

China

Millions in China cram for civil service exam and the hope of a job for life

Amid troubled economic times, many in China are shifting back towards the certainty of a career in the public sector



📷 Candidates take part in the written test for prospective civil servants in December 2023. Millions in China are preparing for the exam this year, when just over 38,000 posts are available. Photograph: CFOTO/Future Publishing/Getty Images

Amy HawkinsSenior China correspondent

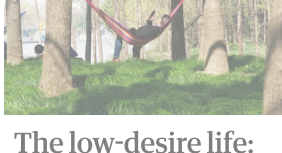
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A record number of people are set to take China’s notoriously gruelling national civil service exam this weekend, reflecting the increasing desire of Chinese workers to find employment in the public rather than private sector.

Around 3.7 million people have registered for the tests on Saturday and Sunday, which will be the first since the government increased the age limit for certain positions. The age limit for general candidates has increased from 35 to 38, while the age limit for those with postgraduate degrees has been raised from 40 to 43.

The millions of applicants will be competing for 38,100 civil service vacancies across the country, the equivalent of an average of 97 people per job.



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Some jobs are particularly in demand. According to data published in Chinese media, the vacancy that received the most applicants was an immigration officer role in Ruili, a city in south-west Yunnan province that borders Myanmar. For the one job, 6,470 people have been approved to apply.

Beijing announced in October that the age limit for the civil service exams would be increased in line with recent increases to China’s retirement age.

China’s ageing population and dwindling pension budget has forced a reckoning with its relatively low retirement ages. Last year, the government approved plans to gradually increase the retirement age for the first time since the 1950s. The statutory retirement age for women will increase from 50 to 55 for those in blue-collar jobs, and from 55 to 58 for women in white-collar jobs. For men, the retirement age will increase from 60 to 63.

Although public sector jobs generally have lower wages – and in recent years some debt-ridden local authorities have struggled to pay wages at all – the jobs are increasingly coveted for their security in an increasingly challenging economy. Harking back to the Maoist era, civil services jobs are known as providing the “iron rice bowl” – an idiom that refers to having a job for life.

In China’s years of reform and opening up, plunging into the risks and rewards of commercial enterprises was known as *xiahai*, or “jumping into the sea”. Now people talk of *shangan*, or “landing ashore”, to describe successfully passing the exams into the stable public sector.

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prepared for the year's most gruelling pre-exam rituals and cramming in

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