Coddled from infancy and raised to be academic machines, China’s only children expect the world. Now they’re buckling under the pressure of their parents’ deferred dreams.

BY TAYLOR CLARK | ILLUSTRATIONS BY BRIAN CRONIN
When Dawei Liu was growing up in the coastal city of Tai'an during the 1990s, all of his classmates—95 percent of whom were only children—received plenty of doting parental support. One student, however, truly stood out from the rest. Every day, this boy went from class to class with an entourage of one: his mother, who had given up the income of her day job to monitor his studies full-time, sitting beside him constantly in order to ensure perfect attention. “The teacher was OK with it,” Liu shrugs. “He might not focus as much on class if his parent wasn’t there.”

Across China, stories of parents going to incredible lengths to give their only children a competitive edge have become commonplace. Throughout Jing Zhang’s youth in Beijing, her parents took her to weekly résumé-boosting painting classes, waiting outside the school building for two hours each time, even in winter. Yanming Lin enjoyed perfect silence in her family’s one-room Shanghai apartment throughout her five-plus years of nightly homework; besides nixing the television, her mother kept perpetual watch over her to make sure she stayed on task. “By high school, my parents knew I could control myself and only do homework,” Lin says. “Because I knew the situation.”

The situation for urban young people in today’s China, from preschoolers on up, is this: Your entire future hinges on one test, the national college entrance exam—China’s magnified version of the SAT. The Chinese call it gao kao, or “tall test,” because it looms so large. If students do well, they win spots at China’s top universities and an easy route to a middle-class lifestyle. If not, they must confront the kind of tough, blue-collar lives their parents faced. With such high stakes, families dedicate themselves to their child’s test prep virtually from infancy. “Many people come home to have dinner and then study until bed,” says Liu. “You have to do it to go to the best university and get a good job. You must do this to live.”

Yu Wang’s parents scraped together the money to buy a sheep and kept it outside the city. Every day, Wang’s father cycled 40 minutes to fetch fresh milk for his son.

When China began limiting couples to one child 30 years ago, the policy’s most obvious goal was to contain a mushrooming population. For the Chinese people, however, the policy’s greater purpose was to turn out a group of young elites who would each enjoy the undivided resources of their whole family—the so-called xiao huangdi or “little emperors.” The plan was to “produce a generation of high-quality children to facilitate China’s introduction as a global power,” explains Susan Greenhalgh, an expert on the policy. But while these well-educated, driven achievers are fueling the nation’s economic boom, their generation has become too modern too quickly, glutted as it is with televisions, access to computers, cash to buy name brands, and the same expectations of middle-class success as Western kids.

The shift in temperament has happened too fast for society to handle. China is still a developing nation with limited opportunity, leaving millions of ambitious little emperors out in the cold; the country now churns out more than 4 million university graduates yearly, but only 1.6 million new college-level jobs. Even the strivers end up as security guards. China may be the world’s next great superpower, but it’s facing a looming crisis as millions of overpressurized, hypereducated only children come of age in a nation that can’t fulfill their expectations.
This culture of pressure and frustration has sparked a mental-health crisis for young Chinese. Many simmer in depression or unemployment, unwilling to take jobs they consider beneath them. Millions, afraid to face the real world, escape into video games, which the government considers a national epidemic. And a disturbing number decide to end it all; suicide is now China's leading cause of death for those aged 20 to 35. “People in China—especially parents and college students—are suddenly becoming aware of huge depression and anxiety problems in young people,” says Yu Zeng, a 23-year-old from Sichuan province. “The media report on new campus suicides all the time.”

“In this generation, every child is raised to be at the top,” says Vanessa Fong, a Harvard education professor and author of *Only Hope: Coming of Age under China’s One-Child Policy*. “They’ve worked hard for it, and it’s what their parents have focused their lives on. But the problem is that the country can’t provide the lifestyle they feel they deserve. Only a few will get it.” China’s accomplished young elites are celebrated on billboards as the vanguard of the nation, yet they’re quickly becoming victims of their own lofty expectations.

BRINGING UP A HIGH-ACHIEVING CHILD IN A CROWDED AND IMPOVERISHED CITY LIKE HOHOT, PARENTS SOMETIMES HAVE TO GET CREATIVE. Since the government issued minuscule rations of milk, for instance, Yu Wang’s parents scraped together the money to buy a sheep and kept it with relatives outside the city. Every day, Wang’s father cycled 40 minutes to fetch fresh milk for his son. Out of his parents’ meager monthly salary of 45 RMB (about $6), 35 RMB went to Wang’s education—including a packed slate of piano, painting, guitar, and even dancing classes.

The pressure to succeed was all the greater given that his parents’ own dreams had been dashed during China’s Cultural Revolution, when Mao Zedong closed schools and sent difficult-to-control intellectuals to be “reeducated” by working the fields. Wang’s father spent eight years herding goats. His own dreams destroyed, he poured all his hopes and ambitions into his son. “Because of the Cultural Revolution, my parents literally wasted 10 years,” explains Wang, 29, who was among the first Chinese only kids born under the one-
child policy. “I was explicitly told that they had lost a lot in their lives, so they wanted me to get it back for them.”

In recent years, however, Chinese parents have sometimes blurred the line between sacrifice and slavery in aiding their child’s success: Mothers carry their child’s backpack around; couples forgo lunch so their kid can have plentiful snacks or new Nikes. Vanessa Fong recalls meeting one mother who resisted hospitalization for her heart and kidney troubles because she feared it might interfere with her daughter’s gao kao preparation; when Fong gave the mother money for medication, it mostly went to expensive food for her daughter.

Parents go to such lengths in part because Chinese culture has always emphasized success, but also for a more pressing reason: Traditionally, children support their parents in old age. With only one child to carry the load, parents’ fortunes are tied to their child’s, and they push (and pamper) the little ones accordingly. “In China, the term for a one-child family is a ‘risky family,’” says Baochang Gu, a demography professor at Beijing’s Renmin University who advises the Chinese government on the one-child policy. “If something happened to that child, it would be a disaster. So from the parents’ point of view, the spoiling is all necessary to protect them.”

Since the policy’s inception, the Chinese have worried that the extreme combination of discipline and indulgence would result in maladjusted kids, self-centered redbrats who can’t take criticism and don’t understand sharing. Asked if he wished he’d had siblings, one 22-year-old from Sichuan province replied, “Does this mean everything I have would have to be cut in half for shared? No, I don’t want that.”

Yet despite the stereotype, the research has revealed no evidence that only kids have more negative traits than their peers with siblings—in China or anywhere else. “The only way only children are reliably different from others is they score slightly higher in academic achievement,” explains Toni Falbo, a University of Texas psychology professor who has gathered data on more than 4,000 Chinese only kids. Sure, some little emperors are bratty, but no more than children with siblings.

This isn’t to say Chinese only kids are pictures of mental health—it’s just that their psychological issues stem not from a lack of siblings but from the harsh academic competition and parental prodding that pervade their lives. Susan Newman, a New Jersey psychologist and only-child expert, says the notion that little emperors are bossy, self-obsessed little brats is simply part of the greater myth of only kids as damaged goods. “Pinning their problems on having no siblings is really making them a scapegoat,” she says. Being an only child is not the problem.

Chinese parents bemoan their only child’s desire for instant gratification, excessive consumption, and a life free of hardship, but such complaints are just proof that the policy worked: The children are like little Americans. “These kids have the same dreams as all middle-class kids: to go to college, to get white collar jobs, to own their own home, to have Nikes and name brands,” says Fong. “They expect things that are normal in developed countries, but by China’s standards, are unheard of.”

Yu Zeng remembers hearing of the first suicide at his school in 2005, when he was a junior at Sichuan University. By the next year, three more of his classmates had leapt to their deaths from campus buildings, and Zeng noticed a wave of news stories about suicides—all of them for a similar, perplexing reason. “It was after they got a bad grade on a test,” Zeng says. “They think to die is better than to have that bad mark.”

In the pressurized world of Chinese academics, any setback can seem fatal. Last January, for example, one 17-year-old Beijing girl tried to kill herself after learning that a paperwork snafu might prevent her from registering for the gao kao. Suicide has become China’s fifth most common cause of death overall, with young urban intellectuals at highest risk. A recent study by the Society Survey Institute of China

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concluded that over 25 percent of university students have had suicidal thoughts, compared to 6 percent in the United States.

The number of Chinese college graduates per year has nearly tripled in the last half-decade—from 1.5 million in 2002 to 4.1 million in 2007—which means more than 2 million grads a year end up with expensive diplomas, but no job. With so few top positions available and so many seekers, urban only children must study constantly just to have a shot. Out of Yan-ning Lin’s five hours of schoolwork per night, four hours went to “voluntary” homework designed to boost test scores. “That one grade becomes the only standard to justify you as a person,” says Zeng. “If you have a good personality or maybe you’re good in math but not Chinese, all of that is your downfall, because it’s all about your grade.”

The extra homework is not required by the teacher, explains Lin. “But all the other students do the extra homework, so if you do not do it you will lag behind.” At one top Beijing kindergarten, students must know pi to 100 digits by age 3.

Many young only children opt for escape from reality through online gaming. Every day, the nation’s 113,000 Internet cafés teem with twitchy, solitary players—high school and university students, dropouts and unemployed graduates—an alarming number of whom remain in place for days without food or sleep. Official estimates put the number of Chinese Internet addicts at over 2 million, and the government considers it such a serious threat that it deploys volunteer groups to prowl the streets and prevent teens from entering Internet cafés.

The mostly male youth who turn to virtual realms find there a place to realize ambitions that are frust rated in real life, says Kimberly Young, a psychologist and Internet addiction expert who has advised Chinese therapists. “With the click of a button, they go from a 19-year-old with no social life to a great warrior in World of Warcraft,” Young says. “Why bother doing things in the real world when they can be in this game and be fulfilled?” Burnt-out and overtaxed, even kids who did well on the gao kao turn into virtual dropouts, choosing the respite of computer games over the university spots they worked so hard to win. Without a parent to push them, many stop going to class. “In Chinese universities, so many just give up,” says Howe, a college student from Chengdu.

Faced with bleak prospects, elite only children often don’t know how to cope; they’ve been brought up to do only one thing: succeed. Indeed, in a 2007 survey on stress in young people by the Chinese Internet portal Sina.com, most respondents—56 percent—blamed their misery on the gap between China’s developing-world reality and their own high expectations. “They have trouble adjusting to the idea that they’re going to be working-class,” says Fong.

FOR THE FRUSTRATED, depressed, and anxious Chinese kids buckling under the constant pressure—the news agency Xinhua estimates there are 30 million Chinese under 17 with significant mental-health problems—finding someone to talk to can be tough. Taught to strive and achieve from an early age, they’ve never had the time for heart-to-heart chats. “It’s not like American universities where you have many friends,” says Yu Zeng. “At Chinese universities, you compete for limited resources and everyone is concerned about themselves. And if you wanted to talk to your parents, they wouldn’t understand. When they were your age, they were reading Mao’s little red book.” Plus, the conversation would be strained even if you did find a sympathetic ear. “In the 20th century, the term ‘depression’ didn’t even exist in China,” Toni Falbo says. “It couldn’t be talked about because there was no vocabulary for it yet.”

Nor is professional help readily available. When Mao cracked down on intellectuals during the Cultural Revolution, he decimated the nation’s already thin psychological establishment. “Back then, every mental problem was seen as anti-socialist,” says Kaiping Peng, a University of California Berkeley professor who was among the first generation of Chinese psychologists to receive formal clinical training, in the late 1970s. “If you’re depressed, they thought you were politically impure and sent you to a labor camp.” For decades, Chinese psychiatrists dealt exclusively in pills and electroshock, and until recently, China had just a handful of university psychology programs—which is why Peng believes there are only about 2,000 qualified therapists at work there today for a population of 1.3 billion.

But as universities work to churn out qualified psychologists and as teens and twentysomethings realize they need more help with their unrealistic expectations than with their grades, Peng grows optimistic. “People in China have more knowledge about mental health today,” he says. “Now there are books and popular magazines about it, and the training infrastructure gets better all the time.” Cities are also experimenting with crisis hotlines. China’s inaugural suicide-prevention line debuted in 2003; it received more than 220,000 calls over its first two years.

Meanwhile, Chinese officials are taking steps to ease the pressure on young students. Schools no longer publicly announce