



Corruption in college admissions examinations in China



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ABSTRACT

This paper examines corruption in college admissions examinations in China. A survey was administered among college students of arts and related majors across China. Based on the data, the magnitude of corruption in the admissions examinations is measured and the causes and consequences thereof are investigated. It is found that the objective level of corruption is 15.8 percent while the subjective level is 47.3 percent. Lack of transparency, poor design of the examinations, the subjects' tolerance of corruption, high levels of corruption propensity, and high income expectations in future careers are identified as the main causes of corruption. Corruption in the examinations lowers student trust in the accountability of faculty and staff in higher educational institutions and this degrading trust in turn exacerbates bribery among new generations of examinees, which results in a vicious cycle of corruption.

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1. Introduction

Corruption is a social phenomenon that has persisted for centuries (Bardhan, 1997). In a society with pervasive corruption, no sector of human life is exempt from it (Liu, 2013). In higher education, corruption has penetrated the system of selection, the systems of accreditation, educational supplies, faculty professional behavior, and use of educational property (Heyneman, 2004a). Corruption in higher educational institutions takes the forms of not only explicit bribery but also embezzlement, extortion, fraud, nepotism, cronyism, favoritism, kickbacks, ghost instructors, cheating, unauthorized private tutoring, and academic misconducts (Osipian, 2009; Orkodashvili, 2010; Sabic-El-Rayess, 2014). This paper studies one of the most prevalent forms of corruption in higher educational institutions, corruption in college admissions processes. Utilizing the statistics from a survey among college students in China, it intends to make a quantitative assessment of the scale and scope of corruption that occurred in college entrance examinations, to discover the principal factors that influence bribery decision at the micro level, and to evaluate the consequences on corruption victims.

Recent studies indicate that corruption in college admission is a common practice in many countries, both the developing and developed. It occurred in the United States, where children of

alumni, donors and celebrities were admitted into the Ivy League universities on the basis of money donations and other factors over meritocracy (Golden, 2006). University admission, according to Janashia (2004), is the most corrupt area in Georgian higher education: over 80 percent applicants for admission into Tbilisi State University paid US\$200 to \$10,000 in bribes, which is 4 to 200 times the average monthly salary. In Russia, bribes paid for admission into higher educational institutions totaled 26.5 billion Russian Rubles in 2003 (Lebedev, 2004). In India, administrators and professors in higher educational institutions took bribes in the admissions process by falsifying examination results or selling examination questions and answers (Altbach, 2009).

Despite the pervasiveness of corruption in college admission, insights into this problem are relatively limited. While many scholars have examined the larger issue of educational corruption in general, discussing the definition (Heyneman, 2003a, 2004a; Rumyantseva, 2005; Waite and Allen, 2003), distinguishing types of educational corruption (Heyneman, 2004a; Heyneman et al., 2008; Rumyantseva, 2005), modeling its structure (Osipian, 2009), or formulating interventions to ameliorate its problematic effects (Heyneman, 2003b, 2004a,b; Lebedev, 2004), much less academic attention has directed to corruption in the admissions process in higher educational institutions. Most of the reports and articles that address this problem are basically anecdotal rather than statistical. In the literature that studies educational corruption, Rumyantseva (2004) and Heyneman et al. (2008) are perhaps the only two exceptions that have ever used empirical data in research. Rumyantseva (2004) based her study on a survey and interviews with students in the Republic of Kazakhstan in 2003. She reported that 88 percent of faculty and 74 percent of

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students acknowledged that corruption in higher education was a widespread occurrence. Admissions and exams were perceived as the most corrupt areas. Heyneman et al. (2008) examined the extent of higher education corruption with data from student surveys in six countries: Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Croatia, Moldova, Serbia and Bulgaria. They found that between 80 and 84 percent of the students in Bulgaria, Moldova and Serbia were aware of the practice of illegal bribes to gain admission. On average, between 18 and 20 percent of the students in Bulgaria, Croatia, and Serbia and 40 percent of the students in Moldova admitted that they had resorted to some illegal methods to gain admission into their university.

Following the methodology employed by Rumyantseva (2004) and Heyneman et al. (2008), this paper investigates corruption in college admission. Different from the two studies, it focuses on the specific problem of corruption in the admissions examinations rather than educational corruption in general or the whole spectrum of corruption that occurs in college admissions procedures. We believe that intensive exploration into just one aspect of the problem is sometimes more revealing to the understanding of corruption in the admissions process in higher educational institutions.

Anecdotal reports suggest that bribing for admission into higher educational institutions is a frequent occurrence in recent China, especially in the admissions examinations for arts and related major students. For example, a vice dean of a painting college in the City of Wuhan in Central China was accused of taking bribes from 81 families and helping 14 unqualified students for admission and enrollment during the five years from 1996 to 2000¹. In the same city in 2008, a group of nine faculty members of a music college were convicted for taking bribes of 1,828,300 RMB from 57 candidates and the biggest bribe amounted to 170,000 RMB (Liu, 2011). To dig further into the problem, we visited the colleges and universities where corruption cases in college admissions process occurred, and interviewed the personnel in charge of college admission and enrollment and the students who had bribery experiences. To know more about the process of bribery, we visited the jailed faculty members accused of corruption in college admission and enrollment. These preliminary investigations proved fruitful. Details of corruption during the admissions processes were shared with us. Appointed examiners were busiest the night before the examinations. Dozens of students queued outside the examiner's house for a visit, some led by their tutors who were acquaintances of the examiners. The student came in to tell his/her name, number of registration for the examinations, paid the money and left. Other students bribed through the hands of the director of a department, a relative of the examiner, or another examiner with whom they had established personal connections. Students without direct personal connections visited and bribed all potential examiners. The few poorly-informed outliers turned to professional intermediaries. Under the threat of adverse selection, even the most capable student joined in the contest of bribery.

Nevertheless, anecdotal evidence is not sufficient for systematic research. To what extent is the corruption in college admission in China nationwide? Does it occur in every college or just in a few in some specific regions in the country? Does every candidate have to bribe for admission or only some of them do? What are the factors that drive individual bribery decision making? What influences has the bribing experience in admissions processes produced on the students on their behavior and vision of life?

To find answers to these questions, we administered a survey among the students from 139 colleges and universities authorized to hold arts examinations in China. Analysis of the survey data shows that corruption in the admissions examinations is also

pervasive in China, as reported in other countries. 15.8 percent of the survey subjects admitted they had bribed for admissions examinations, and 47.3 percent believed that other students had engaged in corruption during admissions examinations. The leading factors that influence individual corruption perception and bribing decision include lack of transparency, poor design of the examinations, high levels of corruption propensity among the applicants, and high income expectations from future careers. The direct consequence of corruption in the admissions examinations is that 92.5 percent of the respondents lost trust in faculty and staff in higher educational institutions.

2. Application and admissions rules for arts major students in China

In China, the rules of application and admission for arts and art-related major students are different from those for other students in four respects². First, candidates for arts and related majors have to attend two sets of examinations: the first consisting of examinations of arts skills, talents, and relevant knowledge, and the second a standard test open to all students. For ordinary students, they are required to attend the standard test, the National College Entrance Examination. Written examinations on nine subjects, including Chinese, mathematics, foreign languages, history, geography, politics, physics, chemistry and biology, are held simultaneously throughout China. Universities select students by scores on these examinations (Hartog et al., 2010). For the applicants for arts and related majors, however, apart from the standard test, they also have to attend examinations on arts skills and related knowledge. These examinations are usually held separately by each college that offers arts and related programs, and sometimes held by a college union in a province.

Second, the rules of application for examinations are different. For ordinary students, the standard test is held only once every year, usually on the 7th, 8th and 9th of June; but for candidates for arts and related majors, examinations on arts and related knowledge are held now and again by different colleges from February to May. Applicants for arts and related programs can choose as many target colleges as they like. To seek more opportunities, most students attend examinations offered by several colleges, and some attend as many as twenty. For example, nearly 20,000 applicants for arts programs in Central China's Hubei province attended over 200,000 such examinations in 2005, with each applicant sitting for examinations offered by ten colleges on average, according to the Examination Administration of Hubei Province.

Third, the selection rules are different for candidates for arts and related programs. The ordinary students are usually selected by their test scores on the standard test. But the selection rules are much more complex for applicants for arts and related programs, because different colleges follow different admissions rules. Some set a bottom line score of the standard test and select students above the line by their performance in the arts examinations. Some set a bottom line of the total score of arts examinations and select students above the line by their scores of the standard test. Still others select students by their total scores summed up from all examinations required, with a bottom line for each examination.

And fourth, the selection procedures for ordinary students are centrally organized, strictly controlled and supervised by the local authority, the Provincial Examination Administration. Each university is allowed to choose from a pool of applicants who have stated this university as their first preference. Size of the pool is preset at 120 percent of the university's enrollment quota

¹ Available at: <http://www.qinfeng.gov.cn/info/1194/33702.htm>.

² For a brief introduction of admission into higher educational institutions in China, see Wang (2011).

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