Testy times: Schools in China are trying to make pupils’ lives easier

Why do some parents object?

Sep 5th 2020
NANJING

The largest museum commemorating the gruelling examination system China used in imperial days to select civil servants opened in 2017 in Nanjing. It would not seem an obvious destination for a fun family outing in the eastern city. As visitors walk into it down a grey ramp—130 metres long to symbolise the test’s 1,300-year history—a sign tells them they will “experience the hardships of the journey to success” for those who sat the keju before its abolition in 1905. Bamboo slips affixed to towering walls represent the “myriad” books that candidates had to read.

Yet on a recent weekday afternoon, there were as many youngsters filling the museum’s cavernous halls as there were attentive adults. A mother from the city of Xi’an, hundreds
of kilometres inland, had brought her four-year-old son in order to inspire him. “He likes the dioramas,” she said brightly, “even though he doesn’t know what an exam is yet.” A coalmine engineer from Ordos, a city in distant Inner Mongolia, was there with his nine-year-old son whose “fate” he hoped to alter through their visit. “Xiangshi, huishi, dianshi,” his son piped up, naming three levels of the ancient test that inspired the creation of civil-service exams in the West.

In terms of the awe it inspires, the keju has a modern rival: the gaokao, a punishingly hard university-entrance exam which is taken by over 10m students every year. For those from poor families, a good score is often their only chance to escape a life toiling on farms or in factories. As a result, Chinese education has long involved little more than rote learning, aimed purely at the gaokao. Pupils attend late-night cram sessions and shoulder twice as much homework as the global average.

But the deep reverence for tests expressed by the museum and its visitors is not shared by reformist educators and some head teachers, who want to downplay them. They have a radical vision—of reducing study loads, expanding the curriculum and encouraging students to take up hobbies. Nanjing, a former imperial capital, is the centre of their experiments.

In 2016 Nanjing Number One Secondary School, the city’s oldest and among its most competitive, began to let students borrow points from a “marks bank” to boost a low grade. These are repaid by deducting points scored in a later test, or earned from good classwork. The aim is to take a bit of pressure off exams. At the school, teachers and students are encouraged to be “on an equal footing”, an appreciative former pupil wrote in an online forum. Nanjing Number One has a vibrant student union, a literary society and other clubs. Its university-acceptance rate this year was 95%, a record for the school. Yet the scene outside Nanjing Number One in late July, soon after the gaokao results were released, was not of jubilation. Dozens of angry parents brandished placards demanding that the head teacher step down. They blamed their children’s lower-than-expected scores on what they saw as his attempts to make light of tests. More traditional schools in Nanjing, they noted, churned out more top-scorers. Nanjing Number One mollified the protesters by extending compulsory revision sessions to 10pm for final-year students. On social media theories circulated that officials who advocated a less demanding curriculum really just wanted to make it harder for students from humbler families to get ahead.

The tussle highlighted a bitter divide over how to educate China’s teenagers, whose summer holidays ended this week. In Nanjing many locals sympathise with the protesters. Xu Wuqing, waiting for his granddaughter outside the school gates with homemade pigeon soup, said that “less pressure” on students was “simply not okay”. In a complaint last year to Nanjing’s education bureau, which was widely shared online, a mother griped that the city’s children were being turned into “slackers”, too weak to cope with exams.

Many in China once supported what schools such as Nanjing Number One are trying to do. In the early 2000s a bestseller about raising a child in the West, “Education for
Quality in America”, popularised the idea of suzhi jiaoyu. The term refers to a well-rounded education that attaches importance to building character as much as knowledge. It guides most of Nanjing’s more liberal teaching. The author, Huang Quanyu, became a household name among the middle class, writes Teresa Kuan, an American academic, in “Love’s Uncertainty: The Politics and Ethics of Child Rearing in Contemporary China”. In 2010 China published a ten-year plan on education which admitted that the country’s teaching was “relatively outdated” and that people had “strong yearnings” for suzhi jiaoyu.

Some reforms have seemed fanciful. In 2018 the central government called for “30 burden reductions”, including a limit of 90 minutes of homework a day and an end to the parental habit of comparing their offspring to others. This year, to prevent cram schools from racing too far ahead with the syllabus, it published lists of subjects suitable for certain age groups. For example, under-nines are not to study how to add and subtract with numbers comprising four or more digits.

From next year a tweaked gaokao will give students leeway to pick and choose some subjects, beyond the compulsory ones. But China is reluctant to overhaul a test that remains remarkably meritocratic. “By sticking with the exam, we waste students with other talents. By moving too far away from it, we disadvantage poor kids,” says Wang Tao of East China Normal University. It is not that loving parents do not want their children to have fun. Rather, as one mother in Nanjing puts it, relaxed classrooms are “just no use” if they do not get a pupil into a good university.

So quasi-military cram schools—“gaokao factories”, as they are known—still thrive. One such is Hengshui Secondary School in the northern province of Hebei. It has 18 branches across China, some of which reward students who get into top universities with tens of thousands of dollars. In 2018 one of them bought two decommissioned army tanks to flank its entrance, apparently to instil a sense of toughness among its students.

Mr Wang says he is glad to see “so much negotiation” under way, with educators pushing forward and policymakers following cautiously, even if parents are still resisting. Observant children at the museum in Nanjing will find, in addition to statues of prominent men who aced the keju, a bronze one of a person who failed it repeatedly: Wu Cheng’en, who was educated in Nanjing in the 16th century. Wu went on to write “Journey to the West”, one of China’s most celebrated novels.