• Educational System

China has a nine-year system of compulsory education. Students attend primary schools for six years and then attend middle school for three. The quality of schools varies widely, and students in rural districts may receive much poorer education. In wealthy areas, many students attend school for much longer than the required nine years. Many students whose families can afford more education go to vocational schools or further academic work at senior middle schools. Fees are high enough to discourage about half of China’s young people from attending school beyond the compulsory grades.

Students in China take a national exam, and many students attend special classes during holidays or after the school day. This “shadow curriculum” commonly includes extra English lessons or math drills. Students are pushed to excel on exams, and there’s little wonder that that’s the case—the national exams given at grade nine and grade twelve can determine students’ placement in senior middle schools or universities and determine their future job prospects. Rural students are at a disadvantage in the university entry exams because more places are held for urban students due to prioritization of “local” students in quotas.

Teachers in the schools are government-qualified, and their success is evaluated based on their students’ exam results. (See the section on education norms for more information about cultural expectations.)