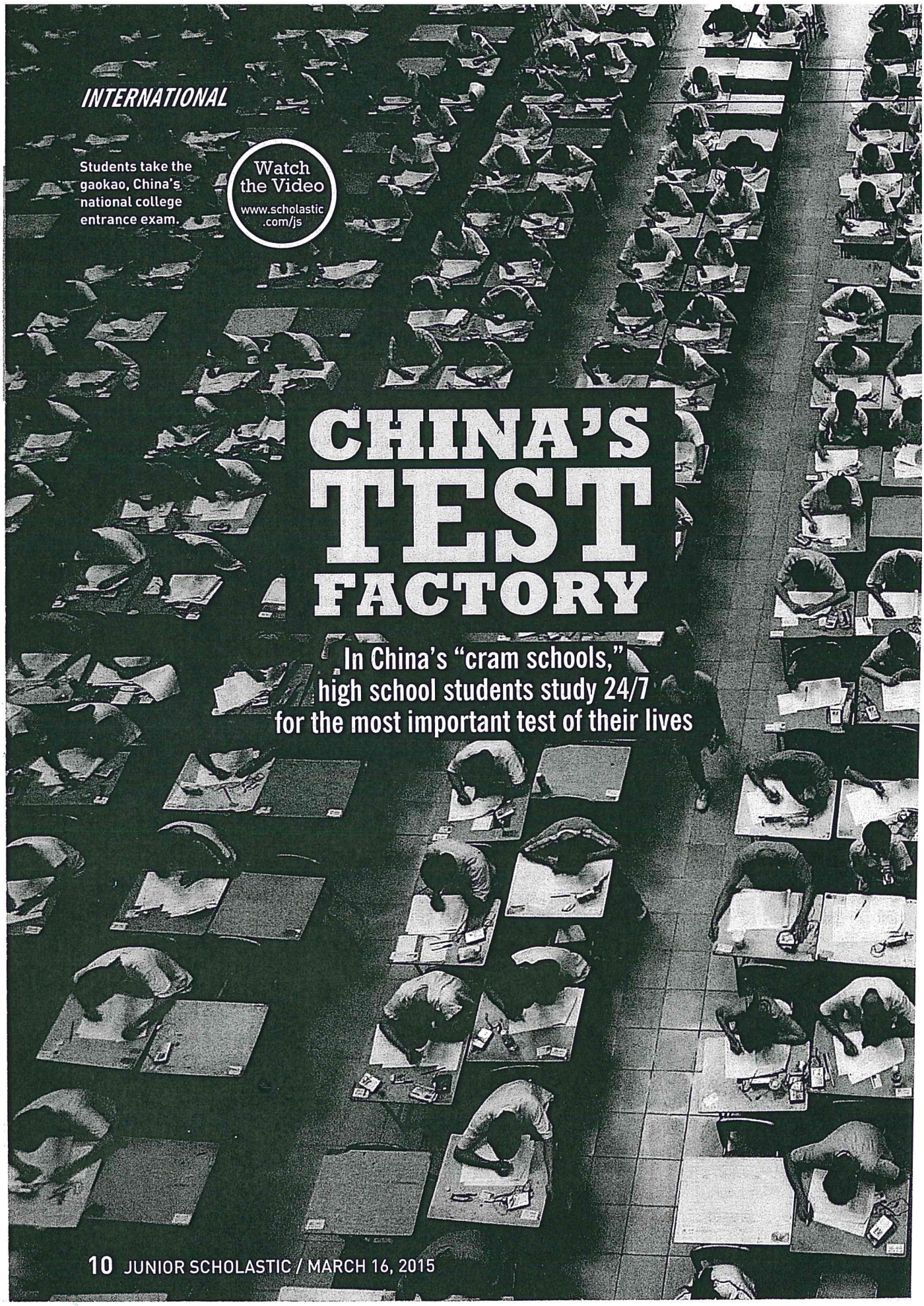


Students take the gaokao, China's national college entrance exam.

Watch the Video
www.scholastic.com/js

CHINA'S TEST FACTORY

In China's "cram schools," high school students study 24/7 for the most important test of their lives

At 11:45 on a Sunday morning last spring, thousands of teens swarmed out of the gate of Maotanchang High School, located in China's Anhui *(ahn-hway)* province. Many of them wore 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"—it's a memorization factory where 20,000 students train around the clock for China's national college-entrance examination, known as the *gaokao (gow-kow)*. In some ways, the gaokao is like America's college-entrance exams—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 chance for a life beyond working in a factory or on a farm.

Yang Wei, a 12th-grader last spring at Maotanchang, had spent the previous three years—weekends included—stumbling to his first class at 6:20 a.m. and returning to his room after his last class at 10:50 at night. With the gaokao just 69 days away, Yang had entered the final stretch.

CHINA DAILY/REUTERS (CLASSROOM); SIM CHI YIN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES MAGAZINE (PRAYING)

Mothers pray for their kids who are cramming for the test at Maotanchang High School.

"If you connected all of the practice tests I've taken over the past three years," he says, "they would wrap all the way around the world."

Yang lived with his mother near the school. The rent for their tiny room was very high, 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 job in a garment factory to be with him for his final year of cramming.

> "IF YOU CONNECTED ALL OF THE PRACTICE TESTS I'VE TAKEN OVER THE PAST THREE YEARS, THEY WOULD WRAP ALL THE WAY AROUND THE WORLD."
> —YANG WEI

Yang knew that if he didn't do well on the gaokao, manual labor would be his fate too. He would have to join the ranks of China's 260 million **migrant** workers, who have left their rural homes in search of construction or factory jobs in China's booming coastal cities.

An Economic Boom

China has come a long way since 1949, when Mao Zedong's Communist forces 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 *(dung shee-owping)*, introduced **free-market** reforms (changes) in 1978 that allowed private business and foreign investment—and led to three decades of explosive growth.

China's economy is now the largest in the world, and the ranks of its middle class have swollen. Despite growing prosperity, vast sections of the country remain poor. The question now is whether those people will be able to grab a piece of China's new wealth.

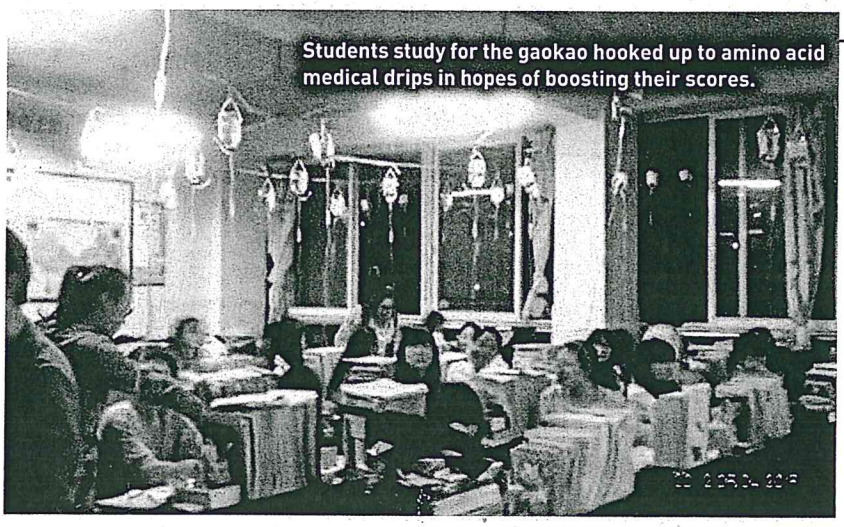
With so much at stake, it's easy to see why the gaokao, taken by more than 9 million students each year, is such a big deal.

However, the gaokao is coming under fire in China. Critics say it puts excessive pressure on students. Two years ago, a student posted a shocking photograph

continued on p. 12

Words to Know

- **migrant** *(adj)*: relating to a person who regularly moves from place to place to find work
- **free-market** *(adj)*: relating to an economy in which buyers and sellers can do business freely



Students study for the gaokao hooked up to amino acid medical drips in hopes of boosting their scores.

online: a classroom full of students all hooked up to intravenous drips to give them the strength to keep studying.

The government is pushing reforms to reduce student workloads and allow universities to consider factors other than gaokao scores. American universities, for example, also consider grades and after-school activities. But many Chinese parents fear that easing the pressure could hurt their children's exam results and jeopardize their futures.

Yang's parents continued to push him. Getting a good score on the gaokao is critical—a few points either way can determine which university a student gets into. However, in rural villages like Yuejin, where Yang is from, high schools are poor and there are few well-trained teachers.

YOUR TURN

How do your study habits compare with those of students in China who cram for the gaokao? Explain your answer.

"Nothing to Do But Study"

Maotanchang provides an alternative. Located in rural eastern China, the school prides itself on eliminating distractions. The dorms, where half the students live, have no electrical outlets. In town, where the rest of the students live, mostly with their mothers in tiny rooms, the local government has shut down all forms of entertainment. This may be one of the few large towns in China with no Internet cafe.

"MEMORIZING THIS MATERIAL IS LIKE TRAINING FOR THE OLYMPICS. YOU HAVE TO KEEP UP THE MOMENTUM." —XU PENG

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

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

Teachers at Maotanchang are more strict, and they get 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.

The school's most famous graduate is 19-year-old Xu Peng. He was raised by his grandparents while his parents worked as migrant fruit sellers in the city of Wuxi. Xu spun out of control in middle school—skipping classes and 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.

At Maotanchang, Xu studied during every spare moment. By his third year, his scores were at the top of his grade.

"Memorizing this material is like training for the Olympics," Xu says. "You have to keep up the momentum."

Studying at Maotanchang might have helped: Xu scored 643 out of a possible 750. He was accepted to the prestigious Tsinghua University in Beijing, China's capital, and now studies engineering.

Like many of his Maotanchang peers, Yang idolized Xu, drawing hope from his success. Yang's hard work 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 get him into one of Anhui province's best second-tier schools.

There's still no guarantee that Yang will find a job when he graduates, but he knows his life will be different from that of his parents.

—Brook Larmer for
The New York Time