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Chinese Applicants to U.S. Universities Often Resort to Shortcuts or Dishonesty. Students can buy essays, stand-ins for exams, and improper access to standardized tests

Every time Mr. Alexander rewrites an application for a Chinese student seeking admission to an American university, he gets 1,000 yuan, or \$120.

As an American graduate student at an Ivy League university, trying to survive on grant money here while doing research on his dissertation, he finds that money hard to turn down -- even though he knows that what he is doing is wrong. In the past semester, Mr. Alexander, who doesn't want his real name published, has rewritten 50 applications, netting \$6,000.

Mr. Alexander says many Chinese applicants to American graduate schools do not give him clear research interests, so he makes up topics for them. For about a third of his clients, he says, "I add a lot of stuff because they just don't have any idea about anything."

Mr. Alexander and about 20 other writers are paid by the New Oriental School, a private Chinese institution, which in turn charges students \$500 to \$1,000 -- a substantial sum in China -- to have their personal statements, resumes, and letters of recommendation doctored. New Oriental School administrators say they only provide polish, but other employees and students say the name of the game is rewriting.

Indeed, with its no holds-barred approach to getting students placed abroad, the New Oriental School, which is most famous here for its test-preparation courses, seems to epitomize a countrywide pattern of practices that clash with Western educational values.

Study in the United States has long been seen in China as the ticket to a bright future. Its popularity increased in the 1990's, in part because more students could afford it. In the year ending September 30, the U.S. Embassy issued more than 24,000 visas to Chinese students and scholars.

As the popularity of study abroad has increased in China, so has the use of shortcuts. They range from the dishonest, like ghostwritten essays, to the downright criminal, like forging degrees and transcripts or using stand-ins to take standardized tests. At least one Chinese company even advertises that it will help students gain admission to American colleges in return for a cut of the students' financial aid.

While only a minority of Chinese students are involved in kickbacks, forgery, or the use of stand-ins, even students who try to play by the rules are likely to have taken graduate test-preparation courses at the New Oriental School.

About 55,000 Chinese now study in the United States, and they are generally viewed as being hard-working, high-achieving students. "In general," says Richard G. Sleight, associate dean of Yale University's graduate school, "the Chinese students are excellent."

In China, high-school students focus for years on a single national examination that determines which students get into which universities. Many Chinese students bring the same single-mindedness to graduate-school admissions tests.

Admissions officers in the United States are on their guard against dishonest shortcuts. Jennifer Caplan, dean of graduate admissions at Columbia University, says that Columbia is especially cautious when evaluating international applicants but acknowledges that it has more problems with students from mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan than elsewhere. Sometimes Chinese people even show up at Columbia with fake letters of admission and try to register. "Every year it happens with two or three people," marvels Ms. Caplan.

One taboo technique is to use a "qiangshou," or "gunner" -- someone who takes a test in place of someone else. Every day, several messages appear on the New Oriental School's electronic bulletin board with titles like "searching for a male TOEFL gunner," referring to the Test of English as a Foreign Language.

One recent message from a person identified only as "bs2002" inquired about a "female GMAT expert" and offered payment of \$1,200 for a score above 750 -- well above the average at the top American business schools. That elicited a response from someone outraged at the "loss of face" that such a scheme could cause for China: "If you're not even willing to put in the effort to prepare for the GMAT [Graduate Management Admission Test], it's hard to imagine how you'll be able to survive the

two years of business school."

Ghostwritten applications are a more common phenomenon. Three of the biggest companies in the ghostwriting business, including the New Oriental School, rewrote about 1,000 applications this admissions season. The employees of one company that calls itself the China Educational Service Center say it provides ghostwriting services, although an administrator there says its main business is just to give advice on study abroad. "I honestly want to help students," he says.

Chinese students usually do need help with their personal statements. Unless instructed otherwise, they typically write detailed autobiographies that may begin with their parents, include mottoes about the value of hard work, and emphasize personal qualities, awards, and class rank. They don't realize that many graduate schools also want to hear about their interests, relevant experience, and goals.

Peking University students who work for the China Educational Service Center say it just asks clients to provide introductory materials about themselves in Chinese. "Then they find other people, such as me, to write a draft based on the Chinese materials," says a student who didn't want her name used.

The woman is an intelligent, lively, poised student who studies hard. She refuses to show samples of her work for the center. "That would not be professional," she says.

She adds that when people with strong academic abilities are rejected for their poor English, it's a waste of their talent. In fact, many Chinese students feel that the American graduate-admissions process is biased against them because of their language skills.

Couldn't her work mislead universities that are trying to evaluate candidates' own thoughts? "Quite possibly," she says. "I hadn't thought about that." Has it occurred to her that her work might be unethical, maybe just plain wrong? "Wrong," she muses. "I haven't thought about this question."

Not everyone in China thinks that way. Using someone else's essay is "really unfair," says a woman from Tianjin applying to statistics Ph.D. programs in the United States. "I want to write something that represents myself," she says.

How do admissions officers spot bogus applications? Lisa K. Urban, admissions

director for the University of Wisconsin at Madison's business school, says, "If you can call and talk to them and their ability to communicate in person is nothing like their statement, you can assume that their statement was written by someone else."

Admissions officers believe that they catch the fakers -- most of the time. "I would imagine there were times when individuals may have slipped through the cracks," admits Brad Pearson, director of admissions at Washington University's John M. Olin School of Business. "I don't know how much more we can police this."

The cheaters, say admissions officers, are harming themselves in the end. "At some point, you're going to get caught," says Ms. Urban. "If you arrive and your English skills aren't what they need to be, you're out of here immediately."

The New Oriental School is the most successful company helping Chinese students enroll at American universities. The school has its headquarters in a small, white-tiled building in Beijing's university district. Roughly 70 percent of mainland-Chinese students who attend American universities are graduates of New Oriental's test-preparation classes.

The school has developed an innovative system, using inspirational lectures, sample test questions, the memorization of test vocabulary, and lots of drill to help Chinese students pass standardized tests.

The company's founder is Michael Yu, a gangly 38-year-old who radiates cheer and has a gift for inspiration. He used to teach English at Peking University.

Mr. Yu opened the New Oriental School in 1992. Within a few years, most of Beijing's ambitious students were flocking to it. Students now come from all over China to attend the school's classes, many of which have hundreds of students enrolled. Mr. Yu says that New Oriental's test-preparation courses had 70,000 students last year.

New Oriental doesn't care too much about its teachers' English-speaking ability. "The most important quality is not substance," says Bao Fanyi, one of the school's assistant directors, "but communication: the ability to teach, the ability to entertain, and the ability to inspire." And of course, teachers have to know the tests. "That is why we don't have native speakers as instructors," Mr. Bao says. "We can hardly find a native speaker who can score as high as these instructors."

Applying for study abroad is a hard road for Chinese students, and New Oriental classes are supposed to make it easier. Instructors, who are usually no more than a few years out of college, rev up students with speeches and tell stories of their own struggles to adapt to life overseas.

By most accounts, the formula works. Zhiyun Yu, a Chinese student now at Columbia University says, "New Oriental provides you with a very competitive atmosphere. You gain incentive and confidence."

Others are dubious about New Oriental's contribution to students' test scores. The most significant thing New Oriental does, says Tina Zhang, a student at Peking University, is distribute sample tests.

For years New Oriental, like other Chinese test-preparation schools, has been pirating and selling Educational Testing Service publications -- thus compromising their integrity and costing the testing service money by violating its copyrights. The testing service is now trying to clamp down.

Mr. Yu routinely brags to students that the Educational Testing Service has no problem with him, but in November, the American organization got Beijing-government authorities to seize unauthorized test materials from the school. Similar government raids hit New Oriental in 1996 and 1997, and each time, says Thomas Ewing, a testing-service spokesman, the company said it would not pirate materials anymore.

Materials confiscated in 1996 and 1997 included non-public tests that could only have been stolen from examination rooms or memorized and written down later. Mr. Bao, the assistant director, denies that the school steals materials from examination centers. New Oriental teachers sometimes tell students that before 1996, the school did improperly obtain tests.

Mr. Bao says the testing service should sell New Oriental the rights to its public materials, so that the school's photocopying will be legal. "If worse comes to worst, and we cannot use their material," he says, the only result will be that students will get sample tests from other sources.

Mr. Bao may be right. Piracy of books, software, and music is so common in China

that outside New Oriental's classrooms, old women hawk bootleg copies of the CD-ROM's that the school sells its students. New Oriental's book about students' essays and letters of recommendation is also a victim. "That book was on somebody's Web site," marvels Mr. Bao.

When Chinese students boast about high scores on graduate-school admissions tests, they often cite, with equal parts pride and shame, people who can score very high -- 2200 or more out of a possible 2400 -- on the Graduate Record Examination without necessarily being able to speak a proper English sentence.

Some Chinese students get scores on the verbal section of the exam that are wildly out of proportion to their command of English, as measured by anything other than a multiple-choice test.

How do they do it? Students say that if they spend enough time practicing on past exams and memorizing Mr. Yu's book of Graduate Record Examination vocabulary, they eventually can ace the tests.

Mr. Yu seems to have created a Chinese-style solution for beating the Graduate Record Examination that students in American test-preparation programs like Kaplan and the Princeton Review would probably be unwilling to use.

The testing service acknowledges that brute force can raise scores, and says that is one reason why it is developing a new generation of tests. "We're aware that students will go to extreme lengths to prepare and that when they do, they have an advantage," says Mr. Ewing.

Some Chinese students aren't thrilled with the stratospheric test scores that New Oriental has appeared to create. The fact that every Chinese student has become an exam-taking machine makes New Oriental's kind of help of little use, complains Mr. Yu, the student at Columbia.

A Graduate Record Examination score of 2000 was once considered high and would really help a student's application, he says. Now a score of 2200 is "just so-so" for a Chinese student even though the average score worldwide is about 1600.

New Oriental's next goal is recognition and respect. Legend, China's largest computer company, has invested \$6-million in a much-trumpeted joint venture with the school

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to offer online courses. The school also wants to be able to grant real degrees.

In the end, New Oriental seems like a strange gateway to the West. On the one hand, it preaches the value of study abroad; on the other, it sends people to the United States who may not be able to communicate once they arrive. But that's an irrelevant subtlety for some Chinese students obsessed with a dream of study abroad.

The Chronicle of Higher Education

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ETS Sues Exam-Coaching School in China, Charging Theft of Test Questions

The Educational Testing Service has sued China's most popular exam-coaching school, charging it with using test questions that the service believes were stolen and that are still in use on tests, thereby hurting the integrity of the service's exams. E.T.S. also indicated that if the suit is not successful, it may stop giving its tests in China.

The suit comes at a time when the international community is closely watching China to see if it can enforce commitments it has made on intellectual-property protection in order to join the World Trade Organization.

The lawsuit, filed in a Chinese court, calls for the New Oriental School, in Beijing, to stop infringing, to compensate E.T.S. for legal costs and for the profits New Oriental has made through the sale of copyrighted materials, and to apologize to E.T.S. in the Chinese media.

The action follows five years of sporadic enforcement efforts by E.T.S. against the innovative school, which gives standardized-test-preparation courses to as many as 80 percent of the 24,000 Chinese students who go to the United States each year.

New Oriental officials said they were not aware of the lawsuit and declined to make any specific comment. They have previously denied stealing test questions.

They say they have tried unsuccessfully to contact the testing service. An assistant director of New Oriental, Robert Du, said, "We want to find a sustainable solution with E.T.S."

E.T.S. replied through a spokesman that it "has no present reason to trust New Oriental School for any purpose." According to E.T.S., New Oriental has twice agreed to stop distributing inappropriately obtained test questions and then continued infringing.

E.T.S. says that New Oriental has questions that are still "live" for the Test of English as a Foreign Language and the Graduate Record Examination and that it believes that

the school stole them when the tests were administered in paper format. But several Chinese students who took those tests say the tests did not include any questions they had seen before in New Oriental material.

The testing service does not believe that the integrity of the Graduate Management Admissions Test, which is also administered in China, has been threatened.

E.T.S. has raised the stakes in the case by threatening to stop administering the TOEFL and the GRE to the 100,000 students in mainland China who take them each year.

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Treat Chinese Scores With Caution, Educational Testing Service Says

The Educational Testing Service has advised American universities that all scores from China for two of the service's standardized tests should be treated with caution, implying that the integrity of the tests has been compromised.

The letter to deans at American universities follows a lawsuit by the testing service against a popular test-preparation school in China, the New Oriental School, for using unauthorized exam material, including questions that are still in use on examinations. In the lawsuit, E.T.S. is seeking reimbursement from the New Oriental School for copyright and trademark infringement.

In the letter, E.T.S. made specific comments about only one test, saying that on the Graduate Record Examination, scores in China from October 1999 to September 2000 were suspiciously high. But the testing service also implied that the integrity of the Test of English as a Foreign Language had been compromised, although it did not say how or when. The Graduate Management Admission Test has apparently not been affected.

E.T.S.'s letter to universities said: "It is always important to review all elements of an applicant's file. In the present circumstances, it is particularly important that all evidence submitted by an applicant from China be reviewed, and that test score results be fully supported by other elements of the file."

The Beijing-based school dominates the test-preparation market among the 100,000 students who take E.T.S. tests in China each year. The school opened in 1992.

New Oriental officials have denied stealing exams from secure test centers. The period when scores went up corresponds to when E.T.S. began to administer a computer-based GRE instead of a paper-based test in China. In setting up the database of questions for the computer-based test, E.T.S. failed to take into account that the New Oriental School had already widely, if improperly, distributed questions on supposedly secure paper tests and included many questions from the paper tests in the database.

New Oriental teachers and students noticed that many questions from old exams were reappearing on the computer test, according to a student who took the test and New Oriental's classes last year. As time went on, some people at the New Oriental School believed that the E.T.S. was adding new questions to the electronic database and diluting the proportion of questions that Chinese students already would have seen on illegally reproduced exams.

Two Chinese students who were told about E.T.S.'s letter to American universities were outraged at the thought that it could hurt their chances of being admitted. It's "unfair to have prepared, to have tried our best. We spent a lot of both money and time," said one student, who spoke on the condition of anonymity. Instead of putting students under suspicion now, E.T.S. should have realized from its previous efforts at enforcement that the New Oriental School was distributing questions in use on the tests, the student said.

The testing service had tried earlier to take action against New Oriental. E.T.S. confiscated materials from the school in 1996 and 1997, and again in November 2000. Each time, E.T.S. found that the school had been using unauthorized material, including questions still in use on tests. After each of the first two actions, E.T.S. said, New Oriental promised to stop infringing on E.T.S.'s copyrights and distributing inappropriately obtained questions. But the school has continued to infringe on copyrights, E.T.S. says.

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ETS Urges Caution on Evaluating Scores of Tests Given in China

The Educational Testing Service has warned admissions officers at American universities to treat the test scores of Chinese students on the Test of English as a Foreign Language and the Graduate Record Examination with caution, because it believes the integrity of the tests in that country has been compromised.

The warning follows a lawsuit in which the testing service charged China's most popular exam-coaching school, the New Oriental School, with using test questions that were stolen and that are still in use on tests. E.T.S. has indicated that if the suit is not successful, it might stop giving its tests in China.

The suit comes at a time when many foreign governments and international businesses are closely watching China to see if it will enforce commitments it has made on intellectual-property protection in order to join the World Trade Organization. At the same time, Chinese students say they are upset that their chances of admission to American universities may be unfairly damaged when they have worked hard and spent a lot of money to prepare for the standardized tests.

In a letter to American universities, the testing service said: "It is always important to review all elements of an applicant's file. In the present circumstances, it is particularly important that all evidence submitted by an applicant from China be reviewed, and that test-score results be fully supported by other elements of the file."

E.T.S. said that G.R.E. scores from October 1999 to September 2000 were under suspicion. That is apparently because a new computer version of the test used questions that the school had distributed.