinary does not, and the only extra classes are those run by the school after the timetabled lessons during the week and on Saturday mornings. One senior 2 NorthWest Ordinary student boldly stated that she did not want to be pressured by study and was not willing to go to extra classes “because they are not useful.”

A practice which was reportedly banned by the provincial Education Department is that of having extra classes at school during the holidays for students other than those in junior 3 or senior 3. Students at Humanities Middle told me that despite the ban, some schools, both key and ordinary, hold holiday classes which they get away with because the Department either does not find out or turns a blind eye. Just before the summer holidays in 1998, my senior 1 and 2 students at Humanities Middle were all complaining that they might have to attend classes during the holidays. Later, however, three students told me that the Department had found out about the planned holiday
classes and put a stop to them. These students thought that someone in the school was informing the Department, as the same thing had happened a couple of times before. The students and, according to them the classmaster, were furious. The students said they were “unlucky” and that they were

falling behind other schools and students. There are many lessons we haven’t done yet that we need to catch up on. In addition, key school students are already strong and with extra lessons will get even stronger. If we cannot have extra lessons, how will we catch up to them?

These comments illustrate that the competition to get into university is so intense that the students themselves seek to take whatever advantages they can get in order to succeed. Competition for average to bright ordinary school students who want to succeed is therefore naturally more intense, as they feel they are disadvantaged when compared with key school students. Some students in ordinary schools made statements such as: “I think that the pressure is greater on me than on key school students, because I have to be more studious than them in order to succeed.” At the same time, Elite Affiliated teachers said that “the NUEE is not so hard for bright students in good schools to do, so they feel confident about it.” Such attitudes seem in line with Dore’s hypothesis that those under the most pressure in exam-dominated schooling are “likely to be those who are bright without being the brightest, those who are..... by no means certain of reaching [the prizes in the competition] without a very great deal of anxious effort.”

Study Aids

For all of the major examinations, students have official revision textbooks which highlight the areas of each subject which will be particularly relevant in the

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examinations. Students often need not take notes in class because they know that the important material will already be set out for them in these books. In many of the classes that I observed, students would make notes all over their textbooks rather than writing in exercise books.

In addition to the official revision textbooks, however, are an abundance of other books purporting to contain exercises from past examinations or suggesting ways in which students can study better and be more effective. Bookstores often have a row of shelves taken up with such books, and the aisles containing these shelves are always busy, if not packed with students. At the end of the 1997 school year, the senior 2 English teachers at Humanities Middle were in deep discussion about a pile of study aids brought to the school by a salesman. The teachers were trying to decide which books to use in their classes during the coming year in preparation for the NUEE. They complained that there were too many to choose from and that many such books are not good value, but pointed out that authors and publishers have a captive market. In order to halt an excessive amount of cramming from such study guides, the Ministry of Education announced in February 2000 that it would issue a textbook catalogue, which would define the texts and reference books required for both primary and secondary students. Teachers and schools would not be permitted to assign extra material on top of these books. In practice, however, so long as the competition remains strong study guides will be purchased and used by most students in senior high school.

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Parental Interventions

Parents will often make all sorts of attempts to help their children study better. Two Humanities Middle students told me that when they were in junior high school they had small dogs as pets. Once they got to senior high school, however, they were no longer permitted to keep the dogs, because they did not have time, in their parent’s opinion, to look after the dogs as they had to put all their energies into study. The girls were very sad at this development, and felt restricted in their lives as a result. As many students in one-child families rely on the companionship of pets to replace that of absent siblings, these students felt they were doubly lonely as a result of their loss.

Excessive television viewing is a particular concern for most teachers and parents. Given that some students told me they “could not possibly survive without television”, such a concern may be warranted. Students often related how their parents became angry at them for watching television instead of studying. One Humanities Middle student related in her diary how her father became so angry at her watching television and sleeping during the holidays instead of doing homework and revision that he beat her with a stick.

I heard numerous stories of parents, particularly those of senior 3 students, not allowing their children to even help with housework, such was their concern that their child study hard and succeed in the NUEE. A Humanities Middle classmaster said she talks with parents and asks them about her students’ home lives to see if the students “are wasting time or doing things like watching television or reading comic books and other unsuitable material”. This classmaster said she often advises the parents on how to help their children study better, which includes ensuring that they are not engaged in
undesirable activities. At the time I talked with her, she had just confiscated a comic book from a student who was reading it in class and she did not want to return it.

Nutrition and health are major areas of concern for parents wishing to see their children succeed in school. In Elite Affiliated, a senior 2 student took out an egg to eat during a morning class break. She gave half to a friend and explained that her mother makes her eat eggs in order that she stays healthy for study. Other students around her nodded and sighed in exasperation and agreement. Humanities Middle students said that it was only when they reached senior 3 that their mothers began to make them drink milk to keep them healthy and help them study well. Previously, they would have been offered the milk but not made to drink it. Pharmaceutical and pseudo-pharmaceutical companies play on these parental notions of what enables students to study well by marketing all sorts of tonics and drugs which purportedly assist students to concentrate and study harder. One such advertising leaflet was put under the doors in our apartment complex. The drug being advertised claimed to help students overcome their fatigue and lack of concentration, and quoted parents extolling its virtues, saying how their child’s study had improved. Television advertisements also promote many supposed health products, and from all accounts, much of the barrage of advertising is effective on parents keen to find any way to give their child an edge over others. Students, however, tend to roll their eyes in exasperation and helplessness in the face of such measures.

**Pressures on Teachers**

Teachers are caught between concern for the students’ health and well-being (many teachers worried about the pressures they see students under), parental expectations and the need for their students to do well on examinations because it reflects on their teaching. Teachers often worried about imminent examinations, and it was only at the
end of the semester spent teaching at Humanities Middle that I had a taste of that concern myself. As the English Graduation Competency Examination for the senior 2 students approached, I was asked to take extra classes in order to prepare the students for the composition section of the examination. The senior 2 classmasters, who were also the English teachers, gave me past test papers and asked me to choose some of the composition topics and coach the students on how to write about them. One of the teachers approached me a couple of days later wanting to know what I was teaching the students. She informed me accusingly that the students had done a practice English GCE on the weekend and had performed badly in the composition section. I should not have been surprised, because a few weeks before, another teacher had warned me in a half-joking way that “the end of year tests are coming up soon and then we shall see whether you have been a good teacher or not!”

Part of the reason teachers are made to feel so accountable for their students’ results is that their promotions to the next salary level are based on their performance, which is largely based on the students’ achievements. In addition, teachers can receive awards from the school or education department. When students receive awards for academic achievements in school or local competitions, teachers also get certificates and “honour and glory” (guāngróng guāngcǎi 光荣光彩) for being behind their students’ successes. Just as key school students have more to lose if they fail than ordinary school students, so do key school teachers, because the standards expected of them are far higher than those expected of teachers in ordinary schools. As I have explained earlier in this chapter, schools are evaluated on the students they produce, and thus push students to try to achieve at ever higher levels. Key schools like Elite Affiliated have a reputation to protect, while ordinary schools, particularly those not far
from the top levels of the hierarchy such as Humanities Middle, desire to attract better students who will raise the school’s reputation with their successes.

As a result of teacher and school expectations, students feel pressure from them as well. One Monday morning, Humanities Middle students told me they had gone on a picnic with classmates that Sunday. They said they had enjoyed themselves greatly, then warned me not to tell their classmaster because she would be angry that they were not at home studying. Senior 1 students at NorthWest Ordinary felt that their pressure came mostly from teachers and the school, but that parental pressure would increase as they entered senior 3. They felt more pressure from the school and teachers because the teachers kept telling them how hard the NUEE will be, which made them feel scared. Elite Affiliated senior 2 students said much the same thing, though their reasoning was that they want to enter university of their own accord and are self-motivated, so their parents do not feel the need to push them as much, while the teachers and school are concerned to uphold their own reputations.

5.7 Undesirable Social Effects

Students have greater concerns about the competition they face than just the sheer amount of work they must do. A number of students felt that the competition engendered by the examination system and qualification escalation has led to undesirable social consequences. One stated that “I think the competition is very fierce. It brings about some abuses. For example, people become selfish, are intent on nothing but profit, have a cold heart and so on.” Another student compared the attitudes of his parents’ generation with those of today, stating that “in the past, the emphasis was on collectivism and helping each other. Now, competition and individuality is
emphasized.” Other students feel that they are constrained by what they have to study for the examinations, and as such are not free to pursue their interests and hobbies:

When I was a child, everybody told me ‘you must go to a good university, then you will live happily’. So I work all day and feel I’m a chess pawn who is controlled by the effort to get into university. How sad I am! I abandon my interests, but I find I don’t get what I want. Competition makes people colder and more detached.

In Japan, the increasing suicide rate among young people has been a cause for great concern. The highly competitive, examination centred education system is viewed as a major contributing factor to youth suicide in Japan. Rohlen’s research, however, suggested that while a proportion of the suicide rate among youth in Japan can be attributed to students’ failure in the university entrance examinations, other school-related problems such as lack of motivation, dislike of school and difficulties with homework are more likely to be contributing factors. The evidence, Rohlen argues, also points to suicide being more common among students who have a hard time keeping up academically than among higher achievers, because many of them drop out of school and face low-status jobs, insecure futures, and “life at the bottom of society.” Such students are more “likely to view themselves as failures and to feel guilt and shame.”

In China, however, suicide rates are not openly reported, and the topic, being sensitive, does not receive the amount of press it does in other countries. It is thus difficult to determine whether, and if so to what extent, the pressures of competition lead some students to commit suicide in a bid to escape the loss of face they and their families experience if they fail to live up to expectations. Students were reluctant to talk

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about the idea of suicide, and did not themselves have much of an impression as to numbers of contemporaries who might take such an option. Two Humanities Middle students acknowledged that some students might commit suicide if they failed the NUEE either because of a fear of parental retribution or because of their own feelings of failure and loss of face. One article in the *Yunnan Education Newspaper* during 1998 concerned a 19 year old key school student who had committed suicide by jumping off a building 110 days prior to the NUEE. The report blamed the parents, school and society for the incident. The parents and other family members had put great pressures on the boy to “become a dragon”, the school had intensified this pressure by the amount of study students were required to do, and society had failed to recognize the emotional and mental needs of students.33 A follow-up article pleaded for education reform, and for the government, schools, teachers and parents to ensure students do not bear such heavy burdens.34 Another article in the newspaper related to a student who killed his parents because of the pressures they placed upon him to “become a dragon” and their reactions when he failed to live up to their dreams. It was after the student failed the NUEE for the third time (his parents having made him study again for a year after the first two failures) that his father lost his temper on many occasions and used extreme language to curse the boy. The boy was made to feel that he was worthless and a failure, and eventually killed his parents to escape them and the shame.35

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Some commentators have expressed concern that students in Japan are so busy that they have few if any real friends and little time to play with peers outside of school.36 While homeroom teachers try to foster cohesiveness and friendship among the homeroom class group, there are few other opportunities to mix with their peers at clubs, in sporting teams and so forth. A similar situation occurs in China, and is exacerbated by the one-child policy. Students often said that they feel very lonely, and while some get together with classmates occasionally outside of school, the opportunities are limited. Many students feel that their parents and their teachers do not understand them, and so they are reluctant to talk through issues which concern them. As a result, almost all of my students cited the ability to make friends and socialize as one of the main reasons they want to go to university, indicating that this is an issue they feel is on a par with the need to graduate and get a good job. One stated that “if I go to university I can make good friends, maybe from whom I can get important and necessary help”, which could indicate a consciousness of the need to establish good guanxi. Others wrote that “at university, I can make some friends. Friends are the most important things in a person’s life” and “we can relax at university, so we can make many friends.”

Students also anticipated having more freedom at university in the way they run their lives:

In senior high school, teachers and parents always tell you what you should do or what you shouldn’t do. They seldom consider your opinion and you always have to obey them. In university, you should try to manage things by yourself.

In university, we have much more freedom than in senior high school. This is what we want to get most of all. After we get into university, we will have more free time to do things we want to do but can’t do in senior high school.

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Children in China must do what their parents want. Childrens’ thoughts are smothered, and some children grow up still dependant on their parents.

Your life is freer at university than at home. You can go dancing, skating, or join in a party on the weekend and not have to tell your parents.

The longing to be free of the constraints of high school study and to be able to pursue one’s interests was a recurring theme when I talked with students. One of the reasons they so desire to enter university is that they see it as a kind of paradise where they can study what they like and have free time to make more friends and “live” a little without parents or teachers controlling everything they do. This attitude is similar to that found in Japan, where students who enter university are virtually guaranteed their degree regardless of how little they study. From personal experience in 1993, my Chinese classmates at the People’s University of China in Beijing were much less studious than me, and certainly less concerned about their courses than they would have been in high school. They enjoyed living in dormitories away from their parents and away from the pressures they had faced prior to entering university.

That many university students are no longer serious about their studies is a fact bemoaned by lecturers, but the lecturers themselves sometimes contribute to it. Just as high school teachers are evaluated by the performances of their students, so are university lecturers. To have a student fail means the lecturer has not done his or her job properly. I have seen this first hand at universities in China, where our Chinese lecturers would do everything they could to ensure that most, if not all, the students in their language classes passed. Furthermore, one lecturer told me how students who do not study cultivate guanxi with the leaders of the administrative area of their department, which deals with the writing of student evaluations. The students and sometimes their
parents give gifts to the leaders, and make polite conversation with them so that the
leaders gain a favourable impression of the students and write a good evaluation about
them. When it comes time for lecturers to submit their final marks, the lecturers are
always well aware that some of the students do not deserve to pass, but the leaders
intervene and encourage the lecturers to ensure that the students’ marks are pushed up to
the pass mark or above, making comments such as “but that student is so nice, he/she
deserves to pass”. If the lecturer does not follow the leader’s suggestion, there could be
problems for that lecturer later on: for example, not being permitted to travel overseas
on a teacher exchange or not receiving a promotion.

As I have illustrated in this chapter, an increasing number of students are vying to
enter schools which are viewed as giving them the best chances of entrance into
university and resultant job opportunities. The competition generated by the desire to
enter university has produced serious “backwash effects” on students, teachers and
schools, as education becomes centred around the achievement of qualifications.
Although the official route to obtain qualifications is through entrance examinations,
other routes have emerged, both official and unofficial. These alternate routes serve to
alter the nature of the diploma disease in China.
Chapter Six

Other Routes to an Education

As I detailed at the beginning of the last chapter, a significant backwash effect of the diploma disease in China is the competition to get into schools which are seen to provide the “best” chances of proceeding to the next higher level of schooling. Such competition has given rise to informal methods of getting into a desirable school outside the official route of entrance examinations. The use of such informal methods from the beginning of a child’s educational ‘career’ ultimately influences the social distribution of education and alters the links between education and opportunity structures. Money has become a major determinant of access to and success in education and employment, both at the formal level of organization and in informal behaviour.

Zheng Li, vice-director and researcher at the Research Office of Beijing Municipality details three types of student who are able to “select” their schools by virtue of power, connections or money. He suggests that the practice of parents selecting schools for their children to attend is not new in China, but that the use of money in that process is a recent development which has become prominent since 1992. Zheng also notes that the proportion of students who “select” their school has increased in all types of schools, though at the beginning the trend was confined largely to key schools. Zheng lists four social reasons for the emergence of these kinds of students in urban areas, which are consistent with those I have already detailed in

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Chapter Three of this thesis. These are: the increase in average per capita incomes for urban households, the one-child policy which has contributed to a sense of urgency on the part of parents for their child to “become a dragon”, the necessity of investment in education in order to receive the desired level and quality of education, and finally the importance attached to knowledge and “culture” which leads to high aspirations on the part of parents.\(^2\)

6.1 Enrolment in Basic Education

For many Chinese, the major role of kindergartens and primary schools is to provide a head start in the competition for success at the later levels of schooling. Junior high schools are to prepare students to pass the difficult Senior Secondary Entrance Examination and, like senior high schools, vary in quality and in success in achieving that goal. An increasing degree of importance is therefore attached to the specific schools a child attends at these levels.

As there are no entrance examinations to schools at the kindergarten, primary and junior high school levels, enrolment is officially based on residential area. Neighbourhood schools, however, are not always viewed as “good” at providing the necessary educational foundations. The suburb of Kunming where I lived during my fieldwork was regarded as a “bad” area, with a high proportion of migrant rural families who were perceived to be “without culture”. The neighbourhood schools were therefore regarded as of low quality, given that their enrolments were primarily from this migrant

\(^2\) Ibid, pp. 31-32.
rural community. One parent said that she would not be enrolling her child in the neighbourhood school because “that is where poor children go”, and a university lecturer commented that the school is a “peasant children’s school.” Schools which are favoured include those attached to universities, because they have a direct link with their key senior high school counterparts. Parents living in a neighbourhood with a “bad” school naturally desire that their children be enrolled in a “good” school, but are officially unable to do so. They therefore turn to other means to attain their goal.

Though money is one of the most common means by which parents can enrol their child into a good, out-of-area school, the cost of doing so is increasing as more families are able and willing to pay. University lecturers said that schools which face a high demand for enrolment have imposed high tuition fees (over and above the government approved tuition fees) on out-of-area families in an attempt to dissuade them from applying. I was told that in 1998, kindergarten fees alone could be as high as 4000 yuan (A$800) per year in Kunming. This does not necessarily deter applicants.

**Work Unit Agreements**

Monetary payments in themselves, however, are not necessarily as successful a means of gaining school entry as *guanxi*. A parent’s work unit (dānwèi 单位) can affect the opportunities their children receive in education. Children of university staff are officially given preference in enrolment to the university affiliated schools and thus not only avoid paying exorbitant fees but also avoid attending “bad” neighbourhood schools. University lecturers I spoke with were very thankful for this system, asserting that their childrens’ chances of going to a key senior high school were much greater as a result.
The push to get children into the best schools in order to give them the best chances of success has also led other work units to establish connections with such schools. Large work units make an agreement with a “good” school under which the work unit pays the school an agreed amount of money annually and the school enrols the children of the work unit employees. University lecturers told me that the schools affiliated with their university have such an arrangement with a cigarette company based in the outer suburbs of Kunming near the vocational school I visited – an undeveloped, semi-rural area with many factories. Buses from the company ferry the workers’ children to and from school each day. Such agreements are unofficial, and although the local government tries to stop them, the lecturers said that such arrangements are too prevalent and too attractive to the schools involved for them to be controlled effectively. According to another lecturer, government work units are also making such arrangements, and although she believed they do not necessarily have large financial resources at their disposal for this purpose, they are powerful and have sufficient guanxi to establish them.

For those parents who are not able to utilize work unit connections with particular schools, the options are limited at the basic education level. I was told that some families with relatives who live in the neighbourhood of a good school might try to send their child to live with those relatives so that the child might qualify for enrolment at the school. A similar arrangement can be made for rural residents with urban-based relatives, though both options are difficult due to residential requirements. One author details an incident whereby a university colleague was asked to foster a child so the child could go to the university affiliated primary school. The colleague would be paid a
considerable amount of money (several times the lecturer’s salary) to participate in the arrangement.\(^3\)

6.2 Bypassing Exam Results to Enter Good Senior High Schools

There are a number of different ways in which students can be enrolled at better senior high schools than the ones they have qualified for as a result of their SSEE performance. All of these require both money and *guanxi*, leading to comments by lecturers that “some parents spend an inordinate amount of time cultivating *guanxi* in order to provide their children with the best opportunities for their education.” The same lecturers cautioned that this has to be the right kind of *guanxi*, with the right people in the right positions of authority, and in order to do this well much trouble has to be taken.

Additional Tuition Fees

The most common way for students to enrol in a good senior high school without the required marks is through the payment of a one-off enrolment fee over and above the annual tuition fees which all students must pay. Students who pay such fees are known as “self-funding students” (zifèishēng 自 费 生).

Each school is officially allowed to enrol a certain number of students who have marks just below the cut-off point. Most of the examples I was given suggested that although school requirements vary, most would permit students to enrol with SSEE scores up to ten marks below the official cut-off. A Humanities Middle teacher told me that a student in her class got an SSEE score of 509 (out of a possible 795), while the

\(^3\) Keith Lewin, *op. cit.*, p. 144.
cut-off mark to the school was 519. By paying a small amount extra, the student was allowed to enrol. An Elite Affiliated student mentioned that her parents had paid 2500 yuan (A$500) for her to enter the school because her score was “just below the cut-off mark”. Elite Affiliated teachers explained that in their school statistics, numbers in the official category of “self-funding students” had dropped in the 1998 intake of senior 1 students due to a change in government policy: the school listed 202 self-funding senior 1 students on their books in 1996, compared with only 61 in 1998. They said that previously, schools could permit students with slightly lower SSEE scores to enrol providing they paid for the privilege. In 1998, however, the local government divided the city up into districts, and then into areas. Elite Affiliated was in a district containing four areas. If they got SSEE scores within the accepted range below the cut-off mark, students would now be allowed to enter the nearest key school in their area without having to pay extra. Students in the same situation from outside the district wanting to enrol would still have to pay and would remain in the “self-funding” category. The recorded numbers of self-funding students Elite Affiliated gave me for 1998 were therefore based on these out-of-area students, rather than the full complement of students with lower marks who had enrolled.

Behind this officially permitted category of self-funding students, however, is an indefinite proportion who are not recorded in school statistics. These students enter schools via the “backdoor”, using money and/or guanxi. A student whose parents had paid a small sum for her to enter Elite Affiliated stated that many students with marks well below the standard were able to enrol if they could pay a fee. A Humanities Middle student told me about a former junior high school classmate of hers who did not do well on the SSEE but wanted to attend a particular key school. The student was unable to
gain permission from that school to enrol, and his parents ultimately paid 10,000 yuan (A$2000) for him to enter a different key school instead.

How low a student’s score is determines how much they will have to pay. As competition to enter key schools is greatest, the costs for those wishing to enrol via the “backdoor” are also high. The head of the English Department at Elite Affiliated believed that about 60% of students in the school had paid approximately 4000-5000 yuan (A$800-1000) to enrol, with SSEE scores that were lower than the cut-off mark but “not too bad.” She described the lowest 20% of students in the school as having “very poor marks” and paying “up to 10,000 yuan to enrol.” According to the head, in 1998 only about 20% of students at the school were there by virtue of their SSEE results and the percentage is decreasing. Other teachers in the school also alluded to the growing proportion of self-funding students, and a Chinese researcher notes that the proportion of students who have entered through the “backdoor” in key schools can be as high as 50% or more. A student at NorthWest Ordinary said there were about ten students at the school who had paid to get in, and she herself had paid about 1300 yuan (A$260) on top of the normal tuition fees. The girl explained that she had not been studious while in junior high school, and so had failed to be admitted to a senior high school on the basis of her marks. Because she attended the junior high school section of NorthWest Ordinary and had guanxi there, however, she had been allowed to pay the money to enrol.

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One of the leaders at Humanities Middle informed me that if a family has good 
guanxi with the local education department, their child may be able to enter whatever 
school they like, even without paying extra fees. Other types of guanxi may assist in 
getting a student into a school, though not necessarily a good one. A student said that 
because a relative of hers was a teacher at NorthWest Ordinary, she was able to transfer 
to the school from the senior high school she was originally admitted to. A Humanities 
Middle student also told me that four of her classmates did not have the marks to enter 
the school but their family connections meant they could enter without having to pay 
extra money.

Although the head of English at Elite Affiliated recognized that having a 
relatively high proportion of fee-paying students in the school would ultimately be 
detrimental to the school transition rate to university, she said that all schools have to 
admit such students because the funding that schools receive from the government has 
been reduced. Stanley Rosen notes that having self-funding students is crucial to 
schools, “given the urgent need to retain qualified teachers who often choose to leave 
the teaching profession for higher-paying jobs.”5 Rosen mentions that even the Vice-
Director of the Research Office of Beijing Municipality has recognized that “schools 
cannot survive solely on the limited budget allocations they receive from the state”, and 
says that “although the government does not approve of [the practice of admitting self-
funding students], it is unable to prevent” it.6

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5 Stanley Rosen, Chinese Youth in the Year 2000: Internalization, Nationalism and Pragmatism (Paper 
presented at the annual meeting of the Association for Asian Studies: San Diego, California, 2000), p. 28. 
6 Ibid, p. 29.
Elite Affiliated would not reveal the lowest SSEE score among the students admitted to the school, and a teacher commented that this was because it could be as low as 200-300 (out of 795). Neither she nor another teacher with us at the time felt this was fair to those students who have entered the school by virtue of their marks alone.

The statistics I received from Humanities Middle showed that the number of self-funding students enrolled there have remained fairly constant up until 1998, at about 24 students across the senior years. Statistics from NorthWest Ordinary show about 33 self-funding students in each of the 1997 and 1998 enrolments. The lowest SSEE entry scores I was aware of at Humanities Middle and NorthWest Ordinary in 1998 were 388 and 420 respectively. As the numbers of self-funding students at the two schools are low, and their SSEE admittance scores higher than the lowest estimated by teachers at Elite Affiliated, the statistics I was supplied with may have been modified to appear better than they actually were.

“Borrowed Study”
If a student is accepted into a senior high school which does not have a good reputation, with the right guanxi and money he or she can actually study in another, better school while remaining enrolled at the original school. This is known literally as “borrowed study” (jiedú 借读), meaning to study at another school on a temporary basis. Students attend all their classes at the good school, thereby receiving the better quality education provided there, but they return to their original school to sit major examinations and are counted in the statistics of that school, not their temporary one. The parents have to pay tuition fees at both schools.

One student at Humanities Middle did not do well in the SSEE and was officially admitted to what she called a “rather bad” school. Disappointed with this outcome, L’s
mother used her *guanxi* with one of the Humanities Middle leaders and received permission for her daughter to attend classes at the school. L was treated just like any other student in the school, and her classmaster told me that she has the same responsibilities towards L as she has to her other students. L herself felt that she was getting a good deal, even though her parents had to pay quite a bit of money for the arrangement. She said that her original school was so bad that there was not much discipline, and the transition rate to university was very low. Three other students in her year at Humanities Middle were in the school under similar circumstances.

In contrast, at Elite Affiliated, teachers said that most of the students who are allowed to study at the school on a temporary basis would be admitted for “good reasons” – which might be that they excel at sport or music but need to improve in other areas. Admission is still dependent on *guanxi* as well as monetary payments, however. The student’s family might know a teacher in the school, for example, who approaches the school leaders and asks if there is an “empty seat” for the student. Attending a key school while being enrolled at another school could put a great financial burden on a family, given that key school tuition fees are the highest in the city.

**6.3 In-School Practices Influencing the Competition**

There are other practices within senior high schools which students believe favour some students over others, and make the competition less fair and equitable than they desire it to be. Students frequently mentioned that teacher favouritism and students cheating on examinations can adversely affect their educational prospects, and while neither of these is unique to China’s education system, that students mention them illustrates the perception that students do not really begin “at the same starting line” in the
competition. It also shows the significance attached to any practice which favours some over others and makes the system “unfair”. Students expressed anger over cheating classmates who might do better in a test as a result, and thereby artificially elevate their names on the class rankings, pushing honest students down. The honest students may then be penalized by teachers and parents for not being higher up in the rankings.

Favouritism

A few Elite Affiliated students told me that top students are generally top across all subjects. The students who raised this issue perceived that “the teachers like these kinds of students, tending to give them all the attention while ignoring the rest”, and they thought this was very unfair. Students who are not favoured feel they are not given the encouragement and support they desire and believe they require in order to improve their marks. A NorthWest Ordinary student expressed his strong dissatisfaction at teacher discrimination, calling it the biggest obstacle to his study. He felt that without his teacher’s support and encouragement, he could not make progress in his study, but that without progress, the teacher’s view of him as a failure would persist and the teacher would continue to ignore him. Two other NorthWest Ordinary students also mentioned that “teachers help those students whose marks are good, but they ignore those whose marks are not good.” They thought this was unfair because the students themselves might be of good character and would miss out on getting the help they need to improve their marks. However, another NorthWest Ordinary student thought that due to the numbers of students in each class “nothing can be done about those who don’t keep up or don’t understand.”

As a teacher, I was encouraged by other teachers at Humanities Middle not to pay attention to (búguān 不管) or to ignore a particular student in my class who caused
disruptions, did not listen and would not do any homework. The teachers had tried
everything they could think of to get him to take his English lessons more seriously, but
had reached the point where they felt helpless and did not know what to do with him.
On the whole, however, I thought the Humanities Middle classmasters were very
cconcerned with the progress of all their students and would not ignore them or treat
them with diffidence if they were struggling. This was perhaps due to the fact that the
classmasters only had around 27 students to look after, rather than the usual 50 or so in
other schools.

At NorthWest Ordinary, I also had the experience of trying to teach the senior 3
class with at least one student who was academically far behind his peers. While I tried
to include him and personally encourage him whenever I could, there seemed to be no
way to rectify the imbalance between his knowledge and that of the others. In his other
English classes, he appeared to struggle on silently, and since he always sat at the back
of the class and I never saw him speak or interact with classmates or teachers, I assumed
that other teachers had encountered the same difficulties. In defence of the teachers,
they have an almost impossible task if they wish to personally care for and encourage
each individual student in their classes. They feel it natural to focus on preparing the
majority of students who have the potential to succeed in the university entrance exams
to ensure that they do succeed, rather than spending time with students they feel will
have only a slim chance of attaining such success. In the backs of their minds, teachers
always feel the pressure placed on them to perform at a particular standard, measured by
the outcomes of their students.

My oral English classes at Elite Affiliated were supposed to be for those students
hand-picked for their already excellent oral English speaking abilities. An English
teacher in the junior high section of the school came to me shortly after the lessons had
begun, and asked if her “niece” (I did not know whether the girl was a blood relative or
not) who was in senior 1 could also attend the class, because she needed the oral
speaking practice and this would be a great opportunity for her. Implicit in the teacher’s
words was a feeling that it was not fair that the student be disadvantaged in her English
study while others who were already good were allowed to attend. While this teacher
saw that her “niece” was disadvantaged and wanted to rectify the imbalance, those
without the guanxi that the “niece” had may have in turn resented her attending the class
while they remained excluded.

6.4 Corrupt Practices in University Entrance

Most Chinese I spoke with firmly believe that despite the ability to circumvent formal
selection procedures at the lower levels of the education system, the National University
Entrance Examination is a fair, just, and infallible way of selecting students for entry
into university. As is becoming more apparent, however, this process of selection is not
necessarily so “clean”.

A university lecturer from Kunming described her shock at discovering the
corruption in university selection while she was in Wuhan recruiting students for her
university. The recruiting teams from each province were confined to a hotel for the
entire time, and were not allowed to telephone or have direct contact with anyone who
might try to influence their decision on which students to enrol. Despite this, all of the
recruiters came under pressure before they had even left their hometowns. The lecturer
detailed two different ways which can be used to circumvent formal selection
procedures. The first relates to students who have passed the NUEE.
Once people know you are going to recruit students, many will come and find you and give you pieces of paper with the name of someone who has done the NUEE (who could be that person’s relative, friend, friend of a relative, friend of a friend etc), their score, and what major they want to get into. The person who approaches you does not necessarily even know you, but they have connections with people you know. Say the recommended student got 533 and the cut-off mark was 530, meaning the student has just passed. You look at the scores of the other applicants for the desired major in your university, and see that someone else has got 603. You don’t know that applicant, and don’t have any guanxi relationship with them. So you can look through their application and find faults with it or reasons to not want to select them so that you can validate your decision to choose the recommended student over and above them, even though they actually scored a higher mark. The higher scoring student might then miss out on getting a place in their desired major at your university, depending on the numbers of students being admitted.

A lecturer in Beijing also observed that at recruiting time, he receives many calls from people wanting him to exert some influence over the recruiting procedure in favour of their son or daughter.

The second means by which students can seek to enter a university relates to when they have actually failed the NUEE.

For example, your marks are 5 below the cut-off mark to get into Yunnan University. The Yunnan University maths department wants 10 students, but 12 want to enter the course. You, the student, have guanxi somehow, even if it is very distant, with the recruiter. From the 12 students the recruiters should take the best, but the recruiter with whom you have guanxi wants to protect you and get you in even though your marks did not reach the cut-off. So the recruiter will find fault with the applications of the other students. Eventually, the recruiting team will agree on accepting 8 or 9 students, leaving 1 or 2 positions free. None of the other applicants are found to be satisfactory. The 8 or 9 students are accepted, and the other 3 who missed out go to other schools. In the end, there is no more time left to recruit, and no satisfactory students left either. So your name is put forward to fill the gap, and it is decided that as you have only failed by 5 marks, you can pay some money and they will let you in.

The lecturer pointed out that there is a great difference between students who pass and those who fail the NUEE. There are not many in the latter category, she said, who can use guanxi to get into university, because getting such guanxi is so hard. The web of contacts is huge, and the more remote your source of guanxi, the less likely they will
help because they have other people who are nearer to them in relationship. For the
former category of student, just because they have got the marks to get into university
does not guarantee them a place. They could be overlooked for someone with lower
marks but with good guanxi. This puts great stress on families to find the right guanxi,
and they have to cultivate it very carefully. Students who are admitted into university
through the “backdoor” often have to pay exorbitant fees, just like their counterparts in
senior high schools. The People’s Daily reported that students admitted to universities
with low NUEE marks can pay as much as 100,000 yuan (A$20,000).7

I heard of one Chinese university lecturer who took a few days off work during
1998 to try to find a way to get her sister into the university. The lecturer believed that
because she worked in the university, she should be able to get her sister admitted, even
though her sister’s NUEE marks were not high enough. Another lecturer explained to
me that at most universities, year-long preparatory classes are run for ethnic-minority
students before they begin their full degrees. She said that if a student’s parents are
teachers or leaders in a university, they can get their child admitted to one of these
preparatory classes even if they are not a minority student. After passing the preparatory
course, the student would then be allowed to do a degree.

The only legitimate way for students to be considered for university enrolment if
their scores are not above the cut-off is to belong to one of five special categories. Extra
marks are added to the student’s NUEE score for being in one or more of these
categories, and universities take such students into special consideration when enrolling.
The first special category are “excellent students” – including students who have

consistently been monitors, Communist Youth League leaders, and “3-good students” (sānhǎo xuéshēng 三好学生, students who have excelled in academic, physical and moral areas). Students whose sporting prowess in a given field is recognized and rewarded at a provincial or national level comprise the second category. Overseas Chinese students make up the third category, as the government wants to encourage them to stay in China rather than return overseas. The fourth category consists of ethnic-minority students, which in Yunnan means only certain officially recognized groups whose numbers are not great, such as the Yi, Pumi or Mosuo. The fifth category of students for special consideration are those who are orphaned or are severely disadvantaged in some way.

6.5 Alternative Formal Paths to Further Education

For failed students who cannot or do not wish to use guanxi to enter university, there are alternative paths to receiving further education. The main options are to re-sit the NUEE in the following year after studying in a cram course (bǔxībān 补习班) or to enrol in a preparatory course to sit the “tertiary self-study examinations” (gāodēng zìxué kāoshì 高等自学考试, or zīkǎo 自考). Both of these alternatives come at a cost. There are also many adult education courses which students could follow at a later stage when they are already in the workforce. These courses are very similar in scope to those found at Australian Technical and Further Education institutions. Adults can enter courses to gain a junior secondary education, to pass their Graduate Competency Examinations at a senior secondary level, to prepare them to sit the adult-entry NUEE, or to study vocational courses at both secondary and tertiary levels. A detailed description of adult education in China is outside the scope of this thesis, but it is enough to say that while these routes are considered viable and popular for adults whose education was disrupted
during the Cultural Revolution or who missed out on education for other reasons, they are not immediate choices for the current generation of senior high school graduates.

**Cram Courses**

The most popular choice for students who fail the NUEE is to enter a cram course and prepare to re-sit the examination in the following year. In 1995, 31% of all university applicants were re-taking the NUEE. There are some problems for students attending cram courses, however. One is that the pressure to pass the NUEE the following year is even greater than the first time around. Universities will also question why the student did not pass the examination initially, and may doubt the student’s capabilities. A lecturer said that universities only accept a certain number of repeat examinees each year, meaning that the chances of success are likely to be smaller than they were originally.

Although most students do not like to admit the possibility of failure, some said in advance that they would try at least one more time to pass the NUEE. Two NorthWest Ordinary students said that after that it would be a waste of time to keep trying. Humanities Middle students also thought that they would re-take the examination if they failed, and Elite Affiliated teachers, while suggesting that not many students at the school would be in this situation, also thought that those who failed would sit the NUEE again. As was seen in the last chapter, some parents will even push their children to re-sit the NUEE three or more times in an effort to get them to pass.

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Students are recruited into cram courses through advertising and stalls set up outside universities after the NUEE results have been announced. Some institutions advertise that they have employed key school teachers to teach the classes. Students fill in an application form stating whether they are in the humanities or science stream, and their scores for each subject in their previous attempt at sitting the NUEE. They also note which subjects they want to improve in. One university requested that the NUEE scores of potential applicants be within 80 marks of the cut-off for tertiary vocational studies.

The tuition cost for cram courses in 1998 stood at about 1500 yuan (A$300), with one advertising that there would also be a 300 yuan (A$60) book and materials fee. While most local students would not need to pay accommodation costs, students from out of town would be disadvantaged unless they had relatives to stay with in Kunming. Students thought that if necessary, their parents would not hesitate to send them to a cram course, despite the costs involved.

Although cram courses and re-sitting the NUEE have traditionally been an option for failed university applicants, a new phenomenon now appears to be growing. Students who have passed the NUEE with good scores and have been offered places at university are choosing to re-sit the NUEE instead of taking up those places. These students reportedly wish to improve on their original NUEE marks in the re-sit, thus heightening their chances of entering a more desirable university and subject major. The students (and their parents, if they support the student’s choice) are prepared to face the challenges of studying for a further year, the possibility of failure, and the financial costs involved, because they are convinced that the subject major and university they
enter have a great influence on their future employment options. It is indicative of qualification escalation that the aspiration of these students is not merely to enter university, but to enter the most prestigious university and most desirable course they can.

“Self-Study Examination” Courses

Twice yearly, the National Education Examination Authority (NEEA) sets examinations (called “state-administered examinations for self-learners”, zixué kǎoshi 自学考试) for tertiary level vocational courses which lead to a qualification called zikǎo dàxué zhānkē biyè zhèngshū 自考大学专科毕业证书 (Self-Study Tertiary Vocational Graduation Certificate). Students sitting these examinations have studied in part-time “self-study tertiary vocational” courses (zikǎo dàzhīàn bān 自考大专班) taught at both government and private tertiary institutions. As these courses do not cover the bulk of subject material required to pass the examination, students are also expected to do a large amount of study in their own time, essentially teaching themselves from the textbooks. They are thus colloquially known in China as “self-study courses”.

Self-study courses have become prevalent in China over the last couple of years as the demand for university education has grown. The China Daily reported 12 million self-study examination candidates in 1998, and nearly 6.5 million in the first examination session in 1999. In Kunming, the increase in numbers of courses is evident in the proliferation of advertisements in the Yunnan Education Newspaper in 1999 compared to 1998. Most courses run for two to three years in subjects such as

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information technology, business, finance, trade, various technical specialties, and tourism. The Yunnan provincial education bureau has required that all university departments run self-study courses in order to give students “a better future”, and sets the target number of applicants each department is to recruit. In addition, there are reportedly over 460 private schools in Yunnan offering courses.\(^\text{11}\)

Students are recruited through advertisements in newspapers and at stalls set up around the universities in Kunming during July and August.\(^\text{12}\) Newspaper articles every year also detail these options for failed NUEE students who want to continue their studies. The main theme of such articles is that “society needs many different talents and abilities”, and that self-study courses offer students the freedom to “study whatever interests them”.\(^\text{13}\) Enrolment in self-study courses is conducted on a “first come, first served” basis, and although the application form for one private school required applicants to list their total NUEE and SSEE scores as well as their scores for individual subjects in these examinations, whether a student can afford the tuition fee is almost always more of an issue than their academic abilities. The advertised tuition costs for self-study courses are as high as 3000 yuan (A$600) per year in some institutions. Accommodation fees are 500 yuan or more (A$100) per year, and fees for materials are about 150 yuan (A$30). At some institutions, even students whose families live in Kunming have to live in the school dormitories and pay accommodation fees. There are also various administration costs. An article in the \textit{Yunnan Education Newspaper} reported that the total cost for a student to attend a self-study course for two and a half


\(^{12}\) I also saw such stalls around universities in Chengdu, Sichuan Province.

\(^{13}\) Li Ling, “Do I still have hope to study?”, \textit{Yunnan Education Newspaper: Senior High School Student Edition}, 29 August 1998.
years surpasses 7000 yuan (A$1400), a considerable cost for most families. 

A university student who was manning a recruitment stall in 1998 indicated that a total of 40 students had applied for the two self-study courses in the foreign language department of her university, with target numbers of 120 in the English course and 100 in the tourism course.

Although self-study courses are advertised as a good alternative for students who have failed to enter regular degrees and diplomas at university, most educational participants I spoke with agreed that they are not a good option for failed NUEE students because the qualification received is quite inferior to the tertiary qualifications gained by passing the NUEE. The NEEA official I spoke with indicated that teachers who teach self-study and other adult education courses are normally only employed part-time. In university departments, teachers would “most likely pay more attention to their normal students and teaching duties, thus not giving full attention to the self-study students and courses.” The courses thus suffer from poor preparation and a lack of resources. The official pointed out that some teachers hired specifically to teach self-study courses might not have good qualifications in the subject. The *Yunnan Education Newspaper* also questioned the ability of teachers at the private schools, citing one self-study student who felt disadvantaged by the low standards of teaching in his course.

Students and teachers at the senior high schools believed that only a small percentage of failed NUEE students would enter self-study courses, and I did not personally meet any student who was even considering the option. Students straight out

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of senior high school would rather attempt the NUEE again in order to get into university, and the courses consist primarily of adults who want to improve their qualifications in order to get an edge over their workmates.

A number of reasons were given as to why self-study courses are unpopular with senior high school graduates. The overall ability of students in self-study courses was cited as a negative, because students who might be capable of doing well would be disadvantaged by the majority who would struggle with the concepts and require the teacher to go through the material more slowly. Self-study courses are seen to be hard because the motivation and “stamina” needed to study for them is greater. The fact that some students need to take on part-time work in order to pay the course fees also increases the difficulty of completing a self-study course. As a result of these pressures and the difficulty of the final course examinations, teachers emphasized that only very capable and hardworking students would be able to pass the courses with good enough grades to have a chance of finding a good job, and that in general, students graduating from self-study courses find it harder to get good jobs. This impression was confirmed by the NEEA official I spoke with who asserted that self-study graduates struggle to get work and that “university graduates will still get the better jobs.” Students attending self-study courses in private schools are often looked down upon by others, as the schools are seen to be of a low standard and the students themselves of low ability. This belief is illustrated in a comment to a newspaper reporter by one such student who most fears the question “what school did you graduate from?”16 Although I was told that some employers might look favourably at self-study graduates, believing they have

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16 Ibid, p. 8.
more drive and motivation to succeed, even the NEEA official noted that “the ability of self-study graduates is not as good [as that of university graduates] to start with.”

6.6 Money – The All-Important Variable

As I have illustrated, money has become increasingly important in ensuring that students receive the kind of education they and/or their parents want. Access to education through fees is not confined to informal methods of entry or to students who have failed to enter tertiary institutions via the NUEE. Even students who are academically capable of entering whatever school or university they like must carefully consider what their families can afford. Tuition fees at senior high schools differ according to the prestige of each school and there are also a number of other significant fees. In 1998, the tuition fees at Elite Affiliated were about 1200 yuan (A$240) per year, while those at Humanities Middle were 800 yuan (A$160) per year, and NorthWest Ordinary students paid 500-600 yuan (A$100-120). At one university’s affiliated junior high school, one of the best in Kunming, the fees for all three years are payable in one lump sum totalling 7500 yuan (A$1500). Officially, the average income for an employee in Yunnan is 7667 yuan (A$1533) per year, with those in the farming, forestry, animal husbandry and fishery sectors earning the least at an average of 5121 yuan (A$1024), and those in the sector for the “production and supply of electricity, gas and water” earning the most at an average of 10570 yuan (A$2114). A Kunming student said that an average salary in the city would be about 700-800 yuan (A$140-160) per month. She thought that employees in “good firms” would get 1000-2000 yuan.

(A$200-400) per month, while some managers could receive more than 10,000 yuan (A$2000). As a monthly average, high school teachers get around 1000 yuan (A$200), waiters about 300-500 yuan (A$60-100), and employees in large hotels about 800 yuan (A$160). The student pointed out that in other areas of the country salaries are better, stating that her cousin in Shenzhen receives 3000 yuan (A$600) per month as a high school teacher. These salary estimates, the student said, do not include benefits that the work unit might offer, such as financial bonuses and reduced price housing.

Other fees are for textbooks, extra classes, bicycle parking and other sundries, which can amount to about 400-500 yuan (A$80-100) per semester at the best schools. Throughout the 1990s there were numerous newspaper articles, editorials and government pronouncements calling for an end to the indiscriminate charging of fees. The practice does not appear to have abated.18 Elite Affiliated students attending my oral English classes paid 30 yuan for the semester, while similar classes at NorthWest Ordinary were free. Private tuition classes cost about 30 yuan (A$6) per hour, a sum which a NorthWest Ordinary student thought parents would be willing to pay “in order to help their child get better marks and have a better chance of going to university.” These additional costs increase in the senior 3 year as students are required to purchase more study guides and attend extra classes. The cost of taking university-run extra classes in senior 3 was beyond the means of NorthWest Ordinary students, none of whom attended them.

Tuition fees were introduced nationally for most university courses in 1997, and the costs vary between universities and courses, with the average course costing about 2000 yuan (A$400) per year. Together with accommodation and living expenses, the average university student is estimated to spend about 10,000 yuan (A$2000) per year, though this varies according to province. These costs have a great influence on how students view their university education. Remaining in Yunnan to study is viewed as the cheaper option, because Kunming is a relatively cheap city to live in, students can stay with their families, and there are no travel costs between provinces. A NorthWest Ordinary student said she would choose a university in Kunming because she could then eat at home. A Humanities Middle student wrote that he would consider the university location above all other considerations, because “travelling expenses are a big problem for me.” Furthermore, the actual costs students must pay at university relate largely to the prestige and facilities of the institution, making famous universities in other provinces much more expensive than local Yunnan ones. A Humanities Middle student noted that “with money, I could choose a better university or even go abroad for further study.”

Students in Humanities Middle and NorthWest Ordinary were particularly concerned about whether their families could afford for them to attend university, with a number listing it as a problem. Many also agreed that financial difficulties are

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19 The variations in tuition fees between universities and courses is discussed more fully in Wu Huiping and Ruth Hayhoe, “Fee-paying public universities and private institutions”, *China News Analysis*, No. 1534 (1 May, 1995).
something most children from working class families have to face. One NorthWest Ordinary student said

my family is not rich because both my parents are workers. If I get into university, my parents will have to scrape to let me go. At the moment, my mother is out of work, so I would have to depend on my father if she does not get work before then.

Even students who are almost assured of getting a university place are concerned about how their families will afford it, with one Elite Affiliated student writing that school fees are a problem, because fees are fairly high. My father and mother are both workers, and their income is not high. My elder sister is already at university, so for me to go I must save and maybe give up some things I like.

Corruption within the universities and their need for more funding means that even students who are academically capable of entering a university course may be discriminated against. A lecturer told me that if a student’s family is poor, or the university for some reason does not think that the student will be able to pay the tuition fees, then the university will not want to recruit that student, regardless of his or her marks.

Tuition fees have not stemmed the tide of students applying for university entrance, however. Parents do everything they can to raise the finances needed. One Humanities Middle student summed up the position of many of the students in ordinary schools, saying that “my parents are both workers. They work hard, but cannot earn much money. If I go to university, I’ll spend a lot of my parent’s money. But I don’t think they mind it, because they’ve always wanted me to go to university.” Students I spoke with strongly identified with the family situation of the student narrator in a CCTV program about senior high school students in Liaoning, where the narrator’s father had borrowed money to buy a taxi so that he could work longer hours in order to raise money to send his son to university. One student said that his parents “have to
Another said that her father earns about 600 yuan per month in his job as a company driver, but that he was studying hard in the evenings in order to pass the adult NUEE so that he could attend university and get a better job which pays more, just so her fees to university can be paid if she gets in. A family friend had done the same, studying business at university, and was now earning 800-900 yuan per month as a result. As happens in the United States, parents often begin to save for their children’s education when the children are still very young, as education is one of the largest expenses a family will face. Parents often borrow money, and student bank loan schemes are being established in major cities,22 but these require eventual repayment. Parents are therefore still forced to work hard and live frugally.

An article in the People’s Daily suggested, though, that university graduates are likely to find well-paid jobs that can help repay such debts within two years.23 Only a few students mentioned that they themselves would get part-time jobs in order to help their parents pay for their tuition fees. While there are various forms of financial assistance available to students, including a variety of scholarships, fee exemptions, loans, and work-study programs, competition to secure these is intense, and others are aimed only at particularly needy students.24

The problem of tuition fees has given rise to a new phenomenon in China – that of “students” begging for money on the streets to cover tuition costs. These “students”

24 For a more detailed description of these see “The Toll Bridge into University”, China News Analysis, No. 1602 (15 January 1998).
appear to be con-artists who have seen a niche in the begging market which might yield good incomes, as citizens realize that the spiralling costs of education disadvantage many students and offer assistance. I came across one of these “students” on a street in Lanzhou, Gansu Province. She was a young girl, supposedly from Guizhou, with a long notice hanging around her neck like a criminal whose crimes are detailed for all to see. A small crowd had gathered around her to read the handwritten notice, which stated that after doing the Senior Secondary Entrance Examination in 1996, she was accepted into the Southeast Commerce School. At the bottom of the notice were the school acceptance letters together with a student card, and she was wearing a school badge. Her course was to run for five years, at a cost of 1800 yuan per year, but due to severe flooding in 1997, her family home was devastated and some family members died, leaving her with no money to complete her course. As she could not finish her course, she was unable to get a job to support her remaining family. She was very reluctant to talk with me, standing with bowed head and tears in her eyes, but the onlookers were more forthcoming. Most did not give her money, describing her as a cheat and a fraud. They argued that it is easy to forge official looking documents and student cards. Several questions arose as to why the girl was in Lanzhou so far from her supposed “home”, how she got the money to pay for the train ticket and so on. When I returned to Kunming, the Yunnan Education Newspaper ran an article describing the appearance of the same phenomenon on the streets of Kunming.\textsuperscript{25} The article exposed the fraudulent claims of another “student” who was also supposedly from Guizhou, and urged the public not to be fooled into giving such people money.

6.7 The Social Distribution of Education

The amount of money required for students to obtain a senior high school education has a great impact on the social distribution of educational opportunity. There was a marked difference between the student bodies at Elite Affiliated and NorthWest Ordinary, with the former largely consisting of students from cadre, wealthy business, intellectual and other well-off backgrounds, while the latter was dominated by students from working class backgrounds. Students who are from working class backgrounds with limited finances cannot afford to pay key school or university fees even if they are accepted on their academic merit. They are also less able to afford the extra classes and tutoring, textbooks, additional study guides and other sundries their counterparts from higher income backgrounds can, which can affect their chances of success in the severe competition for university places. Neither can less well-off students afford to use the informal system of guanxi and monetary backdoor payments to their advantage. It can be hypothesized that these reasons may combine to reduce the proportion of students from lower class backgrounds entering tertiary level institutions.

In examining the question of social class and education opportunity, Thogersen suggests that while there is an under-representation of worker and peasant children in high quality urban schools, access to such schools is not restricted.26 He states that “the avenues of upward social mobility for the offspring of workers and peasants do exist.”27 Certainly there are avenues for upward social mobility. University courses which are unpopular but which are vital to China’s growth and development, such as teaching,

27 Ibid, p. 145.
forestry and agriculture, remain free of tuition fees at present in order to encourage more students to enrol. But often these become the only options for students who cannot otherwise afford a tertiary education. Consequently, their choices are more restricted than for others and they are effectively excluded from those courses which lead to the higher status, higher income jobs.\textsuperscript{28} Graduates from these courses are still assigned jobs by their institution, again restricting their freedom of choice and often with the consequence that they go to poorer regions rather than the more desirable developing cities.

Unlike Thogersen, who argued in 1990 that “money is not a particularly important factor in deciding urban students’ educational careers”,\textsuperscript{29} I have found that due to increases of tuition fees and other costs for education throughout the late 1990s, access to quality education is now dictated to a growing extent by the ability to afford it, thereby narrowing the avenues for students from lower income and social sectors of the community. Although it could be argued that those most affected are from rural areas, there is also a growing number of average to low income urban families who are struggling to meet the financial requirements of education placed on them either by dint of their own expectations or as a result of official policy. My conclusion is shared by Zhou Xueguang, Phyllis Moen and Nancy Brandon Tuma, who found that there is strong evidence of a growing inequality in urban China, and that the effects of gender, family social origin and residential location on entry into senior high school and university are significant.\textsuperscript{30}

\textsuperscript{28} This point is also noted in Stanley Rosen, \textit{Chinese Youth in the Year 2000: Internalization, Nationalism and Pragmatism} (Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Association for Asian Studies: San Diego, California, 2000), p. 27.
The effect of gender on educational opportunity was not an issue I investigated while in Kunming, and it was not raised as an issue by educational participants with whom I spoke. However, statistics show that nationally, the numbers of females in tertiary education is less than the number of males, at 38% to 62%. This could in part be explained by the emphasis placed by the government on science-related occupations which are seen as necessary for the country’s further development. The humanities NUEE cut-off marks are lower than those for the science stream and there are more places available in tertiary institutions for students wishing to study science-related majors. This may disadvantage female students who often prefer to choose humanities majors. Although both the science and humanities streams at Elite Affiliated and NorthWest Ordianry enrolled equal numbers of male and female students, there were noticeably more female students enrolled in Humanities Middle (around 70% of students were female), which focussed solely on the humanities stream.

6.8 Discontent and Its Possible Consequences

My research indicated a growing discontent among educational participants in Kunming over practices which they see as unfair and favouring some students over others. The full extent of unfair practices with regard to university entrance is not widely known, but in the lower levels of the education system, inequity is becoming more the norm than the exception. A Beijing University lecturer has noted increasing discontent among educational participants, telling me that parents often get together to discuss their

31 A fact which requires further research is the difference in ratios of male to female tertiary entrants between provinces. In 1995, 59.5% of tertiary students from Yunnan were male, to 40% female. In contrast, for example, the ratio in Guangdong was 69% to 31%.

childrens’ education, and express a great deal of resentment towards those with money and *guanxi* who can get their children into whichever school they like. As the importance of qualifications escalates, the subsequent competition intensifies, and parents become more willing to use money, *guanxi* and in some cases power to give their child an edge over others, it is likely that resentment and discontent will deepen and become more widespread.

Self-funding students who enter key schools are sometimes strongly resented by academically capable students in ordinary schools who missed out on a place in key schools because their names were “pushed down” in favour of others. One NorthWest Ordinary student mentioned that “backdoor students” are one of her biggest obstacles to success within the education system. She explained that if a student’s score on the SSEE or NUEE reaches just above the cut-off mark, there is the distinct possibility that some “backdoor students” will be given preference in entry to senior high schools or university, thus pushing the student’s name down the list of applicants. The student could then end up in a “bad” senior high school or miss out on entering a university. A Humanities Middle student also talked about “backdoor students” blocking others in the education system and job market, emphasizing that “if someone has powerful parents, he or she will have a bright future.”

In addition, self-funding students who enter schools because of their parents’ desires often do not wish to study and can cause problems in class to the disadvantage of others. Several Elite Affiliated students grumbled that their class was disrupted by such students who are unable to study at such a high level or who are there under their parents’ duress. Teachers at the school were also finding it increasingly difficult to teach because of the mix of abilities in classes and the large student numbers. A teacher at
NorthWest Ordinary said that students with parents successful in business often disrupt the classes and do little work, for they know that if they fail they can fall back on their parents’ money or guanxi to get them a job. One of my Humanities Middle students was in this category, and having failed his English GCE, dropped out of school in the hope that his uncle in America would be able to offer him an opportunity to immigrate.

Teachers at Elite Affiliated thought that students whose parents have money or power are lazy, even in senior 3. These kinds of students not only disrupt lessons making it harder for other students to study, but their low marks also bring down the class average, which can cause anger among the class as a whole who feel they are unfairly labelled as worse than other class groups in their year.

As I detailed in the first chapter, the selective function of education must provide justification for the social division of labour and must be viewed as legitimate. I contend that there is a distinct possibility that those placed in subordinate jobs after their “selection” through education will no longer consider that their “fate has been justly determined” as Thogersen states, thereby challenging the very legitimacy that the Chinese government depends upon. Educational participants are becoming increasingly aware that the official academic criteria for selection can be bypassed by those with money and/or guanxi, and that the selection process is therefore neither fair nor just. As the links between education, social mobility and job opportunities become stronger, resentment towards those who are able to work the system to their advantage will increase. It remains to be seen whether discontentment over “unfair” practices will give rise to unrest with a potential to threaten the current political regime, but when

33 Ibid, p. 16.
coupled with the widening gap between rich and poor, the soaring unemployment rate, and other explosive issues, such discontent could present a serious challenge.

Academic education, however, is not the only stream within the Chinese education system which can provide students with qualifications. One aim of the education system is to select students for different types of educational training. To this end, the Chinese government has particularly encouraged the development of vocational education in order to meet economic demands for skilled and semi-skilled workers. Vocational education, however, has always been beset by a variety of problems relating to the nature of qualifications obtained, the standard of teaching, the curriculum, a lack of finances and resources, and more significantly, the popular perception among urban families that it is inferior to academic education. Although different strands of vocational training have been relatively popular at some stages due to economic opportunities for graduates and perceptions of job status, in the current climate where employers are placing more emphasis on academic qualifications and workers are being laid-off due to industry reconstruction, vocational education remains a last resort for most urban students.
Chapter Seven

Vocational Education

Many countries see the solution to their “diploma disease” problems in the expansion and promotion of vocational education. Vocational education is promoted as an alternative path for those students who are not suited to academic study, and is supposed to provide students with practical skills related to needs in the workforce, increasing graduates’ chances of getting a job. There are generally three types of vocational and technical training in schools. The first seeks to encompass a variety of so-called “vocational” courses within junior academic secondary schools, such as the metalwork or woodwork classes found in Australian high schools. The second is more structured, providing vocational and technical streams in addition to a general education stream in senior secondary schools. The third tradition is that of separate vocational and technical schools.1

In China, the 1985 Decision of the Party Central Committee called for the rapid development of vocational education at the senior secondary level in order to ease the competition generated by the push to enter tertiary institutions.2 All three types of vocational and technical training are officially found in China’s education system, though the majority of China’s vocational education occurs in separate vocational and technical schools like Technical Middle. NorthWest Ordinary’s senior 3 vocational computing course typifies the second type of vocational stream offered alongside the

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2 Leslie Nai-Kwai Lo, op.cit., p. 22.20.
academic curriculum, and the government encourages junior high schools to offer “vocational” subjects within their academic curriculum. By 1998, the target of having equal numbers of students in vocational and academic education was realized, with about 55% of all junior high school graduates enrolled in vocational senior high schools.³

7.1 Problems Facing Vocational Education

Despite this achievement, vocational education in China faces a number of hurdles. The curriculum, aims and goals of such education need to be linked to workforce requirements to ensure a balance between supply and demand, and adequate funding is necessary to ensure quality in both teaching and resources. Perhaps the biggest problem is that vocational education is often perceived as inferior to academic education, receiving students whose academic achievements are poor and offering jobs of a lower status.

Employment Opportunities

Job opportunities for graduates of vocational education vary according to the nature of the economy and the type of vocational school a graduate attended. Specialized schools are usually more popular than other types, as they are of a higher status than vocational and skilled-worker schools. A number of academics said that courses for specialized students are generally of a higher level than their vocational counterparts. The skills of specialized students are more marketable because of the higher quality of education they have received, and due to the continued demand for graduates from specialized courses,

which include teacher training, nursing, post and telecommunications, and tourism. A few Humanities Middle students said that some graduates of specialized schools do get good jobs, for example those who graduate as nurses.

Changes in China’s economy have seriously limited employment opportunities for graduates of vocational and skilled-worker schools. Such difficulties also occurred in the new market economies of former Communist countries in Eastern Europe, where the old transition from vocational school to linked enterprise was broken. Students who had been assigned to vocational schools were no longer guaranteed jobs, and unemployment sometimes ensued.\(^4\) Although the private sector in China has grown considerably, there has also been a re-structuring of state-owned enterprises (SOEs). Changes have resulted in a push for more sophisticated technology, and a move away from heavy industry and labour intensive jobs into areas such as information technology. In 1992, a policy of “re-organizing for the sake of efficiency” was initiated in China, and by 1995 an increase in competition was affecting smaller companies. This has resulted in many factory closures or amalgamations, and an unprecedented number of workers being made redundant. Economic reforms have gradually broken the former ‘iron rice bowl’ system where the state allocated jobs and workers held lifetime jobs with guaranteed welfare and housing, creating intense competition for available jobs. Outdated levels of technical expertise among technicians in SOEs has been identified within China as a major contributor to rising unemployment levels.

\(^4\) K. King, \textit{op.cit.}, p. 6247.
Teachers and Resources

Vocational education is disadvantaged in many countries by the low quality of teachers and resources received. China is no exception, with the best teachers being recruited by key schools, and the least qualified by vocational or ordinary academic schools. I am unable to comment on the qualifications of those teachers who taught the specialized subjects Technical Middle offered, though one student commented that “non-key schools have a poorer quality of teaching.” From observation alone it was also hard to gauge the quality of resources at Technical Middle, though one student mentioned that the school’s facilities and environment are poor. Students feel that they do not receive good qualifications from the school, as evidenced by a student remark that “this school is bad and we have learnt little. The school doesn’t want others to know about our low ability.”

Low Academic Abilities

Most students in Technical Middle appeared to struggle greatly with the academic component of the curriculum. The nature of the Graduate Competency Examinations which vocational students are required to sit require that, as in academic schools, a large amount of textbook knowledge needs to be given and absorbed in a short time. During one politics class the lecturer spoke rapidly through the whole period, barely pausing for breath. After the class she apologized, and said that because the class is behind in its work compared to the other classes, she must get through the content quickly. She realizes that most of the students do not understand, but finds herself caught in a catch-22 situation. If she slows down and explains more, the required content is not covered by the end of the semester, and she has to arrange and teach extra classes. This pressure on teachers is exacerbated by the practical training students take in factories around Kunming, which takes them out of the school for days on end. Furthermore, these senior
students start their holiday period a week or two earlier than students in academic schools to give them time to get to their hometowns, which are often far away.

7.2 Teacher Morale

Given all the obstacles that teachers at Technical Middle face, it is unsurprising that morale among them is low, though the camaraderie they have developed among themselves keeps them cheerful and relatively happy most of the time. Many of the teachers are young women, who have been at the school since they graduated from teacher training college. They said that teacher training institutes still assign jobs to their graduates, and only if a student’s mark is high do they have a chance of being assigned to a city school. Otherwise, they must go to a suburban or rural school.

While I was at the school, a rumour circulated that it was to be amalgamated with another technical school in the area. The female teachers discussed the situation animatedly over lunch, forecasting job losses they had never anticipated – in the current economic climate, teaching is one of the few stable professions left. Many were worried that they would not be able to find another position, and that changing to another profession would be impossible as they were “too old” (they were in their 30s and 40s) to be re-trained. It transpired that the senior school would merge with a local technical school (Technical Middle would revert to being a junior school only) over the next couple of years, but that few teachers would lose their jobs. One teacher said it would only be those who are very bad, who do not come to school or who always talk on the phone who would be targetted.
There was only one English teacher at the senior secondary level, a softly spoken young lady who lived on the campus during the week, and only saw her husband and young child on weekends. At the time I visited the school, she was the classmaster of a Senior 1 electrical engineering class, consisting of roughly 30 boys and a few girls. It was obvious she found teaching English extremely difficult. Most of the boys did not pay attention, and when called upon to answer questions, stood and shuffled nervously, looking at the floor. Few of them seemed to understand anything in the lesson, despite the fact the textbook was quite easy in comparison to those used in academic schools. Some fell asleep on their desks, others used the time to read magazines, and during exercises in which they were to practise dialogues, they chatted among themselves. The girls, however, were more keen to learn and practise, despite their low level of conversational ability. The teacher tried to encourage her students, but she openly despised of them learning anything, saying there was no hope as the students did not want to be there and did not see it as important to their futures. Her tone and manner implied that it was useless trying to improve their level of English.

This teacher was the most despairing of all I talked with. She said her salary is low, and living away from her family is a great strain. Conditions in the school are also not good, in her opinion, and she thinks about leaving all the time, but there is no way out. She often looked tired and quite depressed, and wanted me to talk with the students about the importance of having motivation and studying in order to get a job. At one point, when I went to listen to one of her English classes, she became very agitated and refused to let me attend the class on the basis that I had “listened to them before”. Another English teacher who was with me at the time suggested that this was because the class had performed very badly in some way and there would be no new lesson.
taught – rather, the teacher would spend the time berating the students and resolving the problem. I did not see this occur at any other school.

One consequence of the low job satisfaction, low salary and poor conditions is the ‘moonlighting’ which occurs among the Technical Middle teachers. Apparently, one teacher in the past undertook so much extra work to supplement his income that he missed his classes at the school, even going away for weeks on end. He was eventually dismissed. It is hard to ascertain how many teachers hold extra jobs, as it is officially not permitted and teachers are reticent about discussing the matter. One English teacher who only had responsibility for the junior 1 year, which, due to a drop in enrollments was one class of about 35 students, also taught at an engineering industry school further down the road.

7.3 Perceptions of Vocational Education

Saha and Fägerlind maintain that the major difficulty with the coexistence of vocational and academic curricula is that they relate to two discrete occupational sectors, and therefore tend to institutionalize and maintain inequalities in a society. Coupled with China’s long tradition of education as the path to social mobility and the problems facing vocational education, this difficulty remains.

Prior to 1989, commentators such as Stig Thogersen predicted that successful labour market reform could change the employment pattern, which would facilitate a

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change in attitude by students and parents towards vocational education in China. Thogersen also stated that a market-oriented economy could increase the number of attractive career opportunities for talented students without university qualifications, taking some pressure off the examination system and potentially making it difficult for universities to attract students.\textsuperscript{6} At the time Thogersen wrote his book, it seemed as though such reforms were no longer possible due to the events of 1989 and the resultant tightening of control by hard-line Party leaders. Economic reform did resume, however, and the opportunity structure seemed to alter with the rapid economic growth of the early to mid 1990s, at least in developed cities and areas of the east coast. In Yunnan, I was told by many students and teachers that senior specialized schools in particular were becoming more popular among urban and rural families alike through the mid-1990s due to growth in the job sectors specialized vocational courses cater for.

However, as a result of the uncertainties vocational school graduates face in employment and the attractions of pursuing an academic education, few urban students today voluntarily choose to enter vocational institutions of any variety. One Technical Middle student lamented that “the profession I am going to enter in the future is scorned by others in society. People would like to employ graduates from universities. Vocational schools are inferior.” This situation is similar to that in Taiwan, where the government’s educational planning is geared to meet the needs of the labour market. Many students in Taiwanese vocational schools have been enrolled involuntarily because they failed the entrance examination for academic secondary schools.\textsuperscript{7}

\textsuperscript{7} Young Yi-rong, “School as the Eptiome of the Society: Education and Social Change in Taiwan”, in Gerard A. Postiglione and Lee Wing On (eds.), \textit{Social Change and Educational Development: Mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong} (Hong Kong: Centre of Asian Studies, University of Hong Kong, 1995), p. 123.
Social Status and Inferiority

In Japan, students who fail to enter academic secondary schools are relegated to vocational schools and are subsequently labelled as “failures” destined for blue-collar, low status jobs. I found a similar situation in Kunming. Many students in vocational schools are there because they have done poorly on the SSEE and such schools and students have continued to be considered “second-best” or “failures” among urban residents. Even teachers at Technical Middle agreed that their students are not as bright as those in other schools. They also believe that some of their colleagues give parents and students a bad impression, as they do not work hard because they think they do not have to in such a low quality school. Students in all the academic schools agreed that vocational schools attract poor students and are “not good”.

A number of the students in Technical Middle openly acknowledged that they feel the stigma of being in a vocational school vis a vis other students (especially former classmates from junior high school), and even their parents:

I have feelings of inferiority compared to key school students, because we did the same exam at the same time. Other students got a high score, so I don’t feel good. Now I study in this school. The conditions are not good, other people don’t pay attention to it and parents also look down upon it.

When I meet students who are in a higher level school than me, I feel embarrassed, especially when I meet them on the street and they don’t talk to me. I feel this is too heavy a burden for me.

I feel a little inferior, perhaps because of the importance of diplomas in the current society. In addition, people believe that students of non-key schools have less bright futures and mostly idle away their time.

A vague sense of unfairness emerged when Technical Middle students were discussing how they came to be at the school and not at a key school. Some wondered

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8 Jon Woronoff, *op.cit.*, p. 57.
why others could go to a key school but they could not, some asked themselves whether they are really any different from other students, and others rather defiantly pointed out that key school students (and key school life) are not necessarily that good anyhow:

Students in key high schools are merely good in scores. They are generally weaker than us in their ability to have an independent life.

In key schools, the students have pressure to study.

As a vocational school student, I think we are better than students in a key school. We can learn specialized subjects.

Not all students believe they are inferior to others, and among some stock phrases used in propaganda to portray the equality of such students and schools there are also other insights:

In the end we will all be serving society, it’s just that we’ll be doing physical labour and they’ll be doing mental labour.

There is a rank in the quality of schools, but not in personalities. Key high schools and vocational schools differ in the direction of student training, the former focusing on knowledge and the latter on practising skills.

One student referred to the chance to enter university even after joining the workforce, through the adult NUEE or other self-study options, saying that there are experts in every profession and the important thing is to master a skill. I can also go back to school for higher education in the future after working for a while. It’s like we have the same goal [as students still in the academic stream] but take two different ways to reach it.

“Studying is Useless”

A problem seen in Japanese vocational schools is that students have little motivation to study, and morale among them is low. They are also more likely to become involved in delinquent activities, and discipline problems are greater in such schools.9 In Technical

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Middle, I did not observe noticeably greater discipline problems among the students, though truancy, smoking and being rude to teachers were mentioned as occasional problems. Technical Middle students were actually much quieter during lessons than were students in the other schools where I conducted research. The reasons were probably related to my presence, a tendency of students to fall asleep or do something else quiet during a boring lesson, or the fact that these students were the only ones with single desks (which were always separate from each other), so there were no opportunities to talk easily or pass notes.

There was one exception, however, and that was a senior 1 music lesson. Music is not an examinable subject, and for the most part students disliked it. It was clear from the teacher’s exhortations to behave well in front of “our foreign guest” and her general attitude of having “had enough of them” that there was a definite air that misbehaviour was waiting to happen as soon as I left. The level of misbehaviour would be hard to define, but from my experiences in other schools it could consist of talking, writing notes, doing other homework, studying for another subject, the occasional throwing of objects, and reading comic books or magazines under the desk.

It seemed to me that most of the students, even when they did not fall asleep, were quite bored with the lessons or did not understand them. Teachers agreed that they would rather the students fell asleep than be awake and cause problems. They said that the students who regularly fell asleep (and they were mainly boys who sat close to or at the back of the class) were those with richer farming parents from the outskirts of Kunming. These students did not care if they failed even the required Graduation Competency Examinations, because they knew that if they could not find work after leaving school they would be able to depend on their parents. If a student the teacher
perceived as being “good” fell asleep, they said they would normally wake him or her up and ask what the problem was. A lack of motivation, diligence and keenness were viewed by teachers as the prime obstacles to overcome in their students. Middle-aged teachers complained that students are no longer polite and eager to study as they were when they first began teaching about ten years ago. They blamed this on the parents, whom they said just want to earn money, and do not have time (or take time) to teach their children how to behave or to help them with their studies – accordingly, the value of study is not instilled. They often stated that the students just want to “play” and are not really interested in study because they just want to make lots of money in the future and do not see how study will help them in this. Some students may see subjects such as Chinese or maths as important, as they will help them get a job, but many come from families that do not value education, and most do not have a purpose in mind for their future. Those from farming families also see that some farmers can get very rich, richer than workers trained in their specialties, although teachers agreed that it is harder to get rich in Yunnan as a farmer than in eastern provinces. It is this lack of interest and purpose among students which depresses and discourages the teachers most.

7.4 Specialized Schools – A Better Option?

During 1998, I was able to visit an engineering vocational school (which I was told was a specialized school) in the same district as Technical Middle. Engineering Middle was a larger school in better repair and with better facilities than Technical Middle. The students all wore identification badges, and their English level was markedly higher than that of Technical Middle students. They learn general English in senior 1, then English related to their specialty in senior years 2 and 3. Most of the students come from the country, like those at Technical Middle, and said that they came to the school
in order to get jobs and because getting into university is becoming too hard. The Technical Middle junior 1 English teacher said that Engineering Middle students will find jobs more easily than those from Technical Middle, as their level of training and ability is higher, but that in truth the job opportunities in their industry are not that good because of restructuring. The students said they did not really like the school, and this was explained by the teacher as due to their high expectations prior to coming to the school. As the students are from the country, their notion of city life is rosy, but the decreasing number of jobs has meant that their living conditions and prospects are not necessarily enhanced by coming to the city. These students, the English teacher told me, are very keen to learn, study hard and are polite – in contrast, she felt, to Technical Middle students.

A student whose friends from junior high school attended Northwest Ordinary in 1998 told me that after failing the SSEE, his mother enrolled him in a specialized school. He said he was not keen on the school or the course he is in, and did not want to discuss the matter with me. I believe this illustrates that although specialized vocational schools are on a higher level than ordinary vocational schools, individual schools vary, as do the perceptions of urban versus rural students. Many urban students believe that even specialized schools do not give the opportunities offered by academic schools for upward social mobility, success, and a prosperous future. As such, urban students who enter specialized schools feel they have failed in comparison with their peers and have ended up, somewhat involuntarily, in poorer quality schools offering a much less attractive future.

An article in the *Yunnan Education Newspaper* during 1998 discussed the similarities and differences between academic high school students and specialized
vocational students. The author asserted that the two streams have a completely different atmosphere. In academic schools, students are concerned not to let a single mark be wasted, hence the saying “Marks, marks, marks are a student’s life” (fēn fēn fēn, xuèshēng de mínggēn 分、分、分,学生的命根). The atmosphere is usually tense, constrained and quiet, and there are few students in the playground or dormitories during free time. In contrast, the saying in specialized vocational schools is “Long live 60 marks [the pass mark], one more is wasted, one less will cripple” (liushí fēn wànshuǐ, dōu yǐfēn lǎngfèi, shǎo yǐfēn cǎnfèi 六十分万岁, 多一分浪费, 少一分残废). In these schools, the atmosphere is more lively, with many of the students playing games, reading novels, chatting and generally leading a less stressful life. These portraits are slightly exaggerated and stereotyped, particularly if the comparison is to ordinary academic schools rather than key schools, but I did observe a noticeably different atmosphere between Technical Middle and the academic schools. The article goes on to say that these contrasts are what make students on both sides rather envious of each other. Academic students envy specialized school students because they face few pressures, and once three years have been completed, they can choose their own jobs and relax. At the same time, the article noted that specialized school students remember their days in junior high school as an enjoyable time.

It is hard to ascertain whether specialized school students are really so nostalgic about their days in junior high, though it is clear that those who have entered specialized schools through failure in the SSEE would have some feelings of envy and lost opportunity. For those who have entered vocational schools due to their dislike of or

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inability to undertake academic study, I doubt there would be many feelings of nostalgia for the pressured life academic students lead, but there are feelings of loss in that they did not reach their (or their parents’) once hoped for dream of a university education.

Students in academic senior high schools often do envy those in specialized schools because they see their former classmates getting jobs before them and having much less pressure. On the other hand, some specialized school students without good jobs also envy their academic school counterparts, believing that if they had gone to university they would have found a better job. Nonetheless, a girl at Humanities Middle said that many students want to go to specialized schools, or even vocational schools, because academic study is so hard. Other girls at Humanities Middle told me they know many former classmates who went to specialized schools, some because they did not feel they would have a chance to pass the NUEE, and some just because they did not like to study. One Humanities Middle student considered going to a specialized school, but her mother’s suggestion of a Post and Telecommunications school did not appeal. Despite the fact graduates of specialized schools can sometimes get reasonable jobs with decent status and work conditions, she thought it was still better to go to university. Among other things, she mentioned that specialized schools primarily take the children of employees of companies connected with them, making guanxi important for a place there. Most students at Elite Affiliated assured me they would never consider entering a specialized school even if it meant little homework and no pressure. This, they indicated, was due to the low status of such schools, and also the fact that they wanted to enter university.

The Yunnan Education Newspaper also reported the comments of parents, such as “I am afraid the knowledge acquired at specialized schools will not be enough in
today’s competitive society”; “Work units do not want to employ specialized school students”; and “The reason we are letting our child study at an academic school is because society will increasingly require people with more knowledge.”

Education officials in the article stated that more people are turning away from vocational schooling of all kinds due to the low standard of training received in them, the high unemployment rate, and the fact that academic study is a better foundation for future studies and employment. Part of the difficulty lies in the increasing demand of employers for higher qualifications, with the consequence that a student who attends a secondary specialized vocational school may be overlooked for a graduate from a tertiary specialized vocational school which offers similar courses but at a higher level to its secondary counterpart. Thus the backwash effect of qualification escalation has reached even the upper levels of vocational education, and the pressure on entry into senior high schools and competition to pass the NUEE has not been reduced.

### 7.5 Reasons for Attending Vocational Schools

Despite all the disadvantages and problems inherent with attending vocational schools, students do enrol. Some enrol because they genuinely desire to study the kinds of courses the schools offer, but others have been “selected out” of the academic stream due to poor performance in junior high school, or because they lacked the finances to attend an urban academic school. One ethnic-minority student at Technical Middle had received sufficient marks on the SSEE to enrol in an academic senior high school in Kunming. The reason she did not was purportedly that she had filled the application

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forms in incorrectly because her teacher had not advised her properly as to the procedure.

**Academic Failure**

Some students admitted that they were in Technical Middle because they had “failed” the SSEE, and a number said it was because they did not study well or because “I was so playful at that time, I didn’t get a good score.” Their academic “failure” at junior high school meant they were unable to get high enough scores to enter specialized vocational schools. Teachers said that failed junior high school students are generally willing to come to Technical Middle so they can have a chance of getting a job afterwards, and pointed out that only a few with good *guanxi* need not continue their education at a senior level.

The nature of the SSEE is a further reason to enter the school. If a student has difficulties with some subjects, despite excelling in others, he or she may only find a place in an ordinary school or even a vocational school. One student commented that “when I was in junior high school, my natural sciences were good, but my liberal arts weren’t, so I didn’t get a good score in the examination.” A couple of academics said that some junior high school students decide that they are just not suitable for academic study and so do not want to go through the system and its pressures and then end up failing. Not even their parents would be able to convince them otherwise, and in the end, parents decide to let their children go to vocational schools because the resultant loss of face for the family if the children went to academic schools and then failed would be too great.
**Economic Considerations**

While the majority of students at Technical Middle had low SSEE marks, some had marks high enough to enable them to enter urban academic schools. The reason such students are at Technical Middle, as teachers and others told me, is that they are from poor rural families. These families may not be able to afford for their child to live in the city because living costs and tuition fees are too high. Urban schools with boarding facilities cannot take all the students, and families may lack relatives who live in or near the city. One student wrote that

> before I came to this school, I was accepted into an academic senior high school. At the same time, I was also permitted to enrol at this school. Because things were difficult in my family, I changed my mind and came to this school.

The NEEA official I interviewed stated that it is not just academic schools which cost a lot of money. Specialized vocational schools and courses are also expensive, and students who are from poor families may have little choice but to enrol in a lower level vocational or skilled worker school.

Part of the problem with the rapid economic growth experienced in the eastern regions of China is that it has led to large-scale rural to urban migration. Many rural students in urban vocational schools are there to escape the hardships of life in their hometowns and to get a job in the city. Graduates are unwilling to return to their hometowns or to be posted to remote, poverty-stricken regions, and basic state industries, key construction projects, agricultural and other grass-roots units find it difficult to attract trained personnel, resulting in increased regional disparities. Although urban Yunnan is well behind the eastern provinces in terms of economic growth, the same trends are visible there, with rural residents seeking to migrate to Kunming in order to enhance their prospects. Most rural and particularly ethnic-minority families
have more than one child. Such families need to get their older children into the workforce to earn money to support the family, and students from Technical Middle can be assigned to jobs in city factories if they have no contacts of their own, giving them a greater chance of attaining better conditions, higher pay and other benefits lacking in their hometowns. One student stated that “formerly I wanted to enter a key high school. I changed my mind and became interested in mechanical engineering after my father encouraged me to think about the financial situation of our family.” The NEEA official I spoke with also commented that vocational schools are attractive to rural students because they can find a job and earn money after only two to three years of study beyond junior high school.

The parents of students at Technical Middle are anxious to see their children avoid the poor, uneducated lives they have led and so push for them to complete whatever level of post-compulsory education they can afford. Students stated that their parents could not go to school because of poverty, and many commented that both parents are illiterate or that their parents received only a low level of education (at most junior high school, and that predominantly their fathers). As one student wrote, “my parents couldn’t go to school because of poverty. They work hard to make money to support me to go to school because they don’t want me to live in poverty now”. Vocational education is seen to offer some of the “culture” which I identified as an important reason for receiving education. One student said that “my parents always exhort me to study hard and not be the same as them, because they have no education.”

**Employment Considerations**

Technical Middle teachers told me that although everyone knows that if students attend university they will have a better chance of finding a “good” job, for students with poor
academic records it is better to enter a vocational school and gain a skill. In this way, there are more chances of getting a job than if the students receive no post-compulsory educational training at all. But the teachers also expressed doubts that many of the students would get jobs due to the large numbers of workers being laid off. In regard to their future direction, most students felt that they would undertake any job in the area of the specialty they were studying, even if they did not like it or it did not match their previous ambitions.

Many students stated that competition for jobs is very high and that a skill is vital in getting a job. Students know that jobs are not guaranteed after graduation, and that they should study hard to maximize their chances of success, asserting that even for them, grades are important to their future:

I think our performance decides our employment. Top students will take precedence when work is available. The teacher keeps them in mind. The students who disappointed the teachers will miss out.

In my school, if your grades are good, you will be recommended by the school when you look for work.

We are living at a time when personal ability is a dominant factor in succeeding in the competition for jobs. It was different in the past for our parents, when power was a dominant factor.

These comments are supported by the fact that state enterprises and labour bureaucracies with job openings are required to give hiring priority to vocational-technical graduates in the required field who have performed well in school.\footnote{Mun C. Tsang, “The Structural Reform of Secondary Education in China”, \textit{Journal of Educational Administration}, Vol. 29, No. 4 (1991), p. 73.} One student felt that

now, parents and teachers only pay attention to our grades. If we get a good score, we have a wonderful time. If we don’t get a good score we have a
sorrowful time. This situation makes us confused and disoriented, so we study like bookworms.

Vocational students face problems of *guanxi* and favouritism, which can work for or against them in the competition for jobs. One student asserted that teachers will only support you [in getting a job] if they trust you and have sympathy for you. Some students who can’t get a good score can get a good job, but good students can’t get a job.

These findings illustrate that there is a kind of “qualification escalation” even within vocational schools, which leads to some similar backwash effects as students in academic schools face.

### 7.6 The Social Composition of Vocational Education

Dore asserts that during the 1950s, working-class parents in the former Czechoslovakia were much less concerned to urge their children to study hard in order to get into institutions that led to administrative and professional jobs, as they were happy if their children worked in a factory and earned as much or more money. Middle-class parents, on the other hand, wanted their children to go into the more prestigious (in their eyes) middle-class occupations, even if the financial advantages were small or negative.13

In Yunnan the situation appears to be that it is the rural parents who are content for their children to have a vocational education and work in factories, although financially they would not normally earn as much money as those in administrative and professional jobs. Attendance at any school in Kunming, even if that school has very little prestige, is a step up for rural families. It means that the students might find jobs in

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the city which offer greater benefits than rural work, both for the individual and the family. Thus these families gain what urban families desire on a different level – social status in their hometown because they have a child at an urban school, pride in their children’s achievements, and potential monetary gain compared to what they would receive in a rural setting.

For urban families, however, the route to social mobility is through academic education, and their perceptions of the benefits of academic achievement are enhanced by the current qualification escalation, job opportunity structure and visible lack of quality in vocational education. In the recent past, greater numbers of urban students have also chosen to attend specialized vocational schools, though their popularity has waned as the labour market has set higher requirements for job seekers. Students who fail in their endeavour to get into university may be accepted by a tertiary vocational institution. Employment opportunities following study at the tertiary level are then correspondingly better than that of a specialized secondary school graduate.

Although the Chinese government is continuing its efforts to promote vocational education of all kinds, even it acknowledges that in recent years more students have preferred to enter academic senior high schools.14 With escalating numbers of students vying to enter senior high schools and university, and the realization that there are fundamental problems within the academic sector of the education system, the government has had to consider other methods of educational reform to ease the symptoms of the diploma disease.

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Chapter Eight

Reducing the Effects of the Diploma Disease

In the first edition of *The Diploma Disease*, Ronald Dore suggested some proposals which he believed would cure, or at least reduce, the effects of the diploma disease. These proposals included strengthening the links between study and work through on-the-job training, and altering the nature of selection procedures to give more weight to other criteria besides academic achievement. At the time, Dore believed that China was leading the way in education reform by abolishing the university entrance examination, integrating study with work, and focussing on alternate selection criteria such as on the job performance after graduation.¹ These reforms purportedly made education more egalitarian, providing greater opportunities for peasant and worker children to enter university.

As I illustrated in Chapter Two, such reforms did not achieve their desired outcomes and instead created more problems, resulting ultimately in the return of the entrance examination system and subsequent diploma disease backwash. The Communist Party, however, has continued to seek ways of reducing the effects of an examination-oriented education system without actually removing the entrance examination system. In the early 1990s it seemed as though economic reforms would serve to reduce the number of students aspiring to reach tertiary education (and also increase the attractiveness of vocational education) by virtue of improved job prospects in certain sectors. More recently, the deepening backwash over the last decade has

prompted a major campaign for “quality education”, encompassing reforms to the curriculum and to the examination system. Finally, there has been an expansion of private educational institutions nationwide which offer alternate paths to achieving desired levels of education. As many of these reforms have only occurred in the last few years, it is difficult to ascertain how effective they have been or will be at reducing the diploma disease backwash effects.

8.1 “Studying is Useless”

One factor which had the potential to reduce the links between educational qualifications and the job opportunity structure in China was rapid economic growth during the 1990s. Following the early years of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1968), students felt that “studying was useless” (dúshū wúyòng 读书无用) because what they were learning had no bearing on their future job assignments in factories or as “sent-down” peasants in the countryside.2 Over a decade later, there were indications that studying could once again be viewed as “useless” because the spread of economic reforms offered greater job prospects to youths, and some who quit school earned more money than their peers who continued up the education ladder.

Stig Thorgesen hypothesized that a market economy would so increase the number of attractive career opportunities for youth without any tertiary education that some of the pressure would be taken off the examination system.3 The attractions of a market economy, however, were largely to be found in developed eastern cities such as

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Shanghai, where even peasants on the outskirts of the city are better off than those in more isolated areas. The rapid growth of these cities has created many job opportunities, but most of these require long hours of hard work and poor pay, and as I have illustrated, the majority of students these days do not desire to work under such conditions. State-owned company lay-offs, job uncertainty and an increase in the use of educational qualifications (including those gained through adult education) for employment and promotion have also meant that attractive job opportunities without qualifications remain limited.

In Kunming, the numbers of students dropping out of school to enter the workforce is relatively small, as entrepreneurial activity in the city has been limited and there are correspondingly limited opportunities for early school leavers to make money. Students and teachers told me that students who want to drop out usually do so after junior high school, and very few students who reach the senior high school level would then drop out of school. Two of my Humanities Middle students had classmates in junior high school who dropped out to go into business and make money, but they felt that the status of these drop-outs is low and that in the future, as knowledge becomes more important, they might be adversely affected by their lack of education. For students who do drop out, however, getting a good job is often a matter of *guanxi*, and without it a number of people informed me they would be unable to find a desirable job. A Humanities Middle student thought that even entrepreneurs should obtain tertiary qualifications these days, because they need to learn business, management and economics. He believed that although entrepreneurs who have not been to university have some ability, they “might make some mistakes which would cost their business dearly.” The market economy has therefore not significantly increased the number of
attractive career options for students who drop-out of school in Kunming and the
competition to enter tertiary institutions has not been reduced.

8.2 Quality Education

“Quality education” (sùzhi jiàoyù 素质教育) has become the catch-word of education
reform in China since it was first raised as official policy in the 1993 “Outline of
Education Reform and Development in China”. Its stated aims are to reduce the effects
of an examination-dominated education (yǐngshì jiàoyù 应试教育), by focusing
equally on moral (dé 德), intellectual (zhì 智), physical (tǐ 体), aesthetic (měi 美) and
labour (láo 劳) education. This section address what these mean in actual practice, as
they are vague in official policy. Quality education is also promoted as “necessary for
producing talented, well-rounded citizens who will contribute to the development of
China into the 21st century.”

There has been considerable discussion in the media and among researchers as to
how to implement quality education. The majority of newspaper articles to date have
focussed on the introduction of aesthetic and moral education courses into schools, as
well as on improving school resources and infrastructure, even though the ideals of
quality education are more to do with providing a holistic education for students. There
have also been changes to textbooks and efforts to alter the way students are assessed in
schools. A new curriculum for senior high school students was to have been introduced
by 2000, which includes an obligatory course to improve students’ artistic sense, along

\footnote{朱开轩，<全面推进素质教育方针，积极推进素质教育>，<<中国考试>>，1997年9月，第5期，第4页。Zhu Kaixuan, “Fully implement the guiding principles of education, positively advance
quality education”, 	extit{Chinese Examinations}, Vol. 5 (September, 1997), p. 4.}
with a course on morality. Class meetings, sports, artistic performance and social activities will also be encouraged.\textsuperscript{5} In the area of labour education, however, little has been mentioned. Reports on reform efforts have been primarily linked to primary and junior high schools, with discussion on reforms in senior high schools limited to the first year of senior high school. This suggests that meaningful change which could positively affect students in the second and third years of senior high school remains linked to substantial reform of the National University Entrance Examination. As teachers commented to me, until that occurs, teaching and learning will continue to be dictated by the NUEE and competition for limited university places.

Moral and Political Education – “Red” versus “Expert”

One of the ways the Communist Party attempted to alter selection within the education system during the 1960s was by bringing in an alternative criteria to academic qualifications – that of being “red”. During the first half of the 1960s, the escalating tension between the criteria of “red” and “expert” led to great dilemmas for students as they tried to balance the two. Middle-class students vied to get into the Communist Youth League (CYL) and be seen as an “activist”, both because they desired upward mobility and because they desired to serve the socialist cause.\textsuperscript{6} Membership of the CYL and an “activist” label fulfilled the “political” criteria for entry into university, which gave them an advantage over other students of the same academic standard and family background but without CYL membership.\textsuperscript{7} As the contest to enter university intensified, the weight attached to the political criteria grew in importance relative to examination marks, thus correspondingly heightening students’ efforts in activism in

\textsuperscript{5} \textit{China to adopt new curriculum}, \textit{China Daily}, 10 January 1999.
\textsuperscript{7} \textit{Ibid}, p. 95.
order to keep ahead of their classmates. By mid-1966, entrance examinations had been abolished, and success after schools re-opened in 1968 became dependent on how “red” a student was; in other words, how involved in and devoted to the Communist cause they were, and whether they belonged to one of the social classes of people favoured by the Communists (such as children of the pre-revolution workers, peasants and cadres). Although the “expert” criteria gained prominence again when the university entrance examination system was reintroduced in 1977 after Mao’s death, moral, ideological and political education have remained a significant part of the ideals and rhetoric of Chinese education, though playing a reduced role in practice.

A 1999 “Decision of the CPC Central Committee and State Council on Deepening Education Reform and Promoting Quality Education in an All-Round Way” emphasizes the role of moral education in quality education reform, exhorting schools to “pay more attention to morality-related work.” Such work includes providing education on patriotism, collectivism and socialism as well as “cultivating lofty ideals, ethics, etiquette, morality and civilized habits.” In addition, the work of the CYL is to be strengthened and military training is to be improved. While these criteria are not new in China, their inclusion illustrates their continued importance for the Communist Party, which has witnessed students’ estrangement from its efforts at political socialization and the supersedence of collective values to personal choice.

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8 Ibid, pp. 95-96.
10 Ibid.
The majority of students in the four schools in which I conducted research were not interested in discussing the CYL, which indicated to me that they simply did not feel it was a significant part of their lives. The rather blasé attitude of students towards CYL membership was highlighted at a school ceremony for Young Pioneers being welcomed into membership of the CYL at Humanities Middle. The students, facing the CYL and national flags, had to recite the CYL tenets with fists held high. The whole student body was restless throughout, and those being inducted did not look enthusiastic, with some standing sloppily and putting their fists down before being told to. Teachers chatted among themselves and even groaned when a couple of leaders were called upon to make speeches. Afterwards, a few teachers told me that they think membership of the CYL “is not worth much”, although one volunteered the opinion that it is good for students to belong because it develops their self-discipline by having to perform better than others.

The few students who did comment on the CYL were from Humanities Middle. All except one believed that membership is not particularly advantageous. The student who disagreed was vocal in her support of CYL membership, arguing that it is advantageous in university entrance and employment. A university lecturer said that many employers do not take CYL membership into consideration, but if a student is not a member, a few employers may form the opinion that he or she “is not a good person.” Membership is more important for entering a government work unit, and if a person wishes to become a manager or a leader of some sort in such a work unit, they must belong to the Communist Party. In order to belong to the Party, students generally must have been members of the CYL. As a result, many students may want to belong to the CYL in order to keep their future options open – a non-altruistic career-oriented reason far from the ideals which “quality education” espouses.
In 1990, Stanley Rosen reported that letters to newspapers across the country were complaining that the government sought to recruit the most talented students from key senior high schools into the Youth League while shunning students from ordinary senior high schools. While I was unable to confirm this, the selection process for “three good students” (sănghǎo xuéshēng 三好学生) in schools clearly emphasizes academic excellence ahead of political or moral criteria.

“Three good students” have officially been assessed as outstanding in the fields of morality, academia, and physical fitness. Each school is only allowed to nominate a certain number of “three good students” each semester. At Humanities Middle, students told me only two from each class are chosen each time, and these can be either male or female. The students were not forthcoming in discussing the topic of “three good students” and had many arguments among themselves as to what the actual procedure is for evaluating them. It was agreed that “if your study is excellent, it is not hard to be a three good student”, and that “physical health is the least important of all the criteria.” Students who are favoured by teachers are most likely to be chosen, and favouritism often rests on academic ability. Humanities Middle student told me that she was a principal’s assistant (a student who liaises between the principal and other students), a position which she said would show universities and employers that she “has ability”. She went on to state, however, that “marks are everything. If you have ability but get a low mark, no school will want you.”

A Humanities Middle classmaster said that teachers get together to evaluate the everyday life and study of each student, noting how each one performs in sport, school and class activities, and giving general comments on students’ characters. Another teacher at the school said that marks deducted for misdemeanors such as failing to submit homework, arriving late, arguing with teachers, fighting, smoking, and so on, do not affect a student’s university entrance unless the errors are serious, such as theft. Although the evaluations stay with the students when they enter tertiary education and the workforce, and a comment such as “he/she should pay more attention to respecting teachers” can affect the way a prospective employer sees the student, the primary criteria for success remains that of academic achievement.

Cultivation of ethics and a collective mindset is carried out in class and in weekly class meetings. In each class, students are encouraged to help each other in their study, and are accountable to each other through the class and subject monitors who “take points off” the class as a whole for individual offenses such as arriving late to class or forgetting homework. To some extent, this class organization worked effectively to foster strong bonds and a spirit of co-operation among the students. In one Humanities Middle class, students whose English was good were assigned by the classmaster to help other students who were struggling in English prepare for the English Graduate Competency Examination. The students did not resent this assignment, and indeed, in all the classes there was a degree of student co-operation on difficult subjects. This said, there were also observable cliques within classes, and a great deal of competition among individuals on tests and examinations. Weekly class meetings often addressed issues such as etiquette, politeness and other social graces, although it was hard to measure their effectiveness. One article reported on a school in Beijing which had designed practical activities to teach students to care for and help others. Students each played a
role and were required to work together to resolve conflicts and achieve satisfactory outcomes.\textsuperscript{12} Military training is also a requirement for junior high school and first year senior high school students, with the aim of teaching them the value of hard work, discipline, and respect for others.

**Intellectual Education**

In the realm of intellectual education, the 1999 “Decision” on education reform and quality education prescribes a move away from examination and teacher-centred teaching methods to ones which are more heuristic and student-oriented. Students are to be stimulated to think independently and creatively, learning to analyze and resolve problems rather than rote-learn chunks of information.\textsuperscript{13} However, this does not mean that entrance examinations will be abolished. Rather, the former Minister for Education, Zhu Kaixuan, pointed out that “examinations should be regarded as a means of evaluating the quality of education.”\textsuperscript{14}

A university lecturer told me that her son’s junior high school had implemented a reform to the “100-mark system” used in schools to give students a raw score out of 100 on examinations and homework. But the lecturer said that all schools were changing the system starting from 1998 and that instead of giving a raw score, teachers will give a grade of excellent, good, pass or fair. Previously, a student was considered “excellent” when his or her marks were above 95\%, encompassing only a few students. Now, the


Comment “excellent” equates to a score of 90-100%, so the number of students considered to be top of the class is much greater. The lecturer’s son thought that the change was good, because it takes the pressure off the really good students, and means the distinction between marks is not so great (for example between 95% or 96%). Weaker students also do not feel as bad or as discriminated against because the categories are broader.

Although the reform is designed to reduce the fixation of parents, students and teachers on raw scores, teachers continue to give students a raw score and ranking in practice. At the three senior high schools I attended, the students’ homework was graded using the new system, but the examinations continued to use raw scores. The *China Daily* reported that some parents and teachers dislike the idea of ending the use of scores, worrying that students will now not pay as much attention to their studies and will “become wild and lazy without the pressure” of scores. The same newspaper article, however, suggested that the reform is primarily to be implemented in primary schools.

In order to reduce the amount of rote memorization and homework, textbooks and examinations are being rewritten to emphasize creativity, comprehension, oral skills, critical thinking, problem solving, and the ability to apply knowledge to different tasks and situations. The content of textbooks is to be updated to convey information and ideas relevant to students in the new century, and overly complicated content will be removed. The new senior high school curriculum includes a rule that at least one third of teaching time should be devoted to students’ participation in activities such as

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16 莫之雨, <展望今年高考命題內容改革: 上>, <<云南教育报：高中生>>, 1999年4月24日
   Mo Zhiyu, “Prospects for this year’s reform of the university entrance examination content: part one”, *Yunnan Education Newspaper: Senior High School Student Edition*, 24 April 1999 and
   莫之雨, <展望今年高考命題內容改革: 下>, <<云南教育报：高中生>>, 1999年5月8日
17 Cui Ning, “State plans to ease up on school texts, tests”, *China Daily*, 21 April 2000.
discussion, research or conducting experiments, and also encourages schools to take
students on field trips.\textsuperscript{18} There will also be some elective subjects which the students
can choose according to their interests.\textsuperscript{19} Although these reforms appear to assist the
policy of broadening education, what is actually taught in senior high schools will
remain centred on the content of the NUEE. Parents will not want time taken away from
examination preparation for their children to go on field trips or take elective subjects
unless they can see the benefits in terms of university entrance. In addition, many
schools do not have the facilities for conducting experiments.

A number of articles have focussed on quality education reforms at the Huazhong
Normal University First Affiliated High School in Wuhan. This school implemented a
“quality point system” in 1997 in order to alter the previous sole focus on academic
results and include results from aesthetic, moral and physical education subjects in
students’ end-of-year scores. Under the system, the total final score of 100 for first year
senior high school students would be comprised of 70 points for academic subjects, 10
points for aesthetic and physical education subjects, and 20 points for moral education
activities and a student’s evaluation. There would also be 20 additional points awarded
for elective classes.\textsuperscript{20} It was unclear, however, whether this calculation of final scores
would apply to the senior 2 and 3 years, meaning that the curriculum for these students
probably remained focussed on preparing for the NUEE. While the school was
reportedly successful in implementing the system, as reports indicated that its students

\textsuperscript{18} Katherine Forestier, “Capital pilots foreign methods”, \textit{Times Educational Supplement}, 22 January 1999.
\textsuperscript{19} “China to adopt new curriculum”, \textit{China Daily}, 10 January 1999.
\textsuperscript{20} "A Wuhan high school implements the ‘quality point system’, \textit{Wenhuibao}, 16 July 1997."
were receiving a more balanced, less stressful “quality” education, there were some reservations about its applicability to other schools. One education official reminded readers that Huazhong First Affiliated was a top key school, and thought that without similar foundations and standards of excellence other schools would find it hard to implement such a system. A deputy principal also argued that without reform to the NUEE, his school would not be able to emulate Huazhong First Affiliated, as the NUEE was a “noose around the necks of school leaders, teachers, students and parents.”

These comments illustrate Thomas Rohlen’s point that bright and self-confident students make all the difference in a school, as they will more naturally engage in extracurricular activities and take an active part in learning, as they are more assured of success in university entrance examinations.

In the three Kunming senior high schools, I saw little evidence to suggest that “quality in intellectual education” was being put into practice, particularly in senior 3 classes where teachers asserted that the most important thing for the students was to “practise how to do the examination papers.” A Humanities Middle English teacher said that in senior 3, “listening comprehension and oral work are of no use, as the students’ whole focus must be on preparing for the NUEE.” In senior 1 and 2 classes the picture does not alter much, with teachers telling students to recite and remember the content of their revision books for each GCE subject. Even when some teachers encouraged

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23 Ibid.
students to discuss an answer or issue, the teacher guided the conversation to ensure that all students eventually came up with the “right” answer – the answer which was in the textbook or which the teacher wanted to emphasize.

Aesthetic Education

Aesthetic education has been the most enthusiastically embraced part of the “quality education” reforms, but this has been mostly at the primary and junior high school levels. Most articles that discuss how individual schools have implemented quality education have stressed the development of children’s creativity, emphasizing the introduction of music, fine arts and theatrical arts into the curriculum. In the three schools where I conducted research, only senior 1 students took art and music classes within their normal curriculum hours, taking one course per semester with one lesson a week. The introduction of such classes into the curriculum is a positive step which will encourage students to acquire an appreciation of art and music, and will hopefully stimulate their own creative responses. The positive effects of aesthetic education could be compromised by the tendency for such classes to centre on theory, and the penalization of students if they do not follow the correct formula or disagree with the teacher or other authority in creative-response tasks.

Extra-curricular hobbies have also been promoted. While these activities also help to broaden students’ experiences and talents away from academic learning, some parents push their children to excel in extra-curricular activities as well as academic subjects in order to win fame or acquire advantages in future competition.25 This can

25 Lu Jingxian, “Education should have a place for the fine arts”, China Daily, 19 February 1998.
make learning a hobby an additional chore rather than a pleasure, and in some cases students are even busier than they were previously with purely academic homework.\textsuperscript{26}

The potential advantage for senior high school students who are artistically talented lies in the way universities admit students. Students who excel artistically can receive bonus points towards their NUEE score, and in a trial run by nine key state universities in 1998, some artistically talented students received preferential enrolment, purportedly to “help broaden the aesthetic base of the student body.”\textsuperscript{27} The numbers of students who actually benefit from this kind of recruitment are relatively small, however. None of the students in the three senior high schools was significantly involved in extra-curricular activities, and a number complained that due to their study loads they were unable to pursue their artistic or musical talents to their satisfaction and enjoyment. The costs of pursuing hobbies can also be prohibitive for families who already face other significant costs for their children’s education.

A group of ethnic-minority students (in 1998 there were 31) studying painting at the Art Institute Affiliated Middle School in Kunming do benefit somewhat from the lower scores they need to receive on the NUEE in order to enter university. The students regularly attend their academic lessons at NorthWest Ordinary in order to prepare them for the NUEE, paying about 3000 yuan (A$600) per year for tuition, accommodation, food and materials. If they are unable to afford this cost they may be supported by local communities – for example, one Muslim student was being supported by the local Muslim community in Kunming. Their politics teacher told me that these students are only required to secure the minimum marks necessary on the NUEE in order to enter


\textsuperscript{27} \textit{Ibid.}
arts institutes, but even with their artistic talent taken into account, only half would pass. She said the students were normally very busy, with evening classes on top of normal lessons. Upon graduation, the students would be expected to return to their hometowns to teach art in primary or secondary schools, although some would remain in Kunming and try to find work in companies.

School Resources

In addition to lauding school achievements in aesthetic education, many articles also focus on schools implementing “quality education” through means of improving and increasing their resources, particularly in the information technology area.

An article in the *Yunnan Education Newspaper* discussed the importance of preparing students to enter the new “intellectual economy” (zhīshì jìngjì 知识经济) in which they would need to be able to use information technology to conduct business and communicate. Among other things, the article advocated more information technology training for teachers, more computers in schools, more computing lessons, and the establishment of internet links in and between schools, all in order to facilitate students’ learning and ensure that education is keeping abreast of changes in society and the economy. Not all schools will be able to implement such changes, however, given the resources needed to provide a computer laboratory. While all three schools in my study had a computer laboratory, the quality of computers varied, with Humanities Middle having the oldest and most outdated computers and Elite Affiliated the newest.

Computing as a subject was taken by senior 1 and 2 students in all the schools, for one

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or two lessons per week. The only senior 3 students to do so were those at NorthWest Ordinary doing a vocational computing course rather than preparing to sit the NUEE.

It is not just computers and instruction in computing which are seen as important, however. Some schools also include other resources such as televisions, videos, overhead projectors and so forth in their definition of “quality education”. Key schools are best able to show improvements in this area given their greater finances. Elite Affiliated is a case in point, with an array of equipment far greater than that at the other schools. An article in *Guangming Daily* described the equipment purchased by Beijing City Number 11 School, which included a satellite receiving system, multimedia computers, video recorders, televisions, and digital photography, recording and editing systems, but the article (as with others written along similar lines) fails to show the link between the increase in equipment and the actual “quality” of the students or the education they received at the school. I believe that this relates to the way in which school quality is perceived. When schools are ranked in Kunming, part of that assessment is based on facilities and equipment, so schools and educational participants begin to associate the quantity of such things with the overall quality and success of the school. As I illustrated in Chapter Five, students at the three schools believe that school facilities and resources do play a part in their educational success. If such facilities and resources were utilized, students’ educational experiences would be broadened and they would be better prepared to meet the technological challenges of changing workplaces. However, skills in using information technology may not be gained if the curriculum remains centred on preparing for the NUEE.

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Students’ Well-Being

The psychological and emotional health of students is also included in some discussions of “quality education”. As I have noted in Chapter Five, there are a great many pressures placed on students to succeed, and the consequences of these pressures and the intense focus on entrance examinations can be detrimental.

While teachers have always been called upon to act as mentors for their students, the need for student counselling and guidance is seen to be growing. One of the Humanities Middle classmasters attended a conference on quality education during 1998, and told me that teachers were exhorted to pay more attention to their students’ mental and emotional health. Later that year, an article in the *Yunnan Education Newspaper* reported on a summer workshop which had been held for over one hundred students from all over Yunnan. One of the major conclusions from that workshop was that more attention needs to be paid to students’ psychological health. Students should be encouraged to look out for and assist each other, and teachers should educate their students in this area and help them to discuss problems which arise.31

Many students at the three schools mentioned that they lack courage, self-confidence, and willpower, are afraid of failure, and face problems among their peer groups at school. At the same time, students told me that they do not feel able to talk with their parents about their problems, and are only sometimes willing to discuss difficulties with their teachers, as their teachers are unable to be objective and will just try to encourage them with the normal rhetoric about working hard, such as “believing

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that if you try you can succeed”. There were no counsellors at the schools I visited, and students sometimes felt isolated and unable to deal with the issues they face. Due to the focus on studying to pass examinations, the issues which teenagers all over the world have to deal with are largely ignored.

This concentration on studying for the single goal of entering university also leads to a loss of purpose and hope after students achieve that goal. One of my Humanities Middle students wrote to me in the year 2000 after entering university, saying that

I'm still trying to get used to my new life. In the past three years, my only aim was to study hard and go to university. That was all. Now I have achieved that goal and I am lost. I need to find another higher task to give me strength to go on. This loss of purpose happens to most freshmen all over the country as far as I know.

Students often told me that they are at once afraid and excited about attending university, as they know they will gain a freedom and independence not previously experienced, while at the same time facing life issues which they have not had to deal with while at high school. The media also highlights the number of students who move away from home to attend university who do not know how to deal with everyday issues in life such as cooking and cleaning.

### 8.3 “Quality Education” – The Answer?

From what can be gleaned about the practical implementation of quality education in schools, it can be surmised that education at the primary level can be positively affected because it is unconstrained by entrance examination requirements. At the senior high school level, however, the changes have been largely cosmetic. For senior 3 students in particular, little will change without reforms to the actual content and method of the NUEE and number of examinations they need to sit, which I shall address next. For
students in senior years 1 and 2, the extent to which quality education will be
implemented and be effective will depend on the school. As Thomas Rohlen notes, it
was the elite school in Kobe which provided the most extra-curricular activity and
couraged students to analyze and discuss various topics in class.\textsuperscript{32} Nada students were
not only assured of success, they had also already studied the required subject matter for
the university entrance examination by the time they were entering their final year, so
that year could be spent on revision.\textsuperscript{33} As I have illustrated in earlier chapters, students
and teachers in China do not have this luxury and are always seeking more class time in
which to get through the curriculum.

Part of quality education reform aims to retrain teachers and alter teaching
methods. In Kunming, some English teachers mentioned various in-service training
courses they had attended at a local teacher-training institute. While they felt that new
methods which encourage teacher-student interaction, greater oral work in English, and
problem-solving are necessary for quality education, they said that they would not be
using these new methods in their current classes, as the NUEE curriculum is not
adaptable to them. Furthermore, students, parents and teachers are wary of abolishing
entrance examinations altogether, believing that they are a motivating factor for students
to study. Homework is also viewed in the same light, so moves to reduce it can
sometimes lead to opposition.

The cost of acquiring more material resources prohibits the majority of schools
from developing in this area. For students and parents, the cost of attending out-of-
school field trips or participating in extra-curricular activities is also a negative factor.

\textsuperscript{32} Thomas P. Rohlen, \textit{op.cit.}, p. 26.
\textsuperscript{33} \textit{Ibid}, p. 20.
Students and schools with enough money will continue to benefit, while others will be disadvantaged, further exacerbating feelings of discontent and “unfairness”.

While I was in Kunming, the junior high school teachers at Elite Affiliated and Technical Middle had to write an essay about their ideas on “quality education”. Most of the teachers thought this exercise was a waste of time, arguing that it is difficult to define “quality”. One Elite Affiliated teacher thought that the best way towards “quality” would be to abolish entrance examinations, reduce the number of subjects studied, and cut down the number of classes and activity periods held per day. Although students and teachers complained about the examination-dominated curriculum and advocated a more holistic education, all agreed that real change will not occur unless the NUEE is abolished, or the proposed reforms to the NUEE reduce the backwash effects it produces.

If entrance examinations are abolished, however, more problems will be created. Thogersen concludes that there are no real alternatives to a “mechanistic enrolment procedure based on examination scores”, as a move away from that will “open the door to nepotism” and the influence of guanxi.34 I have already illustrated that parents are able to corrupt the system using guanxi and money in order to enrol their children in key senior high schools and universities. If university selection officially reverted to relying on criteria other than entrance examination marks, studying could once again be seen as useless, as more students would be unable to compete with those with guanxi and a good financial background. In addition, the manner in which alternative criteria would be assessed is a matter of concern. As Dore points out, cognitive knowledge is far easier

to measure than a student’s social attitudes and self-perceptions, ability to reason, creativity, critical thought and so forth, which are all ideals of “quality” education.\(^\text{35}\)

### 8.4 Examination Reform

Many journal articles have been published in recent years complaining about the unfair nature of the NUEE and calling for widespread changes. Researchers have raised several areas of concern, including the way students’ life chances largely hinge on their success in the examination, the corruption in selection procedures, the lack of alternate criteria in university entrance selection, the backwash effects on students, the nature of examination questions which stifle creativity and problem solving.\(^\text{36}\) In response to such calls, and on the basis that reform to the NUEE system is seen as the main determinant of the success of quality education, a number of significant reforms are being trialled.

Examination questions are being re-written, trials are underway to have two yearly NUEE sittings, and the number of examinations that students must sit has been reduced.

**“3 + X”**

The most significant change to the NUEE system is what is known as the “3 + X” reform, which alters the number of examinations students must sit in order to enter

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Zhou Daping, “Science, one of the main areas of reform in the University Entrance Examination”, *Liaowang news weekly*, No. 29 (1997), pp. 34-35.

university. At present, students take five compulsory examinations in the humanities or sciences. Under the new system, students will take three compulsory examinations in English, mathematics and Chinese. The “X” stands for an extra one or two examinations in politics, history, geography, biology, chemistry or physics. In Guangdong, music, physical education, fine arts and a second foreign language examination were also added to the list of “X” examinations in the year 2000. These “X” examinations will continue to be written and administered by the National Education Examination Authority. Guangdong was the first province to trial the “3 + X” examination system in 1999 (Shanghai also trialled various forms of it), to be followed by Shanxi, Jiangsu, Zhejiang and Jilin in the year 2000. The system will be implemented for the rest of the country in 2001.

An official at the NEEA told me that each university will decide how many “X” examinations a student must take in order to enter particular courses: for example, Beijing University’s biology department might require students to take chemistry and biology. This requirement will be made known to students prior to starting their third year of high school, so that their third year of study will focus on the subjects they will be examined on. Famous universities such as Qinghua University and Beijing University want students to take two such “X” examinations. The subjects chosen for examination dictate whether students can apply to enter highly contested university courses (rèmén 热门) or less desirable university courses (lèngmén 冷门).

38 Li Ling, “This year’s trend for NUEE reform”, *Yunnan Education Newspaper: Senior High School Student Edition*, 10 April 1999.
39 He Hongtao, “This is how I did the ‘3+X’”, *China Youth Daily*, 17 May 2000.
Before the “3 + X” reform was implemented and trialled, I surmised that most
students would attempt to take two “X” examinations in order to maximize their chance
of entering good universities and popular courses. Newspaper articles since, however,
suggest that in practice this has so far not been the case. One article stated that in a class
of 60 students only three were taking two “X” examinations. The article commented
that students who had only chosen to study one “X” examination “have already given up
some opportunities.”40 Thus even though students may initially welcome having to take
less examinations, as the system becomes more fully implemented they may be
pressured into taking two “X” ones in order to keep their options open. One student
quoted in an article about the “3 + X” trial in Guangdong thought that students would
resist such pressures, saying that in his class of over 60 students at a key school, only
the very best and brightest were taking two “X” examinations.41 While his marks were
good, he felt that taking only one exam meant he had more assurance of success. Rohlen
states that the majority of Japanese students avoid wasting their efforts on examinations
to the best schools which attract the brightest students, and the competition instead
clusters toward the higher end of the middle.42 It seems fair to suggest, therefore, that
Chinese students who are given a choice in which universities to apply for and which
examinations they will need to sit will follow suit. Already, students show tendencies
towards this in their choice of senior high school, as only the most self-confident will
dare to select one of the top key schools as their first preference.

Student choice in which subjects they study and which examinations they take is
seen as a positive step in examination reform. Some academics and officials told me

40 贺洪涛，<我这样考“3+X”>，<<中国青年报>>，2000年5月17日。
41 He Hongtao, “This is how I did the ‘3+X’”, China Youth Daily, 17 May 2000.
42 Thomas P. Rohlen, op.cit., p. 84.
that apart from the three compulsory examinations, students will now be able to choose subjects they enjoy and perform well in. One student taking politics and biology in the “3 + X” trial in Guangdong said that these would enable her to apply to enrol in a less desirable course, giving her more chance of success, and a student taking only physics thought that his options are also increased as physics is a requirement for many majors.\(^43\) However, there are already some indications that students may choose subjects they are not so competent in just to maximize their chances of university entrance. One article mentions a student who decided to do politics even though her marks in that subject were not good, because there was a greater number of majors to choose from afterwards.\(^44\)

In 2000, an extra examination requirement called a “composite” (zhōnghé 综合) subject was added to the “3 + X” examination trial in Guangdong.\(^45\) This change had been foreshadowed in a 1998 article by the vice-director of the NEEA.\(^46\) The composite subject is a compilation of physics, chemistry, biology, geography, history and politics, designed to broaden students’ general knowledge base.\(^47\) According to an article in the China Young Daily, the opposition to this additional examination has been intense, with students complaining that it increases their study burden and teachers arguing that they are not qualified to prepare students for such a broad “subject”.\(^48\) The article quoted Guangdong officials as saying that the variegated topics are hard to grasp, more revision

\(^43\) He Hongtao, “This is how I did the ‘3+X’, China Youth Daily, 17 May 2000.
\(^44\) He Hongtao, “This is how I did the ‘3+X’ II”, China Youth Daily, 24 May 2000.
\(^48\) Ibid.
classes and homework will be needed to cover them fully, and the subject will be
difficult to teach because it is so broad.49

In a 1999 newspaper article, however, the deputy-head of the Yunnan Education
Bureau described the composite subject rather differently. He asserted that it would not
be a “hors d’oeuvres” of the six subjects listed. Rather, there would be three composite
subjects, namely a “humanities composite subject”, a “science composite subject” and a
“humanities and science composite subject”, all of which would be included in the “X”
optional examination list.50 This article demonstrates that changes to educational policy
and trials initiated are frequent, and that conflicting information about what will actually
happen is widespread. It is thus difficult to ascertain the results of trials and what
changes will be implemented nationally until the process has been finalized – and even
then, local and provincial variations may occur.

Second NUEE Sitting

As part of the effort to reduce the impact of two days’ examination results on a student’s
life chances, a second sitting of the NUEE was trialled in Beijing, Shanghai and Anhui
Province in January 2000.51 A Yunnan education official foreshadowed this trial when I
spoke with him in 1998, and said that it was designed so that students would not have to
spend a full year of revision before attempting the NUEE again after an initial failure.
At the time, he thought that there were some problems with the idea, one of which was
that it might mean more students would be passing the NUEE and entering university,
putting pressure on the government to increase its educational funding. Universities

49 Ibid.
50 袁尚. <高考正在改革：教育部副部长远清谈高考>，<<云南教育报：高中生>>，
1999年3月13日。Xiao Gang, “Current reforms to the NUEE: the vice-head of the Education Bureau
would have to expand in order to cope with the influx. In addition, there would be the problem of making the two sittings fair, because the same examinations could not be used at each sitting. That would mean one might be slightly easier or harder, thus skewing the results and creating dissatisfaction among students.

The only reported problems with the January 2000 sitting, however, were that students did not have enough time to study and that the majors offered by the 13 universities involved in the trial were not ones applicants wished to apply for. Students passing the second examination are only be allowed to choose majors which are “urgently needed by society” – in other words, those which are largely unpopular and fail to attract enough applicants during the first round in July. As a result of this, there were fewer applicants than expected for the January 2000 trial. Educators also said that there are not as many places offered at universities for second round students, and that the chances of entering a highly regarded university are slim.

Whether offering a second NUEE sitting will provide a genuine increase in options for those who fail the first time around is therefore debatable. It appears that most students would be happier re-sitting the NUEE a year after their first attempt as this would mean their university and subject major options would not be limited.

Reform of Examination Content

Reforming the content of individual subject examinations for the NUEE is one of the major reforms to be initiated. Reforms in this area, therefore, have the potential to have a great impact on students’ learning. Examination questions are being rewritten to

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52 Ibid.
53 “2nd College Entrance Exam to be given”, *China Daily*, 18 October 1999.
strengthen students’ analytical, problem-solving and creative skills.\(^{54}\) Questions will no longer be based on the exact information presented in textbooks, but will present new and different situations for students to address using the basic skills they have acquired. There will be more practical questions for the science subjects, a continuation of multiple choice questions, more questions requiring both subjective and objective answers, and a better overlap of subject information.\(^{55}\)

In another new move, the Ministry of Education called for public input on NUEE examination questions as of 1999.\(^{56}\) Proposed questions from the public could be based on the curriculum for each subject or could be related to overall skills, testing students’ breadth of knowledge and their flexibility in knowledge application. The change was designed to encourage schools to promote quality education and focus on the cultivation of creativity.\(^{57}\)

If these changes to the content of university entrance examination subjects are fully implemented, students will presumably become more rounded in their knowledge and skill bases. The negative effects which Dore raises relating to entrance-examination-dominated learning will be lessened as students become better able to think critically, solve problems, and be creative. There are foreseeable problems, however. While Dore suggests that multiple-choice questions can test problem-solving abilities and the capacity to make imaginative leaps,\(^{58}\) I saw little evidence that the large volume


\(^{55}\) ibid.

\(^{56}\) Cui Ning, “Public asked to submit college exam questions”, *China Daily*, 2 March 1999.

\(^{57}\) ibid.

of multiple choice questions already contained (and to remain) in the English examination papers were encouraging students in that direction. Teachers continued to go over practice test papers, picking them apart and discussing in minute detail the ins and outs of grammatical and comprehension points. Students had to use their ability to read a passage quickly and find relevant information, or their knowledge of grammar in order to choose the right answers – the former testing speed and word/phrase recognition skills; the latter requiring the memorization of grammatical rules. The creative writing sections of the English tests were also practised in a rote fashion, with students copying and memorizing pre-formulated answers/compositions on various topics. That teachers are able to predict (or are informed) which topics are to be set negates any element of surprise in the creative writing section of the examination. Furthermore, it is the teachers who guide the students in gaining desired skills, yet most of the teachers have not been trained to do so, and all are constrained by the need to be “correct” rather than controversial or original. The sheer volume of information which could be covered in each subject examination also counteracts any efforts to alter the way teachers teach and students learn, as they are still under a great deal of pressure to get through the required amount of subject material and will naturally resort to methods they are most familiar with in order to achieve that goal.

8.5 Private Education

Private educational institutions have flourished in China since the first openly labelled “private” school was opened in 1992 in Sichuan.\(^{59}\) To date, estimates suggest that there

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are around 60,000 private schools of all types and levels in China. In 1999, 3.4% of academic senior high school students and 6% of students at vocational senior high schools were enrolled in private schools nationally. Around the country, large billboards advertise the attractions of various private schools, and towards the end of the school year, newspapers and magazines also carried a huge number of private school advertisements. China’s premier, Zhu Rongji, has endorsed the expansion of the private education sector, stating that the problems in China’s education system have left the government with “no choice” but to pursue this avenue of educational development.

At the secondary and tertiary levels, private schools are seen to relieve some of the competition for places in public educational institutions, while at the same time they do not add to the state’s need to finance education. As private tertiary institutions often target areas of market demand, they can be seen as a good way for students to obtain qualifications that lead to desirable jobs.

Private schools in China are normally owned and run by individuals with few government ties. The official term for private schools is “people-run” (mínbàn 民办), although the word “private” (sīlǐ 私立) is also interchangeable. The private schools are often established by businessmen, and some of these in urban centres and some coastal provinces also attract foreign capital, particularly from overseas Chinese business people. Most of the private schools charge tuition fees, although the number of elite schools charging over 10,000 yuan per annum are a minority, with most others charging

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63 Peng Deng, op. cit., p. 124.
from 10 to 100 yuan per month.  

Many of the schools also charge an initial “enrolment” fee. The enrolment fee at one Pearl River Delta private school amounted to 300,000 yuan, while one Beijing private school charges 40,000 yuan. Accommodation and sundry fees are additional. Due to such high costs, most of the students at the best private schools come from elite and upper middle class families. An article in the *China Daily* reported that the students of one elite private school in Beijing are mostly children of business people, entertainment and sports stars, writers and journalists.

Private schools are subject to the authority of the local educational authorities, and at the primary and secondary levels most have to fulfill the regular core curriculum set by the Ministry of Education. A teacher at a private girls senior high school in Kunming said that education officials regularly visit the school to ensure that the correct textbooks and curricula are being used in preparing the students to sit the NUEE. Some subjects are emphasized more at private schools, however, such as English and computing skills. A few private schools in China are accredited to teach and issue the prestigious International Baccalaureate (IB) diploma, which is used for enrolment by tertiary institutions worldwide. A further handful of schools in China teach the IB Middle Years Program which provides a rounded education and prepares students to sit the IB diploma. At the tertiary level, private schools specialize in subjects such as accounting, business, trade, foreign languages, journalism, finance and engineering.

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67 Ibid.  
68 Wang Chengzhi, *The Revival of Private Education in Reforming China* (online paper by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign PhD student, 1998), http://lrs.ed.uiuc.edu/students/cwang2/pepaper.html.  
69 see the International Baccalaureate web page for details: http://www.ibo.org/ and specifically their country list at http://www.ibo.org/ibo/english/direct.cfm#countries
Some of these private tertiary institutions offer many “self-study courses” for students who failed to enter degree courses at university.

Peng Deng argues that middle and upper class families see private schools as improving their children’s chances of receiving higher levels of education, and for some, sending children to the best private schools becomes a status symbol. Busy working parents who work irregular hours or travel frequently on business can also have their children’s needs met through private boarding schools.\textsuperscript{70} Ka-Ho Mok suggests that in the Pearl River Delta, parents have welcomed private institutions at all educational levels, as many have become dissatisfied with public education due, among other things, to concerns regarding low teacher salaries, low student motivation, declining academic quality, poor management and inadequate facilities and resources.\textsuperscript{71} Mok states that because private schools rely on student tuition fees or donations from local communities, individuals and private enterprises, they are held accountable to their ‘clients’ (parents, students and donors) and their quality is, and needs to remain, high.\textsuperscript{72} Other perceived positive features of private schools are their smaller class sizes, better resources and equipment, more modern facilities, greater flexibility in curriculum, the occasional employment of foreign teachers and occasional links with international schools. For teachers, private school salaries can also be attractive, although they are often hired on a temporary or contract basis with little job security and few benefits.\textsuperscript{73}

Not all impressions of private schools are positive, however, and there are numerous problems which have been highlighted. Most educational participants I spoke

\textsuperscript{70} Peng Deng, \textit{op.cit.}, pp. 123-124.
\textsuperscript{71} Ka-ho Mok, \textit{op.cit.}, p. 45.
\textsuperscript{72} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 48.
\textsuperscript{73} Julia Kwong, \textit{op.cit.}, p. 256.
with in Kunming stated that private schools in the area were not yet competitive in quality with key schools. One lecturer mentioned that the children of some friends of hers had been to a private school and had started using bad language and behaving in inappropriate ways – which she attributed to the lax discipline and low standards at the school. Variations in the quality of curricula and teachers, and a lack of qualification standards and regulations for certification are issues facing private tertiary education. In addition, regulations and guidelines for the establishment and management of private schools are still being drawn up and there are imbalances and tensions between the autonomy of the schools and state control. Of concern to parts of the government is that, by virtue of their autonomy, private schools are able to circumvent much of the moral and ideological education which remains in the public school system, and “patriotic” activities, such as flag-raising, may be overlooked. This causes some angst among officials, as they have little control over the socialization function of such schools.

A more serious issue for the government, however, is that of public discontent over what is seen as another elitist practice within the education system. The growth of what some Chinese government officials have called “aristocratic” education is seen as contrary to socialist ideals, contributing to the disparity between rich and poor. Private institutions have also been accused of making high profits for the gain of a few individuals, rather than redistributing those resources back into education, particularly to help public education. Students in good private schools can be resented by others

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75 Wang Chengzhi, op.cit.
76 Ka-ho Mok, op.cit., p. 55.
77 Wang Chengzhi, op.cit.
for the same reasons key school students are sometimes resented – because they have been able to pay their way into receiving a better quality of education and a higher subsequent chance of attaining university entrance or a good job, while students unable to pay have had to settle for second best in the public system. Julia Kwong states that private schools “may be giving rise to elitism in a society that has stood for an absence of social class divisions.”\textsuperscript{78} I believe that private schools are not giving birth to such elitism, as it already exists in the public sector, but rather are contributing to a growing polarization of classes seen in public education and in other facets of Chinese society.

\textbf{8.6 Whither Reform?}

As I have demonstrated, most of the reform efforts currently underway in China face a variety of problems. Any positive effects they may have on reducing the backwash effects of the diploma disease are not yet ascertainable, given that most of the reforms have not yet been fully tested or implemented nationally. While educational participants and researchers welcome moves towards reform of the education system, some of the changes, such as “quality education”, are merely cosmetic in all but the best key schools, which have the resources and quality of students to support them. Economic growth has slowed in the late 1990s, and the deepening unemployment crisis has only served to emphasize to the general public the need for ever higher qualifications, the best of which are still only accessible through the highest realms of the public education system, dominated as it is by competitive entrance examinations. While private education has opened a new avenue to satisfy both individual and national needs, it is a

\textsuperscript{78} Julia Kwong, \textit{op.cit}, p. 258.
relatively new venture and one which faces a number of problems in terms of quality control and accessibility.
Chapter Nine

Conclusion

In this dissertation, I have illustrated that education in China at present displays many of the manifestations of the diploma disease and its backwash effects as detailed by Ronald Dore. At the same time, however, there are variants relating to region, individual schools and individual educational participants as seen in Kunming, which serve to alter the nature of the diploma disease.

The overwhelming perception of education in Kunming is that it is the key to upward social mobility and the stepping stone into desirable jobs. Urban parents desire that their children achieve high educational accomplishments in order to “become a dragon or phoenix” and to bring pride, “face” and honour to the family. Gaining knowledge and “culture” is seen to be vitally important for upward social mobility, particularly in the minds of parents who missed much of their education due to being sent to the countryside during the Cultural Revolution. The ultimate achievement for students is entry into university. As the diploma disease theory suggests, the competition to enter university is intensified as more students become educated to a tertiary level, and as employers increasingly select employees on the basis of their educational qualifications. Although economic development in some areas in the early 1990s created desirable job opportunities for students without tertiary qualifications which could have led to a reduction in numbers of students vying for tertiary entrance, as Thogersen hypothesized¹, in Yunnan such development has not occurred at such a

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rapid pace or in such scope. Instead, the competition to enter an academic senior high
school and proceed to university has intensified alongside job uncertainty and
unemployment due to the end of most graduate job assignments and economic
restructuring. This has contributed to the anxious hope that higher educational
qualifications will lead to “better” jobs. Dore’s diploma disease prediction that as more
students become educated to ever higher levels the job market will become saturated,
leading to a group of ‘educated unemployed’ who have attained the right qualifications
but who cannot find employment, is not yet significant enough in Yunnan to alter the
view that higher qualifications will lead to better jobs and social mobility.

Although individual student job aspirations are affected by variables such as their
family background, gender, school, and recognition of their chances of obtaining such
jobs, most educational participants in Kunming believe that if students do not enter
university, they will have little chance of obtaining a “good” job. The competition to
enter university is partly attributed to population size, with ever-increasing numbers of
students progressing up the education system. In Japan, the diploma disease effects are
so great that the particular university a student enters dictates the kind of job he or she
will get upon graduation. This happens to a lesser extent in China.

University choice is important for Kunming students in particular, because they
face various hurdles that students in provinces with numerous top universities do not
face. If they wish to leave Yunnan to find employment in more economically advanced
provinces, graduating from a Yunnan university would be a disadvantage, as Yunnan’s
tertiary institutions are not highly regarded in comparison to the tertiary institutions of
other provinces. In order to be competitive in such a market, where there are many
graduates from more famous universities, these students instead have to try to enrol in
out-of-province institutions. As universities outside of Yunnan can only enrol a select number of Yunnan students into each subject major, this puts great pressure on students to make careful choices when listing their university preferences. While many Kunming students aspire to enter highly regarded universities outside of the province, most non-key students would prefer to choose “safe” options within Yunnan in order to maximize their chances of admission.

Dore asserts that the use of entrance examinations as a meritocratic method of selection leads to a ‘backwash effect’, where all teaching and learning becomes increasingly oriented towards preparing students to sit and be successful in such examinations. The school’s and teacher’s performance is measured by their proportion of ‘successful’ entrants to the next level of education. Creativity and problem-solving are blunted and overwhelmed. Homework, supplementary classes and accompanying pressures increase, and competition emerges to enter schools which are seen as giving the “best” chances to proceed to the next level of schooling.

In Kunming, the ranking of senior high schools, which is primarily related to their transition rates to university, has led to great competition to enter one as far up the hierarchy as possible. Entry into key schools, such as Elite Affiliated, is viewed as highly desirable, as these schools are seen to give the best preparation for students to succeed in the National University Entrance Examination (NUEE). As such, great importance is placed on success in the Senior Secondary Entrance Examination (SSEE) for entry into the best possible senior high school.

For students and parents, there are other factors which make a school “good”. The quality of teachers, quality and quantity of facilities, resources and equipment, and
study atmosphere are all considered in educational participants’ evaluations of different schools. As key schools receive the best teachers, resources, and students, they are perceived as offering a better standard of education than ordinary schools. Students at ordinary schools often believe they are disadvantaged by the lack of quality teachers, resources and students at their schools. Feelings of superiority and inferiority can arise among students as they are often judged by parents, teachers and society according to which school they enter. In-class rankings serve to reinforce student perceptions of their own or others’ superiority or inferiority.

Once in a school, students are under great pressure from parents and teachers to perform at a high academic level, and the competition to succeed in the NUEE increases. Elite Affiliated students sometimes felt more pressured than ordinary school students, as they had a great deal to live up to, having entered such a good school, but students in all of the schools complained about the pressures they faced in their studies. The ‘backwash effects’ on teaching and learning were very visible in the Kunming schools. Homework is a great burden, study aids abound, and parents will attempt to ensure their children study better by way of influencing their diet and health. Most teachers and parents do acknowledge and are concerned about the extreme pressures students are under, while at the same time bowing to their own, school and social pressures for students to succeed. These pressures are unlikely to change while the perceived need for qualifications and use of entrance examinations remains. As in Japan, the effects may indeed worsen, particularly in the area of youth suicides.

One of the main arguments of the “diploma disease” thesis is that examination orientation fosters rote-learning and memorization, and hinders imagination, creativity and problem-solving. However, Rohlen argued that students at the most prestigious high
school in Kobe demonstrated the most pleasure in learning, creativity, and problem-solving, and Dore concurred that those who suffer most from examination-dominated curricula are not those to whom such activities come most naturally. Such students are assured of success and are highly self-confident. This view is also borne out by my evidence. Excellent students at both Elite Affiliated and Humanities Middle were highly creative and imaginative, while students at NorthWest Ordinary displayed little ability in these areas. Yet none of my students were good at critical thinking. I contend that their lack of critical thinking and problem-solving abilities are as much a product of Chinese history and society, reflected in the curriculum, as they are a result of an examination-centred curriculum.

A significant backwash effect of the diploma disease seen in other Asian countries is that of supplementary classes. Such classes give students extra preparation for entrance examinations. In Kunming, there were a variety of extra classes, with some school-run and some run by alternative educational institutions, plus private tutoring. Students in their third senior high school year are the most likely to be taking a combination of all three types of supplementary classes, as NUEE preparation intensifies during that year. Extra classes run in school time are often necessary due to the amount of subject material which has to be covered by teachers in their lessons. Teachers are under a great deal of pressure to cover all textbook material in time for each examination or class test, and often schedule extra classes in order to do so. Classes taken outside of school hours are either supplementary or extension classes, and most require a payment of fees. While students at Elite Affiliated and Humanities Middle all attended extra classes of some sort, particularly in senior 3, students at NorthWest Ordinary did not. This is in part because the school did not have arrangements for its students to undertake NUEE preparation classes run by universities...
within the city, and partly because many students came from working class families who could not afford the cost of such extra tuition. Ordinary school students who do not receive extra tuition sometimes feel as though they are disadvantaged in the competition as a result, particularly when compared with key school students who are seen as already having a head start because of their natural abilities, which is then furthered by their extra lessons.

The competition to enter the schools seen as providing the best chances of proceeding to the next higher level of schooling has led to a distinguishing characteristic of the diploma disease in Kunming and China in general – that of the use of informal methods outside of the examination system (such as guanxi and money) for school and university entry. Enrolment in a good kindergarten, primary school or junior high school is seen as important in providing the right foundations for entry into a top senior high school. As there are no entrance examinations at these educational levels, entry is supposed to be on a neighbourhood basis. The only ways in which to enrol in a good out-of-area school are via the payment of high tuition fees imposed by the school or through guanxi. The establishment of work unit agreements with individual schools is a significant manifestation of the use of guanxi in school enrolment. For parents without work unit connections options are more limited, though some may try to arrange for their child to live with a relative or friend in the school’s neighbourhood.

The use of guanxi and money in order to bypass poor SSEE examination results and enter a good senior high school is growing in Kunming. While all schools are officially allowed to admit a certain number of students who fall just below the SSEE cut-off mark, a far greater proportion of students are also entering schools as a result of their parents’ guanxi and ability to pay one-off fees determined by the school.
Sometimes the extra fees are geared to how low the students’ SSEE scores are. As entry into key schools is most desirable, the fees to enter these schools are much higher than those at ordinary schools. My findings suggest that at Elite Affiliated, the numbers of students who have enrolled in the school via the payment of fees could be as high as 80%. This rate could have significant adverse effects in the long-term upon Elite Affiliated’s transition rate to university. Parents are willing to pay for their children to enrol in ordinary schools as well, however, as they are keen to give them any educational opportunities they can. Students can also enrol in schools on a “borrowed study” basis, which also requires guanxi and sufficient money to pay tuition fees to both the original and host schools.

It is an irony that key schools which used to perpetuate academic elitism and restricted the perceived benefits of a key school education to the already academically talented have, by admitting increasing numbers of students via non-academic routes, made those benefits available to students with lesser academic abilities. This undermines the legitimacy of the education system by detracting from the meritocratic principle which assures participants that ability and effort will be rewarded.

Even the supposedly meritocratic university entrance procedures are not immune from students and parents “working the system” to their advantage. Students who just pass or even fail the NUEE can use guanxi to procure a place at university ahead of those who have legitimately gained the required marks. Students who are admitted via the “backdoor” often have to pay very high fees, just like their counterparts in senior high school.
The use of alternative means to gain entry to desirable high schools or universities has led to the increasing vocalization of discontent among Kunming students and parents. Such practices, as well as others which favour some students over others, are seen as unfair, and students who have entered schools via these means can be strongly resented by others who have enrolled by dint of their academic achievements alone. Students at ordinary schools who may only just pass the NUEE are concerned that they may miss out on places in university because their names could be “pushed down” the list of applicants in favour of those with guanxi. Both teachers and students also dislike the growing mix of student abilities within classes, as this disrupts the teaching and learning process.

As the links between education, social mobility and job opportunities become stronger, resentment towards those who are able to work the system to their advantage will increase, but so will the use of such practices as more parents and students seek to gain advantages over others in the competition. Ultimately, the awareness among those who have failed to enter a university or who have been placed in undesirable jobs that the selection process is not fair could compromise the legitimacy of education’s selective function which the Chinese government relies on. The possibility of demonstrations by students (or their parents) who have done well enough on the NUEE to be admitted to university but who have then missed out on a place due to favouritism shown to those with guanxi should not be ruled out. In 1979, demonstrations in Beijing did occur for exactly that reason, targeting children of cadres who had been favoured for entry by university admissions boards.²

Despite the use of informal means by some students and parents to circumvent official university entrance procedures, for the majority of failed NUEE candidates the best course of action is still to re-sit the examination the following year, having undertaken a cram course. There are disadvantages to this, as the pressure to succeed can be greater the second time around, and the number of second-time applicants that the universities will accept is usually smaller than that of first-time applicants. According to one lecturer involved in recruiting for her university in Kunming, universities are wary of recruiting second-time applicants, as they question why the students did not pass the NUEE the first-time around and they dislike the fact that the students are older than the average. In addition, cram courses cost money. Despite this, most of my students in Kunming, if they admitted the possibility of failing the NUEE at all, said they would take a cram course as their first option, because entry into a bachelor degree course is considered to be the key to future success and social mobility.

Another option for failed NUEE students is to enter into a “self-study” program leading to a tertiary vocational diploma, which can be undertaken at both government and private tertiary institutions. Although these programs are heavily promoted as a good alternative for students who want to do tertiary studies, I did not meet any senior high school student who had contemplated undertaking such a program if they failed the NUEE. There are numerous reasons for this lack of interest. The qualification received is inferior, the courses are often poorly resourced and taught, and the jobs available upon graduation would be of lower status and not have the benefits students are looking for in their future employment. An additional disadvantage is the considerable cost of such courses, and the fact that most students would need to work either part or full-time in order to cover the costs, thus increasing their study burden. Despite these drawbacks, “self-study” programs are proliferating in China and have increasing numbers of
enrollees, largely, it was thought by those I spoke with, adults who had missed out on education for various reasons and who wish to improve their prospects. Given the demand for such courses, it can be inferred that the nature of ‘qualification escalation’ in China is such that even currently employed individuals are returning to study in order to gain qualifications that will make them competitive for better jobs in their line of work or to transfer to another, “better” type of employment (such as one with higher status or higher salary). Another aspect of ‘qualification escalation’ is that in the long-term, qualifications which previously provided a means of obtaining “better” jobs may become so common that they will ultimately only lead to lower level jobs. This is an area for future research, and is linked to “deskilling”, the concept of which could also be explored in the Chinese context.

Education has become one of the main areas of expenditure for Chinese families, along with housing and living costs. The escalating costs of education encompass normal tuition fees, extra enrolment fees if needed, study materials, supplementary classes, accommodation fees (mainly for university), and if required, cram courses. While average urban income levels are also rising, there are growing disparities between the incomes of different social classes. Students are concerned about their parents’ ability to pay for their education, particularly at the tertiary level, and take these concerns into consideration when selecting which universities to apply for. As tuition fees to well-known universities plus the costs involved for travel and accommodation are estimated to amount to about 10,000 yuan per year, students unable to afford such costs would be unlikely to apply to attend even if they had received high enough marks on the NUEE. Those from lower income families are most likely to select universities within Yunnan, as the tuition fees to these are cheaper and there are minimal travel costs involved. In an effort to earn enough money to send their children even to a local
university, parents work long hours, sometimes hold more than one job, and even borrow money from relatives.

The amount of money required for students to obtain even a senior high school education has a great impact on the social distribution of educational opportunity. Students from low-income families are disadvantaged if they are able to enter a key school on their academic merit but are subsequently unable to afford extra classes, tutoring, and textbooks. Such students are adversely affected in these areas even in ordinary schools. Less well-off students also cannot afford to use the informal system of guanxi and monetary backdoor payments to their advantage, which adds to their feelings of discontent. Some university courses, such as teaching, forestry and agriculture, remain free of tuition fees so as to encourage more students to enrol. As a result, these unpopular options often become the only options for students who could not otherwise afford a tertiary education. These students are therefore effectively excluded from courses which can lead to high-status, higher-paying jobs. Access to quality, desirable education and subsequent preferred employment is thus to a growing extent dictated by a family’s financial resources, narrowing the avenues of social mobility for students of lower income families.

Not all students enter the academic avenues in China, however, with vocational senior high schools receiving almost equal numbers of students as the academic senior high schools. Despite the rapid development of vocational education in China, it remains beset by many problems which serve to undermine its potential to reduce the diploma disease effects.
Vocational education is, like academic senior high schools, divided hierarchically, with specialized vocational schools being the most prestigious, and a wide range of skilled-worker, vocational and technical schools in a less clear-cut hierarchy below them. This hierarchy is based on perceptions of graduates’ job opportunities and subsequent social status, teachers and resources, and the academic abilities of students in the schools. Courses at specialized schools are seen to be of a higher level than those at vocational schools, and depending on the school, have better teachers and resources. Some specialized schools recruit students of high academic abilities, and graduates find it easier to get jobs than do graduates from other kinds of vocational schools. For students who fail to enter a good academic senior high school, who dislike academic study, or who desire to undertake a particular course, specialized vocational senior high schools are “not a bad” option. Despite this, many students in Kunming believe that even specialized schools do not offer the same opportunities for upward social mobility, success and a prosperous future that they envision can be attained through an academic education, because graduates of a specialized or other kind of vocational school cannot sit the NUEE to enter university. A number of newspaper articles in Kunming have also noted that academic study is generally seen as a better foundation for employment, and employers are increasingly recruiting graduates with academic qualifications.

For graduates of Technical Middle, therefore, prospects are dim. Students who enter vocational schools are often there because they have failed the SSEE, as was often the case at Technical Middle, and graduates of such schools enter blue-collar, low status jobs which academic senior high school students shun. Due to economic restructuring, even getting a job of any kind with these types of vocational qualifications can be difficult. Vocational schools are under-funded, and suffer from a lack of resources and qualified teachers. These factors combine to ensure that vocational schools are viewed
by urban residents as inferior to academic schools, and their students are seen as “failures”. For a student with a poor academic record, however, it is still better to enter a vocational school and gain a skill, because there are more chances of getting a job than if the student had no post-compulsory education at all. Even vocational students face problems of qualification escalation within their areas, with Technical Middle students recognizing that the competition for jobs is high and that even for them, the grades they receive will determine how easily they find a job and what kind of job it will be.

Vocational education is one of the only options for some students, however. Some students at Technical Middle were there because they were from poor rural families who could not afford to send their child to an urban academic senior high school. Families without relatives living in or near the city find accommodation and living costs, when combined with tuition fees, prohibitive. At Technical Middle, though, the tuition and accommodation costs are not so high. In addition, rural ethnic-minority families generally have more than one child, and they need at least one child to enter the workforce as soon as possible to earn money and help support the family. Vocational training at the senior high school level is seen as providing a means towards this goal. As students from some urban vocational schools, such as Technical Middle, can be assigned to jobs in urban factories, such students enhance their chances of attaining better conditions, higher pay and other benefits lacking in their hometowns. Vocational education is also seen to offer rural students some of the “culture” and “knowledge” which their parents often missed out on, and gives the family pride, “face” and a greater social status within their hometown, where few other students may have been able to attend an urban vocational school. For urban families, however, the route to upward mobility continues to be through academic education, and thus the promotion of
vocational education has not been able to impact positively upon the qualification escalation and diploma disease backwash effects in the academic system.

The Chinese government itself has acknowledged that vocational education remains an unpopular option for most urban students and has recognized that the competition to enter academic senior high schools is becoming more intense. In an effort to reduce the negative backwash effects which the government and Chinese educators see as occurring, such as the over-reliance on rote-learning and pressures on students to pass numerous examinations, the government has introduced a number of reforms to the education system. The most significant of these are the “quality education” reforms, including reform to the NUEE system itself.

Quality education aims to provide a holistic and heuristic education for students in an effort to stimulate their creativity, imagination, and problem-solving skills and to move them away from the current heavy emphasis on preparation for SSEE and NUEE examinable subjects. Such reforms are in line with Dore’s ideals for an education system.

The problem with the implementation of quality education in China so far, however, has been the ambiguous nature of policy documents. This has led to many varied interpretations of “quality education” and an ad hoc implementation of it. Newspaper reports suggest that it has largely consisted of the addition of arts subjects into schools, a push towards involving students in extra-curricular activities, and the acquisition of technological resources. A reform implemented at a key school in Wuhan appears to go further, with the introduction of a “quality point system” which evaluates students on the basis of scores in academic subjects, arts and physical education.
subjects, moral education activities, teacher evaluations of students and elective
subjects. While this appears to take into account a more rounded view of a student’s
development and learning in their assessment, how the subjects and activities are
actually taught and evaluated are more important to the ideals of fostering quality than
just the fact they are included in a student’s assessment. While the ideals of quality
education are to promote creativity, imagination and problem-solving, the way in which
subjects, even in the arts, are assessed and examined too often revolves around the
subjective evaluation of theoretical knowledge. For example, students in a music class
can best pass the examination by memorizing facts about the theory and history of
music. They are given models to base their own compositions and performances upon,
and deviation from these can lead to low marks. A similar situation is seen in student
participation in extra-curricular activities, where they are pushed by parents to perform
to high standards, which may negate any intrinsic joy and fascination the student derives
from the activity itself.

While textbooks are being re-written to emphasize student participation in class
discussion, research and experiments, teachers and students in senior high schools
remain harnessed to the requirements of the NUEE and there is rarely time to deviate
from these. As no practical experiments are part of the NUEE itself, these are not seen
as an important element of the curriculum and are rarely conducted. A lack of resources
in ordinary schools means that not all students can participate in experiments anyway,
and the sheer numbers of students in each class means that student participation would
be quite limited. Student participation in discussion is also extremely limited due to the
large class sizes. Even I, as a western teacher educated to foster student discussion and
small group activity, was at a loss as to how to best to do so with 50 students per class.
Humanities Middle students were at an advantage in their English lessons, as these were
conducted with an average of only 25 students in the class, and the smaller class size did make a positive difference to their confidence and abilities in spoken English, but for the rest of their subjects, they too were in classes averaging 50 students.

A further difficulty with the implementation of quality education is that the ideal of encouraging students to think critically and to express themselves does not sit comfortably with most educators. Students have been brought up with the idea that authority is always right and have looked to their teachers as the source of knowledge, so getting them to think critically and engage in topical debates where someone may contradict the presented “official” viewpoint is almost impossible. A fundamental area of reform, therefore, needs to be that of teacher-training. Unless teachers are trained to think critically, be creative and imaginative, and solve problems in a variety of ways, they will be unable to teach their students to do so.

The impact of quality education reforms cannot as yet be fully ascertained in senior high schools in Kunming as their implementation is relatively recent. However, teachers and students in Kunming did not believe that quality education could make a difference to the way in which the NUEE dominates their teaching and learning. There was little visible evidence that quality education was, in fact, being implemented in any of the schools, particularly at the senior 3 level, where the effects of examination preparation are most severe. Educational participants in Kunming were in agreement that real change will not occur until the NUEE system itself is drastically altered or abolished. Without such changes, reform to the nature of teacher-training to assist teachers to acquire the skills and attributes relevant to providing quality education will not have any desired effect, as teaching will remain oriented around preparation for the NUEE.
The main change to the NUEE currently being trialled, the “3 + X” examination system, is aimed at reducing the number of examinations students have to prepare for, from five compulsory examinations to three compulsory examinations and up to two elective ones. Educational participants see this change as positive, as it may serve to reduce some of the study pressures students face, and so far only the best students have been attempting to sit two elective examinations. How long this will continue, however, is debatable, as sitting only one elective examination has already been seen to reduce the options for students at the tertiary level. In addition, the composite subject introduced to the “3 + X” trial in Guangdong may jeopardize the system’s potential to reduce the study pressures on students. Aside from the potential to reduce students’ study load, the “3 + X” changes are largely cosmetic, because they do not affect the qualification escalation phenomenon or other diploma disease backwash effects.

The NUEE tests theoretical knowledge and focuses upon the recollection of facts and the reproduction of model answers. Current reforms to the content of the NUEE subject examinations have to date produced no effective observable change to this focus. A possible solution would be to alter the way in which students are selected to proceed up the educational ladder. In his proposed solutions to the diploma disease, Ronald Dore suggests that aptitude tests could be used successfully as a means of selection to higher levels of education in place of achievement tests. As Angela Little has argued, however, the substitution of aptitude tests for achievement tests would not “lead to substantial changes in the examination-cramming attitudes and behaviours of students, teachers and parents.”\(^3\) Little states that one reason for this are beliefs about

the causes of academic success and failure. Among parents, students and teachers in Sri Lanka, Ghana, Mexico, Malaysia and England, effort and student motivation or interest were the most frequently cited explanations for academic success.4

In Chapter Five, I illustrated that effort is similarly perceived by educational participants in China to be the key factor in academic success or failure, despite an often unacknowledged recognition that natural ability also plays a part. Even students in ordinary academic schools are said to be able to pass the NUEE if they put in the required effort. Aptitude tests would be seen as denying students that possibility of success, and would not be viewed as a fair or valid method of selection. Furthermore, aptitude tests would not test “knowledge”, the gaining of which I have illustrated is of perceived importance in China. As aptitude tests at the end of many years of education for knowledge would not be seen to relate to that education or knowledge, there would be little motivation for students to study their various subjects throughout their school years. Little also points out that the labelling of students as having high or low aptitude may well affect their future motivation and effort to succeed in whatever they do.5 As a teacher, I have seen the negative effects on students who are labelled as having low aptitude in a particular subject, who then “live up (read “down”) to” that perception of them and fail to be motivated or encouraged to achieve from that point on.

As has occurred in other countries where there are prevailing beliefs that ability, aptitude and intelligence can be gained or improved through effort and practice6, the strong belief that effort leads to success in China would mean that the effort would get

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redirected away from preparation for achievement tests towards preparation for aptitude tests.

Methods of selection other than entrance examinations, of whatever form, are not perceived to be a viable option by most Kunming residents with whom I spoke. Despite its faults, in the minds of most, the SSEE and NUEE remain the “fairest” way to select students for different types of senior high school and tertiary education. Other alternatives that have been suggested by Dore, such as school quotas and lotteries, would be open to far greater abuses of *guanxi* than already occur under the current examination system. Lotteries remove the element of “effort leading to success” and would be considered neither fair nor meritocratic. The removal of entrance examinations could mean the loss of a motivating force for students’ study, and this possibility is one which would concern parents and teachers in the senior high schools in Kunming.

It can be seen, then, that most systems designed to select some students over others for places in higher education have inherent problems and will always face accusations of “unfairness”. But some more than others can foster the kinds of skills which Dore wishes all education systems would aspire to develop in their students. I believe that entrance examinations in themselves are not the problem at the heart of the diploma disease backwash effects. Rather, it is the content of those entrance examinations and the way they are assessed which alters how students are taught and how they learn in high school. Entrance examinations can test students’ creativity, problem-solving skills and critical thinking ability, but they have to target these areas. More fundamentally, teachers must have these skills themselves in order to be able to teach them to students. In order to alter the focus of entrance examinations, it would be
necessary for China to make a fundamental shift away from the knowledge and fact acquisition approaches to learning that have characterized the Chinese education system for thousands of years.

It is evident that there will always be more and less desirable jobs in any society, though which individual jobs are more or less desirable will vary somewhat with the changing needs and demands of the economy and individual preferences. Some kind of selective process is therefore necessary, as the competition to secure desirable jobs will naturally be greater than that to undertake less desirable ones. Even vocational training can become popular if the jobs for which it trains are seen as desirable. As soon as a selective process is implemented, that process will inevitably generate competitive pressure of some sort, whether it be to pass academic entrance examinations, improve vocational skills or enhance performance in aptitude tests. If the selective process relies on family background, as it did in China in the Maoist era, the incentives to be competitive are removed and the qualifying function of education is thwarted.

The ability to succeed in a competitive process will depend upon a set of variables and the nature of the competition. Key variables include individual ability and effort, individual and family aspirations, family background, financial resources, guanxi, and gender. The nature of the competition will give these variables a weighting, and the final placement of students through the competitive process will depend on a combination of variables particular to them and the weighting of those variables. Thus there will always be a distribution of employment opportunity which has follow-on implications for social mobility. While different selection practices can produce variations in the types of knowledge and skills acquired and way in which those are
acquired, the fundamental phenomenon of the diploma disease, that of qualification escalation, will remain.

The most significant aspect of the current education system in China is not so much that it exhibits many of the problems associated with the diploma disease, but rather the way in which it is affecting the social distribution of education and opportunity. The selective function of China’s education system, while largely relying on individual student effort and ability, has engendered competition which as well as emphasising individual effort has also lent increasing weight to the variables of financial resources and guanxi. The introduction of private education will contribute to and foster the current trends, particularly at the primary and secondary levels of education, where places in the best public schools are limited and the emergence of good private schools extends the number of desirable places only to those who can afford it.

Already, the Chinese government is coming under a great deal of pressure to expand the tertiary education system to better meet the public demand. Although Dore warns against the expansion of the tertiary system because of the potential for an increasing number of educated unemployed and the rapid devaluation of educational qualifications, it seems unlikely that the Chinese government will be able to resist the pressure for long. Over the past few years, the numbers of students admitted to tertiary institutions have already increased. It appears that qualification escalation will continue in China, and as a result, examination orientation will remain a feature of the high school education system.
While the education system remains the primary route to upward social mobility, those who stand to gain the most from it (those from lower-class backgrounds) have the least chance of availing themselves of the opportunities, even if they have the academic ability to succeed. They will find it increasingly difficult to raise the finances required to progress up the educational ladder, while those with greater financial resources and guanxi will be able to take available places regardless of their academic capabilities. Thus, the links between the Chinese education system and the opportunity structure will reinforce the positions of middle and upper-class families, while widening the gap between them and those of less privileged backgrounds.
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