

# THE CHINA LETTER

## To Be Young in China

“The University here is lazy,” Bella mumbles, waiting at the front of a line that snakes around Suzhou University library. It’s a cold morning and she is wearing exactly 45% of her closet: five thick layers. Bella is 23 and has devoted this year after graduating from college solely to study. She wants to go to graduate school, and good scores on a test are her only ticket. Thin like a willow and just as common—her personal description—Bella blends seamlessly into the crowd of Chinese college students. She exudes a kindness that could be mistaken for meekness, her smile warm and bright. After hearing the vigor with which she talks about her future, that mistake cannot be made twice. “Our high school library opened earlier than this. Do they not want us to succeed here?” Finally, at 6:45 AM someone comes to open the doors. Bella races to secure her usual seat with the same five students that join her daily at a table for six in a library filled with hundreds.

Like nearly all of her peers, Bella is a single child. She belongs to the generation 九零后 pronounced *jiulinghou*. It translates to *Born after '90*. Her generation will be in charge of pivoting China towards a new direction of economic, political, environmental, and social stability.

When she was growing up, Western media dubbed her and her generation of single children “Little Emperors.” Now grown up, the combination of family pressure and a cutthroat competitive system makes these only children’s lives far from royal. With the odds of success

stacked high against them and the stakes of failure focused singly on their shoulders, for these so-called “Little Emperors,” heavy hangs the head that wears the crown.

This dispatch will look closer at what it takes to succeed while being young and Chinese, and how and why this young generation is more diligent and hardworking than most any other in the world.

Each month, Bella spends over 300 hours in the Suzhou University Library. That is just under 80 hours per week, more than ten hours per day. Her seat is demarcated by a small bulwark of books shielding her from the other five students at her table - nearly all of whom also spend more than ten hours each day immersed in study. The library is always full, packed with tables loaded with students and books. Once, after seeing one student consistently occupy the seat next to her, I asked Bella what he was studying. “Economics.” Anyone could take this in at a glance based on the bricks of his book fortress. And his name? “I don’t know. We have never spoken.” In response to my confused look, Bella rejoins, “I’m here to study, remember?”

To be young in China means to bear enormous pressure to succeed, to get ahead, to make something of yourself. Mao’s Cultural Revolution notwithstanding, China has long prized education for its immeasurable value to society. When higher education became widely available in the ‘80s and ‘90s, China eagerly integrated university

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*One of a series of occasional letters from The Dilenschneider Group about Chinese culture. This was prepared by Zak Dychtwald, a recent Columbia University graduate currently residing in Chengdu, Sichuan where he is writing a book about China’s new youth generation titled *Jiu Ling Hou (Born After 1990)*.*

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into their aspirations. For single children like Bella, each family's hopes and expectations are invested in their child. Also similar to Bella, most recent grads are the first in their family to have ever attended college. Add to that the fact that the traditional Chinese retirement package relies heavily on the financial support of children. Plus, China's current demographic spread creates a family structure of four grandparents, two parents, and one child—the 4-2-1 phenomenon. Like an inverted pyramid, the weight of supporting elders weighs acutely on the single children. Combine this with the centrality of China's education system in the formula for success and the difficulty of getting into a good school, life for these "Little Emperors" is a pressure cooker. The expectations can be smothering.

Fulfilling those expectations means fighting terrible odds. This year China's colleges will graduate over seven million students. In 1999, only one million graduated. What many people around the world don't realize is that job creation for college graduates in China is far too low, particularly jobs whose wages keep pace with the escalating costs of urbanization. China's modern economy formed around a population that, in 1975, only had 11% of the adult population *high school*-educated. They started by making the world's shirts, doing rote manufacturing and other low-skill careers.

China's *jiulinghou* will not be making shirts. However, today the job market for college graduates is overcrowded with ambitious candidates who cannot get jobs that match their skills and hopes—or their families' expectations and financial needs. What these expectations create is a culture of study, commitment, and grind—all starting at a very young age.

Commitment to study starts young. While in high school, Bella could be found in her high school library as early as 5:30 until after midnight every night. Five hours of sleep and a 15+ hour study schedule are a common story across high schools in China. With just one way to get into college—China's infamous 高考 *gaokao*, the college-entrance exam—Chinese spend much of their youth preparing to take the test that will define their future.

In fact, a high test score is the only road to a good college. Here you do not "get into college"; you 考上, *kaoshang*, "test in." Extreme cases of study frenzy show students hooked up to IVs for sustained energy, oxygen tanks for better memorization, and, without fail, spikes in suicide rates as test results are released in late June. Leadership qualities, extracurricular activities, community service—these don't matter at all. An intense three-day test analyzes the first 15 years of academic rigor in a Chinese student's life. Have a bad three days and risk your future.

The odds are painful. Tsinghua University and Beijing University are China's top two universities. Admission rates are staggeringly low. For example, if you are a resident of Beijing, these two universities collectively will accept 82 out of 10,000 from your city: .82%. Beijingers have it the easiest. If you are from Guangdong province, home to megacities Guangzhou and Shenzhen, Beijing and Tsinghua will collectively accept only two out of 10,000: .02%.

The pressure cannot be expressed in words, but a silent library packed with 16-year-old high school juniors late on a Friday night can start to tell the story. In high school, Bella was not on any after-school sports teams. She did not sit on a student council nor she did she hang out at the movie

theater after school. Bella studied. By Bella's side at all times throughout her years as a student were the people she had to beat to get ahead—her competition. And make no mistake: everyone understands that.

Bella is quick, creative, driven, and a great person to work with—intangibles that Chinese tests overlook. With an accountant's precision, she stretches her meager budget she earned at a summer job, supplemented by her parents to extend her studying time and increase her chances of acceptance. While attending Suzhou University, Bella lives on a bottom bunk in a small room underneath a bridge not far from the college campus, which she shares with five other girls. It has no bathroom, and there is only a shared sink in the hall. If she wants to shower, she washes in a building ten minutes away in a large, communal shower hall. When it snows in winter, she just washes her hair in a plastic tub with water she boils in a teapot. With no heat inside, she wears much of her wardrobe to bed. It could be called monkish were it not that most every student in China lives similarly.

Finally, after a year of preparation, Bella took the test that would allow her to attend graduate school. Out of 1,000 students taking the test, only three will be accepted into the program she wanted. She is the first of her lineage to attend college and her parents are hopeful that she will succeed.

She told me she tried her very best on the test. Yet, after months of 80 hour weeks in the library, waking up and going home in the dark, sacrificing sleep, comfort, friendship and fun, Bella's score was short by three points. Bella will not be going to graduate school.

There is much talk about China's youth as the "Little Emperors and Empresses." People imagine that they are spoiled, single-children, over-doted upon by their four grandparents and two parents that typify a modern Chinese family. However, with the level of competition, terrible odds of success, and extreme familial pressure to succeed, a punishing culture of testing and study has formed and quickly become the norm. People rant against the standardized testing culture, but how else does a country assess nine million a year?

A generation of diligent, hard-working, but pressure-worn young people is emerging unlike any we see in the West. Their childhood cannot be compared to most of ours. Test-taking culture has obvious downsides, particularly the inability to reward those individuals with the intangibles that success in the real world—and China's current development needs—requires. On the other hand, if a country can be built on hard work and diligence alone, China will need to look no further than its libraries.

