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## Biggest competition in China: Exam time In a single-child culture, family hopes weigh heavily on 4.5 million test takers

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**Abstract:** Clearly, it's [Chang Wenyi] who would lose face if her boy cocks this up. But failure is unlikely. Chinese high school students are relentlessly drilled on the curriculum in preparation for the exams. Unlike Canadian schools, where high schoolers are graded largely on work performed over the entirety of a term, with final exams accounting for a portion of the final mark, Chinese students live and die by their performance in these entrance ordeals. Though not as torturous an experience as in, say, Japan, where the suicide rate for petrified teenagers skyrockets at this time of the year, the college entrance examination is a laborious rite of passage for Chinese adolescents. It's all terribly wearying. The standardized examination begins with a broadcast section, with students expected to recognize fact from fallacy, a sort of video true-or-false quiz. That's followed by reading comprehension and the written part of the examination, including essays on various subjects. Science students are tested on science, math, physics, chemistry and English; liberal arts students get history, math, political science, Chinese literature and English. And phys. ed., of course, for everybody, which doesn't count as a credit but is mandatory. FUELLING DREAMS: A worker dumps debris into a cart in front of a mural of the Olympic flame on a construction fence in Beijing. Standing between millions of Chinese and the prospect of such menial labour are tough entrance exams that determine who gets into university.; NG HAM GUAN/AP

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**Full Text:** Note AT THE NO. 35 middle school, fretful parents hover about the entrance, wringing their hands and offering words of encouragement to one another. They pace, they smoke, they gnaw at assorted snacks pulled from plastic carryalls. And every few minutes they look up anxiously toward the classroom windows. No calamity has occurred on this overcast morning to draw all these parents to No. 35 not an accident or fire, not the type of school shooting that has become all too common in the West, nothing like that. Yet there is a palpable sense of dread in the environment, as thick and heavy as the smog-choked air. This is the most important day in the young lives of the students bent over their desks inside No. 35 and so also for their families. It is the season of the national college entrance examinations. "I am so nervous for my son," says Chang Wenyi, who can recall her own high anxiety in similar circumstances 20 years ago. "He's been studying so hard for months. His father and I have gone over all the work with him. We've hired a tutor. But who knows how he will respond to the pressure of the examination? Maybe he'll forget something, freeze up in his head. And then what? Try all over again in a year? He would be so ashamed." Clearly, it's Chang who would lose face if her boy cocks this up. But failure is unlikely. Chinese high school students are relentlessly drilled on the curriculum in preparation for the exams. Unlike Canadian schools, where high schoolers are graded largely on work performed over the entirety of a term, with final exams accounting for a portion of the final mark, Chinese students live and die by their performance in these entrance ordeals. Though not as torturous an experience as in, say, Japan, where the suicide rate for petrified teenagers skyrockets at this time of the year, the college entrance examination is a laborious rite of passage for Chinese adolescents. Doing well here, spectacularly well, will determine who gains entry into the country's top colleges and universities, thereby increasing the possibility of obtaining a good job afterward. It's a ruthless selection process. Over the past three days, according to the Ministry of Education, more than 4.53 million applicants nationwide have been sitting for the

examinations, which run from 7 to 9 a.m., in China's upper middle schools. That's 650,000 more than took the test last year. At most schools, at least some of the students' parents have come along to wait out the procedure, although they're not allowed inside. As if this weren't tough enough on the kids already. However, in a society of one-child families as prescribed by law, though somewhat eased these days no parent can afford to raise a dud scholar. There are no second chances. One child, one opportunity for parents to get it right. "It is a very worrying time for us," admits Jing Huikzhong, an assistant hotel manager who passed the examination with flying colours in another era, going on to study accounting at Beijing University. Now he can only watch helplessly as his daughter goes through the same rigours. Watch and wait. "If you want to have a good life, make money, you must have a university degree. There is much opportunity now in China, but it's very, very competitive. We are such a big country, but there are only so many professional positions available." Ouyang Guang, an English teacher at No. 35 for more than two decades, comes outside to speak with a visitor. Immediately, the parents descend upon him, firing questions. How are they doing? How much longer? The 47-year-old Ouyang has been through this many times before and knows the ropes. These parents won't get any insider information from him. In fact, he disapproves of the adults hanging around. It's somewhat of an embarrassment for their children and an added pressure, especially for those who can see their moms and dads through the window. They try not to look. They try to stay focused. And it's all terribly wearying. The standardized examination begins with a broadcast section, with students expected to recognize fact from fallacy, a sort of video true-or-false quiz. That's followed by reading comprehension and the written part of the examination, including essays on various subjects. Science students are tested on science, math, physics, chemistry and English; liberal arts students get history, math, political science, Chinese literature and English. And phys. ed., of course, for everybody, which doesn't count as a credit but is mandatory. "I'm not concerned about my students," says Ouyang. "At this school, I'm predicting 100 per cent success. I don't think anyone will fail." Imagine Ontario teachers feeling just as confident about their charges. This year, for the first time, about 16,000 of those taking the exam are older than 25. Ten that's 10 from all across this nation of 1.3 billion are over 60. The oldest test taker is 73. Previously, anyone 25 or older was prohibited from taking the exam, though students younger than that could sit for the test as often as required before passing until they hit the quarter-century mark. But the education ministry lifted both age and marital status restrictions. Said Qu Zhenyuan, director of the Department for College Students' Affairs: "Removing the restrictions on age and marital status is a big reform step for the higher education sector. The reform is significant for the public." The government is also in the early stages of reforming the system to make higher education more affordable and less uniform, shifting toward diversified testing. A new loan system was introduced in 1999 for cash-strapped students. (University education was free to everyone until 1992.) They're required to repay the loans within four years of graduation and are responsible for only half of the interest rate, with the remainder picked up by the state. Because many students were not getting their loans on time, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Finance have stepped in to monitor loans obtained from the banks. A month ago, the two ministries held a conference with China's four major banks to discuss how better to help poor students, primarily those from the more impoverished western regions of the country. As well, the central government has undertaken considerable efforts to make college life more tolerable for all students. It's largely forgotten now, but the Tiananmen Square demonstrations in 1989 originally were begun by students protesting the low quality of their university education and the crowded conditions of their dormitories. It was after workers and professionals joined the protests that the focus shifted to broader issues of corruption and inflation. But Tiananmen is not within the memory recall of the students sitting for examinations today. It's not a subject they're taught in history class. And it's not on the examination. Rosie DiManno usually appears Monday, Wednesday, Friday and Saturday. E-mail: dimanno@hotmail.net Illustration Caption: FUELLING DREAMS: A worker dumps debris into a cart in front of a mural of the Olympic flame on a construction fence in Beijing. Standing between millions of Chinese and the prospect of such menial labour are tough entrance exams that determine who gets into

university.; NG HAM GUAN/AP

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