
Major University English Tests in China: Their Importance, Nature, and Development

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Among the world's languages, Chinese has the greatest number of native speakers. Nevertheless, outside of China (and other Chinese-language countries and communities) Chinese is not commonly spoken. For this reason, English is widely studied in China as a language for international communication. As China has grown into an economically powerful and politically influential country over the last few decades, more and more communication between the Chinese and the outside world has required proficiency in the English language. Consequently, English is now studied in China on a grand scale. The English-learning population in China is estimated to be around 300 million (Hong, 2009). That means there are more learners of English in China than native speakers of English in the United States (Sun, L., 2009).

For these reasons, English language teaching and testing constitute an important part of the Chinese education system. The number of English learners and speakers in the People's Republic of China has been growing since the start of China's 1979 Open Door Policy. This policy has led to much international trade by Sino-foreign enterprises and many Chinese students studying abroad. Even more people started learning English when China became a member of the World Trade Organization in 2001, and then again when the Chinese prepared for the 2008 Beijing Olympics and the 2010 International Exposition in Shanghai. From being a subject that was ignored and even abolished completely in China during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), English has developed into not only one of the most important subjects at all levels of school, from kindergarten to graduate school, but also a subject on which every Chinese student who tries to get into an institution of higher education will be tested.

Many reports have been written by Chinese scholars and outsiders regarding English language *teaching* in China (Campbell & Yong, 1993; Cowan, Light, Mathews, & Tucker, 1979; Henrichsen, 2007; Liu, 1988; Maley, 1983; McKay, 1994; Wang, 1999; Weng, 1996). In contrast, relatively few articles and books about English language *testing* in China have been published for international readers and scholars (Cheng, 2008; Guo, 2006; Liu, 2010; Yang, 2003). Chinese language educators and researchers themselves did not start serious studies in foreign language teaching and learning until about twenty

years ago, and the history of research on English testing in China is even shorter due to the relatively short history of English tests in the PRC. In addition, because of the isolation of the Chinese from the rest of the world after the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, it is hard to find articles published by Chinese in international academic journals before 1980. This was especially the case during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) when China did not have any relations or contact with Western countries.

This situation began to change, however, when China's doors to the outside world opened, and when more and more Chinese started studying or conducting research at western universities. In China also, Chinese language educators and researchers began doing research on language teaching and learning, and later, on language testing. However, publications in international journals of research conducted by Chinese scholars are still limited. Consequently, there is a serious discrepancy between the huge number of English teachers and learners in China and the little knowledge about this situation that has been disseminated to international educators and the outside world. To help remedy that unfortunate situation, this article provides an introduction to and overview of the Chinese system for testing students' English language skills.

High-Stakes English Examinations in China

More than a dozen different, national, high-stakes English examinations are offered in China every year. One thing is common to all of them—no matter which one students take—the remainders of their lives are determined by the results of those exams, especially the college-level English tests. For example, if high school seniors fail to score high enough on the National Matriculation English Test (NMET), they lose the opportunity to get into universities. If college students fail the College English Test—Band Four (CET-4), they will not receive their degrees, which makes it challenging for them to find jobs after graduation and impossible to pursue graduate studies.

The high-stakes nature of these and other tests makes many educational activities in China very exam-oriented. Teachers and students alike are all very driven by them. The teachers focus on helping their students prepare for these tests, and the students focus on passing them.

High-stakes English examinations in China can be classified into two major types: entrance examinations and school completion/leaving certificate examinations. The entrance examinations are given in order to screen candidates desiring to enter high school, university, or graduate school. The major English entrance exams include the National Matriculation English Test (NMET), the Graduate School Entrance English Exam (GSEEE), the English Test for Admission to Institutions of Higher Education for Adults, the Entrance English Examination for Self-Taught Higher Education, the Entrance English Test for TV-University, and the Entrance English Test for Correspondence University.

In contrast, the purpose of the certificate or school-leaving tests is to evaluate the level of English proficiency students have achieved through coursework already taken.

The major certificate tests include the College English Test (CET 4 & CET 6), the Test for English Majors (TEM 4 & TEM 8), the National Professional and Technical Titles English Test, the Cambridge Young Learners' English Test, the Public English Testing System, the Business English Examinations, the *Wàiyǔ Shuǐpíng Kǎoshì* (WSK—an English proficiency examination to select professionals to study abroad), and the National Accreditation Examination for Translators and Interpreters.

Due to length restrictions, this article cannot discuss all of these many high-stakes English tests in depth. Therefore, it will focus on only the four most important and influential college-level English tests in the People's Republic of China. Two of these tests are entrance examinations: the NMET (National Matriculation English Test) and the GSEEE (Graduate School Entrance English Examination). The other two are certificate examinations: the CET (College English Test) and the TEM (Test for English Majors). Each test's nature, historical development, projected future development, and significance to international educators will be discussed. Before that discussion and as a foundation for it, this article will first provide a brief historical overview of English language learning, teaching, and testing in China.

English Language Learning and Testing in China

English was first introduced to China during the Sui Dynasty (581-617 CE) and Tang Dynasty (618-907 CE), when the new Silk Road connected China to the outside world and led to “cultural, commercial, and technological exchanges between traders, merchants, pilgrims, missionaries, soldiers, nomads, and urban dwellers” in China and many European countries (*Sīchóu zhīlù*, 2009). For example, when British Christian missionaries came to China during the Tang Dynasty, some Chinese Christians either learned English from the missionaries in China or were sent to European countries to learn English or other European languages (*Yīngyǔ zài*, 2009). During the 1600s, the establishment of the John Company by the British in India helped introduce the English language to China again through business and missionary work. The Westernization Movement (1861-1894) of the Qing Dynasty brought English to more Chinese through diplomacy, the munitions industry, civil industry, and education (*Yǎngwù yùndòng* 2009). In 1862, the first school of foreign languages in Chinese history, *Jīng-shī-tóng-wén-guǎn* (Beijing Normal Language School; 1862-1900), was started. It was a school established by the government of the Qing dynasty to train translators, diplomats, and other foreign language specialists for the government. It taught only English in the beginning, but later added French, German, Russian, and Japanese (*Jīng-shī-tóng-wén-guǎn*, 2009).

Although English has been taught at schools in China since those early days, it did not become a subject for all students until the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, when English was introduced to all schools. The existing English language tests, however, can be traced back only to 1977 when the National Higher Education

Entrance Examination (NHEEE, the *Quánguó Pùtōng Gāoděng Xuéxiào Zhāoshēng Tǒngyī Kàoshì* or *Gāokǎo* in Chinese) was resumed after the ten-year Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), during which higher education was forbidden and English was ignored. During the Cultural Revolution, Chinese students did not learn any foreign languages at school, books published in foreign languages or about western countries were burned, and those who tried to teach or learn foreign languages were criticized as being subservient to foreigners. Before 1966, the NHEEE included a required Russian language examination, but English was optional and not as popular. When the NHEEE was resumed in 1977, an optional English exam was again administered. Nevertheless, the English score was merely taken into consideration (not required) for admission into colleges and universities. In schools, English was listed in the curriculum as one of the required subjects, but because there were no qualified English teachers in most parts of China, most urban Chinese students did not start learning English until the sixth grade, while most suburban and rural Chinese students could not start learning English until the last year of high school. Those students who lived in more remote parts of China never had the opportunity to study English.

Following the resumption of the National Higher Education Entrance Examination in 1977, the next great leap forward in English testing in China was made in 1985 when English became one of the mandatory subjects on the examination. At about that same time, another high-stakes, nationwide English test, the College English Test (CET), began. The College English Test Band-4 and Band-6 (CET-4, CET-6) were introduced to Chinese students in 1987 and 1989 respectively, first among college students and then to all levels of public education. As the importance of the CET grew and became recognized, English began to be taught to children as early as the third grade starting in the mid-1990s (Cheng, 2008) and then from the first grade in the early 2000s. Today, parents send their children to bilingual kindergartens or pay private tutors for their children to learn English starting at age 5 and continuing through age 18 when their children graduate from high school.

Twenty years ago, the Chinese people were keen to learn English mostly in order to learn advanced science and technology from overseas. They do so today for a great variety of academic, personal, and professional reasons (L. Sun, 2009). Along with the rapid development of China's economy, an increasing number of Chinese students have gone abroad to attend universities and graduate schools. With their new prosperity, more and more Chinese citizens travel the world as tourists. In addition, an increasing number of successful Chinese entrepreneurs invest in the outside world, mainly in English speaking countries like the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. For all these reasons, China today has a larger EFL-learning population than any other country in the world.

Exam Orientation and English Tests in China

Chinese education today is often characterized as being examination-oriented. Chinese children, willingly or not, may start taking examinations as early as age 4 or 5 to get into a selective kindergarten, and they never stop taking examinations if they want to get into higher education or aspire to important social positions. “Over the years of primary education (K-Grade 6), secondary education (Junior High Grade 7-9, Senior High School 10-12) and university education (4-year undergraduate), students take numerous examinations at the school, municipal, provincial, and national levels” (Cheng, 2008, p. 16). In China, nine years of education are compulsory, but all students have to pass examinations to move from one level to another. Many take very competitive examinations to get into better schools.

Testing in China also has a very long history. *Kējǔ*, the first standardized test to select the highest government officials based on merit, started in the Sui Dynasty (605 CE) and continued until the end of the Qing Dynasty in 1905 (*Kējǔ zhìdù*, 2009). English language testing, however, did not start until 1862 with the establishment of *Jīng-shī-tóng-wén-guǎn* (Beijing Normal Language School). All these early tests were typically small in scale and aimed at selecting officials for the government (Cheng, 2008).

The present national English testing system has a relatively short history. The only current national English test that existed before 1966, was the pre-standardization National Matriculation English Test (NMET, described below), which was an optional part of the National Higher Education Entrance Examination. The rest of the current national English tests did not come into existence until after 1977 when China resumed its entrance examinations for colleges.

The National Higher Education Entrance Examination (NHEEE)

The NHEEE (National Higher Education Entrance Examination or *Quánguó Pùtōng Gāoděng Xuéxiào Zhāoshēng Tōngyī Kǎoshì* in Chinese), known commonly as *Gāokǎo*, is the major gateway (though not the only one) through which Chinese students must pass to achieve higher education. It is a multi-part academic examination held annually over a three-day period in early June throughout China, and one of its parts is the National Matriculation English Test (explained in the next section). All secondary students in their last year of high school who want to get into colleges and universities must pass the NHEEE, which is a prerequisite for entrance into all colleges and universities.¹

¹Although an increasing number of candidates can be accepted by different levels of colleges and universities, about half the candidates still cannot get into higher education institutions through the NHEEE because of limited enrollment capacities at Chinese universities. For those who cannot get into higher education institutions through the NHEEE, various other exams exist, such as the Admission Tests to Institutions of Higher Education for Adults and the Self-Taught Higher Education Examination System.

The NHEEE or *Gāokǎo* (nicknamed the “Footslog Bridge”) is seen as the gatekeeper for formal higher education. It is undoubtedly the most visible and important entrance examination in China. “During the examination season each year, secondary schools, universities, and even government officials at different levels will focus their attention on the examinations that make up the [NHEEE]” (Liu, 2010, p. 35). It is also the most competitive entrance examination in China. Each year, millions of high school graduates and others with equivalent educational credentials try to enter into universities by means of this “Footslog Bridge.” The number of the test takers varies but each year has had more candidates than the year before (see Figure 1).

The *Gāokǎo* was discontinued between 1966 and 1976 due to the Cultural Revolution. During those 10 years, the Down to the Countryside Movement in China brought secondary school graduates, the so-called “intellectual youths,” to the country to work as peasants in villages throughout China. All except a limited number of higher education institutes in China were closed. Instead of selecting students according to their academic achievements in the entrance examination, the few non-closed institutes selected students who had been working as farmers, workers, or soldiers for over three years and called them “worker, peasant, and soldier college students” (*Gāokǎo*, 2009).

The *Gāokǎo* officially resumed in 1977, but instead of being a national test, it was first designed and administered by the individual provinces. Its resumption was still a history-making event in modern China (*Gāokǎo*, 2009). From 1978 on, it has been a national examination, uniformly designed by the Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China. Since then, millions of students across the country have taken this examination each year.

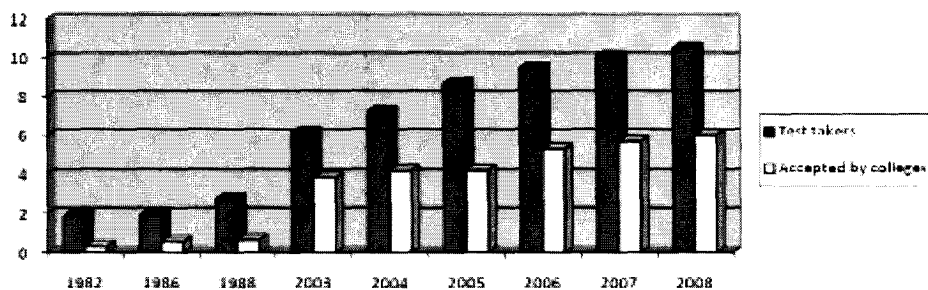


Figure 1: Numbers of *Gāokǎo* Test Takers and Number of Test Takers Admitted to Colleges in China (in millions) (Zhōngguó línjiàn, 2008)

Before 2004, a single paper test for each subject of the *Gāokǎo* was used nationwide on the same examination day. The test was and is still organized by examination and admissions offices of the department of education of each province, autonomous region, and directly-controlled municipality on behalf of the Ministry of Education. However, in 2004 for examination security reasons, the National Education Examination Authority (NEEA) was required to develop four forms of the exam for each subject. These different forms were used in different provinces. At the same time, nine provinces were allowed to develop their own matriculation tests. In 2005 and 2006, some more provinces were allowed to do so (Liu, 2010), and today, many major universities are allowed to develop their own matriculation tests.

No matter whether the candidates take a national, provincial, or university matriculation test, the *Gāokǎo* is administered between June 7th and 9th, which used to be between July 7th and 9th before 2003 but was changed to June due to the hot weather in July (*Gāokǎo*, 2009).

The *Gāokǎo* is a multi-part examination, with some parts being mandatory and others optional. Chinese, mathematics, and English² are the three mandatory subjects tested in the *Gāokǎo* (*Gāokǎo*, 2009). Physics, chemistry, geology, geography, political education, and history are the other subjects that applicants take depending on whether they want to study sciences or humanities in college (*Gǎigé kāifāng*, 2009). However, for the 2010 *Gāokǎo*, four out of six universities with the right to develop their own matriculation tests in Shanghai announced that only mathematics and English would be mandatory subjects. When questioned why Chinese was no longer included in these versions of the *Gāokǎo*, one of the presidents of these four universities explained that the purpose of this reduction was to lighten the burden on the test takers (Ji & Xu, 2010). It is noteworthy that despite the dropping of some important academic subjects—even the Chinese language—English, in the form of the NMET and explained in the following section, continues to hold a secure position on the *Gāokǎo*.

The National Matriculation English Test (NMET)

The National Matriculation English Test (NMET) or *Gāokǎo Yīngyǔ* (*Quánguó Pǔtōng Gāoděng Xuéxiào Zhāoshēng Tǒngyī Kǎoshì—Yīngyǔ*) is the English-language component of the National Higher Education Entrance Examination. The NMET is a norm-referenced standardized test whose major function is to select high school graduates for institutions of higher education (Cheng, 2008). The specific purpose of the NMET is to “make inferences about candidates” and their English language ability, which are “used in university admission decisions together with the scores from other university entrance tests” of a few subjects (Cheng, 2008, p. 19). The NMET’s historical development can be divided into two main phases: pre-standardized and standardized (Lu, 2008).

²Students may also take tests in other foreign languages, such as Japanese, Russian, or French, but English is by far the most common choice.

Pre-standardized Phase (1950-1988)

During the first stage (1950-1966) of the pre-standardized phase, the NMET mainly tested reading, English-to-Chinese translation, and Chinese-to-English translation. The ratio of subjective questions to objective-response questions was 80:20 (1950 nián, 2008).

The NMET was stopped for 10 years between 1966 and 1976 due to the Cultural Revolution, and it was not resumed until 1977. The format of the test changed greatly during the second stage (1977-1988) of its pre-standardized phase. The new NMET was composed of 16 completely different types of questions. The ratio between the subjective-response questions and objective-response questions was reversed from 80:20 to 20:80. Initially the NMET score was not counted into the total score of the *Gāokǎo*, but that changed in 1978 when it started being counted.

The Standardized Phase (1989-Present)

In its second standardized phase, the NMET underwent three different stages of development. *MET (Matriculation English Test) Phase (1989-1994)*

The MET (Matriculation English Test) was started in Guangdong Province in 1985 and expanded to the whole country in 1989. The total possible score was 100 points. It had five different sections: phonetics (5%); multiple choice (15%); cloze test³ (25%), reading comprehension (40%), and writing (15%).

NMET Phase (1995-2003)

The *National* Matriculation English Test (NMET) was piloted in some provinces as early as 1991 and offered nationwide in 1995. This test had 150 points in total with five different sections: reading comprehension (50 points), situational conversation and word spelling (i.e., dictation) (20 points), multiple choice (25 points), cloze test³ (25 points), and writing (30 points). The ratio between subjective and objective-response questions was 55:95 (out of 150 total points). Listening was added to the test around the year 2000, but it was not counted into the total score until 2003.

Second MET Phase (2004-Present)

Starting in 2004, the Chinese Ministry of Education allowed nine provinces to make their own English tests for the *Gāokǎo*. By 2007, another nine provinces were given the same privilege. This decentralization reversed the earlier trend toward central control over the exam. Nowadays more provinces use their own test than use the national MET. The biggest difference between the national and provincial versions of the NMET is whether or not listening is counted in students' overall test score.

³A cloze test consists of a passage with blanks that have been inserted for words that have been deleted, either randomly or systematically. Although relatively simple to construct, cloze tests have been shown to be valid and reliable integrative measures of learners' overall language proficiency (Oller, 1973; Oller, 1976; Oller & Conrad, 1971).

To summarize, the National Higher Education Entrance Examination (NHEEE) is by far the most important entrance exam in China today. It is taken by millions of high school graduates each year and wields a strong influence on their future careers. No less important than the overall NHEEE is its English component, the National Matriculation English Test (NMET). It makes English language teaching and learning an essential part of secondary education in China today. The particular language skills it has tested over the course of its historical development have determined to a large degree the emphasis given to these skills in English classes throughout Chinese students' secondary school years. In a study of teachers and students who were preparing for the *Gāokǎo*, Huang (2005) concluded that no knowledge was more important to them than what was going to be tested. When interviewed, both the teachers and the students admitted that they stopped regular English listening practice after the *Gāokǎo* Administration released the news that listening would not be tested that year.

The Graduate School Entrance English Exam (GSEEE)

Like the NHEEE (or *Gāokǎo*), the Graduate School Entrance Examination (GSEE) is an entrance examination administered annually at the national level. The most important difference is that the GSEE is taken by undergraduate students hoping to enter graduate schools (Cheng, 2008). The GSEE has four components, one of which is the GSEEE (Graduate School Entrance *English* Exam). The GSEEE tests English, which is one of two compulsory GSEE subjects (the other is political science) required by the National Education Examination Authority (NEEA) of the Chinese Ministry of Education. The other two subjects tested in components of the GSEE are discipline-related and depend on students' intended fields of study. They are developed by the universities or research institutes the applicants want to enter. The GSEEE is administered in late January or early February each year by the NEEA.

The number of students taking the GSEEE is steadily increasing (see Figure 2), and the challenge of getting into graduate school is becoming much greater than before. This increase is due to the increasing competition in the employment market and the fact that graduate-level study is viewed as a way to postpone job hunting in a challenging market or as a way to improve one's chances of finding a job later (Shen, 2009).

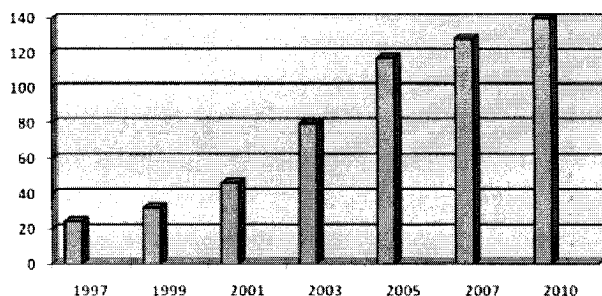


Figure 2: Numbers of GSEEE Test Takers (in 10 thousands) (Shen, 2009; Su, 2009)

The current GSEEE test format was designed in 2004 and first used in 2005 (Liu 2010). It contains three main sections: use of English (10%), reading comprehension (60%), and writing (30%).

Section one, use of English, focuses on control of formal elements of the language in context including a wide range of vocabulary, expressions, structures, and features of discourse relating to coherence and cohesion. Test takers are also required to do a cloze test with twenty multiple-choice items.

The second section is made up of three parts focusing on examinees' ability to read written English. In part one, candidates are required to read four passages and complete twenty multiple-choice questions based on their understanding of these passages. In part two, candidates read an incomplete passage with five gaps and fill the gaps with five of the seven choices given. In part three, test takers are also required to read one passage and translate five underlined sections from English into Chinese.

The third section is made up of two parts. First, the test takers are asked to write a letter, a report, a memorandum, or an abstract of about 100 words based on the information provided. Second, candidates write an essay of between 160 and 200 words based on guidelines given either in English or Chinese.

Taking the various sections and subsections of the GSEEE requires a total of 180 minutes (cloze test 15-20 minutes; reading 70-75 minutes; translation 20 minutes; fill-the-gap 20 minutes; and writing 50 minutes).

Although the GSEEE is taken by far fewer students each year (1,400,000 in 2010) than the number who take the NMET (over 10 million), the GSEEE is still an important "gatekeeper" test. It plays a significant role in determining which students go on to graduate studies in China.⁴ The GSEEE's history of development, however, is much shorter than the NMET's. In addition, the fact that the number of examinees is smaller makes it possible for test items and tasks to be more natural and authentic even though they are also more time-consuming to score.

The College English Test—Band Four (CET-4)

The College English Test – Band Four (CET-4) is the most important certificate, or school-leaving, English test in the Chinese university system. It has more test takers each year than any other certificate English test in China—over 10 million a year (*2009 nián gāokǎo*, 2009). Figure 3 depicts the growth in CET-4 takers over the years.

⁴For Chinese students who wish to travel abroad to attend English-speaking universities, the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language, administered worldwide by Educational Testing Service) plays a similar role.

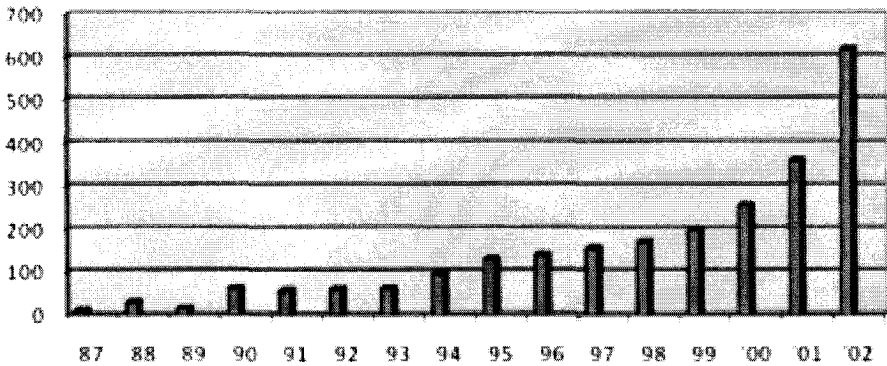


Figure 3: Numbers of CET-4 Test Takers Between 1987 and 2002 (in 10 thousands) (Yang, 2003)

The CET-4's purpose is to examine Chinese college students' English proficiency and ensure that they reach the required English levels specified in the National College English Teaching Syllabi. First offered in 1987, the test was extended to college students all over China in 1988 but was still optional: students could take the Band 4 examination created by each school. But slowly, some colleges started requiring all sophomores to take the CET-4 after they finished the required English courses. Over time, more and more colleges and universities required students to pass the CET-4 to get a graduation certificate or a bachelor's degree. Starting in the mid-1990s, increasing numbers of companies, as well as the government, made the CET-4 certificate an important requirement for hiring graduates.

Nature of the College English Test

The College English Test is a national, large-scale, standardized test administered by education departments of every province, autonomous region, and directly-controlled municipality in China. It is administered biannually, in June and December/January. It is created under the direction of the National College English Testing Committee (NCETC) on behalf of the Higher Education Department of the Chinese Ministry of Education (CET, 2009). The test takers are undergraduates pursuing majors in every subject but English. (For English majors, there is a special test, the TEM, explained in the next section.) These students take the test when they complete their corresponding required English courses. The CET is actually a test battery with three sequential stages: the CET-4 (Band 4), the CET-6 (Band 6), and the CET Spoken English Test (CET-SET).

The term *band* as used in connection with these tests is unfamiliar to most educators outside of China, so some explanation may be helpful here. All Chinese college students are required to study English courses for two academic years, the first four semesters of

their college education. Each semester is counted as one band. Students take final exams for Bands 1, 2, and 3 each semester at their own universities, but they take the CET-4 as a national English achievement test at the end of their fourth semester, or band. After that, teaching and learning English for general purposes is stopped and switched to learning English for specific purposes (ESP) related to the students' academic background. Only those who have completed Band 5 and 6 English courses and have passed the CET-4 with a score at or above 425 may take the CET-6, which is optional and taken by far fewer students. For those reasons, it will not be discussed in any detail here.

CET-4 scores are reported within a range of 290 to 710. The test itself is made up of four parts: listening, reading, integrated skills, and writing. These components, along with their contents, item formats, times, and score weights, are explained in Table 1.

Each of these components of the CET-4 will now be explained in turn. For those interested in seeing copies of the entire CET-4 examination, electronic copies from recent years are available online at <http://bbs.dict.cn/viewthread.php?tid=33764>

Part One: Listening Comprehension

The listening section of the CET-4 assesses students' ability to understand main ideas, important facts, specific details, and implied meaning, as well as their ability to determine the communicative function of discourse, the speaker's point of view, and attitudes in oral conversations and passages. Passages are spoken in both standard American English and standard British English (*Dàxué Yīngyǔ sījī kǎoshì dàgāng*, 2009).

The listening section of the CET-4 counts for 35% of the total score. Fifteen of these percentage points come from the comprehension of conversations, including eight short conversations and two long conversations. Each short conversation consists of one speaker turn followed by a multiple-choice question, while each long conversation has five to eight speaker turns followed by three or four multiple-choice questions. The other twenty percentage points come from three longer listening passages, followed by three or four multiple-choice questions each (for a total of 10 questions), and one compound dictation passage with 10 blanks. In seven of these blanks, students must write the single, exact word spoken in the passage, and in three blanks the missing information is a phrase or clause and can be filled in either word-for-word or in the students' own words. The speed of speech in the listening conversations and the passages is approximately 130 words per minute, and the whole section lasts for 35 minutes.

Part Two: Reading Comprehension

The reading comprehension section of the CET-4 assesses students' ability to acquire written information through reading. This section generates 35% of the total CET-4 score and is composed of two subsections: reading in depth and speed reading.

Table 1

Contents, Item Formats, and Weights of the Different Sections of the CET-4

Section	Contents		Formats	Time	Score	
Listening comprehension	Dialogues	Short	MC	15%		
		Long	MC		35	35%
	Passages	Comprehension	MC	20%		
Compound dictation		Compound dictation				
Reading comprehension	Reading in depth	Discourse	MC			
		Discourse voc.	Banked cloze	25%	25	
	Skimming and scanning		Yes/No Ques.			35%
			Fill-in-blanks, complete sentences	10%	15	
Integrated test	Cloze or error correction		Multiple choice or error correction	10%	15	
	Short answers or translation		Q & A. or Chi. to Eng. trans	5%	5	15%
Writing	Writing		Short essay		30	15%
Total					125	710

The reading in depth subsection (25%) is 25 minutes long and includes three short passages with 300-350 words apiece. Each passage is followed by items in different formats: multiple-choice, banked-cloze, and short answer. In the banked-cloze format, there are 10 blanks in the passage and students can select one word for each blank from

a list of 15 words given in the word bank. In the short-answer format, students must complete a sentence or answer questions with no more than 10 words based on their own understanding of the passage.

The speed reading subsection (10%) includes both skimming and scanning. Students have 15 minutes to skim or scan one passage of around 900 words. The item formats used in this part are multiple-choice (seven items) and sentence completion or true/false (three items).

Part Three: Integrated Test—Cloze

In contrast with traditional, discrete-point tests, integrated tests do not examine each language skill or component separately. Rather, they test multiple skills and linguistic points all at once. Cloze tests are a widely used and empirically validated type of integrated test (Oller, 1973; Oller, 1976; Oller & Conrad, 1971). On the CET-4, cloze is used to assess students' general language comprehension and proficiency at the word, sentence, and paragraph levels. It contributes 10% to the total score and takes 15 minutes. The cloze passage is about 220 to 250 words long with 20 blanks and content that is familiar to students. For each numbered blank, students are to choose the correct word from a set of multiple-choice options. An alternative format to cloze, used some years, is error correction, which asks students to identify and correct 10 errors embedded in a passage of the same length.

Part Four: Writing and Translation

The writing and translation section assesses students' ability to write a short, expressive composition in English and to translate a printed Chinese-language passage into written English. It constitutes 20% (writing 15% and translation 5%) of the total CET-4 score and takes 35 minutes.

For the writing portion, students are asked to write a composition of no less than 120 words in 30 minutes based on information given to them, for instance a title or topic with an outline, a situation, a picture, or a graph.

For the translation task, students are asked to complete five English sentences by translating the part of each sentence given in Chinese into English in five minutes. In some years, an alternative format for the translation subsection involves writing short answers to questions based on one of the reading passages from part two.

The College English Test—Spoken English Test (CET-SET)

The College English Test—Spoken English Test (CET-SET) assesses the test-takers' competence in English oral communication. This test is given only to students who have passed the CET-4 or the CET-6 at a predetermined score level. For instance, according to the December 2009 CET-SET registration notification, only those who passed the CET-4 with a score of 550 or above or the CET-6 with a score of 520 or above (out of a total score

of 710)⁵ in 2008 and 2009 could register for the CET-SET (Oral Exam Registration Notification, 2009).

The CET-SET is composed of three parts. Part one lasts for approximately five minutes and involves three or four examinees and two authorized CET-SET examiners who interact in a small-group, question-and-answer conversation. Part two consists of 90-second personal statements spoken by each examinee and then a 4.5-minute panel discussion. This part lasts about 10 minutes. In part three, the examiners ask more questions to further check the examinees' oral English proficiency for an additional five minutes.

The evaluation of test-takers' performance on the CET-SET is based on the following six criteria: (1) accuracy in pronunciation, intonation, and use of grammar and vocabulary; (2) complexity and scope of vocabulary and grammatical structures employed; (3) contribution made to group discussion individually; (4) consistency in extended and coherent discourse; (5) flexibility in handling different scenarios and topics; and (6) applicability of language used in the specific context (*Dāxué Yīngyǔ sì liù jí kāoshì kǒushì dàgāng*, 2009).

Effects of the College English Test

To a large degree, the College English Test governs the other English tests as well as the teaching and learning of English in China. *Washback* is a term used to describe the effects of testing on teaching. In brief, "what is assessed becomes what is valued, which becomes what is taught" (McEwen, 1995, p. 42) or, in other words, what is examined becomes what to teach (Yang, 1992). Because of its importance, the CET-4 has brought much positive washback to the teaching and learning of English in China. Gu (2005) found in her empirical study of CET washback that most of the CET stakeholders thought highly of the test, especially its design, administration, marking, and the new measures adopted in recent years. They believed that the positive washback of the test was greater than the negative washback, and the negative washback was due mainly to the misuse of the test by users rather than the test itself. In 2008, Sun and Peng (2009) conducted a pilot study about the washback of the CET-4 on teaching and learning in China. Many teachers and students admitted that because of the test they treated teaching and learning more seriously and prepared for lessons more thoroughly. Overall, most Chinese teachers agree that the design and the proportions of the various parts of content are appropriate and fair for students of different academic backgrounds (Mao, 2009).

⁵Or those who passed the CET-4 with a score of 80 or above or the CET-6 with a score of 75 or above (out of a total of 100 possible) in the years before the new score reporting system.

Wang (2005) believes that the CET has not only brought about fundamental changes in the quality of English teaching and learning in China but has also developed into a complete system. The CET-4 has matured as a “criterion-related norm-referenced test” with high reliability and validity. It would be difficult to find any scientific, large-scale and high-stakes English test other than the CET-4 that could reflect the actual English proficiency of college students and could be as operational as the CET-4.

The Test for English Majors (TEM-4 and TEM-8)

The Test for English Majors (TEM) is an English certificate test designed especially for Chinese university students pursuing an English major and was first administered in 1991. It is administered nationwide by the National Advisory Commission on Foreign Language Teaching in Higher Education. It aims to measure the English proficiency of university undergraduate English majors in accordance with the National College English Teaching Syllabus for English Majors (*Yīngyǔ zhuānyè*, 2009). The TEM has two versions: the TEM-Band 4 and TEM-Band 8. The TEM-4 is administered in May at the end of English majors’ second (sophomore) year, and the TEM-8 is administered in March near the end of English major’s fourth (senior) year.

The purposes of the Test for English Majors are (1) to assess the language performance of English majors and (2) to examine how well the college English teaching syllabus is working in order to promote reforms in English teaching and learning (Cheng, 2008). The TEM certificate issued by the NACFLT is valid for the examinee’s lifetime. TEM-4 and TEM-8 scores are reported at three levels: 60-69=pass; 70-79=good, 80 and above=excellent. Starting in 2003, those who fail to pass the TEM the first time can have one more opportunity to take the test. Nevertheless, those who take the TEM for the second time and pass it can get a certificate labeled “pass” only, no matter how high their score.

Test for English Majors—Band 4

The TEM is a criterion-referenced test (*Yīngyǔ zhuānyè*, 2009). That is, students’ performance is evaluated against the criteria stipulated by the teaching syllabus (Zou, 2003). The complete TEM-4 has 40% subjective-response questions and takes 130 minutes.

The TEM-4 is composed of six parts (see Table 2 for their times and weights): 1) writing, consisting of a composition/essay and note-writing, 2) listening dictation for which examinees listen four times to a 150-word passage spoken at a speed of 120 WPM and write it down, 3) listening comprehension which contains short, two- or three-sentence statements followed by 7-9 multiple-choice questions; longer, three-sentence dialogues followed by 7-9 multiple-choice questions; and several short VOA or BBC news broadcasts followed by 7-9 multiple-choice questions, 4) a multiple-choice cloze test which uses a passage of about 250 words with 15 blanks and four choices for each blank, 5) grammar and vocabulary for which there are 25

Table 2
Contents, Item Formats, and Weights of the Different Sections of the TEM-4

Section	Contents	Format	Time	Score
Writing	Essay	Writing	35	15
	Note-taking	Writing	10	10
Dictation	Passage	Dictation	15	15
Listening Comprehension	Dialogues	MC	15	15
	Passages	MC		
	News broadcast	MC		
Cloze	Passage	MC	10	10
Grammar and vocabulary	Sentences	MC	15	15
Reading comprehension	Passages	MC	25	20
Total			130	100

multiple-choice questions with about half testing grammar and half testing vocabulary, and 6) reading comprehension which involves reading in depth and skimming and scanning.

Test for English Majors—Band 8

The TEM-8 is made up of six parts as well (see Table 3): 1) listening comprehension which contains four sections: talk or mini-lecture, conversation or interview, news broadcast, and note-taking and gap-filling; 2) reading comprehension which involves reading for depth and skimming and scanning; 3) general knowledge about the culture and society of English-speaking countries, English literature, and English linguistics; 4) proofreading and error correction on a reading passage of about 200 words with 10 lines containing labeled errors which examinees correct by adding, deleting, or changing one word or phrase; 5) translation of two approximately 300-word passages, one in Chinese and the other in English, with about 150 underlined words to be translated from Chinese to English and English to Chinese; and 6) writing an argument or an expository essay of about 400 words. The total TEM-8 takes 185 minutes.

Table 3

Contents, Item Formats, and Weights of the Different Sections of the TEM-8

Section	Contents	Format	Time	Score
Listening comprehension	Mini-lecture	Fill-in-blank	10	25
	Conversation and interview News broadcast Note taking and gap filling	MC	25	10
Reading comprehension	Passages	MC	30	20
General knowledge	Passages	MC	10	10
Proofreading and error correction	Passage	Error correction	15	10
Translation	Passages	Chinese to English to Chinese	60	20
Writing	Essay	Writing	45	20
Total			185	100

In its two forms, the Test for English Majors examines Chinese students' abilities in English at a fairly advanced level and in relatively authentic and valid ways. It can do this because the number of examinees (only English majors) each year is comparatively small. Nevertheless, the number of TEM-takers is still so large as to make the testing of English majors' speaking skills impractical. Despite earlier hopes in this regard, the speaking test planned for the TEM has been suspended because conditions are not yet conducive to holding a large-scale speaking test throughout China (*Yīngyǔ zhuānyè*, 2009).

Conclusion

This article has reviewed the four most important English examinations in modern China. Two are entrance examinations (NMET and GSEEE), and two are certificate or school-leaving examinations (CET and TEM). Table 4 summarizes and compares the four tests discussed in this article in terms of each test's audience, possible score, purpose,

Table 4

Comparison of Major English Tests in China

	NMET	GSEEE	CET-4	TEM-4	TEM-8
Test takers	High school graduates	College graduates	Sophomore non-English majors	Sophomore English majors	Senior English majors
Scores	150	100	710	100	100
Purpose	College entrance	Graduate School Entrance	Certificate	Certificate	Certificate
Time (Minutes)	120	180	125	130	185
Cost (Yuan)	Varies from province to province	Varies from province to province	Varies from province to province	¥80 & above	¥80 & above
Time scheduled	Annual (June 7)	Annual (January or February)	Biannual (January & June)	Annual (May)	Annual (March)
Number of test takers (in millions, 2009)	10.2 (2009 nián gāokǎo, 2009)	1.246 (2009 nián kāoyán, 2009)	17.48 (Anhui, 2009)		
Scoring	By province or area	By individual school	By geographical region	By geographical region	By geographical region
Contents	Listening grammar and structure, reading comprehension, writing	Use of English (grammar and structure) reading comprehension, writing	Listening, reading comprehension integrated test, writing	Listening, grammar & structure reading comprehension, writing	Listening, reading comprehension proofreading (grammar & structure), writing

length, cost, scheduling, number of test takers, scoring venue, and contents. All four of the major, college-level English tests reviewed in this article—especially the CET-4—have developed into super-large-scale standardized tests with their own processes, systems, and standards. This article has provided only a descriptive introduction to these tests. It leaves the following tasks to experts on English language testing in China: (1) providing more detailed information for each test introduced in this paper to people interested in English language teaching in China and (2) conducting more research on the measurement criteria, instruments, and procedures of these large-scale standardized tests in order to make the results of each test more accurate, objective, comprehensive and reflective of the true proficiency of students in actually using the English language (Jin, 2005).

A common shortcoming of all four tests is that none of them tests students' speaking ability, except the CET-SET, which is given to a very small number of CET takers. Given the importance of washback from testing to teaching in China, this deficiency has serious repercussions. Despite the practical difficulties associated with testing students' speaking abilities, this important skill should be tested in the future more than it currently is. China's growing economy and the accompanying improvements in educational funding, facilities, and personnel should make this advancement in English testing possible.

Another potential area for improvement is test scoring, which is done both by machines and by human beings. Certain aspects of the scoring raise questions about reliability. While the objective-response questions are machine-scored, the subjective-response questions are graded by human teachers and are, therefore, subject to inter-rater and intra-rater reliability problems due to factors such as fatigue. Further, the types of educators who score these four major college level English tests are not consistent. To illustrate, the NMET is graded by selected high school and college English teachers of each province who are gathered together in an enclosed place day after day for a period of about two weeks; the GSEEE is graded by English teachers of each individual educational institution; and the TEM and the CET-4 are graded by selected college English teachers of each geographical region working persistently in an enclosed place for two weeks.

To summarize and conclude, the National Matriculation English Test (NMET) is the most important English entrance examination in China, and the College English Test—Band Four (CET-4) is the most influential certificate English test among the many other certificate English tests in China. Nevertheless, all four tests described in this article are important. English teaching and learning at Chinese high schools focus heavily on helping students get high scores on the NMET, prospective graduate students must do well on the GSEEE to achieve their goals, and English courses and teachers at colleges and universities devote a lot of time and energy to preparing students to pass the CET (or TEM). The impact of these four tests throughout China is significant. Expatriate English language teachers and researchers in China will do well to pay attention to these tests'

natures and effects. Taking such factors into account will lead these educators to achieve greater success. This article is intended to constitute a first step in that direction.

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