The Gaokao: How China’s College Entrance Exam affects Chinese Students’ Well-Being

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Abstract in Academic language:
The gaokao, China’s National College Entrance Exam, has been criticized as a culprit of stress, depression, and suicide for Chinese students. This paper analyzes how the gaokao can affect Chinese students’ well-being. To answer this question, I conducted semi-structured interviews with two 17 and 18 year old Chinese high school students in Beijing about their experiences with the exam and inside and outside of school. To aid the interviews, I reviewed literature on values in Chinese life and society, exam-education in China, the stigma of mental health in China, generational changes in living, and definitions of well-being. My results demonstrate that although the gaokao seems to be a cause of stress and negativity, overall it does not dictate the students lives. They are mentally strong, resilient, and positive about their daily lives and future aspirations and highly value their relationships with their family, friends, and teachers. This demonstrates that the exam does not significantly affect their well-being. Further research should be done with students from different socioeconomic backgrounds from less urban areas to develop a more inclusive picture.

Abstract in Everyday language:
This paper is about the Gaokao. This is the national college admission process in China. It has been criticized so far because it causes stress, depression and suicide among the students. The paper analyses how the Gaokao can influence the well-being of Chinese students. To find out if that was true, two interviews were conducted with young people in China. Literature on the topic was also reviewed. The results show that although the gaokao seems to be a cause of stress and negativity, overall it does not dictate the students lives. The student are mentally strong and resilient. They are also positive about their daily lives and future aspirations and highly value their relationships with their family, friends, and teachers. This demonstrates that the exam gaokao does not significantly affect their well-being. Further research should be done to develop a more inclusive picture.
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The Gaokao: How China’s College Entrance Exam affects Chinese Students’ Well-Being

Known as one of the most challenging exams in the world, the gaokao is a standardized college entrance exam in mainland China that is often considered the single determinant of a Chinese high schooler’s future and one of the biggest culprits of stress for China’s youth (Hu & West, 2015; Larmer, 2014). Existing research has demonstrated that depression and suicide are linked to the pressure students face in preparation of this exam and from China’s education system (Larmer, 2014; Yang, 2016). I will focus on the impact of the gaokao and school on Chinese students’ well-being, and outlook on their future.

To discuss the impact of the gaokao on the lives of youth, I will discuss the origins of exam-oriented education in China, how it prevails today, and introduce the gaokao and how it is linked to depression and suicide. I will then discuss the stigma of mental health in China, the decreasing stigma of depression and increasing emotional awareness in China, and generational changes in ways of living. Finally, I will define well-being.

Origins of the exam-oriented education system

In Imperial China as early as the Sui dynasty, the civil service examination (keju, 科举), was invented. It focused on Confucian literature and was an important “vehicle for social mobility” (Cohen & Teiser, 2007; Xi’an Jiaotong-Liverpool University, 2019). Education was not limited to the elite and success in the exam was dependent on ability, not social status. The exam also circulated the core ideas of Confucianism through all levels of Chinese society (Cohen & Teiser, 2007). For example, notions about respectable behavior and relationships. Women, however, were prohibited from participating.

Learning and education has long since been a deeply rooted part of Chinese culture. Wang Zhu, a scholar of the Song dynasty, summed this key cultural wisdom up in year 1100: “Learning is the only thing above everything else (万般皆下品,唯有读书高).” Education is still highly valued in Chinese society today.

What is the gaokao?

The exam-oriented education system prevails in China today. The gaokao (高考), officially named the National College Entrance Exam (NCEE), is an annual academic higher education exam administered in the People’s Republic of China. It was first established in
1952, suspended when education was at a standstill, and reintroduced in 1977 after Mao Zedong’s leadership (Gu & Magaziner, 2016). It has been instituted every year since. It is a requirement for nearly all undergraduate universities in China and mainly taken by third year high schoolers. In 2018, over 9.75 million students registered for the exam (CGTN, 2018). The exam is taken in June over the course of two days and lasts a total of nine hours (Larmer, 2014). It is composed of a Chinese literature, Math, and Foreign Language section, wherein most students select English. In addition, a choice of any three of the liberal arts-centered—history, political science, and geography or science-focused—chemistry, physics, and biology subjects (Larmer, 2014).

How fair is the gaokao?

The gaokao places no limits on gender, age, the number of times you can participate, or official educational background. Thus, there are more chances for those without recognized status. For example, Liang Shi, a 52-year-old man who took the Gaokao for the 23rd time, dreams of studying in a university and did not have the opportunity to when he was younger (Jiang, 2019). Although the test alone is fair in the objective score it produces, the educational system and preparation time leading up to the exam is heavily dependent on social and economic standing (Hu & West, 2015). For example, resources such as, “university scale, teacher resources, education funding, and hardware facilities” (Xi’an Jiaotong-Liverpool University, 2019), may vary. There also exists a regional imbalance—where students in urban areas have more opportunities than less affluent migrant students in more rural regions. One governmental program, the “Support for West China Enrollment Collaboration Program,” aims to promote fair access to higher education by simplifying the recruitment process and creating preferential admission policies for less privileged students (Xi’an Jiaotong-Liverpool University, 2019). Still, it is difficult to take in account the diversity in the student pool and important to note that much research on the gaokao’s impact does not specify what background the students come from.

Exam-oriented education and mental health risks

The exam-oriented education system prevails in China today and research links depression and suicide to the pressure students face in school (Larmer, 2014). According to a
study by Li (2013) on suicide prevention for Chinese students, there is too much importance attached to knowledge and little training on improving psychological quality, pressure resistance, and self-recognition (p. 104). A survey on Chinese university students found they have have “declining psychological health” (Li, 2013, p. 104), which may be connected to the psychological damage in earlier education and re-entering an exam-focused environment.

A study of 79 suicides in 2013 in China discovered that “almost 93 percent happened following arguments between the pupils and their teachers, or after the students experienced heavy pressure with their studies” (AFP, 2014). According to research findings in the 2014 Annual Report on China’s Education compiled by Chinese government and education organizations, some of the suicides in 2014 were attributed to students’ inability to “bear the heavy pressure of the test-oriented education system” (AFP, 2014). Larmer (2014) also found that teenage suicide rates tend to rise as the exam nears. As illustrated, mental health is a very pertinent topic when we discuss the impact of the Gaokao.

Stigma and Mental Health in China

With the rise of depression and suicide rates, more people in China are recognizing the risks of excessive school pressure. Yet, people living with mental illnesses are still “among the most marginalized, stigmatized, and oppressed groups in society” (Gewurtz et al., 2016). In addition, while students are receiving more mental and emotional support, the exam-based education system still places more value on a child’s future, not his or her feelings and perspective in the present moment (Deng, 2014).

While some research indicates mental health and illnesses are still stigmatized in Chinese society, other research finds that people are becoming more accepting and aware of depression specifically. One explanation could be the normalization of depression— that it’s simply more common and included in global conversations.

Depression

Depression was almost an unknown category in China until the early 1990s. Beforehand, during the Maoist socialist era, they used a more general term for the more generic individual—neurasthenia (Lee, 2011, p. 178). The term “depression” has become more widely accepted and used by medical professionals and individuals themselves. In
effect, more individuals have been diagnosed and treated with antidepressants and therapies. This can be attributed in part to more patients more openly expressing their emotions (Kleinman, 2011, p. 12).

Emotional Openness

According to Lee (2011), suffering was the hallmark of Chinese society (p. 178). Thaxton (2008) found that the Great Leap Forward, resulting in the largest famine in human history, and other grueling experiences “completely demolished” (p. 142) human emotions. During Maoist times there was also a big risk of political denunciation and surveillance for sharing personal ideas (Lee, 2011, p. 185). This can be connected to the ways parents show affection. For example, instead of hugging and saying “I love you,” Chinese parents will cook their children their favorite food and ask them to dress warmly (Lee, 2011, p. 178). Emotions are often expressed in an indirect manner. The 1980s, however, were a time when Chinese people could release emotions and feel more comfortable disclosing their feelings and thoughts more freely (Lee, 2011, p. 185). Moreover, in psychopathology, anthropological and psychiatric research, the holding in of depression leads to physical symptoms (Lee, 2011, p. 179). Thus, it’s important that younger generations in China recognize the therapeutic value of disclosing their feelings.

What it Means “To Live” in China

The post 1980s generations endure in a different way from the older generations who lived through the 20th century turmoil in China— from the war with Japan in 1937-45, to the civil war between the Communist and Nationalist parties, to era of Maoism and the cultural revolution from 1966-76, to the Japanese occupation in Taiwan (Kleinman, 2014, p. 119). During this time, all that individuals would aspire for was survival. To live a successful life was to endure. By contrast, the new generation has developed greater dreams. The main American and Western cultural message has permeated China: “that life offers many possibilities, that individuals can strive for success, wealth, and happiness, and that to merely get by is unacceptable” (Kleinman, 2014, p.119).

These changes have not only continued to place strong value on education, but also have given more meaning to future dreams and aspirations and definitions of well-being.
Well-being

Well-being is a multi-dimensional construct (Dodge et al., 2012, p.223). Merriam-Webster dictionary defines well-being as “the state of being happy, healthy, or prosperous. Crafted in philosophy, popularized in positive psychology, and thoroughly debated in definitions, well-being is usually measured with self-reports. Self-report measures can vary based on individual differences (Diener, 1994), which demonstrates the fluidity of well-being. First proposed by Aristotle was the idea of eudaemonic well-being. He believed that true happiness and wellness was established by “leading a virtuous life and doing what is worth doing” (Boniwell, 2008). For him, the goal was human potential and realization. In positive psychology, subjective well-being (SWB), is based on hedonistic well-being—to maximize positive and minimize negative affect. Yet, Lyubomirsky & Dickerhoof (2006) found that a person can simultaneously report a high depressive affect and a high level of well-being. Also, that women may be more depressed and still happier than men because they experience negative and positive emotions more intensely (p. 171). One important aspect of SWB is the concept of “hedonic adaptation.” This refers to after having a positive or negative initial reaction to a new life circumstance, returning to the baseline level of well-being (Diener et al., 1999, p. 286).

I will focus on one definition of well-being proposed by Dodge et al. (2012) in this paper. According to Dodge et al. (2012), well-being is the “balance point between an individual’s resource pool and the challenges faced” (p. 230). Well-being can be represented visually by a weighing scale. One side with ‘resources’ and the other with ‘challenges,’ both broken down into three levels: psychological, social and physical. The relationship between challenge and skills to cope with a challenge can be illustrated by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s (2002) concept of ‘flow.' When an individual is so immersed in an activity in the moment, nothing else matters. This suggests that in this moment of ‘flow,’ challenges and skills are in balance (p. 252).

As Dodge et al. (2012) indicate, however, well-being should not only be confined to a perfect balance or equilibrium. During a time of imbalance, well-being can still be present. According to Nic Macs, “Well-being is not a beach you go and lie on. It’s a sort of dynamic dance… it’s the functuality of that movement which actually is true levels of wellbeing” (Dodge et al. 2012, p. 230). I would like to focus on this dynamic definition of
well-being because the *gaokao* is a significant turning point that signifies movement, new decisions, and inevitable change.

This fluid definition takes into account the “unique resource pool” (Dodge et al. 2012, p. 231) that students have to cope with their individual lives. This resource pool can include resilience— that an individual will learn to cope with stress and struggles with experience (Dodge et al., 2012, p. 229). According to Connor and Davidson (2003), resilience is the “possession of personal qualities that enable a person to thrive in adverse conditions” and can “improve both physical and psychological health” (Skrzypiec et al., 2018, p. 541). In a study of 2,756 primary and middle school students in Beijing, Skrzypiec et al. (2018) found that resilience was a strong predictor for mental health and positive emotional state. They also found that school satisfaction was the strongest predictor of flourishing, and both flourishing and mental health were predictors of well-being (p. 548).

**Research Question and Hypothesis**

The aim of this research was to examine the question: How does the *gaokao* affect Chinese students’ well-being?

Specifically, I explored how the students feel about the exam and school, from where they feel the most pressure, how they cope with their stress, in what spaces they participate outside of school, and how the exam may stifle creativity. Also, how cultural values in China might play a role.

Based on existing research (Hu & West, 2015; Larmer, 2014; Yang, 2016), I hypothesized that the *gaokao* negatively impacts Chinese students well-being, by increasing their stress levels and stifling creativity during school and exam preparation. I also hypothesized that students still may have a positive outlook on the exam as a contribution to their achievement of their future goals, and that cultural norms of collectivity play a role in students’ opinions.

**Materials and Methods**

According to Flick (2014), there has been a “pluralization of life worlds” (p. 11) and local knowledge has eclipsed universalism. This paper used an inductive method to focus on the students unique experiences, and form theories based on their individual lives. This return
to the particular does not assume universal validity, but studies ways of living in the particular context “in which they are embedded” (Flick, 2014, p.22).

This study used a semi-structured interview method. I started with more open-ended questions and used the interviewee’s answers to guide the order. According to Flick (2014), the “interview guide should be applied flexibly” and “leave room for the interviewees perspective” (p.197). Please find my interview guide in Appendix A.

A participatory method called the draw and write technique (Gabhainn & Kelleher, 2002) was also used as a segue to discuss the topic of mental health.

Sample

The sample for this research was Chinese high schoolers preparing for the gaokao, from age 13 to 17. I interviewed an 18-year-old male third year high schooler (Z) and a 17-year-old female second year high schooler (P). The interviewees will be anonymously named Z and P for the purposes of this paper. Both students currently reside and attend public high school in Beijing. The two interviewees come from an upper middle class, urban background, so their experiences may be very different from students who are less privileged.

Sampling Method and Field Access

The two interviewees were obtained via snowball sampling from a relative who lives in Beijing. I am a peripheral member of the field and can participate only in a limited manner because I don’t fully share the same experiences as the interviewees. My ability to speak Mandarin Chinese and shared Chinese cultural heritage, however, allowed me to access the field more conveniently.

Interview Conduct

I conducted the two interviews using WeChat video call. Beforehand, I sent a participant consent form on WeChat messenger for them to digitally sign (Appendix C). The first interview was conducted over WeChat video call on 29/12/19, with Z, and lasted approximately 59 minutes and 35 seconds. The second interview was conducted on 31/12/19 using WeChat video call with P, and was approximately 52 minutes and 53 seconds.

Both interviews were conducted bilingually in Mandarin Chinese and English by both the interviewer and interviewee. In the interview with Z, his mother and father were present
in the room. In the interview with P, her mother was present in the room. For both interviews, it was unclear whether the parents were there for the whole time, but they all gave audible commentary at some points in the interview.

Please find the full interview transcripts in Appendix D and E respectively. Translations from Mandarin to English are noted in the transcript with a “/” in the middle (e.g. Mandarin Text / English translation)

Data Analysis

The process of grounded theory created by Strauss & Corbin (1990) was used in the analysis to build theories that were sensitive to the realities of the interviewees (p. 57). By using open coding, axial coding, and then selective coding, I was able to build concepts and put the data back together in meaningful ways (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

I transcribed the interviews from the audio recordings and then read through the transcripts on printed paper with a pen, using line-by-line analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 72). I highlighted and wrote out conceptual labels, key words, related meanings, and important subjects that were key to the interviewees experiences. Then, I grouped the related concepts together in categories that made sense to me. With axial coding, I identified repeated labels, themes, and relationships among the codes, and began to write out phenomena and their dimensions (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 100). Finally, I developed possible theories to explain my hypotheses and to research question about the impact of the gaokao on Chinese students’ well-being. I did this by selectively choosing core variables that include all of the data and conversely, identifying what part of the data relate to the core variables. Please find my grouped codes from my data analysis in Appendix F.

Results

Overall, the tone in both interviews was positive. Both interviewees were very open and honest throughout and display a lot of gratitude. They enjoy school, after school activities, and are close to their teachers, classmates, and parents. The only strong negative opinion they expressed is toward the gaokao. P describes her negativity toward the exam:
[The] gaokao, is just, sometimes I think it's just crazy or something like that….and I sometimes really hate the gaokao…school cannot [impact mental health], but [the] gaokao can. (Appendix E, 235)

Although the exam sparked a negative reaction in them and P recognizes how it can impact mental health, to them it isn’t the ‘be all end all.’ They are also unafraid of the difficulties met when studying for it. Compared to studying one of his favorite subjects, physics olympics, Z is more confident studying the gaokao. P also states:

I think gaokao is really bad, is really something gross, make me feel bad, and then I don’t want to take it, and but after that, about 10 minutes after reading or after doing my homework, I thought ‘oh yes! I'm doing it!’ and I can just [believe in myself] and I can and that's all…I know whether you like it or not, you got to take the exam.

(Appendix E, 237)

They are prepared mentally for the exam, understand that they are responsible for their own happiness, and that they should just try their best, accept the results, and move on.

The gaokao, although a primary topic, was not a central part of both conversations. After coding and finding core themes to describe the interviewees experiences, I found a number of values important to both Z and P that will be outlined below.

Collectivism and ‘we’

Collectivism, community, togetherness, close relationships, and a strong sense of ‘we’ were present throughout both interviews. For example, Z often used the word “we” when discussing activities and accomplishments: “we learn,” “we do,” “we study,” “we have.” A strong sense of shared responsibility was also noted when asked about standing out. For both interviewees, they like to stand out if there is a need. According to P:

If…you are the only one who knows how to do the things, you must stand out, because if you don’t stand out then… there’s nobody to solve the problem. (Appendix E, line 260)

She emphasized a desire for equality as well, and expressed that when other people are capable of acting, she doesn’t feel a need to stand out. Similarly, Z states:
If the students in our class have their own ideas I would be happy to let them do it and just fit into them, but if they don’t have decisions I am happy to lead. (Appendix D, line 255)

Their modesty shines through when they express that they like to give their classmates the center stage. The class makes decisions together, and to stand out is ironically not an individual thing, but a group determined thing.

**Communication**

These collaborative efforts are also strengthened with constant communication between classmates and teachers. Z discussed using WeChat groups frequently to communicate with teachers and classmates for every class subject and how teachers would sometimes send homework in the chats. Overall, teachers are also close confidants and friends for both interviewees. For P, the teachers office is where she feels the least stressed and can talk to her teachers alone and ask questions. According to Z, his teachers are very friendly willing to help him when he has questions. Both also mentioned talking with their teachers as one of their favorite parts of school. According to Z, he enjoys school because his teachers are “very funny, yes they are very nice… we have created a lot of emojis with our teachers [and they are] widely used in our WeChat groups” (Appendix D, line 86).

**Help and Support**

Connection and friendship is inclusive of a lot of help and support from parents, friends, and teachers to cope with stress. P talks to her teachers and friends if she is stressed: “I think my teachers my parents and my friends, they are just they trying to give me some power and they give me passion, they give me strength to keep on going” (Appendix E, line 120). P gave the example—

If I tell them that oh sorry today I’m really stressed, I’m down, and then they'll say “oh don’t be down" you are great you must be happy and you must know that there are still something wonderful in life and and you are not that bad and if they tell me they are stressed, I’m going to say the same things. (Appendix E, line 199)
It is a community of support and the close relationships that the participants seem to value. In addition to spending time with friends and talking to teachers, both participants mentioned music, books, tv, food, and sports— basketball and badminton— as ways to cope with stress.

Confidence

When discussing how he prepared for the physics olympics, Z points out that compared to other students who are helped by my teachers, he studies by himself: “I think I’m not afraid studying myself anymore… I have the ability to study well without anyone” (Appendix D, line 176). P is proud of herself when she writes and acts in plays: "I play in the school activities and I write some drama plays and my classmates play it and it is successful actually, I’m proud of myself” (Appendix E, line 152).

Modesty and Pressure from Self

Although they are confident in their ability to pursue their passions and study on their own, they are still modest about their achievements and give themselves the most stress. Both interviewees seemed to downplay their abilities, such as music and drawing skills. P described a situation: “… they’ll say, oh can somebody sing? and then it won’t come from me, because I can’t sing and I can’t draw, and they won’t come for me, and the chance is not for me” (Appendix E, line 262). Z also pointed to specialization as a desirable trait: “I think for students who have their specialties…they are very good at some subjects… not like me” (Appendix D, line 161). Both participants used the phrase “not like/for me,” supposing that these skills are out of reach from them.

For both Z and P, stress does not come from parents or teachers, but the expectations they have for themselves. P gives herself the most pressure. “…I know very well I’m not good at math…and I know if I don’t just practice again and again and I am going to fail this exam” (Appendix E, line 116). According to P, “it is myself who keeps on telling myself that I’m not that good…and I fail exams and I haven’t got the things I want and I haven’t reached my dreams so I must keep on going. That’s me, myself” (Appendix E, line 116).
Competition and Comparison

Comparison between classmates is also a top source of stress for them. For example, when P talks to her friends about stress, it helps relieve her stress, but when she begins to compare her progress with others, it gives her more pressure. Z observed: “we are a very happy class, but I do think some students are stressed…because they are giving themselves too much stress” (Appendix D, line 204). A feeling of competition also gives rise to more stress, as P explains:

If there are no tests, no exams, and nothing that are going on with grades, races, and competitions, there is no competition between our classmates, and we just play together, talk together…and if there is exam, then the atmosphere changes and everyone is comparing with others…everything that you can just imagine… ( Appendix E, line 208)

Balance and Mental Health

Both interviewees seem to have a balanced awareness of school and the gaokao. In a way, their balanced outlook on the gaokao is how they view mental health. Both had very straightforward descriptions of a mentally healthy person. For Z, his or her “inner spirit is very bright, and nice, and shouldn’t be cold hearted…is pretty much okay, has feeling, has motivation to live, just like that” (Appendix D, line 212). P’s description was:

To be physically healthy, all aspects of the body…. Secondly is mental health. Mental health is more important. For me, I think his thinking is healthy…has positive awareness, and attitudes toward life is positive…then thats about it. (Appendix E, line 228)

Growth, Future, Hope and Dreams

Overall they have a positive outlook on future and have big dreams. Z is looking forward to learn what he wants to learn, to finally have time for himself, and to make his own decisions. P is excited for university. “Everything seems prepared for you and it’s just an area for you to show yourself and for you to just..learn more knowledge. It’s great” ( Appendix E, line 176). Z wants to “learn something funny” and exciting. For example,
Doing [a] science experiment is very interesting and you can learn everything new but it's not like repeated works...like if you are a doctor you go to the clinics and stay there everyday...but a work that...everyday you can find something new. (Appendix D, line 201)

He also emphasized that he wants to improve himself. There was a repetition of learning more, having more knowledge, emphasizing their motivation for growth as individuals. One of P’s dreams is to “just write something about the world.” She cited an author and explained this further:

…[he said] ‘Who can save the world? The writers can save it, and the players can save it, and if you write something that just reflects the world, the world will just be grateful to you and you will save the world by your own pen.’ I want to do something like that. That’s the true dream and I think they are crazy. (Appendix E, line 244)

Global Generosity

Both demonstrated a concern for those around them and the environment. For example, one of P’s dreams was to save the world from earthquakes. She also believes it is very important to protect nature. Z set up an ‘ocean club’ after school to watch documentaries and gain geographical knowledge and further his interest in environmental studies.

Home, Comfort, Loyalty and China

In both interviews, at least one parent was present in the background. In the interview with Z, both his mother and father contributed to his answers in the background, and at one point the interviewee jokingly expressed that his mom “answered all the questions for him.” This is a clear example of how parental presence is strong. P and Z also are very loyal to home— their family and China. When I asked P about studying abroad, she expressed that she would prefer to stay in China and explained: “…first of all China is my home country, and I think in China I'm just more comfortable and the things will go on more like what I'm planned about” (Appendix E, line 186). Z was looking forward to spending more time with his family in the future. He noted his school is very nice and attributed that to studying there for five years already, which illustrates a sense of loyalty.
Discussion

I conducted this research to discover how the *gaokao* affects Chinese students’ well-being. My first hypothesis was that the *gaokao* negatively impacts Chinese students well-being, by increasing their stress levels and stifling creativity in school and during exam preparation. My second hypothesis was that students may have a positive outlook on the exam as a contribution to their achievement of their future goals, and that cultural norms of collectivity play a role in their opinions.

My first hypothesis is not fully supported by my interview findings. Although the *gaokao* causes some stress and negativity, overall it does not dictate their lives. I theorize that the *gaokao* may affect Chinese students well-being, but not significantly enough to outweigh other aspects in their lives. The *gaokao* was not a central part of our conversation, which may reflect that it’s not a central part of their lives. Both students demonstrate resilience and mental strength in their outlook of the exam and remain positive about their lives inside and outside of school. They hold the qualities in a definition of resilience that “enable a person to thrive in adverse conditions” (Skrzypiec et al., 2018, p. 541). Based on Dodge et al.’s (2012) definition of well-being, they found balance between their individual resource pool and the challenges they face (p. 230).

They also expressed strong admiration for school and their relationships with classmates and teachers. Skrzypiec et al. (2018) found that school satisfaction was the strongest predictor of flourishing, which is a predictor of well-being (p.548). In the same study of 2,756 primary and middle school students in Beijing, mental health was also a predictor of well-being. Both have individual knowledge of mental health, such as using descriptions such as “motivation to live” and “positive awareness” to describe a mentally healthy person. P recognizes the importance of maintaining her mental health and believes it can impact learning. Z, however, separates his daily school schedule from his life of a high schooler, which illustrates a structured way he creates mental space in his social life and school life.

My second hypothesis, about having a positive outlook on the exam, is partially supported. Although the students have a negative immediate view of the exam, they seem to have more of a positive outlook of what the *gaokao* means for their future— one of
acceptance. They know they have to deal with it, try their best to hopefully get into the university they want, and make their parents proud.

The second part of my second hypothesis, that cultural norms of collectivity play a role in students’ opinions, is supported. Both interviewees emphasize constant communication and support from friends and teachers. Most decisions are also democratically decided as a group, thus there is a strong sense of shared responsibility. The teachers want the kids to do well, and students recognize that hard work will pay off, and want to make their parents and teachers proud. Although to endure in 20th century China included fending for yourself and your in-groups (Kleinman, 2011), I theorize that collectivism for Chinese students today extends to their out-groups as well. For example, P and Z were very open in the interviews and seemed to be more comfortable with their emotional side, which reiterates Kleinman’s (2011) point about increasing emotional sensitivity in China. This also may be a reflection of the destigmatization of mental health and depression. By developing close relationships with others, there are more opportunities for collaboration on future global goals, such as protecting the environment.

Although collectivity is a strong value for both students, they also embody confidence and independence for their individual futures. I theorize that a part of Chinese students identity today is the intermingling and balance of the Western type of capitalist independence and collective good—between “desire and responsibility” (Kleinman, 2011, p. 5). It is reflected in the students independence to achieve their dreams, but also their loyalty to parents sacrifices and struggles and desire to stay close to home. According to Kleinman et al. (2011), the “priority of economic growth reflects the dangers accompanied by the shift from a collective ethics of responsibility and self-sacrifice to an individual ethics of rights and self-realization” (p. 61). My last theory is that they give themselves the most pressure because of this struggle of selfishness and loyalty to their parents. Although Lee (2011) noted that suffering was a hallmark of 20th century China (p. 178), this mindset of survival has been carried on to generations of children in Taiwan and China, “such that it became a core cultural wisdom” (Kleinman, 2014, p. 119). They have high expectations for themselves to lead fulfilling lives, but also understand their role to be good students who take the gaokao. Although both Z and P are looking forward to the independence of university, collectivism is a thread that runs through their lives and desire to give back to school and family.
Limitations and Future Research

In the interview process, there could be issues of validity because of social desirability bias and adult bias with an adult interviewer. Parental presence during the interviews could make the children more afraid to complain or speak negatively about school and the gaokao. According to Punch (2002), children may be vulnerable to unequal power relationships and “may fear adult reactions” (p. 326). Moreover, the virtual setting was not shared or controlled for and it was more difficult to read gestures and body language.

Although Chinese is their mother tongue, the interviewees voluntarily used both English and Chinese in the interviews. Thus, there could be reliability issues of words being lost in translation. Also as coding was word-based, the analysis could be biased by my interpretation and Chinese-to-English translations in the transcripts.

Further research with a larger sample and more socially diverse group of Chinese students should be conducted. Both participants come from upper middle class backgrounds and have the resources and backbone to fail. “Due to the huge economic gap between rural and urban areas, educational standards in rural schools are much lower than those in urban schools” (Hu & West, 2015, p. 23). A student who comes from a lower socioeconomic background may feel much more pressure from the gaokao as a key to social mobility and to provide for her or his family. Further research and information about students with learning or physical disabilities, medical conditions, or mental health issues would also be insightful.

Existing research linking the gaokao and mental health is negative, but little focus is placed on how it can foster resilience in students. Skrzypiec et al. (2018) found various school-based initiatives to promote well-being in schools in Beijing. For example, processes for recording students’ progress that focused on their social and emotional capabilities (p. 540). I propose more research should focus on helping children face challenges. By valuing the well-being of students, China’s youth will be able to handle not only the stress of one exam, but also believe in their abilities to achieve their dreams.
References


Punch, Samantha. (2002). Research with Children: The Same or Different from Research with Adults? *Childhood*, 9(3), 321-341.


