

A Comparative Study of the College Admission System in the Chinese Mainland and the Taiwan Region

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Abstract: With both pros and cons, the historical reforms, administrative authorities, regulations & policies and admission methods of the college admission system in the Chinese mainland and the Taiwan Region have exhibited a broad array of similarities and differences due to their intermingling yet varying social and cultural backgrounds. This study can provide a scientific basis for colleges and universities in the Chinese mainland to explore their innovative approaches to independent recruitment and multi-aspect student assessment.

Keywords: cross-straits, college admission system, comparative study

1. Introduction

The college admission system refers to the system through which high school students get admitted into colleges and universities. It is not only an important link in the higher education system, but also an important node connecting basic education and higher education [1]. The college admission system varies between the Chinese mainland and the Taiwan Region due to their different social and cultural backgrounds, yet the two are faced with a broad array of similar development challenges. By comparing the historical reforms, administrative authorities, regulations & policies and admission methods of the college admission system in the China mainland and the Taiwan Region, and through in-depth analysis of pros and cons of the two in institutional innovation, this study can provide a scientific basis for the upcoming reform to the college admission system in the Chinese mainland.

2. Comparison of Historical Reforms

The reforms to the education system are always closely bound up with the political and economic developments. Through historical review, we can unveil the changes in the college admission policies in the Chinese mainland and the Taiwan Region.

The college admission system in the Chinese mainland has gone through roughly three stages. In the first stage (1949-1977), the college admission system

swung back and forth between independent recruitment and unified recruitment. During the Cultural Revolution, the college entrance examination was abolished and colleges/universities suspended the recruitment of students, and the unified recruitment system was only restored in 1977. In the second stage (1978-1998), the Chinese mainland kicked off the reform of college admission system and launched a wide array of reform measures such as unified test question drafting, addition of English subject, student recruitment by recommendation, establishment of the Examination Management Center under the Central Education Commission, and “3+2” reform scheme, in an effort to explore the optimal college admission system best geared to the socialist market economic system. In the third stage (1999-present), in view of the necessity to stimulate domestic demand and other considerations, colleges and universities began to expand the number of enrolled students and to roll out reforms to their college admission system, such as the gradual promotion of “3+X” scheme, independent recruitment, etc. [2].

The college admission system in the Taiwan Region has also undergone three periods. In the first period (1949-1971), adhering to the principles of unified recruitment, unified admission and unified placement, colleges and universities mainly recruited students based on their total score, and the test subjects were relatively fixed. In the second period (1972-1988), significant changes took place in the institutions responsible for the joint entrance examination, test subjects and test content. On the one hand, these changes expanded students’ freedom of choice and increased their chances of getting admitted to colleges and universities. On the other hand, these changes also increased the autonomy of colleges and universities, giving them more opportunities to recruit suitable students. Moreover, the separate recruitment of undergraduate students and junior college students during this period also contributed to the thriving development of vocational education in the Taiwan Region. In the third period (1989-present), the government replaced the decades-long “Joint Entrance Examination” with the “Multiple Entrance Program”

in 2002, and kicked off groundbreaking reforms to many important links of the college entrance examination as a prelude to the development of “Multiple Entrance System” in the Taiwan Region.

Overall, colleges and universities in the Chinese mainland and the Taiwan Region both discarded independent recruitment and embarked on the road of unified entrance examination in the early 1950s, followed by equally frequent reforms. So far, the Chinese mainland has witnessed roughly 40 reforms to the college entrance examination at all levels [3], whilst the explorations into the examination reform in the Taiwan Region closely followed global trends and led to a multitude of advanced and scientific reforms.

3. Comparison of Administrative Authorities

With regard to the unified student recruitment in the Chinese mainland, the National Education Examination Authority (NEEA) is responsible for drawing up the examination policies and regulations, drafting test questions, grading test papers, taking statistics of scores and commenting on the results, whilst the educational examination authority at provincial, municipal and prefectural levels is responsible for guiding and supervising local colleges and universities, drawing up specific implementation opinions for the local recruitment work, setting cutoff scores, reviewing student recruitment plans, forwarding and assigning candidate files, and handling matters related to examination venues, test questions, test paper printing, invigilators, test paper grading, etc. With regard to independent recruitment, colleges and universities are responsible for releasing enrollment charter, reviewing application materials, fixing the candidate list, organizing tests and determining and announcing the list of admitted candidates [4].

In the Taiwan Region, the Joint Board of College Recruitment Commission is a private organization established as the highest authority for college recruitments. It is responsible for assembling colleges and universities to discuss recruitment matters and drawing up the corresponding recruitment policies. The College Entrance Examination and Placement Committee affiliated to the Joint Board of College Recruitment Commission is responsible for the joint placement of students to colleges and universities. As the organizer of the college entrance examination, the College Entrance Examination Center is responsible for organizing subject competence tests and assigned-subject tests, and co-organizing the college admission practical examination. By joining the Joint Board of College Recruitment Commission, colleges and universities recruit the students placed by the Joint Board, and yet they can also recruit students by means of “admission by recommendation and screening”, in which case the students must file personal applications. Colleges and universities tend to have greater

autonomy and can set up their own admission committee to draw up their own admission criteria.

In either the Chinese mainland or the Taiwan Region, we can see the participation of administrative authorities in the college admission system. Still, the two differ slightly in terms of the establishment, functions and operation of the examination management authorities. In the Chinese mainland, the examination management authorities submit to the unified leadership of the Central Government and the hierarchical management by the local governments, with the government playing a central role in both examination and recruitment. Although such a mechanism is conducive to improving work efficiency, it may hamper the scientific development of examination organization and management in the long run. Without stringent supervision, the examination and recruitment positions are at high risk for corruption.

4. Comparison of Regulations and Policies

In the Chinese mainland, the existing legal provisions on college entrance examination and independent recruitment are scattered in the relevant laws and rules, including Higher Education Law, Education Law, Interim Regulations on the Administration of and Penalties for the National Unified College Entrance Examinations, Measures for Handling National Educational Examination Violations, Interim Measures for Handling Student Recruitment Violations of Regular Colleges and Universities, etc.

In the Taiwan Region, laws and rules such as the University Act and the Examination Affairs Law define the specific rights and responsibilities of relevant stakeholders in the college entrance examination. Specifically, the admission committee of colleges and universities has the right to determine the recruitment results, whilst the educational authorities carry out supervision and provide guidance without any direct interventions into student recruitments.

In the Chinese mainland, with regard to the laws and rules on the college entrance examination, there are no clear provisions on the legal responsibilities and obligations of the relevant examination authorities, the fact of which is not conducive to the standardized operation of the college entrance examination and the effective supervision by relevant authorities over the exams. In the Taiwan Region, there are sound and sophisticated laws and rules on the college admission system, and these laws and rules have played an extremely important role in ensuring the orderly and smooth implementation of the college entrance examination.

5. Comparison of Admission Methods

In the Chinese mainland, joint recruitment is the mainstay. That is to say, most students get admitted

into the college/university through the unified college entrance examination, the test questions of which are drafted by either NEEA or the local province/municipality. In addition, there are also other insignificant recruitment channels, such as independent recruitment, special programs, special talent selection, admission by recommendation, etc. The main goal of independent recruitment is for colleges and universities to recruit outstanding students with deep expertise in specific subjects and innovative potential. Students need to sign up before the college entrance examination and take the tests organized by the target college/university after the college entrance examination. Although more and more students get admitted into colleges through independent recruitment year by year, the total number is controlled within 5% of annual quota set out in the student recruitment plan of colleges and universities. The special programs mainly include national special programs for rural and poverty-stricken areas (targeting poverty-stricken areas), local special programs (through which top local colleges recruit rural students) and college-specific special programs (targeting rural students). Special talent selection includes art examination and the recruitment of art specialty students and sports specialty students, who need to take both the specialty examination and the college entrance examination. In the case of admission by recommendation, provincial students of excellence who meet the admission requirements, winners of relevant contests, outstanding students recommended by foreign language middle schools and children of retired athletes or police martyrs are admitted to colleges by recommendation. Some colleges and universities also arrange cultural or related tests for the recommended students, who can directly get admitted into these colleges and universities without the need to attend the college entrance examination [5].

In the Taiwan Region, among the multiple admission channels, students admitted to colleges through “Star Plan” account for 10%, and students admitted by recommendation/screening and by examination are both 45%. “Star Plan” is the main way for high schools to recommend outstanding students to colleges. Star students will be evaluated and admitted based on their academic performance in high school, results of the unified exam and interview organized by the college, and other potential procedures. A college can only recruit one Star student in each high school. In the case of admission by recommendation and screening, students can freely apply to college departments they have interest in based on their personal strengths, interests and choice. Each applicant can only apply to no more than 6 college departments. Admission by recommendation and screening is generally divided into two stages. In the first stage, students must take the subject

competence tests and the practical tests in the winter vacation of senior year. In the second stage, students must take the examination organized by the target college department. Students who do not participate in the recruitment by recommendation and screening, or who do participate but fail, or who get admitted but seek after a higher-level university may give up the opportunity and choose to take the unified college entrance examination. Each student can only apply for no more than 100 programs [6].

Both the Chinese mainland and the Taiwan Region have geared their college admission system to their own realities. The college entrance system in the Chinese mainland can effectively narrow the quality difference of students admitted to colleges and universities, thus ensuring the stability of student quality, whilst the multiple entrance system in the Taiwan Region has also played a vital role in helping colleges and universities recruit and foster academic or professional talent best aligned with their own characteristics and strengths.

6. Pros and Cons of the College Admission System in the Chinese Mainland and the Taiwan Region

The unified college entrance examination implemented in the Chinese mainland saves manpower and financial resources and ensures fair competition. Independent recruitment marks a new attempt to discover outstanding and innovative students. Although the proportion of students recruited through independent recruitment is relatively low for the moment, colleges and universities have gradually gained a certain space of autonomy in student recruitment. Still, there are five noteworthy problems with the unified college entrance examination: 1) one-sided pursuit of high scores, high ranking and high enrollment rate; 2) the singular evaluation approach ignores students’ growth experience and moral quality, and turns a blind eye to the different demands of different colleges and universities for the knowledge structure and competence of students; 3) test question drafting and student recruitment by province are likely to cause regional unfairness; and 4) the government-led recruitment mechanism lacks flexibility, thus discouraging students from participating in student recruitment and reducing the efficiency of student placement.

The multiple entrance system in the Taiwan Region has optimized the concepts of “multiplicity” and “appropriateness” based on the principles of justice, fairness and openness, thus opening up more opportunities and broadening the channels for students to get enrolled into colleges and universities [7]. The multiple entrance system also encourages colleges to shift from a passive and conservative approach to an active and open-minded style in student recruitment, and contributes to the closer interactions between colleges and high schools. Still, there are also three

noteworthy problems with the multiple entrance system. Firstly, in the case of admission by recommendation and screening, the files submitted showcase the learning history of candidate students. If the information is collected in a standardized manner, it may cause undue pressure to students amid their learning, or it may be unfair to disadvantaged students in remote villages. Students may collude with high school teachers to provide false information in a bid to get enrolled into their dream colleges, thus violating the principle of good faith and causing injustice. Secondly, when a student applies to too many colleges for admission by recommendation and screening, he/she may have to pay through the nose for application, preparation of application materials, travel and accommodation. Thirdly, the “Star Plan” sets different quotas for urban and rural students, giving students from remote villages little hope for enrollment into top universities.

How to achieve the perfect balance between unity and diversity has been a major challenge facing the reform of college entrance examination. Only by taking into account both scientificity and fairness can the reform achieve the maximum synergy, clear away obstacles and lead to success [8]. In the future, the reform of the college admission system in the Chinese mainland can be considered from the following aspects:

(1) Increase the Autonomy of Colleges and Universities in Independent Recruitment

The government should change its functions and focus efforts on guidance and supervision instead of leading and running the whole show. In addition to exercising macro control over the proportions of students recruited by colleges through unified examination and independent recruitment as well as the recruitment quotas set by colleges for respective provinces, municipalities and autonomous regions, the government should increase the autonomy of colleges and universities in independent recruitment, raise the proportion of students independently recruited by colleges year by year and allow colleges to set their own selection criteria. Colleges and universities should pay close attention to the appropriateness of the selection criteria set for independent recruitment, and draw up the recruitment plan and determine the test forms, test questions and admission standards in accordance with their own theory on school management, their advantaged subjects and majors, and the market demands, thereby reflecting the different requirements of colleges at different levels and of different types [9].

(2) Explore Multi-aspect Student Assessment for College Admission

In addition to the results of the college entrance examination, we can also further assess students from

aspects such as students’ academic performance in high school, prizes received from contests, interests & talents, moral quality and recommendation letters, and incorporate these considerations into the student selection and assessment system to truly achieve comprehensive assessment and selective admission.

(3) Improve the Laws and Rules on the College Admission System

We must formulate and improve relevant laws and regulations on the college admission system, define the rights and responsibilities of relevant stakeholders in the college admission system in more detail, further clarify the rights and responsibilities of colleges and universities in recruiting students, and fight against dishonest acts and even law violations. In addition, we must improve the social supervision mechanism and tighten our grip over teaching, examination, recruitment and admission activities in colleges, high schools and social settings.

(4) Strengthen Career Guidance for Students in Middle Schools

We can have a college entrance consultant in the middle schools to provide students with intensive and personalized assistance, so that students can discuss their interests and explore themselves from an early stage. Such consulting service can be extended to the high school until students are eventually clear about their target colleges and target majors. Furthermore, we can also train parents to achieve parent-teacher synergy, so that parents and teachers can jointly help students plan for their upcoming tertiary education and future career [10].

7. Conclusions

With both pros and cons, the historical reforms, administrative authorities, regulations & policies and admission methods of the college admission system in the Chinese mainland and the Taiwan Region have exhibited a broad array of similarities and differences due to their intermingling yet varying social and cultural backgrounds. This enlightening study can certainly inform the much-needed reforms of the Chinese mainland to increase the autonomy of colleges and universities in independent recruitment, to explore multi-aspect assessment of students’ comprehensive quality, to improve the laws and rules on the college admission system, and to strengthen career guidance for students in middle schools.

Acknowledgment

This research is supported by the educational research project for young and middle-aged teachers in the Fujian province, grant/award number: JZ170226; Fujian educational science “12th five-year plan” project, grant/award number: FJJKHX15-027.

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