

Students in Hubei Province go to extremes to study beyond the point of exhaustion.



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Crunch time: Students in Guangdong Province taking the gaokao

At precisely 11:45 on a Sunday morning last spring, thousands of teenagers swarmed out of the front gate of Maotanchang High School. Many of them wore identical black-and-white jackets emblazoned with the slogan, in English, "I believe it, I can do it." Maotanchang High School is one of China's "cram schools"—a memorization factory where 20,000 students train around the clock for China's national college-entrance examination, known as the *gaokao*. In some ways, the *gaokao* is like the SAT or ACT, but it's more than twice

as long and the stakes are much higher: Given every June over several days, the test is the only thing that matters for admission to Chinese universities. For the students at Maotanchang, most of whom come from rural areas, the *gaokao* offers the promise of a life beyond the fields and the factories. Yang Wei, then a senior at Maotanchang, had spent the previous three years, weekends included, stumbling to his first class at 6:20 in the morning and returning to his room only after the end of his last class at 10:50 at night. With the *gaokao* just 69 days away, Yang had

entered the final, frenetic stretch. "If you connected all of the practice tests I've taken over the past three years," he said, "they would wrap all the way around the world." Even with all the relentless practice, Yang's scores were slipping—a fact that worried his mother, who lived with her son near the school. The rent on their tiny room was high, rivaling rates in downtown Beijing, and it represented only part of the sacrifice Yang's parents made to help him become the first in his family to attend college. Yang's father is a peach farmer in a village 45 minutes

away; his mother quit her garment-factory job to support Yang in his final year of cramming.

Yang's closest friend from his home village, Cao Yingsheng, was a classmate at Maotanchang. Cao's mother came to live with her son as well.

"It's a lot of pressure," said Cao. "My mother constantly reminds me that I have to study hard, because my father is out working construction far from home to pay my school fees." (Even public schools in China charge fees, but Maotanchang's are higher than is typical.)

The boys know that manual labor would be their fate too, if they failed to do well on the gaokao. Yang and Cao would have to join the ranks of China's 260 million migrant workers, who have left their homes in rural China in search of construction or factory jobs in the nation's booming coastal cities.

China's Economic Boom

China has come a long way since 1949, when Mao Zedong's Communist forces won a civil war over U.S.-backed Chiang Kai-shek and founded the People's Republic of China. Over the next three decades, the country endured great turmoil. By the time Mao died in 1976, China's economy was in ruins. His successor, Deng Xiaoping, introduced free-market reforms in 1978 that allowed private business and foreign investment—and led to three decades of explosive growth.

The results have been stunning. China is now the second largest economy in the world, behind the U.S., and the ranks of China's middle class have swelled. Despite growing prosperity, vast swaths of the country remain rural and very poor, and the question is whether those people will be able to grab a piece of China's new wealth.

With so much at stake, it's easy to see why the gaokao, taken by more than 9 million students each year, is such a big deal to young people. To Yang and Cao

despite its importance, the exam is essential to the nation's future. It is the only way to ensure that the best talent is being nurtured and put to use.



Students in Sichuan Province study for the *gaokao*.

Population

GDP

Size of Workforce

155.4 million

Number of Students Taking College Entrance Tests Annually

3.5 million
students taking SAT and/or ACT

Projected Share of World's College Graduates in 2020

pressure on students. Teenage suicide rates tend to rise as the gaokao nears. Two years ago, a student posted a shocking photograph online: a classroom full of students all hooked up to intravenous drips to give them the strength to keep studying. *(See photo, p. 121.)*

The government is pushing reforms to reduce student workloads and allow universities to consider factors other than gaokao scores. But these efforts have met resistance from many parents, who fear that easing the pressure could hurt their children's exam results and jeopardize their futures. Many wealthy families are simply opting out of the system, placing their children in private international schools in China or sending them abroad for an education.

But for those of limited means, like Yang, there is no alternative to the gaokao; a few points either way could determine whether he qualifies for a degree that could change his life—or nothing.

Rural students are at a severe disadvantage. Villages like Yuelin, where Yang is from, have poor schools and few well-trained teachers. Wealthy urban families can hire private tutors, pay for test-prep courses, or bribe their way into the best city schools. And rural students are allocated far fewer college-admissions spots than students from cities.

Maotanchang stepped in to fill this need. Located in Anhui province, two hours from the nearest city, the school

PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES/ALAMY

prides itself on eliminating the distractions of modern life. Cellphones and laptops are forbidden. The dorms, where about half the students live, have no electrical outlets. Dating is banned. In town, where the rest of the students live, mostly with their mothers in tiny partitioned rooms, the local government has shut down all forms of entertainment. This may be the only town in China with no video arcade, billiards hall, or Internet cafe.

"There's nothing to do but study," Yang says.

Frequent Punishments

Maotanchang is different than a typical Chinese high school only in the extreme degree of its harsh rules and long hours, but its curriculum is essentially the same: Everything taught in 10th and 11th grade is focused on what the gaokao tests—Chinese language, math, foreign language (usually English), and either social studies and literature or sciences. In 12th grade, students typically just review and memorize what they've already learned.

Maotanchang's teachers dole out lessons, and frequently punishments, with military rigor; their job security and bonuses depend on raising their students' test scores. Security guards roam the 165-acre campus in golf carts and on motorcycles, while surveillance cameras track students' movements.

This system gets results. In 2013, more

than 9,000 Maotanchang students—about 80 percent of those who took the exam—scored high enough to enter a university.

Maotanchang's most famous graduate is 19-year-old Xu Peng. He grew up as one of China's 60 million "left behind" children, raised by his grandparents while his parents worked as migrant fruit sellers in the distant city of Wuxi. Xu spun out of control in middle school—skipping classes, sneaking out with his friends, becoming obsessed with video games. After he blew his chance at getting into one of the region's best high schools, Xu turned to Maotanchang as a last resort.

"I only knew that the school was very strict, to the point that some students had supposedly committed suicide," he says. "That convinced me."

After arriving at Maotanchang, Xu decided that his teachers weren't strict enough. Xu filled every spare moment with study, testing himself between classes, on the toilet, in the cafeteria. After the lights went out at 11:30, he sometimes used a battery-powered lamp to keep going. By his third year, Xu's test scores

'There's nothing to do but study' at Maotanchang.



Yang Wei, a former student at Maotanchang High School

were at the top of his grade.

"My parents thought I was a maniac," he says. "But memorizing this material is like training for the Olympics. You have to keep up the momentum. Skip a day or two, and you can get off form."

The extra push might have helped: Xu scored 643 out of a possible (but never achieved) 750. That enabled him to get into Tsinghua University in Beijing, one of China's most prestigious schools. Its minimum admissions score for students from

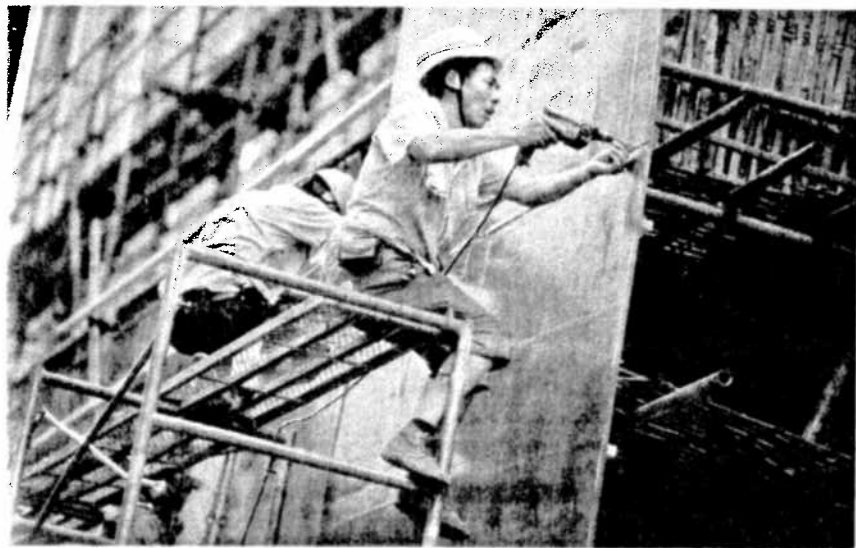
Anhui province taking the gaokao was 641. Xu made it by just two points, and is now an engineering major at Tsinghua.

Maotanchang students like Yang idolize Xu, who has inspired them to devote their young lives to the test. Yang's hard work has paid off. A few weeks after he took the gaokao last June, he learned his score and was ecstatic: It wasn't high enough to qualify for a first-tier university in Shanghai, but it would win him a spot at one of Anhui's best second-tier universities.

There's no guarantee he'll find a job when he graduates, but he does know one thing: His life will be different from his parents' lives.

Not all of the news was happy. Yang's childhood friend, Cao, tanked on the exam. Cao's family was heartbroken. His father had worked 12-hour days, 50 weeks a year, building high-rises in eastern China to pay the Maotanchang fees. His family couldn't afford a repeat year.

Cao really had just one option: manual labor. Days after learning he'd failed the gaokao, Cao left their home village to search for migrant work in China's glittering coastal cities. He would end up on a construction site, just like his father. •



That they're avoiding: Failing the gaokao likely means ending up in a factory or construction job.

Brook Larmer is a freelance writer based in Shanghai, China.