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Test That Can Determine the Course of Life in China Gets a Closer Examination

By EDWARD WONG

BEIJING — Millions of high school graduates across China have been furiously dialing telephone hot lines or gathering with family members around the home computer in recent days in a nail-biter of a ritual not unlike that of waiting for a winning lottery number.

The number, in this case, is the score for what is generally considered the single most important test any Chinese citizen can take — the gaokao, or college entrance examination. High school seniors took the test over two to three days in early June. Now, the tests have been graded, the numbers tabulated and the results released, region by region. In the final step, college selections are being made in an opaque process that stretches from late June into July.

"When the result came out on June 23, it happened to be my 18th birthday," said Yang Taoyuan, who lives with his parents in Kunming, capital of the southwest province of Yunnan. "We had a family get-together on that day, and everybody was there when we called over to a hot line to find out about my scores."

In a country where education is so highly prized, the score that a student earns after the days of testing at the end of high school is believed to set the course of one's life. The score determines not just whether a young person will attend a Chinese university, but also which one — a selection, many Chinese say, that has a crucial bearing on career prospects.

But debate appears to have grown more heated lately over the value of the gaokao (pronounced gow-kow). Critics say the exam promotes the kind of rote learning that is endemic to education in China and that hobbles creativity. It leads to enormous psychological strain on students, especially in their final year of high school. In various ways, the system favors students from large cities and well-off families, even though it was designed to create a level playing field among all Chinese youth.

Last month, a 12-minute television segment railing against the exam by Zhong Shan, a well-known talk show host in Hunan Province, gained popularity on the Web and became a focal point for fury against the gaokao in particular and the Chinese educational system in general. Also widespread on the Internet were photographs

taken in a Hubei Province classroom of students hooked up to intravenous drips of amino acids while cramming.

Perhaps most shocking to the public was the story of Liu Qing, a student from Xi'an, Shaanxi Province, whose family and teachers hid from her for two months the fact that her father had died so as not to upset her before the exam. Ms. Liu, according to reports in the Chinese news media, did not hear the news about her father until after she had completed the test.

"We Chinese are indeed the most intelligent people in the world," Mr. Zhong said near the end of his widely broadcast screed. "Is there no way at all we can avoid having the younger generation, the future of our nation, grow up in such a fearful, desperate and cruel atmosphere?"

Standardized testing is common throughout the world, and students and parents in nations like the United States, Britain and France also complain loudly about the weight that admissions committees at universities place on such tests. But the admissions process in those countries is still considered much more flexible than that in Asian nations. The emphasis on entrance exams in China, South Korea and Japan induces widespread fear and frustration, leading more and more parents from elite families to look for alternatives, like sending their children abroad.

Defenders of the gaokao, which has its roots in the imperial exam system, say the test is a crucial component in a meritocracy, allowing students from poorer backgrounds or rural areas to compete for spots in top universities. Nevermind that the odds are heavily against those students, since a quota system based on residency means it is much easier for applicants in cities like Beijing and Shanghai to get into universities there, which are generally considered the best in China. Peking University, among the most prestigious, does not release admission rates, but Mr. Zhong said on his television program that a student from Anhui Province had a one in 7,826 chance of getting into Peking University, while a student from Beijing had one in 190 odds, or 0.5 percent. (Harvard had a 5.9 percent acceptance rate this year.)

Even supporters of the gaokao system acknowledge the level of anxiety involved. It is not uncommon for Chinese to have recurring nightmares about cramming for and taking the gaokao years after they have graduated from university. Many schools in China set aside the final year of high school as a cram year for the test. Mr. Yang, the student in Kunming, said he spent 13 hours a day in his senior year studying, and his

parents even rented an apartment for him near his school so he would not have to waste time traveling back and forth to his parents' home.

"When I was getting close to the test, pretty much all I did besides eat and sleep was study," Zhao Xiang, a high school graduate from Zunyi, Guizhou Province, said in an Internet chat interview.

He said students' lives before the gaokao were full of suffering: "Sometimes it was pressure from my family, sometimes it was the expectations from my teacher, sometimes it was pressure from myself. I was constantly in a really bad mood in the period before the gaokao. I was really confused."

A report by Xinhua, the state news agency, said that of the 9.15 million students who took the gaokao this year, about 75 percent would be admitted to universities in mainland China. Once the students get their scores, they submit to education officials a list of universities, ranking them in order of choice. Administrators at the universities then look at the students' scores and decide whether to admit them for the coming September.

Many universities do set aside a few slots for students admitted on the basis of special merit, thus allowing leeway for students who do not take the gaokao or have low scores. Admission in those cases can be based on factors like musical talent, foreign language skills or athletic prowess, as in the United States. Ethnic minority students sometimes get an advantage.

Of course, children of senior Communist Party members, government leaders and prominent businesspeople have their own back channels to admission, a phenomenon that exists, too, in the West, though perhaps not to the same degree.

There has also been a growing trend of students in China applying to universities outside the mainland. Many Chinese parents — including the party's top leaders — not only value a foreign degree over one from a Chinese university, but also want their children to avoid the stress of taking the gaokao. An Education Ministry report last year said the number of high school students from top cities leaving the mainland to pursue higher education overseas grew at 20 percent each year from 2008 to 2011.

Gao Haicheng, a junior in Kunming, said he planned to apply to universities abroad rather than ones in China. Though avoiding the gaokao is not his main aim, Mr. Gao said the exam "is a big problem in China's education system."

"In China, they only use marks to explain something," he added, referring to the emphasis on the gaokao score.

Each year, cheating scandals become the talk of China. One common tactic was for students to give their identification cards to look-alikes hired to take the test; later, many provinces installed fingerprint scanners at test centers. In 2008, three girls in Jiangsu Province were caught with mini-cameras inside their bras; their aim was to transmit images of the exam to people outside the classroom who would then provide answers. This year, the big scandal involved students in Huanggang, Hubei Province, famous in the past decade for churning out students with high scores; several dozen students were caught there last month for using small monitors costing nearly $2,500 that resembled erasers and that allowed the students to receive electronic messages with test answers.

Zhang Qianfan, a law professor Peking University who has studied the education system, said the main problem was the lack of slots at universities. Despite a boom in university construction in China, there is still a shortage. This year, there are seven million university slots, two million short of the number of gaokao test takers. The gap was much wider in 2006 — there were 5.3 million slots then for 9.5 million test takers. The drop in the number of students taking the gaokao can be attributed to demographic trends in China and the rise in the number of students opting to study abroad.

“Many people are harsh critics of the gaokao, but I think they somewhat miss the most crucial point, which is that the supply from decent academic institutions falls short of the demand from the public,” Mr. Zhang said.

Students who have received their gaokao scores and are now submitting their choices for universities expect to hear results this month. Mr. Yang, the graduate in Kunming, said by telephone on Saturday that he had put down the University of Shanghai for Science and Technology as his top choice. But he said if he had done better than his score of 517, out of a possible 750, he might have put down the Civil Aviation University of China in Tianjin.

“I did the best in my class, so I’m pretty happy with the result,” he said. “So are my parents and most of my friends. But it’s not high enough to get me into the school I’m longing to attend.”

Christy Khoshaba contributed reporting from Kunming, China, and Jacob Fromer from Hong Kong. Mia Li and Shi Da contributed research.