



High Stakes: Arriving for the nine-hour test in Suzhou

FAILURE IS NOT AN OPTION

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China's annual college entrance exam can make or break young lives

BY SHARON LAFRANIERE IN TIANJIN, CHINA

For the past year, Liu Qichao has focused on one thing, and only one thing: the *gaokao*, China's college entrance exam.

He studied 14 to 16 hours a day for the test, which will determine the fate of more than 9 million Chinese students this year. "I want to study until the last minute," says Liu, who's from Tianjin, in eastern China. "I really hope to be successful."

The *gaokao* (*gow-kow*) is in some ways like the SAT, but it's more than twice as long and the stakes are much

higher. The nine-hour test is offered once a year in the spring and is the sole **determinant** for admission to virtually all Chinese colleges and universities. About three in five students make the cut. Those who don't pass have to wait a year to retake the exam.

With China's economy booming and millions moving into the middle class, the nation now has more than 2,000 institutions of higher learning, about double the number in 2000. Close to 19 million students are enrolled in college, a sixfold jump in a decade. But there still aren't spots for everyone.

In a country where education is so highly prized, a student's score on the *gaokao* is believed to set the course of

one's life. The score determines not just whether a young person will attend a Chinese university, but also which one—a selection that has a huge influence on career prospects.

Oxygen & an Audi

Many schools in China set aside the final year of high school as a cram year for the test. Students and their families pull out all the stops to maximize scores. Last year in Sichuan Province in southwestern China, some students studied in a hospital, hooked up to oxygen containers, in hopes of improving their concentration. Some rich parents promise big rewards.

"My father even promised me, if I get

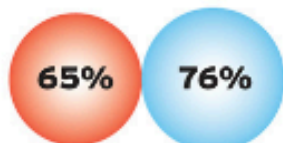
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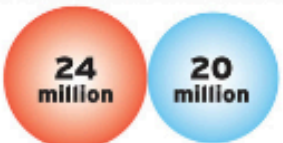
Side by Side

China vs. the U.S.

HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION RATES



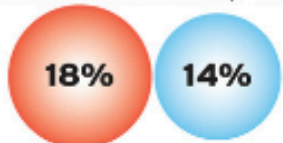
NUMBER OF STUDENTS ENROLLED IN COLLEGE OR GRADUATE SCHOOL



NUMBER OF COLLEGES/ UNIVERSITIES



SHARE OF WORLD'S COLLEGE GRADUATES, 2010



PROJECTED SHARE OF WORLD'S COLLEGE GRADUATES IN 2020



SOURCES: ORGANIZATION FOR ECONOMIC COOPERATION AND DEVELOPMENT; CHINA EDUCATION CENTER; U.S. CENSUS; NATIONAL CENTER FOR EDUCATION STATISTICS; THE CENTER FOR AMERICAN PROGRESS; CENTER FOR THE NEXT GENERATION



Parents keep vigil outside a test site in Beijing (above); monitoring exam-takers in Sichuan Province (below).



into a college like Nankai University in Tianjin, 'I'll give you a prize, an Audi,'" says 17-year-old Chen Qiong.

Some resort to cheating. One father equipped a student with a miniscanner and had nine teachers on standby to provide answers.

Outside the exam, parents keep vigil for hours, as anxious as husbands waiting for their wives to give birth. A tardy arrival is disastrous. In 2007, a student arriving four minutes late was turned away, even after she and her mother knelt before the exam proctor, begging for leniency.

Critics of the gaokao complain that the test reflects the flaws in an education

system that stresses memorization over independent thinking. Educators also say that rural students are at a disadvantage because an admissions quota system favors residents of big cities.

A nine-hour test that determines everything

Standardized testing is common throughout the world, and students and parents in nations like the U.S., Britain, and France also complain loudly about the weight that college admissions committees place on such tests.

But the admissions process in those countries is still considered much more flexible than that in Asian nations. The emphasis on entrance exams in China,

South Korea, and Japan induces widespread fear and frustration, leading more and more parents from elite families to look for alternatives, like sending their children to colleges abroad.

For Chinese students, the stress can be overwhelming.

"Sometimes it was pressure from my family, sometimes it was the expectations from my teacher, sometimes it was pressure from myself," says Zhao Xiang, a high school graduate from Guizhou Province. "I was constantly in a really bad mood in the period before the gaokao." •

Sharon LaFraniere covered China for *The Times*; additional reporting by Edward Wong.