COVER STORY

Students desperate to pass China’s do-or-die college entrance exam flock to schools that eliminate all distractions with military precision

BY BROOK LARMER

Watch a video on the gaokao

Intravenous Drips: Students in Hubei Province go to extremes to study beyond the point of exhaustion.
At exactly 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 with the slogan, in English, “I believe it, I can do it.”

Maotanchang High School is one of China’s “cram schools.” These schools are memorization factories, 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. The test is given every June over several days. It’s the only thing that counts for admission to Chinese universities.

Most of the students at Maotanchang come from rural areas. The gaokao offers them the promise of a life beyond the fields and the factories.

Yang Wei, then a 12th-grader 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, hectic 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 nonstop practice, Yang’s scores were slipping. That worried his mother, who moved near the school to be with Yang. The rent on their tiny room was high, rivaling rates in downtown Beijing. But that 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
coming under fire in China. Its critics say it limits creativity and puts too much pressure on students. Teenage suicide rates tend to rise as the gaokao nears. Two years ago, a student posted a shocking photograph online that showed a classroom full of students all hooked up to intravenous drips to give them the strength to keep studying (see photo, p. 12).

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 threaten 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 have a huge disadvantage. Villages like Yuejin, 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 there are far fewer college-admissions spots set aside for rural students than for students from cities.

Maotanchang stepped in to fill this 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 attended Maotanchang with Cao Yingsheng, his closest friend from his home village. 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.)

The boys knew 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. These workers leave 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. That year, 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 suffering. Mao died in 1976. By that year, China’s economy was in ruins. His successor, Deng Xiaoping, introduced free-market reforms in 1978. Those reforms 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. The ranks of China’s middle class have also swelled. But despite growing prosperity, large parts of the country remain rural and very poor. Now 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 is such a big deal to young people like Yang and Cao. More than 9 million students take the test each year.

Despite its importance, the exam is
need. It’s located in Anhui province, two hours from the nearest city. And the school 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 sectioned-off 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 has harsher rules and longer hours than typical Chinese high schools. But its curriculum is essentially the same. All 10th- and 11th-graders in China study Chinese language, math, foreign language (usually English), and either social studies and literature or sciences—subjects on the gaokao exam. In 12th grade, students typically just review and memorize what they’ve already learned.

Maotanchang’s teachers give 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 scored high enough to enter a university. That’s about 80 percent of the school’s students who took the exam.

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. He skipped classes, snuck out with his friends, and became 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, and 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 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 thrilled. 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 that 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’s only option was manual labor. Days after learning he 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.

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