

# The Gaokao Essay: Reflecting China's Socio-Political Shifts

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The National College Entrance Examination of China, commonly known as gaokao, has served as the primary pathway to higher education for generations of Chinese students since its reinstatement in 1977. This thesis examines how the essay prompts of gaokao reflect socio-political changes in China over the past half-century and whether the exam serves as a tool for elite selection from the perspective of Chinese authorities. Using a qualitative method, the study categorizes gaokao essay prompts into six themes: environment, political ideology, personal growth, national events, reading reflections, and national laws and regulations. These themes are analyzed across five distinct historical periods, each defined by significant socio-political shifts in China. The analysis demonstrates clear changes in the themes, correlating with China's evolving socio-political landscape, positioning gaokao essays as a reflection of these broader transformations.

The thesis argues that while gaokao is designed as a meritocratic system for elite selection, it is inherently political. The transformation of its content reflects changes in how authorities interpret the qualities that future elites should possess to serve governance needs. This thesis is one of the first studies to juxtapose the ideological transformations of the Chinese Communist Party's leadership with the evolving content of gaokao, analyzing how China's education system fosters civic values and political loyalty, especially in the context of reform and opening up over the past half-century. It provides not only an alternative view of politically guided education in China but also a deeper exploration of the links between government objectives and educational practices.

## Introduction: A National Essay for the National Exam

The National College Entrance Examination of China, also known as gaokao, is a standardized college entrance examination held annually in mainland China. Since its restitution in 1977, ten years after its suspension during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), a movement aimed to preserve Chinese Communism, the exam has served as the major conduit into higher education for generations of Chinese students. In 2023, 12.91 million<sup>1</sup> students across China took the exam.

The tradition of score-based meritocracy in China traces back to the imperial examination system, or Keju (科举), which began in the Sui Dynasty (581-618) and was abolished in 1905 during the late Qing Dynasty reforms. This system selected state bureaucrats based on merit rather than birth. While gaokao no longer serves for bureaucratic selection, it continues this meritocratic legacy by distributing limited higher educational resources and potential employment opportunities to perceived "elites." This continuity raises critical questions about how authorities design exam content to define and select these "elites" in modern China. To answer this question, an analysis of gaokao's content and its role in shaping contemporary meritocracy is necessary:

While the traditional imperial exam tested on Confucian classicists and obsoleted strategic questions like the eight-legged

essay, a specific essay styled used in imperial examinations in Ming and Qing Dynasty, the gaokao system attempted to find a balance between humanities and STEM in the modern era—gaokao consists of mandatory subjects, including Chinese, Mathematics, and English, which all students must take. Prior to 2019, the "3+X" system allowed students to choose either a set of "liberal-arts" subjects (History, Geography and Politics) or a set of "science" subjects (Physics, Chemistry and Biology) while sharing compulsory subjects. Later, this system was replaced by the "3+1+2" following NCEE Reform that "1" refers to a selection between Physics and History, and "2" refers to two subjects that test takers choose from Chemistry, Biology, Politics and Geography.

The assessment of various subjects in gaokao reflects a comprehensive approach to selection standards; however, the evaluation methods for each subject differ significantly, and their weightings in the overall gaokao score are disproportionate. Each of the three compulsory subjects (Chinese, Mathematics, a foreign language) contains 100 over 750 in total, and the essay writing in the Chinese exam values 60 alone, standing out as the most important part of gaokao. In addition, while most of other questions are related to the state-organized curriculum and focusing on question-solving techniques, the essay is designed as an exercise in writing skills and critical thinking. Its specialty and higher score-proportionality provide an insight into the question of selection standards, and since the prompts in the

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past more than 40 years can vary from political events to philosophical reflections, it is highly possible to mirror an “official ideology” that authorities aim to promote from gaokao essays. To evaluate this hypothesis, this paper collects all post-1977 gaokao essay prompts, categorizing themes and comparing their prevalence against socio-political shifts and educational policies, ultimately assessing the extent to which gaokao essays reflect elite selection criteria and the interplay between China’s education system and state ideology.

## Literature Review

Gaokao stands as a topic in academia that unveils the social and political dynamics in the history of the People’s Republic of China, and has gained considerable attention across various disciplines, including sociology, history, politics and literature. For instance, some scholars have focused on the aspects of social stratification. In the book *Meritocracy and its Discontent*, Zachary M. Howlett<sup>2</sup>, a sociocultural anthropologist of China and Chinese diasporas, claims that the gaokao examination system historically serves as a continuation of the score-value hierarchy, representing a “fateful event” of class mobility. Furthermore, Howlett underscores that during the era of Reform and Opening Up (1978- 1992), the gaokao system provides a narrative that aligns with the developmentalist ideology of the country, which links the individual struggle and the national prosperity, emphasizing the social consciousness that diligent efforts are destined to result in a successful future. However, this book only explores the impact of gaokao on students’ class mobility and future careers at a macro level, concluding that gaokao as a “fateful event” alienates students. It fails to examine the exam content and curriculum details to understand how gaokao influences students’ mindsets and ideologies.

1. In addition to examining gaokao’s impact on social stratification, some scholars have focused on its specific content, exploring how it influences students’ development and aligns with the Chinese authorities’ criteria for talent selection. For instance, Zhang Jia-Yi and Hu Sheng<sup>3</sup> two linguistic scholars from East China Normal University, identify three categories related to gaokao essay prompts: source-based essays, self-reflective essays, and social discussion essays. They argue that the drawback of gaokao essays is the inherent bias of role assumption, which severely discourages students’ creativity and independent thinking. Du-Wei<sup>4</sup>, a literature scholar researches on Chinese examinations’ thematic design, takes the issue of homogenization in gaokao essay writing as a starting point, analysing the primary themes of essay prompts spanning various historical decades and exploring the origins of this phenomenon through the utilitarian mindset of Chinese candidates. He argues that the trend of homogenization in gaokao essay prompts has become more pronounced after 2010. Since essay writing constitutes the largest proportion of gaokao’s score, students

tend to focus on practicing similar topics to achieve high scores, which exacerbates their fixed thinking patterns and lack of critical thinking skills.

These studies partially bridge the gap between gaokao’s content and student development but do not fully address why authorities design specific exam content or how gaokao, as a selection mechanism, ideologically connects students with the state. As a result, they fall short of answering this essay’s central question: “How do authorities design exam content to define and select ‘elites’ in modern China?” This essay aims to explore the interconnection between gaokao essay prompts and the historical, sociological, and political contexts of China since 1977, offering a comprehensive view of how gaokao has reflected the profound changes in Chinese society over the past half-century. By doing so, it highlights the evolving influence of gaokao on generations of students’ perceptions of the state, society, and individual responsibility, showing how exam content serves as a lens through which the state’s ideological expectations are communicated and internalized.

## Methodology

This essay aims to shed light on the interconnection between the gaokao’s essay prompts and the post-1977 China’s socio-political contexts. To achieve this, the research first establishes its database by collecting all post-1977 gaokao’s essay prompts. The primary sources for collecting essay prompt data include platforms like “Gaokao.com,” “Beijing Bendibao,” and “China Education Online,” which compile national and regional gaokao exam resources. Additionally, media outlets such as Sina News provide historical reviews of past gaokao exams, offering valuable insights into the evolution of essay prompts over the years.

This essay then employs a qualitative analysis approach, classifying gaokao essay prompts into six themes and dividing the post-1977 era into five distinct periods, each reflecting China’s evolving political landscape. The 1977 gaokao, heavily influenced by the lingering ideologies of the Cultural Revolution, stands alone due to its overtly political essay prompts. From 1978-1989, as the Reform and Opening Up shifted focus toward economic growth, prompts began to explore social issues like pollution. Following the 1989 Students Movement, the 1990s saw political stagnation and a shift toward themes of personal development. The 2000s and early 2010s, marked by increased global integration, featured prompts encouraging reflection on national events. Post-2015, as Xi Jinping’s political rhetoric emphasized national rejuvenation and patriotism, gaokao prompts began to increasingly prioritize patriotic themes, creating a new and distinct category.

Lastly, through frequency analysis of the six themes in each period, this essay identifies the shifting focus of gaokao essays during different periods, as well as comparing the prevalence of

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gaokao essay themes within the same timeframe and tracking changes over time. This approach allows the research to observe micro-level transformations in Chinese society and politics and assess the extent to which official ideologies influence gaokao essay content. It further examines how these ideological trends shape students' perceptions of the state, society, and their sense of individual responsibility.

### Comparative studies Data analysis

This section analyzes the gaokao essay prompts from 1977 to 2023, categorized into six themes: environmental (topics related to pollution and industrial impacts), political ideology (state ideologies and nationalistic values), personal growth (individual development and moral education), national events, reading reflections (reflections based on specific reading materials), and national laws and regulations.

In the 1980s, the prevalence of environmental themes reflected the impact of industrialization and an emerging public consciousness about environmental protection. In contrast, the 1990s and 2000s saw a rise in essays centered around national events, correlating with China's role as a host of significant global events like the Shanghai World Expo. This shift highlights a growing emphasis on China's international image. Notably, the rise in political ideology themes post-2010 often intersects with discussions of national events, suggesting an integration of national pride with political narratives. Similarly, the prominence of personal growth themes often dovetails with political ideologies, guiding students towards (state-endorsed values. The growing emphasis on political theme aligns closely with Xi Jinping's nationalist rhetoric, such as the "Chinese dream". The interaction between these themes not only mirrors state priorities but also shapes student perceptions, as discussed in the following sections.

The late 1970s and the entire 1980s were characterized by significant transformations in Chinese society and politics. Politically, the Cultural Revolution, which lasted for a decade from 1966, and ended in 1976, and the subsequent power struggle after the death of Mao Zedong (the supreme political leader of PRC from 1949 to 1976, during which he initiated the Cultural Revolution between 1966 and 1976) brought further uncertainty to the country. Throughout the 1980s, under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping (the de facto supreme political leader of PRC after 1978, serving as the Chairman of the Central Military commission and promoted the Reform and Opening-up policies), China experienced the ideological shift from the previous Maoist class-struggle principle to prioritizing economic development. China's economy has gradually transformed the socialist planned economic system to a more marketized and privatized economy. During 1977-1989, many gaokao essays aligned with the societal changes to a certain degree, and the most notable ones were the political

ideology-themed essays in 1977 and the environmental-themed essays throughout the 1980s.

As the first gaokao held after the Cultural Revolution, the 1977 gaokao stands as a distinctive point in Chinese educational history. Because of the urgency of reestablishing the examination system, the 1977 gaokao did not design the examination paper nationally. Among the 25 provincial examination papers, 12 essays (48%) were classified to the theme of political ideology. It's also worth noting that most political-themed essay prompts were closely tied to the contemporary political events. For instance, the essay prompt from Jilin Province "The great leader Chairman Hua united with the people of Jilin, the great victory—Unforgettable October 1976 (英明领袖华主席和吉林各族人民心连心、伟大的胜利——难忘的1976年10月)" was used to praise the leadership Hua Guofeng, the directed successor of Mao. In summary, though the Cultural Revolution politically had already ended in 1976, the essay prompts of the 1977 gaokao could be considered as an ideological continuity of the Cultural Revolution.

In the 1980s, as the leadership of the Communist Party shifted away from the principle of class-struggle and emphasized on the importance of economic development, the proportion of political-themed essays notably declined. Simultaneously, with the rapid process of industrialization, the environmental issues became widely concerned. As a result, the proportion of environmental-themed essay prompts increased from none to 26.7% (4/15) in the period between 1978-1990. Some environmental prompts focused on the issue of deforestation, for example, the prompt from the 1981 national paper "Write a reading reflection based on the article It is easy to destroy trees but difficult to plant trees (仔细阅读《毁树容易种树难》, 写一篇读后感)" aimed to educate students with the concept that environment is difficult to be rebuilt after the destruction. There were also some essays which attempted to test students' ability to observe social phenomenon and draft their own advice, the most representative example was the prompt from the 1985 national paper "In the name of the Chengxi Middle School Student Union, write a letter to the editorial department of Guangming Daily to report the situation, present the reasons for our appeal, and urge for a prompt resolution to the issue of pollution caused by the discharge of wastewater and harmful gases from the chemical factory (以“澄溪中学学生会”的名义, 给《光明日报》编辑部写一封信, 反映情况、申诉理由、呼吁尽快解决(化工厂排放废水、有害气体、污染)问题)".

In fact, the focus on environmental issues burgeoned in China during the 1980s. On a political level, the government passed legislatives, such as the Marine Environment Protection Law (1982) and Air and Water Pollution Control Laws (1984, 1987), to strengthen environmental management. By 1988, the elevation of the State Environmental Protection Bureau to a vice-ministerial level under the State Council.

Gaokao Essay Questions by Theme (1977-2023)						
Note: No markings refer to the national essay question for the given year. Year(S) refers to the Shanghai-specific essay question for that year. Year(B) refers to the Beijing-specific essay question for that year. Year(T) refers to the Tianjin-specific essay question for that year. Year(P) refers to a provincial-specific essay question for that year.						
Theme	Environment	Political Ideology	Personal Growth	National Events	Reading Reflections	National Laws and Regulations
Frequency	4N 1P 1B 6/201 =2.9%	9N 13P 3S 5B 4T 34/201=17.0%	23N 35P 23S 11B 6T 98/201=48.8%	3N 1P 1S 1B 6/201 =3.0%	29N 22P 2S 5B 2T 60/201=29.9%	2N 1B 3/201=1.5%

### Essay Questions of the Post-Cultural Revolution Examinations (1977-1989)

Gaokao Essay Questions by Theme (1977) New Version						
Note: No markings refer to the national essay question for the given year. Year(S) refers to the Shanghai-specific essay question for that year. Year(B) refers to the Beijing-specific essay question for that year. Year(T) refers to the Tianjin-specific essay question for that year. Year(P) refers to a provincial-specific essay question for that year.						
Theme	Environment	Political Ideology	Personal Growth	National Events	Reading Reflections	National Laws and Regulations
Example Question	NA	英明领袖华主席和吉林各族人民心连心、伟大的胜利——难忘的1976年10月 (The great leader Chairman Hua united with the people of Jilin, the great victory—Unforgettable October 1976)	我在这战斗的一年里 (In this year of struggle)	NA	《一个青年矿工的变化》读后感 (Reading Reflection of "The change of a young miner")	NA
Frequency		10:00 PM 1 S 1 T 12/25=48%	10:00 PM 1 B 11/25=44%	NA	2:00:00 PM 2/25=8%	NA

On a social level, environmental activism emerged in response to the negative impacts of industrialization: in the mid-1980s, pioneer Chinese environmental activists, along with scientists and professors, have called for the public awareness for the environmental impact of the Three Gorges Dam's construction, drawing attention to large scale environmental problems overshadowed by China's developing economy. The alignment between government priorities, social activism and educational guidance illustrated the increasingly open socio-political atmosphere of the 1980s following the trend of Reform and Opening up.

To conclude, in the post-Cultural Revolution era, serving as China's almost only method for selecting talents from the masses, gaokao acted as a venue for social discussion, and it reflected China's shift from the Cultural Revolution's emphasis on class struggle to the prioritization of economic development in the 1980s. At the same time, gaokao provided a limited but important platform for students to express their opinions on social issues like environmental pollution in the 1980s. Especially under the context of political democratization advocated by the liberal wing of the CCP leadership in the late 1980s, students were no longer just indoctrinated, but became part of the political participation, forming their views on social issues in the process of education. The shift in the purpose of education also affected the overall attitude of students towards politics: in 1986 and 1989, Chinese university students and

intellectuals led protests with a platform of anti-corruption and demands for democratization. After the suppression of the 1989 student movement, gaokao essay prompts had pivoted away from themes that were directly linked to governmental policies, making the liberal-leaning educational standards of the 1980s more particular in the post-1977 dynamics.

In the 1990s and the 2000s, China went through a series of significant national events, including the return of Hong Kong in 1997, the return of Macau in 1999, the Beijing Olympics in 2008 and Shanghai World Expo in 2010. A few essay questions during the period provided students with opportunities to comment on these national big moments, for instance, the essay prompt from the 2000 Shanghai paper invited students to create a theme for 2010 Shanghai Expo. Incorporating national events into gaokao essay prompts also served as a way for the government to write the "first draft" of the history, shaping the narrative around these national key events.

However, comments on national events were not the major theme of essays at the time. The largest section among all the essay themes in the period was personal growth, which accounted for 52.9% between 1990 and 2000 and accounted for 59.3% from 2000 to 2015. After the Tiananmen Square Incident in 1989, China's political reform came to a standstill, and gaokao, as an important engine for guiding education, greatly reduced the proportion of political theme essays in the 1990s. Instead, more personal growth theme essays emerged, which

<b>Gaokao Essay Questions by Theme (1978-1989)</b>						
Note: No markings refer to the national essay question for the given year. Year(S) refers to the Shanghai-specific essay question for that year. Year(B) refers to the Beijing-specific essay question for that year. Year(T) refers to the Tianjin-specific essay question for that year. Year(P) refers to a provincial-specific essay question for that year.						
<b>Theme</b>	<i>Environment</i>	<i>Political Ideology</i>	<i>Personal Growth</i>	<i>National Events</i>	<i>Reading Reflections</i>	<i>National Laws and Regulations</i>
<b>Example Question</b>	仔细阅读《毁树容易种树难》，写一篇读后感 (Reading Reflection of “It is easy to destroy trees but difficult to plant trees”)  以“澄溪中学学生会”的名义，给《光明日报》编辑部写一封信，反映情况、申诉理由、呼吁尽快解决（化工厂排放废水、有害气体、污染）问题。(In the name of the Chengxi Middle School Student Union, write a letter to the editorial department of Guangming Daily to report the situation, present the reasons for our appeal, and urge for a prompt resolution to the issue of pollution caused by the discharge of wastewater and harmful gasses from the chemical factory)	将《速度问题是一个政治问题》缩写成一篇五百至六百字的短文 (Summarize “The Issue of Speed is a Political Issue” into a Short Essay of 500 to 600 Words)	知足常乐的争论 (Discussion on “happiness lies in contentment”)	NA	读《画蛋》有感 (Reading Reflection on the story of “drawing egg”)	NA
<b>Frequency</b>	4N 4/15=26.7%	1N 1/15=6.7%	3N 3S 6/15=40%	NA	4N 4/15=26.7%	NA

<b>Gaokao Essay Questions by Theme (1990-2000)</b>						
Note: No markings refer to the national essay question for the given year. Year(S) refers to the Shanghai-specific essay question for that year. Year(B) refers to the Beijing-specific essay question for that year. Year(T) refers to the Tianjin-specific essay question for that year. Year(P) refers to a provincial-specific essay question for that year.						
<b>Theme</b>	<i>Environment</i>	<i>Political Ideology</i>	<i>Personal Growth</i>	<i>National Events</i>	<i>Reading Reflections</i>	<i>National Laws and Regulations</i>
<b>Example Question</b>	NA	NA	遥望星空(looking up to the starry sky) 尝试(Try)	请你为2010年上海世博会确立一个主题 (create a theme for 2010 Shanghai Expo)	根据《玫瑰园的玫瑰》材料，写一篇议论文 (Reading Reflection of “The Roses of the Rose Garden”)	NA
<b>Years</b>	NA	NA	4N 5S 9/17=52.9%	1S 1/17=5.9%	6N 1S 7/17=41.2%	NA

Gaokao Essay Questions by Theme (2001-2015)						
Note: No markings refer to the national essay question for the given year. Year(S) refers to the Shanghai-specific essay question for that year. Year(B) refers to the Beijing-specific essay question for that year. Year(T) refers to the Tianjin-specific essay question for that year. Year(P) refers to a provincial-specific essay question for that year.						
Theme	Environment	Political Ideology	Personal Growth	National Events	Reading Reflections	National Laws and Regulations
<b>Example Question</b>	倡导绿色生活 (advocating for a green lifestyle)	我国的文化遗产 (the cultural heritage of China)	相信自己与听取别人的意见 (believe in yourself and listen to others' advice) 诗意的生活 (Poetic life)	五月十二日汶川地震温家宝第一时间赴灾区, 武警官兵、全国各地支援灾区。一样的爱, 不同的表达。根据材料自选角度, 自定标题, 自选立意 (On May 12, Premier Wen Jiabao arrived in the disaster area of the Wenchuan earthquake at the earliest point. Armed police officers and soldiers, along with support from all over the country, came to the aid of the affected region. The same love expressed differently. Based on the material, choose your own perspective, title, and thesis)	诗人对宇宙人生, 须入乎其内, 又须出乎其外。入乎其内, 故能写之; 出乎其外, 故能观之。入乎其内, 故有生气; 出乎其外, 故有高致。谈对王国维《人间词话》这段文字的感悟。(A poet must immerse themselves in the universe and life, yet also stand apart from it. Immersing themselves allows them to write about it; standing apart allows them to observe it. Immersion brings vitality; detachment brings sublimity. Discuss your insights on this passage from Wang Guowei's "Renjian Cihua").	因父亲总是在高速路上开车时接电话, 家人屡劝不改, 女大学生小陈迫于无奈, 更出于生命安全的考虑, 通过微博私信向警方举报了自己的父亲; 警方查实后, 依法对老陈进行了教育和处罚, 并将这起举报发在官方微博上。此事赢得众多网友点赞, 也引一些质疑, 经媒体报道后, 激起了更大范围、更多角度的讨论。对于以上事情, 你怎么看? 请给小陈、老陈或其他相关方写一封信, 表明你的态度, 阐述你的看法。(Because her father always answered calls while driving on the highway, despite the family's repeated advice to stop, college student Xiao Chen, out of desperation and considering the safety of life, reported her father to the police through a private message on Weibo. After verification, the police educated and penalized Mr. Chen in accordance with the law, and posted the report on their official Weibo account. This action won praise from many netizens, but also raised some questions. After being reported by the media, it sparked a wider and more diverse discussion. What is your view on the above situation? Please write a letter to Xiao Chen, Mr. Chen, or any other parties involved, stating your attitude and explaining your views)
<b>Years</b>	1P 1/89=1.1%	2P 1S 1B 4/89=4.4%	10N 6B 9S 4T 23P 52/89=59.3%	1N 1P 2/89=2.2%	7N 15P 3B 1S 1T 27/89=29.7%	2N 1B 3/89=3.3%

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emphasized students' critical thinking in a softer way. Different from other topics that direct students onto certain ideologies or social issues, personal growth-themed essays offered extensive space for students' expression and imagination: some prompts focused on the process of maturation in adolescents, such as the prompt of 1994 national paper "Try (尝试)" and the prompt of 2004 national paper "Believe in oneself and listen to others' opinions (相信自己并听取别人的意见)"; other prompts might be designed in a relatively vague and poetic style, challenging students' writing skills and creativity, such as the prompt of 1992 Shanghai paper "Looking up to the Starry Sky (遥望星空)" and the prompt of 2007 Hunan paper "Poetic Life (诗意的生活)".

The diversification and personalization of essay prompts in the 1990s can be seen as a reflection of the broader educational shift towards 'Quality Education' (suzhi jiaoyu), which had its roots in efforts to cultivate critical thinking skills that began in the 1980s. During the 1990s, the concept of *suzhi jiaoyu* gained significant prominence within Chinese educational policy, becoming a central element in major government resolutions and strategic initiatives, such as the Ninth and Tenth Five-Year Plans. This focus was further formalized in the 1999 Action Plan for Invigorating Education in the 21st Century, which emphasized the reform of curricula and assessment systems, as well as the incorporation of moral and aesthetic education, marking a decisive move towards developing a more holistic approach to student learning and skill development.

However, the scope of "Quality Education" (*suzhi jiaoyu*) has often been constrained by governmental limitations, as Yu Dong, a scholar researched on China's education system, highlighted in "Critical Thinking Education with Chinese Characteristics." (Dong, Yu. "Critical Thinking Education with Chinese Characteristics." ResearchGate, June 2016.) The emphasis on critical thinking in Chinese education has largely centered on logical reasoning and quantitative skills, with little focus on social and political awareness. This observation aligns with the trend of declining references to political issues in the *gaokao* essay prompts during the 1990s and 2000s. This phenomenon reflects China's broader strategy during its period of economic reform without parallel political reform, shaping its criteria for talent selection: elites with technical skills and logical thinking were seen as essential for driving economic growth, while the ability to engage in democratic processes was not prioritized.

After 2016, the themes of *gaokao* essays showed a return to the political focus that characterized the period from 1977 to 1989. This trend has a sharp contrast to the inclination towards personal and diversified themes that marked the 1990s and 2000s.

Although political discourse has always been an important element of *gaokao* essays, after the 1977 exam that was heavily influenced by the impact of Cultural Revolution (1966-1976),

the proportion of ideological-based essays gradually decreased over the next few decades. The turning point of political-themed essays occurred around 2016, compared to the 4.4% during 2000-2015, the proportion of it increased to 27.9% from 2016 to 2023. Several reasons have contributed to this transformation: in 2015, the recentralization reform made many provinces that had previously been autonomous in setting examination papers reverted to the national paper (the national paper also distributed as different sets in various provinces), which in a certain way causing the design of essay topics leaned towards to the ideas of the central government.

More importantly, since President Xi Jinping assumed leadership in 2012, there was a pronounced emphasis on the nationalistic narrative, with the most symbolic example, the slogan "The great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation". Although the emphasis on patriotic education has been implemented since the 1989 Student Movement, Xi Jinping has adopted a more direct and stringent approach compared to his predecessors in implementing laws that reinforce nationalistic values. The primary reason for this shift lies in the need to address the challenges faced by China following the rapid economic growth of the post-reform and opening-up era, which began to slow down significantly after 2010. As economic growth decelerated and social inequalities intensified, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) needed to find a new source of legitimacy to maintain its authority. Under these circumstances, promoting nationalism and patriotic values emerged as a strategic means for the CCP to sustain its political control and reinforce its ideological foundation. After 2012, China has introduced specific legislation to promote patriotic education, notably the Patriotic Education Law, which was passed by the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress and will take effect on January 1, 2024. This law emphasizes instilling patriotism across various aspects of society, including ideology, history, national symbols, and the deeds of national heroes. The law mandates the use of resources related to the Communist Party's heritage, cultural relics, and patriotic education bases to foster a sense of national pride among citizens. Under Xi's new wave of patriotic education campaign, *gaokao* has become a platform for students to showcase the result of this campaign. Students have reverted to a state reminiscent of the pre-1980s era, where they were subjected to ideological indoctrination and lacked the capacity to formulate critical viewpoints on social issues. This shift aligns with the requirements of elite selection under Xi Jinping's leadership, where there is an increased emphasis on elites being more aligned with and obedient to the establishment. This approach is exemplified by the slogan "Patriots rule Hong Kong," which gained prominence following the 2019 Hong Kong protests, highlighting the need for loyalty to the state as a criterion for political participation and leadership.

However, compared to the ideological questions in 1977 that were closely tied to the Maoist class-struggle ideology,

### Essay Questions of the 2016-present

<b>Gaokao Essay Questions by Theme (2016-2023)</b>						
Note: No markings refer to the national essay question for the given year. Year(S) refers to the Shanghai-specific essay question for that year. Year(B) refers to the Beijing-specific essay question for that year. Year(T) refers to the Tianjin-specific essay question for that year. Year(P) refers to a provincial-specific essay question for that year.						
<b>Theme</b>	<b>Environment</b>	<b>Political Ideology</b>	<b>Personal Growth</b>	<b>National Events</b>	<b>Reading Reflections</b>	<b>National Laws and Regulations</b>
<b>Example Question</b>	绿水青山图 (picture of lucid water and lush mountains)	共和国，我为你拍照 (Take a photo for our Republic)  新时代新青年——谈在祖国发展中成长 (New Youth of New Era—talking about personal growth within the development of China) 毛泽东《体育之研究》材料写作 (Material based writing on Mao Zedong's "A Study of Physical Education") “使命和担当”，源自周恩来对联 ("Mission and Responsibility," from a couplet by Zhou Enlai.)	重读长辈这部书 (Reread the book of elders)	疫情中的距离与联系 (Distance and connection during the Covid pandemic)  两次举办奥运会“跨越，再跨越” (Hosting the Olympics Twice: "Leap, and Leap Again")	“本手、妙手、俗手”材料写作 (material based writing on Go terms) "Tesuji, Brilliant Move, and Commonplace Move")	NA
<b>Years</b>	1B 1/61=1.6%	8N 4B 1P 1S 3T 17/61=27.9%	6N 4B 6S 2T 2P 20/61=32.8%	2N  1B  3/61=4.9%	12N 2B 1T 5P 20/61=32.8%	NA

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the political prompts after 2016 focused relatively more on the narrative of national pride and party line. Keywords like "republic (共和国)" and "motherland (祖国)" have frequently appeared in gaokao essay prompts, aligning the youth generation with the optimism towards national development and patriotism. For example, the essay prompt of 2017 Beijing paper "Take a picture for the republic (共和国, 我为你拍照)" positioned students as the recorder of PRC's history, and the essay prompt of 2018 Beijing paper "New youth of the new era—growing up with the development of motherland (新时代新青年—谈在祖国发展中成长)" connected students' growth with the development of the country. In addition, over the past decade, Chinese patriotic propaganda has often been linked with the revolutionary history of the Communist Party to argue for the historical legitimacy of the CCP's governance, and motivated students align themselves with "New Youth" (originated from the magazine "La Jeunesse," founded by Chen Duxiu in 1905) that struggle for the greater future of the nation. By alluding to the articles or sayings of past party leaders, some essay prompts aimed to ideologically connect students to the party line: the prompt of 2021 national paper I alluded the article "Study of Sport (体育之研究)" that Mao Zedong wrote in 1917 to ask students what is the key of strengthening oneself or a country, and the prompt of 2023 Tianjin paper alluded Zhou Enlai (the first PRC's Premier)'s couplets "yu you gan dan ren gong shi, cong wu zi ju chu du shu (与有肝胆人共事, 从无字句处读书)" to encourage students being responsible for themselves and the nation's future.

Although it is challenging to measure the effectiveness of patriotic education across all students from various regions in China since 2012, some research highlights its impact on a significant segment of pupils. For example, a study conducted in Dongguan City, Guangdong Province, surveyed 89 primary school students using the Hong Kong module of the International Study of Civics and Citizenship Education. The results showed that nearly all respondents held very positive attitudes toward their country, demonstrating a high sense of national pride. This pride extended beyond China's history and achievements to include strong support for the Chinese Communist Party and the People's Liberation Army, reflecting the influence of patriotic education on young students. To sum up, the dominance of political-themed essay prompts in the post-2016 era reflects the prevalence of nationalistic narrative and a relatively more authoritarian CCP governance compared to the 1990s and 2000s within the education sector. The trend also indicates that the gaokao as a national system for allocating higher education resources and selecting talents, is inherently guided by the ideological and political shifts of CCP's leadership. This shift towards patriotic discourse in gaokao essay prompt indicates that patriotism has become an increasingly important quality in talent selection.

## Conclusion

Based on the data above, it is evident that at the macro-level, the changes in gaokao essay-setting are constantly influenced by the changes of socio-political circumstances of China, and most importantly, by the ideological transformations and policies of the CCP leadership. From this point, this paper provides an insight to the previous raised question about the standard of selecting elites in current gaokao system: as a national, relatively uniform channel for higher education selection in contemporary China, gaokao does not only filter for academic abilities in STEM or humanities, but also include the assessment of political inclination (not that explicit in the 1990s and 2000s) and their adaptability to the social circumstances of their respective era. As a part of the college entrance examination, a platform for students' social discussion, and a window into the recent socio-political changes of PRC, gaokao essays are inherently political. Throughout different historical periods, authorities have strategically embedded their political ideologies within the essay prompts, transmitting these ideas explicitly and implicitly to guide students' ideological positions, ultimately shaping their thought processes and worldviews. During eras that emphasized economic reform and democratization, students were encouraged to engage as active participants in political discourse, critically articulating their perspectives in the gaokao, which represented one of the most consequential events of their lives. In contrast, during periods focused on ideological conformity, students were subjected to systematic indoctrination, compelled to align their views to secure higher scores in the exam. Fundamentally, the gaokao essay prompts serve as a mirror reflecting the Chinese authorities' evolving criteria for defining elites across different time periods. The power to shape these standards rests firmly in the hands of the authorities, driven by their socio-political objectives for maintaining stability within the establishment and advancing the nation's development.

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