A nation prepares for the dreaded gaokao

Shanghai, 5 June – Tomorrow cities throughout China (1) will close roads near schools, prohibit the hooting of car horns, and even change some aeroplane flight paths, so that nine million students can concentrate on the gaokao, the three-day-long national university entrance exam.

University places are scarce in China, and most students (2) are not going to have a chance if they do not do well on the gaokao, a name which means ‘high exam’ in Mandarin Chinese. The stakes are very high indeed: a place in a top university will almost always lead to a high-paid job after graduation. For millions of Chinese, the exam is an important chance to improve their lives, and because most Chinese families (3) have only one child, the pressure on candidates is intense.

We spoke to students who (4) hadn’t been out with their friends for many months, and who (5) were studying all the time that they weren’t sleeping. And while some cram, others cheat. Each year, candidates (6) are caught with high-tech devices such as wireless earphones, as well as pens and watches with tiny scanners. James Bond would be proud.
Teachers’ lives are difficult, too. One gaokao tutor (7) explained her schedule: morning exercises start at 6:10 a.m.; evening classes end at 10 p.m.; students get only one day off a month – and teachers must spend that day marking practice exams.

To prepare for the exam, students memorize past exam papers and try to guess what questions (8) will be asked this year. All candidates answer questions in Chinese, Maths, and English, then choose two additional subjects: History, Geography, Physics, Biology, Chemistry, or Political Ideology. Some of the unusual essay questions that (9) have appeared on past papers include:

- ‘An Englishman dreams of living in Western China in another era. Write a story based on this.’
- ‘Why chase mice when there are fish to eat?’
- ‘Talk about water.’
- ‘Why do we want to return to our childhood?’

The exam (10) has been criticized for testing endurance rather than intelligence. Small reforms (11) were made to the exam a few years ago, but little has changed overall. More and more Chinese students (12) have been moving overseas for university or even secondary school, just to avoid the gaokao. The number of candidates who sit the exam has fallen dramatically in recent years, from 10.2 million in 2009 to nine million this year.

However, at the same time, the gaokao (13) is beginning to be more widely recognized abroad. The University of Sydney has said it will accept gaokao scores from Chinese students in place of its own entrance exam. China may not need to reform the gaokao after all – it will reform the rest of us.