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A Chinese Education, for a Price

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BEIJING — For Chinese children and their devoted parents, education has long been seen as the key to getting ahead in a highly competitive society. But just as money and power grease business deals and civil servant promotions, the academic race here is increasingly rigged in favor of the wealthy and well connected, who pay large sums and use connections to give their children an edge at government-run schools.

Nearly everything has a price, parents and educators say, from school admissions and placement in top classes to leadership positions in Communist youth groups. Even front-row seats near the blackboard or a post as class monitor are up for sale.

Zhao Hua, a migrant from Hebei Province who owns a small electronics business here, said she was forced to deposit \$4,800 into a bank account to enroll her daughter in a Beijing elementary school. At the bank, she said, she was stunned to encounter officials from the district education committee armed with a list of students and how much each family had to pay. Later, school officials made her sign a document saying the fee was a voluntary “donation.”

“Of course I knew it was illegal,” she said. “But if you don’t pay, your child will go nowhere.”

Bribery has become so rife that Xi Jinping devoted his first speech after being named the Communist Party’s new leader this month to warning the Politburo that corruption could lead to the collapse of the party and the state if left unchecked. Indeed, ordinary Chinese have become inured to a certain level of official malfeasance in business and politics.

But the lack of integrity among educators and school administrators is especially dispiriting, said Li Mao, an educational consultant in Beijing. “It’s much more upsetting when it happens with teachers because our expectations of them are so much higher,” he said.

Affluent parents in the United States and around the world commonly seek to provide their children every advantage, of course, including paying for tutors and test preparation courses, and sometimes turning to private schools willing to accept wealthy students despite poor grades.

But critics say [China](#)’s state-run education system — promoted as the hallmark of Communist meritocracy — is being overrun by bribery and cronyism. Such corruption has broadened the gulf between the haves and have-nots as Chinese families see their hopes for the future sold to

the highest bidder.

“Corruption is pervasive in every part of Chinese society, and education is no exception,” Mr. Li said.

It begins even before the first day of school as the competition for admission to elite schools has created a lucrative side business for school officials and those connected to them.

Each spring, the Clean China Kindergarten, which is affiliated with the prestigious Tsinghua University and situated on its manicured campus in Beijing, receives a flood of requests from parents who see enrollment there as a conduit into one of China’s best universities. Officially, the school is open only to children of Tsinghua faculty. But for the right price — about 150,000 renminbi, or about \$24,000, according to a staff member who spoke on the condition of anonymity to avoid retaliation — a Tsinghua professor can be persuaded to “sponsor” an applicant.

Parents with less direct connections have to bribe a chain of people for their child to be admitted to the kindergarten. “The more removed you are from the school, the more money you need,” the staff member said. “It can really add up.”

A school official denied that outsiders could pay their way in.

The costs can increase as college gets closer. Chinese news media reported recently that the going bribery rate for admission to a high school linked to the renowned Renmin University in Beijing is \$80,000 to \$130,000.

Government officials have also found a way to game the system. The 21st Century Business Herald, a state-run newspaper, reported that powerful agencies and state-owned enterprises frequently donated to top schools under what is known as a “joint development” policy. In exchange, education reformers say, the children of their employees are given an admissions advantage.

The same practice has been taken up by private companies that provide “corporate sponsorships” to top schools.

In China, education through junior high school is mandatory, and free, but the reality is often more complicated. As a child grows up, parents lacking connections must pay repeatedly for better educational opportunities. Across the country, such payments take the form of “school choice” fees that open the door to schools outside the district or town listed on a family’s official residency permit.

These illegal fees are especially onerous for the millions of struggling migrant workers who have

moved to distant cities. The Ministry of Education and the State Council, China's cabinet, have officially banned "school choice" and other unregulated fees five times since 2005, yet school officials and relevant government departments keep finding creative ways around the ban, allowing them to keep the cash flowing.

At some top-ranked high schools, students with low admission test scores can "buy" a few crucial points that put them over the threshold for admission. According to an unwritten but widely known policy at one elite Beijing high school, students receive an extra point for each \$4,800 their parents contribute to the school. "All my classmates know about it," said Polly Wang, 15, a student who asked that the school not be named to avoid repercussion.

Surrounded by a culture where cash is king, teachers often find their own ways to make up for their dismal salaries. Qin Liwen, a journalist who writes about education, said that some instructors run cram schools on the side and encourage attendance by failing to teach their students a vital chunk of the curriculum during the school day.

"Why do something for free when everyone is paying you?" Ms. Qin said. Faced with the prospect of their child's missing critical material or incurring the teacher's wrath, many parents feel compelled to pay for these extra courses, she said.

The culture of brown-nosing becomes a costly competition during Teacher Appreciation Day, a national holiday in September, when students of all ages are expected to bring gifts. Gone are the days when a floral bouquet or fruit basket would suffice. According to reports in the Chinese news media, many teachers now expect to be given designer watches, expensive teas, gift cards and even vacations. In Inner Mongolia, some parents said, more assertive teachers welcome debit cards attached to bank accounts that can be replenished throughout the year.

The value of such gifts, the newspaper Shanghai Daily estimated, has grown 50 times from a decade ago.

"It's a vicious cycle," said Ms. Zhao, the owner of the Beijing electronics business and parent of a 10-year-old girl. "If you don't give a nice present and the other parents do, you're afraid the teacher will pay less attention to your kid."

Poor students are the most vulnerable in this culture of bribery. Bao Hong, 33, a maid in Beijing, used to think her 7-year-old daughter, Rui, was having a tough time at school because she was reared in the countryside by her grandparents. Ms. Bao now blames her teachers.

Last year, she said, a teacher slapped her daughter and called her "stupid." In the spring, the teacher stopped grading Rui's homework and then skipped a mandatory home visit. "My daughter's discriminated against because we don't make much money," Ms. Bao said, standing

outside the room she rents with her husband, a street cleaner.

Some parents have found that the only way to preserve any integrity is to reject a Chinese education altogether. Disgusted by the endemic bribery, Wang Ping, 37, a bar owner in Beijing, decided to send her son abroad for his education. In August, she wept as she waved goodbye to her only child, whom she had enrolled at a public high school in Iowa.

“China’s education system is unfair to children from the very beginning of their lives,” she said. “I don’t want my son to have anything more to do with it.”

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