

ACADEMIC PRESSURE AND IMPACT ON STUDENTS' DEVELOPMENT IN CHINA

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ABSTRACT. This paper examines the enormous pressure Chinese students must bear at home and in school in order to obtain high academic achievement. The authors look at students' lives from their own perspective and study the impact of home and school pressures on students' intellectual, psychological, and physical development. Cultural, political, and economic factors are analyzed to provide an explanation of the situation. The paper raises questions as to what is the purpose of education and argues for the importance of balancing educational goals with other aspects of students' lives.

RÉSUMÉ. Cet article s'intéresse aux pressions considérables dont font l'objet les étudiants chinois à la maison et à l'école en vue de réussir sur le plan scolaire. Les auteurs étudient la vie des étudiants à la lumière de leurs propres points de vue de même que l'impact des pressions familiales et scolaires sur leur développement intellectuel, psychologique et physique. Les facteurs culturels, politiques et économiques sont analysés en vue d'expliquer la situation. L'article soulève des questions sur le but de l'éducation et insiste sur l'importance d'équilibrer les objectifs pédagogiques avec les autres aspects de la vie des étudiants.

Many recent studies have been done on China's educational system (Lin, 1993; Hayhoe, 1992; Epstein, 1991; Gasper, 1989; Hayhoe, 1984; Hawkins, 1983). Some researchers have attributed Asian students' high academic achievement to their parents' high expectations and willingness to put in time and effort for their children's education (Schneider & Lee, 1990; Stevenson & Lee, 1990). While this may be true, not enough attention has been paid to the daily experience of children under constant pressure to become successful in school. How students actually feel, and what kind of negative consequences have been experienced by them, have been studied much less. This paper examines Chinese children's experiences both at home and in school, and raises

questions as to what extent the daily experience of Chinese children under the double pressure from their parents and teachers has been given sufficient attention in previous studies.

This paper begins with a description of students' life at home and in school. Although the focus is mainly on the experience of urban children in general primary and secondary schools, much of the description is also reflective of children in townships and some rural areas. Through listening to their concerns and the agony in their voices, we have developed a picture of the negative impact of high academic pressure on their intellectual, psychological, and physical growth. Educational, cultural, political, and economic factors are identified as an explanation for these phenomena. In conclusion, the paper argues that in light of Chinese children's experience, a balanced view of the purpose of education should be pursued and that education should, after all, be dedicated to the all-around development of children.

CONTEXT OF ACADEMIC PRESSURE

In China, as elsewhere, the nature of the pressure for high academic achievement is exerted within a cultural and social context. It is related to people's perception of education in a society, and to the demands and availability of educational opportunities.

Education has historically played a central role in Chinese society, and competition for admission into higher education has always been fierce. Every year on July 7, 8, and 9, millions of Chinese children are engaged in an intense, nerve-wrecking battle during the annual National Unified College and University Entrance Exam. The scores from the three days' examination determine the students' fate, channelling them into "winners" and "losers." Those admitted by colleges and universities are given a chance to have a future of good jobs, high social status, opportunities to go abroad to study, and so on. They are thus greatly admired and highly praised by the society, whereas those who fail to be admitted are looked down upon, facing a life with much less opportunity.

This practice stems from China's long history of examinations. From the Sui Dynasty (about 400 AD to 1905) – for nearly fourteen hundred years – an examination was relied on to select bureaucrats for governing the country. Scholars who went through years of study and successfully passed the exams were given titles, power, prestige, and lands. A family could benefit and prosper for generations with such a scholar. This

tradition of moving up the social ladder through education has a tremendous impact on Chinese cultural values. In contemporary China, except for the Cultural Revolution period (1966-1976) which saw the breakdown of the educational system for ten years, a university degree has been essential for one to be assigned a government job, to find employment in lucrative corporations, to go abroad for further studies, and to obtain political power. As is the situation in Japan:

The flow is simple: in order to get a good job, one has to get into a good university. In order to get into a good university, one must do well on the entrance examination. In order to do well on the entrance examination, one must study very hard, and for many years. Thus, testing is important for Japanese students because it ultimately determines their quality of life. (Ogura, 1987, p. 27)

However, individuals' opportunities to enter higher education have been severely restrained by the limited capacity of China's universities. China has about 2,000 universities which have an average of 2,000 to 3,000 students each. Since the Entrance Exam was restored in 1977, after the Cultural Revolution was ended, about half a million students have been admitted every year. This means that of the nearly 200 million students studying in China's formal primary and secondary schools, only 4% will have an opportunity to go for higher education (Huang Shiqi, 1992). This renders the competition extremely strong despite the fact that the government in recent years has tried to develop vocational schools, nonformal education, and adult education to divert students from pursuing formal higher education. That the number of admissions increased to 800, 000 in 1993 has done little to lessen the competition either.

This reality pressures families and schools to center their functions on preparing students for the annual Entrance Exam. High scores in examinations are thus the obsessive concern of parents, teachers, and school administrators. As an outcome, schools are being rated by the number of students they are able to send to higher educational institutions. It is within this social context that students are under tremendous pressure to become "competitive" and academically successful.

High expectation and pressure from parents

A great number of Chinese parents believe that if their children are to go to a good university, they have to give them early preparation. Pressures therefore are exerted on the children early in life, and these continue throughout their school years until the date they take the Entrance Exam and make a final decisive dash from a long race.

Like other Asian parents (Stevenson & Lee, 1990; White, 1987; Ssimahara, 1986), Chinese parents have very high aspirations for their children and are willing to do anything to have their wishes fulfilled. They are willing to spend a tremendous amount of time and money to ensure that their children achieve academic success. They start saving money when their children are still very young, and with their meager income, squeeze savings out of food and clothing money over a period of many years. They spend hours in the evenings and during the weekends to coach their children, giving up TV programs and holidays. While some parents study the textbooks taught in school so that they can coach their children better, others even enroll in adult education programs to enable themselves to understand the school materials. To make sure that their children have sufficient time to study, they take charge of all household chores, so much so that it is reported many children can not perform very simple physical labor (Xue Suzhen & Xiao She, 1992). Parents ride on their bicycles back and forth for hours in order to transport their child to a good daycare center, a good kindergarten, and so on. They hire high-priced tutors or send their children to extra classes after the normal school days and during the weekends.

In return for these efforts, parents expect their children to obtain good scores in all kinds of exams, on all subjects, throughout the school years. Drastic measures are adopted by parents in an attempt to make sure their children eventually prevail over others by a large margin. The measures include taking away the children's play time, locking up leisure-time magazines, curtailing TV times, restricting outdoor play, to name just a few. Violations often result in scolding, beating, withholding food, among other things.

Parents also check their children's diaries, search their furniture drawers, and constantly consult with teachers to make sure that nothing is distracting their children from full concentration on school work. They use material as well as verbal rewards to encourage good performance, but with little hesitation they will apply physical punishment for poor grades. Due to the relative success of the government's "one child per family" policy, most Chinese families today have only one child. It has been reported that parents may spoil this only child by excessive material indulgence. However thrifty and frugal their own lives may be, they try to provide their child with everything they can afford. The "only child" is often called "little emperor" and is guaranteed not only the best material life possible but also "the obedience from the people

around” (Han Yi, 1988). However, the outcome may result in physical punishment and verbal abuse if parents become unsatisfied with their child’s academic performance.

High performance expectations also lead parents to set unrealistically high standards for their children. For example, parents may declare that in their opinion ninety percent out of one hundred on an exam means only a pass; and that, for example, the child has to be among the top three in the class. They may fly into a rage when the child falls short of the expectation. The children are frequently reminded to remember such Chinese idioms as: “If you are willing to go through thousands of hardships, you will become a man above men someday.”

In case their child fails to be admitted into an elite school, commonly called a keypoint school in China, which has much better teaching staff and learning conditions than ordinary schools, parents may resort to everything they have – power, money, relations – to get the child enrolled. If they reside in cities where enrollment in keypoint schools requires residence in the district where the school is located, parents will use all kinds of devices, including real or false change of residence, or false adoption of a son or daughter by a relative or by a stranger living in the district (by paying them a sum of money). They may also engage in “for-show-only marriages” or divorce as a last resort. Every summer, many keypoint schools are crowded with parents who beg, threaten, and bribe teachers and administrators for their children’s chance of admission. In one case, some parents even staged a sit-in in the principal’s home (Su Xiaokang & Zhang Min, 1988).

In summary, Chinese parents hold high expectations for their children and are willing to sacrifice for them. However, in return for their effort and sacrifices, they hold their children responsible and accountable for high academic success and eventual admission into a college or a university. Parents can be so obsessed with this that they are willing to place excessive demands on their children regardless of the price.

High pressure within schools

The competitive exam system and parents’ high expectations push schools to wage “examination wars” on students, causing an “examination hell” for them, a phenomenon which is also reported in Japan (Ogura, 1987). That schools are evaluated by the number of students they are able to send to colleges and universities, and that promotion and reward for teachers and administrators are all based on this number, teachers gear all their efforts into preparing students for the Entrance Exam, thus forming another source of high pressure on students.

In the majority of schools, particularly at the secondary level, students are tested constantly, sometimes every three to five days, sometimes every day. The types of exams administered to students are wide-ranging, including “feeling the bottom” exams [to pretest students’ potential of getting a good score on the unified or general exams], selective subject exams, imitation [of the unified entrance] exams, preliminary exams, sectional exams, mid-term exams, final exams, and city-wide, county-wide, and provincial-wide general exams, and so on. Schools hold competitions with each other and teachers compete among themselves in order to have the highest admission ratio in their graduating classes (Lin, 1993). The exams are intended to keep students constantly “warmed-up” so that they maintain the morale of a battling soldier.

Cramming and rote learning are the methods teachers use most often in the classroom so that they can “stuff the students” as much as possible. Despite government guidelines which set a limit on the amount of home work a teacher can assign daily, students are still shouldered with excessive assignments and often have to spend four to six hours in the evenings working on them before they can go to bed. Teachers also require students to complete both the required and the optional assignments in the textbooks and to do a great amount of extra exercises drawn from other textbooks. They demand that students not only be able to recite certain subject matter, but also write down the material without consulting textbooks. To gain an advantage over other schools, teachers often use textbooks that are prepared for a higher grade (Xiao Xia, 1992). Students in a middle school in Yunnan Province is reported to have received 40 sheets of supplementary learning materials in a single day. In a random-sample survey, 114 instructional books of various kinds were found in a student’s desk (Xiao Xia, 1992, p. 30), and some primary school students’ schoolbags were found to weigh as much as four kilos, filled with various textbooks.

Thus, the knowledge that teachers want to impart to students is complete, thorough, and difficult, so that the students may excel in all exams and, ultimately, the national Entrance Exam. A wide-spread saying reveals the intent of this practice: “To enable the students to shoot a mosquito, they should be equipped with anti-aircraft guns.”

Children’ voices on parental pressure

Double pressure from family and schools has turned many a child’s life into one of depression, nervous breakdown, and dissatisfaction. Here

we illustrate this by “listening to the children’s voices” and learn about their lives from their own perspectives. These statements were collected from a variety of sources, including magazine and journal articles, and our own correspondence with children living in China.

Li Min, a tenth-grader who ran away from home, describes the pressure he felt from his parents, in a letter he wrote to his aunt:

Day and night, month and year, I’m like a donkey made to turn the grinding-stone, circling around the grades with eyes being covered. . . . In retrospection [sic] of my childhood, I only have in my mind a machine running at a high speed, and a pushing-cart in a mine where there is no sky and sunlight. I often have the feeling that I’m not a human being, but a something.

It is clear that he felt he was not treated as a human being but as an object or machine. He recounted that when he was three or four years old in the kindergarten, he was brought by his parents to various places to learn drawing and how to play musical instruments. When he was in primary school, his parents made him keep a daily diary in addition to the regular homework and assignments from the school interest group. He exclaimed:

The diary was not just a diary, but a composition every day! After I entered a key-point junior middle school, I thought I could take a breath of relief. But my parents brought home all kinds of supplementary exercises for math, physics and chemistry, in order that I receive ‘intensified practice’. My life is all darkness whether it is day or night. I have to score 100 on exams, and have to win prizes on contests. Am I a programmed computer? (Min Zhi, 1991, p. 38)

The boy further said:

Father often told me that in a competition, only the strongest survive, thus I have to build up my advantages. Mother urges me with all kinds of reasons that I have to keep on learning more and more so that I advance ahead of my age group. I finally understand that as the son of my parents, I have to gain fame for them. I have to combine the best of them both. (Min Zhi, 1991, p. 38)

Some children feel that their parents never really care about how they feel and think. As a girl complained to her father:

You only want me to get full scores and be admitted into a keypoint school. What if I fall ill [under pressure] and can not do anything at all in the future? How I wish that you and mom were also my friends. (Han Yi, 1988, p. 225)

After running away from her parents for several days, she came home and explained the reason:

I don't like being reminded all the time to prepare for my study so that I get a good result. Why do you never ask about what is in my mind and what is troubling me? You just want me to bring you fame and glory, and you never want to listen to me. (Han Yi, 1988, p. 227-28)

Children express nervousness whenever they are pushed by their parents. A ninth-grader wrote in his diary:

As the entrance-exam (for attending senior middle school) draws near, the 'ghost narrow pass' is approaching fast. My parents are almost fixing their eyes on me. The fear in my heart grows every time I hear the shout 'Go and study!' The exam is like a big mountain. No, for me it's now heavier than 365 Everests as if I would be deported to hell if I fail. (Xiao Xia, 1992, p. 31)

Students whose grades deteriorate suffer great self-doubt and go through tremendous psychological and emotional turbulence. Scolding, additional homework, isolation, and a total ban from play hurt them deeply. A student who fell behind other students after an illness and who eventually failed to pass two exams said:

I became totally numbed, and the teachers were shocked. It seemed that the air in our family had frozen. Father pounded on the table, yelling: 'You useless thing! Your mother and I give you good things to eat and good clothes to wear, and you return with this lousy score....' I did not know what to say. I had done all I could. Every day except eating and sleeping, I spend all my time with books. I am so tired, but do you care? (Wu Fei, 1992, p. 9)

After his failure on the two exams, his mother changed, his father's cold attitude "made him tremble", and his friends distanced themselves from him, too. In his despair, he wrote to the *Women of China* magazine, declaring himself "no longer a good child," and asking for some support.

Children's voices on pressures in school

Pressure from schools has a similar impact on students. The *Women of China* magazine conducted a survey among a group of ninth-graders and asked them to write a composition entitled "My Worries." Among the 70 articles collected, 38 or 54% claimed the excessive academic pressure as their "no. 1 worry". The following passages are quoted from what they wrote:

It [academic pressure] is just like a devil, hanging around me all day long and depriving me of the beautiful life. The sky has changed from blue into gray and there is no sign of life left in the surroundings. . . .

Academic Pressure

Every day, the six subjects are like six huge mountains on top of me. Only the ten minutes or so on the way back home is the time I can have a rest. But even then my mind is blank and numb. . . .

Morning is my busiest time, with breakfast skipped sometimes. Noon is devoted to assignments, which make the lunch tasteless. Evening would have me exhausted with no appetite at all. Physical training has been given up to make more room on the schedule for academic courses. In the past I could run 1500 meters with ease, but now I have become so weak that I cannot stand running a circle (note: no more than 400 meters) on the sports field. . . .

Since the beginning of the ninth grade, I seem to have entered a small dark room filled with assignments. . . .

We seem to be living in hell, with no freedom from morning till night! (Xiao Xia, 1992, p. 31)

Students studying in ordinary schools with little chance of being admitted to a university feel a strong sense of shame and failure, and so do the teachers. As a student said:

The sight of my school simply depresses me – a gray yellow one and a snow-white one. No one in the world would like my school. To be in it is my ill fortune. Even the teachers feel this way. They are assigned to work here, only because they are losers of a competition or victims of fate. In us students they find their younger counterparts. What do you get when you throw big losers and small losers altogether? In class a weird expression often shadows our teacher's face – a kind of disgust for the kids. We, being what we are, seem to have put them to shame. (Quoted in Ross, 1991, p. 71)

Students who are lucky enough to be studying in keypoint schools are also subject to endless pressure and competition and a sense of self-doubt. This is particularly true for those who are ranked at the bottom of the class. A Senior One (tenth grade) student wrote to the authors and described in a very vivid way his life in a keypoint school:

Time Again for Putting Together the Golden List

Terror is quietly descending.

With the death penalty drawing near, threats from the teachers increase day by day. Anxiety is spreading. Top students are gearing up for the big fight, and second rate students like us again live under their shadow in pale comparison. Time becomes precious, all kinds of preparation plans are being manufactured, and everyone begins to wind up and work in full force. With eight mountains (Chinese, math, a foreign language, physics, chemistry, geography, history, and politics) on our back, we are like desperate dogs jumping up the wall, trying all our means to seek survival. From the history of the primitive time four billion years ago to the present

anti- [capitalist attempted] peaceful evolution campaign, we became supermen traveling up and down billions of years of history and in and out of the earth, splitting our heads into eight pieces and stacking them up one by one. These things merge and crash and become 'eight spices rice' or cement in our mind. . . .

Into senior high school for just two terms, we have already learned what it feels like to prepare for the Entrance Exam. However, the teachers are saying this is the easiest year in senior high school. My heaven, just to catch up with others in the headache-causing English, I have already slipped like an avalanche in other subjects.

We all know that the exam is for the students and teachers to battle on their wisdom. The students brandish their guns and ride their horses on the paper on a two-hour exam, and the teachers mark the students down one by one. Only a few are marked to the sky, and listed at the top of the golden list. These few are so high up there and have become so powerful that we hardly dare to look at them. Yet they pretend to have gotten a bad score and their dreadful cries fill the classroom: bad scores, no hope any more, next year the productivity has to double, fail to live up to teachers' and parents' expectations, did not study hard enough, have to study everyday, and make progress everyday, making it known to all people around. Their modesty is in fact as obvious as an open toilet. The troops trailing the list have to hang their heads and drag their feet. Taking pain killers does not help nor does it help those who pound on their chests and promise improvement. So during holidays, we all have to make resolutions and set goals. If we are found playing outside, we receive a spanking from parents, which will almost scare us to death, if not kill us.

The death penalty is near, and every day is passed with the fear of death. Parents never fail to remind us of high standards and never stop comparing us and other students. To lie back and recount one's store of knowledge, failure is guaranteed even if teachers do mark loosely. No hope in delaying the execution. It says that a real hero will smilingly face the gallows, but as we towards fear death, we just have to sharpen our knives by working day and night. How sad!

Many students who eventually fail the Entrance Exam are devastated. A student who opted to repeat another year at a high school called himself a "Senior Grade Four" student. After his defeat in "black July," he expressed himself:

The cold autumn wind can not take away the sadness in my heart, and my life is full of shadow despite the sunshine outside. How I wish I were on the list of those accepted by universities!

With great determination, he returned to school to prepare for the unified entrance exam for another year. He was constantly made to feel

guilty by the support and worried looks from his parents, and was shamed by the concerned inquiries and obvious sympathies displayed by his neighbors. Three times a day, he rode on his bike for a long distance in order to take classes. He worked as hard as anyone else in his class to detect "traps" set by the teachers in all kinds of exams, studying late into each night and during holidays and weekends. He felt greatly depressed whenever he received letters from former classmates who had already "made it." There was a small blackboard placed at the entrance of his school. The blackboard made daily announcement to remind all the students passing by that there are only "x" days left for the preparation for "the killer Exam". Nervous as he was seeing the blackboard, he was full of determination to go through all the pains again and to endure all the humiliation and loneliness, "in order to embrace the loving sun in the black July of this year, in order to win the smiles of my mother, and in order to obtain the key to the gate of the university" (Chu Guochiang, 1992, p. 32).

Negative impacts: physical, psychological, and intellectual

In Japan, high academic pressure has led to home violence, school violence, and rejection of schools (Ohta, 1986). In China, the impact on students can be said to be physical, psychological, and intellectual.

Physical violence is one consequence of high expectation and high pressure. In November 1992, three "only children" from urban worker families died at their fathers' hands. When 3-year-old Hu Dandan forgot a word in the poem his father was teaching him, the father exploded in anger. He boxed the boy's ears, then kicked him, sending him reeling into a closet. Hours later, Hu Dandan died of head injuries. Eight-year-old Wang Xiaochuan got in trouble when he went out to play, ignoring orders to study. His father boxed him on the ears and kicked him twice, knocking him unconscious. The father of Xia Hui, 11, tied a rope around the boy's stomach and hung him from a ceiling beam after he played "hooky" from school. Both Wang Xiaochuan and Xia Hui died in hospital. The deaths of the three boys initiated a public debate in the nation's leading newspaper, the *People's Daily*. It was also reported that a father in Guiyang struck his 7-year-old son with a red-hot metal hook for forgetting to do his homework. Such violence aroused indignation among people and became the topic of public debate on the purpose of education (Wilhelm, 1992).

A 12-year-old seventh-grader in Beijing committed suicide with insecticide in 1985. She left her last words to her parents and elder sister in a recording, which lasted six minutes and twenty seconds. She had been planning to kill herself since she was in the third grade. The only reason was that she could not stand the endless scolding and spanking from her parents because of her unsatisfactory academic performance at school. She wasn't a poor student indeed. She just could not make herself among the best. She became desperate when her parents threatened to escalate the punishment if she could not get into the top 10 in the class (Han Yi, 1988, pp. 227-228).

High pressure has led to a decline in students' health; for example, excessive use of the eyes renders many students near-sighted. According to a 1988 national survey on students' physical development, 18% of the primary school students were near-sighted, so are 49% of the secondary school students, and 73% of college and university students. The trend is on the increase every year (Jiang Naichiang, 1991).

The psychological impact is dismal as well. According to a survey among 459 university and secondary school students by the Xi'an Medical University, at least 7% of the secondary school students were recognized as having psychological problems. The figure rises to 20% if judged by such expressed problems and symptoms as serious insomnia, memory loss, short attention span, unstable moods, and disappointment towards life. These problems lead to deteriorating academic performance and various kinds of misbehaviors. A study by the Hangzhou Municipal Mental Institute pointed out 3.76 % of students at junior high schools and 18.79 % at senior high schools suffered from considerably serious psychological difficulties (Xiao Xia, 1992, p. 31). At the Out-Patient Center for Psychological Counseling at the Westlake District of the City of Hangzhou, 48.60 % of the patients were teenagers (Xiao Xia, 1992, p. 32). This same report also indicated that the suicide rate among teenagers has been rising with each passing year.

Students' intellectual development is distorted as well. Fierce competition leads to cheating behaviors among students. It is reported that in order to obtain good scores in a closed-book exam, students will use all sorts of tricks to sneak notebooks, textbooks, and other articles into the exam room. Poor students as well as top students are known to do the same. Many schools tried very hard to stop this by changing the exam place, adding more teachers to watch over the students, or having students sit back to back instead of facing each other. These measures

failed as students outwitted teachers by a variety of tricks or manouevers. For example, in a standardized test, students invented a "standardized cheating method." For a multiple choice exam, students signaled to each other that "a" is the correct answer by supporting their forehead and "b" by wiping their forehead with the left hand, "c" by supporting their forehead, and "d" by wiping their forehead with the right hand, respectively. Some students formed pairs to cheat: one student would preoccupy the teachers with many questions, while the other would quickly open textbooks and notebooks for answers. Both poor and good students cheated. The rationale given by a top student in a keypoint school is: For a poor student, cheating will just get him a pass; but for a top student, one or two points will mean whether or not s/he is listed as the number one in a class. "If cheating can make your classmates like you better and your parents love you, why not do it? We are just trying to prove our worth" (Zhou Shun, 1988, p. 344).

Another form of cheating has to do with the heavy load of home work. One summer evening, a father felt very sorry for his ten-year-old son, who, besides countless assignments in math and the Chinese language, had to write thirty diaries, twenty book reports, and six compositions during the summer vacation. But the father was surprised that within moments, the son jumped and shouted: "Father, I have finished all my summer diaries." Puzzled, the father picked up the diary book, and on it were written unevenly these words: "July 14, sunny day. Today is the first day of summer vacation, I planted a Labahua [trumpet-shaped flower] seed in our backyard garden." "July 16, sunny day. Two leaves grew out of the soil, I watered it and put in the fertilizer." "This morning, I set up a rack for the Labahua." "Labahua has grown into a thin and long vine, climbing up the rack." "In the afternoon, the lovely Labahua reached the top of the rack, and was full of green leaves." Soon, the diary reached August: "August 7, sunny day. A little yellow flower appear among the leaves, so lovely and so tender." "August 20, sunny. Beautiful flowers filled up the rack, and the air was full of its wonderful scent. Daddy said, if we are willing to sweat, we will be sure of a harvest." The father wanted to scold the child, but was speechless. It was only the first day of the summer vacation, his family never planted flowers, and their apartment was so small that there would not even be a place for the pot, but what could he say? (San Mugong, 1988, p. 14).

The high value placed on exam scores also affects teachers' attitude toward students. Teachers tend to look down upon, complain about,

and scorn low-score students. It is reported that in one classroom, a student raised his hand to offer an answer to a question but gave the wrong one. The teacher lashed out this way: "Fortunately you did not know, otherwise you would have three hands to raise." The student flushed and was extremely humiliated and embarrassed. Teachers also make hostile comments to students. A teacher was reported to say this to a student: "I bet my job that no one like you can be accepted by a university." Some teachers like to say "dumb" or "I've seen you through" to students with low scores (Yuan Bizen, 1992, p. 27). In contrast, teachers favor high-score students and often offer them extra help. Their high expectation often results in high achievement among these students (Lin, 1993, pp. 56-59).

Some Explanations

Academic pressure arises from multiple factors in China's educational, cultural, political, and economic systems. These include the organizational set-up of the Chinese educational system, Chinese cultural values, class mobility in the society, and the government's political and employment policies in the past and at present.

Educationally, China's urban and rural schools are divided into two major categories: "keypoint schools" and "ordinary schools" (or "common schools"). Keypoint schools enroll about four percent of the secondary population (Smith, 1989), and the students are given many privileges. For example, they are permitted to choose good students and teachers from other ordinary schools; they receive much more financial support from local governments (Rosen, 1984). With their tremendous advantages over common schools, they account for 95% of the university admissions from their graduating classes. It is this prospect that has fueled the fierce competition among schools and pressure from parents. According to a report, a Beijing keypoint junior high school set the admission score for the tested subjects of Chinese language and mathematics above 190, out of a possible score of 200. A municipal keypoint school sets its cut-off point at as high as 193-198. Even a relatively good non-keypoint school will not accept students who score below 185. The competition for admission to a keypoint senior high school in Beijing is so rigorous that on the six tested subjects – math, physics, chemistry, foreign language, Chinese, and political science – students must score a total of 574 or more out of a possible 600. This means a minimum average of 95.5 (Xiao Xia, 1992, p. 31)! High competition results in the high level of pressure from parents and teachers. There have been numerous calls to abolish the elite system, but the notion that China

needs to concentrate limited resources on the best students still prevails.

Culturally, Chinese children are seldom considered to be individual beings with their own individuality, interests, and personalities. Rather, they are the means to an end, and their life is often defined in terms of fulfilling responsibilities to their parents and other people. As is pointed out by Pieke:

The primary goal of the Chinese is not the well-being of the individual, but that of the family as a whole. Children are first of all an asset to the family, a means to certain ends: reproduction of the patrilineal descent line, income-producing labor increasing the wealth and status of the family, and support in old age for their parents. Children are essential elements in the strategies for social advancement of the family.

A son's educational advancement and later professional success both increase the status of the family and produce income to profit it as a whole. . . . Having a child finish university confers much status upon the parents within the Chinese community. (Pieke, 1991, p. 172)

Children's unconditional obedience to parents' demands presented in the form of filial piety is taken for granted by most Chinese people. Children are believed to owe their lives to their parents, and are often seen as part of the family's property. From birth, a child is thrust into a relationship net, in which her life is closely monitored by her parents, grandparents, relatives, and people in the neighborhood. Parents have the strong tendency to cultivate in children a sense of obligation, but at the same time feel they have the undeniable responsibility to look after the children's future even if that means many sacrifices. Parents consider themselves to have superior knowledge for guiding their children's future and expect the children to grow up following "the right path" and bring the family fame and glory. The society assumes to have the right to hold their children accountable for high academic achievement, failing which they are justified in the use of physical and psychological punishment.

Political factors have played a very important role in the Chinese people's life. Under the control of the Chinese Communist Party since 1949, ordinary people's chances of social mobility have been greatly affected by governmental policies. For example, during the Cultural Revolution, schools were closed down for two years, and schooling was disrupted for a decade. A whole generation of people thus lost the opportunity to attain higher education, which hampered their advancement in the society. Today in their thirties and forties, many have

reached the top of their career, locked into a dead-end job, having no way to improve their situation. The economic reform in force since 1978 allowed some Chinese people to improve their life substantially through business ventures, whereas the great majority of ordinary people have no power or influence and little capital to invest, and the university is still the best avenue for their children to rise above their present circumstance. This reality pushes them to pin their hope on their children whom they hope will do better than themselves.

The country has a huge population of 1.2 billion people with limited resources. Despite rapid economic development in recent years, China has not been able to commit a large amount of resources into building enough colleges and universities. The government has tried to develop vocational and technical education in order to channel students into different pursuits and directions, but it has been reported that they have very limited success (Delany & Paine, 1991), as the tradition of emphasizing formal, liberal arts education continues. The reform era has also seen the restoration of meritocracy in which a university degree becomes vitally important for one to obtain good jobs. People with just a high school education have to work as "contracted workers" in factories or hotels with no health insurance or other benefits, and may be fired as the contracts expire, whereas those with a higher education have many more choices. They can be government officials who will be promoted much faster than those without higher education; they may work in large foreign-invested corporations making many times more money than others; or they may go abroad for further studies.

Furthermore, China has not set up an adequate pension system either in the past or at present. Historically, with a predominantly agricultural economy, people had to rely on their sons in old age, and children were essential in providing a sense of security to the parents. At present, the situation is different for urban and rural people. Urban residents have certain government support and do not worry so much about pensions, but it is still very important that their children do well so that they can have a more secure old age. In rural areas where more than 80% of the Chinese population reside, senior citizens have little government support and have to rely on their children for their livelihood. Therefore, the better off the children, the better off the parents.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

There has been strong public outcry about the detrimental emphasis on academic achievement. "Give children back their childhood," "let

them play," "let them be innocent" are among many of the outcries from parents and educators. In March of 1993, the minister of the State Education Commission, Li Tieying, called on schools to relieve students of excessive school assignments ("We have solved the problem of excessive school work for children: Comrade Li Tieying talked with a group of primary and secondary school principals" [1993, p. 9]). However, these voices seem to have had little effect in changing the situation (Liu Bin, 1993; Yang Qiliang, 1993).

The resistance to change is partly due to the fact that parents and teachers have no choice. Parents have to be very demanding so that their children are the ones selected for educational opportunities. However, while they are pushing the children, many feel uneasy about it. For example, it is reported that one father who was extremely upset when his son could not pass any of the subjects in school and faced the possibility of having to repeat a year, after doing all that other parents usually do, such as scolding, banning TV, constant pushing and persuasion, gave up and accepted the reality. It was a hard thing for him to do, as he had to admit his failure in bringing up a "dragon." Then he realized that his son, except for low scores, actually had many merits: he was good-natured, clever, polite, and kind. He decided to stop pushing his son and enjoy life as it is. Interestingly, his son then became conscious of his own situation and started to make more effort, and soon his scores improved (Li Xiangyang, 1992). In another report, a mother felt a strong sense of guilt after her daughter finally passed an entrance exam and was admitted into a prestigious keypoint school. The girl had fallen seriously ill after years of being pushed by the mother, who once beat the daughter so hard that she broke a bamboo pole. She admitted that "I have unfairly placed all the burdens on my daughter so that she might fulfil my dream which was broken during the Cultural Revolution" (Mo Shuqing, 1994, p. 23). A father, after being shocked by his son's comment that "father wants me to die", became aware of what was happening and made a plea for parents to stop the "psychological violence" toward their children (Zhang Jin, 1994, p. 8).

Teachers feel powerless in making changes in the system. First, their work is little appreciated. "When a child is accepted by a university, the parents think it is because the child is clever; when a student fails, the parents complain that the teacher is not good" (Su Xiaokang & Zhang Min, 1988, p.192). Teachers and principals have been the scapegoat. As a principal said:

If we do not have a good admission rate, not only will the society and parents blame me, our teachers would also feel that we have lost face. Therefore every moment in our middle school teachers and administrators are under the heavy burden of the admission rate. (Zhou Zhanguang, 1992, p. 13)

These sentiments have created a great crisis in the morale in schools. Fewer and fewer people want to enter the teaching profession today. A popular saying is: everyone wants their child to have a good teacher, but no one wants his/her child to become a teacher. In recent years, the exodus of teachers into other professions has been unstoppable, despite strict government regulations.

This article describes the experience of Chinese children in their educational system. Similar conditions are being reported to happen to Asian students in the U. S., and to students in Taiwan, Japan, and Korea. Excessive pressure for achievement in Japan has also been reported. According to a report, when a western Japan junior high school class turned in substandard exams in the spring of 1991, the teacher used electric shock to punish the students. Students had to grasp a metal bar and received one volt of electrical current for each point below 100 on the exam. One student received seventy volts and complained that his hands were numb for two minutes afterward (*The Gazette* [Montreal], 1992, p. 1). In other reports, students attending "cram schools" are often shown wearing a head band with the word "victory", symbolizing it as a battle of life.

This raises the question: Education for what? Extreme pressure from family and the society will undoubtedly make students passive objects, which hamper their growth as an all around person. High expectation is important and necessary for any sort of achievement, yet the pressure it generates on students, regardless of their growth, may effectively deprive the children of their happy, exploitative, curious, and imaginative childhood.

The North-American type of child-centered education has been the target of much criticism, particularly for the low scores students receive in international competitions. There have thus been calls to learn from Asian cultures on how to improve the scores. However, the lack of attention to the students as human beings in those countries has rarely been mentioned. A balanced view is needed as to how we can motivate students through family and school influence while seeing children as basic human beings and treating them with respect and giving them a certain degree of autonomy. The West and the East can learn from each

other in their need to balance the treatment of children to improve academic achievement.

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