CHAPTER 3

Competition on the Transition of Primary School Graduates to Junior High Schools in Large Cities and Governance of Mathematical Olympiad Training

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At the very beginning of the fall semester in February of 2012, *Eight Measures to Regulate School Selection and Arbitrary Charges during Compulsory Education Period* (《治理义务教育阶段择校乱收费的八条措施》, thereafter “Eight Education Measures”) was issued jointly by the Ministry of Education, the Development and Reform Committee and the Audit Committee in a bid to “bring obvious alleviation to arbitrary charges of compulsory education and make school selection and arbitrary charges no longer a problem responded strongly among the public within the next three to five years.” This document clearly forbid recruiting and charging students by launching training classes for entering higher schools, cross-district enrollment and charges, and donation linked to enrollment. In addition, *Opinions on the Implementation of Regulating Education Charges and Arbitrary Charges in 2012* (《关于2012年治理教育乱收费规范教育收费工作的实施意见》) was released. The reason behind all these policies was the almost frantic “transition of primary school graduates to junior high schools” in some major cities.

Transition to junior high schools ("primary to junior high" for short) constituted part of the compulsory education and should be test-free, tuition-free and based on the geographical proximity. However, in recent years, the competition of the transition to junior high schools has been more and more fierce and even spread to the transition to primary schools from kindergartens. Consequently, the Mathematical Olympiad, linked to the transition to junior high schools remains popular in spite of repeated regulation.

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I  The Still Chaotic Entrance to Junior High Schools in Major Cities

A  "Transition to Junior High" Became a "Major Test in Life"

The “transition to junior high schools” was gradually viewed as “crucial examinations in life”, not second to the college entrance exam. As this competition occurred earlier and earlier and tests tended to be harder and harder, parents and students were undergoing huge pressure. Primary school students, who were supposed to be studying happily, entered this competition way too early. In this deformed competition, the “Mathematical Olympiad” became the most important “weapon.”

In Shanghai, the measures to curb this trend only worked for a short time and in certain areas. Private schools, run under the elite school conglomerate that relies on demonstrative high schools, became the synonym of good schools. Several of those schools were popular among parents and were certainly the stars on the stage of the “transition to junior high.” The Shanghai municipal Department of Education issued a “ban on certificates” and promised that student enrollment would only ask for “The Handbook of Students Growth Record for Primary and Secondary School Students in Shanghai,” not students’ resumes, certificates or tests of any kind. The department also promised to strengthen surveillance and punish with a vengeance any school or person in charge that violates the regulation. However, the effects of this commitment were limited. During the school selection process of private schools, other forms of competition occurred, such as entrusting agencies to hold examinations in the name of activities, early-recruitment through entering “the fifth-grade class (小五班),” pre-enrollment and face-to-face talks (interviews). The “fifth-grade class” has become such a new focal point for parents that some training agencies’ classes were fully registered. Naturally, the Mathematical Olympiad became the “currency” for school selection.

In Chengdu, the test for the entrance of junior high schools, held by over ten private schools and set for the three days during the May 1st holiday, was dubbed as “small college entrance examination (‘小高考’).” Tens of thousands of parents and students sat for exams in different schools across the city, in which the Mathematical Olympiad was an important indicator. In spite of the repeated “ban on Mathematical Olympiad (‘禁奥令’),” there was no sign that its popularity was fading away. Though the time for the entrance of junior high schools was till six months away, primary school students already threw themselves into this heated competition. On November 18, 2012,