

Understanding Chinese Students' Obsession with Grades and Degrees under the Traditional Exam-oriented Education System in Shanghai by Drawing on Existence Theory

Yanxuan Wu

School of Environment, Education and Development, The University of Manchester Oxford Rd Manchester M13 9PL UK

Abstract: In today's era of educational globalization, Chinese students' high pursuit of academic achievements such as grades and rankings are well known to international scholars. However, this obsession with education has had negative consequences for Chinese students, resulting in depression and even suicide. This article presents a novel perspective on the issue, employing existence theory as a framework to explore the reasons behind Chinese students' academic obsession and the changes that have emerged in the context of late modernity. Drawing on a literature review and semi-structured interviews, the author reveals that the factors driving this preoccupation with educational achievement are multifaceted and complex, including the influence of traditional Chinese Confucian culture, the close connection between education and the job market, the parenting styles of Chinese parents, and the Chinese examination system itself. The article also highlights the growing trend among modern Chinese students to pursue a more holistic and well-rounded approach to education, focusing not only on academic scores but also on developing moral, personal, and career-related skills. Nevertheless, it is clear that achieving academic success and meeting educational milestones remain the primary goals for most Chinese students, driven in part by the intense pressure and competitiveness of China's current social environment.

Keywords: Chinese education obsession and cause; Chinese grade and ranking obsession; Chinese academic pressure and competitiveness; Chinese education approach transformation; Chinese parenting; Chinese educational examination system

Introduction:

The globalization of education has shone a spotlight on China's education system, vast education market, and students. In the ensuing Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2009, 2012 and 2018, this huge and outstanding group of Chinese students topped the world ranking and, thus, attracted international attention to their learning characteristics. Scholars and educators have generally praised Chinese students for their diligence and hard work, but they also pointed out their assessment-centred learning, anxiety about not being able to satisfy syllabus and correct answers, and their obsession with grades and rankings (Sit, 2013). To make matters worse, the excessive academic pressure brought by this education obsession has led to many serious social problems in China (Zhao, Selman and Haste, 2015), such as the fact that 60% of students suffer from sleep deprivation, that there is an annual increase of adolescent suicides and mental health issues (Jiang and Saito, 2022).

The following article endeavours to explore the reasons behind the persistence of Chinese students in their insistence on academic pursuit despite the possibility of negative consequences. This will be done by combining insight into traditional Chinese culture and educational policies with aspects of sociology theory. While a significant number of studies in educational sociology rely on Bourdieu's theory, this article employs a different theoretical framework based on existence theory in contemporary sociology. Existence theory is a new and innovative perspective, developed by Baert in collaboration with Morgan and Ushyama. In the first part of the article, some

background knowledge about the Chinese education system and existence theory will be introduced. In the second part, I will conduct a literature review of existing research in the field, combining insights into tradition, culture and politics to explore why Chinese students care so much about grades and degrees as milestones of existential existence. I will also explore whether this excessive focus changes with the expression of existential milestones in late modernity. In the third part and subsequent parts, I will introduce the research method used and analyse the data to draw conclusions.

Review of pertinent literature:

The preceding literature review highlights the intricate reasons behind the intense focus on education among Chinese students, with social class acting as a contributing factor in creating inequalities for less privileged students. In light of these complexities, this research aims to address two key questions, as shown below, to uncover the factual causes and current state of academic obsession among modern Chinese students.

1. Why do Chinese students care so much about grades and degrees as an existentialist existence milestone?
2. Has this excessive preoccupation changed with the articulation of existential milestones in late modernity?

In order to obtain first-hand and timely data, a qualitative methodology will be employed as part of an empirical study to collect the learning experiences of Chinese students. This approach will allow for a detailed examination of the reasons behind academic obsession among Chinese students (Cleland, 2017). The research design will be elaborated upon in the following section.

Method:

Participants

The current research employs purposive sampling as its chosen method to select five students. All participants are 20-year-old sophomores who hail from Shanghai and study at various universities in Shanghai, guaranteed the ethics protection of this study from the age. Furthermore, they all had completed and passed the high school and college entrance examinations. It is worth noting that all candidates graduated from Shanghai Southwest Weiyu Middle School, one of the top ten private junior high schools in Shanghai, which has much higher educational quality and tuition costs than other public and private schools. This implementation of purposive sampling techniques can prove beneficial in identifying pertinent candidates for research studies (Palinkas et al., 2015). Furthermore, by establishing specific criteria such as region of birth, education level, and private school education experience, participants all belong to a more homogenous and economically and intellectually privileged social class. This, in turn, can lead to more targeted and precise research results. Finally, the gender ratio of the students is also controlled at three girls and two boys. The purpose of trying to balance the ratio is to eliminate the possible side effect of gender on the results as much as possible to ensure the validity. The student demographics are shown below in Table 1.

Table1: Selected student demographics

Student	Gender	Age	Province	Senior secondary school	University	Year of study
Y	Male	20	Shanghai	Shanghai Southwest Weiyu Middle School	Fudan University	2
L	Female	20	Shanghai	Shanghai Southwest Weiyu Middle School	Shanghai International Studies University	2
G	Female	20	Shanghai	Shanghai Southwest Weiyu Middle School	Fudan University	2
D	Male	20	Shanghai	Shanghai Southwest Weiyu Middle School	Fudan University	2
Z	Female	20	Shanghai	Shanghai Southwest Weiyu Middle School	Shanghai Normal University	2

Data collection

Data collection for our research project involves conducting one-on-one semi-structured interviews with participants. This methodology promotes mutual communication between interviewers and interviewees, enabling participants to concentrate on specific topics while also affording them the opportunity to express themselves freely and openly (Wilson, 2014). As a result, the researcher can obtain more in-depth information on how and why students approach and experience the pursuit of educational existential milestones. Each interview session lasts for a duration of 40 minutes and is held in the Chinese language to ensure that

participants can comprehend and articulate their responses with ease. In addition, the interview questions are instructive and open, and the discussions gradually shift from general questions to specific inquiries (Muthanna and Sang, 2015) to ensure the participants' participation experience.

To ensure the quality of the qualitative data, we record each interview session and transcribe, translate, and extract the relevant information. We strictly adhere to the APA Research Ethics Code and have obtained informed consent from the students participating in our research project (Gierczyk and Diao, 2021). The consent form and the participants' information sheet attached in appendix 1 and 2 outline the research content, purpose, process, and privacy protection measures in place respectively. The document also includes a statement signed by the student, indicating their agreement to participate.

Analysis

The present study employs a thematic analysis methodology as a means of conducting qualitative research. This particular approach focuses on identifying the theme within the data and then coding it flexibly to extract relevant responses from participants (Castleberry and Nolen, 2018). These responses are then subjected to in-depth analysis in order to support the research objectives.

Findings and Discussion:

The analysis of semi-structure interviews yielded several themes through repeated responses from people interviewed, and individualistic views were also retained. The major themes responding to the educational obsession of Chinese students are listed below.

Self-accomplishment

First, participants repeatedly mentioned in interviews that the reason for pursuing high scores and rankings is because they want to complete educational milestones and achieve self-completion.

I think education is something that a person must complete in his life. It is more appropriate to call it a milestone. So I try my best to learn well and get high scores to give a perfect answer to my educational experience and achieve my lifelong study milestone. (Student Y)

Education is a thing a person must do and, for me, if I don't do it I will definitely feel like my life is incomplete. Indeed, education gives me a milestone feeling. [...] I am quite perfectionist when it comes to education. I want to do my best and get the highest ranking and grades I can, to give my study career a complete end. (Student D)

I take education as part of my life. And, of course, an important part. That is to say, if I graduated without finishing my undergraduate study, I will definitely feel that my life is incomplete. (Student Z)

As many scholars noted, China's Confucian culture attaches great importance to education (Bahtilla and Xu, 2021). Such heritage allows Chinese students to place immense value on education (Ng, 2009), as emphasized in the preceding statements, and regard education as an existential milestone from the view of the existence theory. The achievement of educational milestones is closely related to their personal existence and life integrity (Baert, Morgan, and Ushiyama, 2021). Furthermore, the comments by Student Y and Student D also imply that good grades and rankings are the embodiment of the perfect achievement of educational milestones. Therefore, in order to achieve existential educational milestones and attain self-actualization, fulfilment, and life satisfaction, respondents actively pursue educational outcomes to validate their completion of these milestones. Ultimately, this has contributed to an unhealthy fixation on education.

Job

The second factor that motivates respondents to intensively pursue educational achievements is the future job. Interviewees stated that obtaining good grades and completing education is crucial to a good job in the future.

Education is for the future, that is, for a better job, and then, emm, for more job choices. [...] I study physics, and if I don't have good grades, then I can't go to graduate school. Then, according to the current situation in China, I cannot enter a good company with just a bachelor's diploma. Even if I'm lucky enough to get into a company, I can only do meaningless, non-physics-related work for a very low salary. (Student Y)

Education must be related to my future job. [...] A large part of the teaching and education I am receiving now determines my future work. [...] People with good grades are also admired by people, even if they are not that perfect on other things, such as personalities. I want to be a better person like them. So, I also have such a yearning and concern about my academic performance and

ranking. (Student L)

I pay a lot of attention to my grade points because it is very important for my future work. A good job can bring high income and status, I mean, there is no one who doesn't want wealth and status, right? (Student G)

In my opinion, the connection between education and the future is more practical. That is, completing education with good grades can help me find a good job and live a better life. (Student Z)

I felt like I was being forced a little bit. Because good grades mean a good educational background and achievement, this will bring great help to me in finding a job in the future. So in order to have a good job in the future, I was forced to pursue good grades and rankings and enter a good school. (Student D)

The above responses all linked good grades, good rankings and degrees to future job success and income, making educational attainment a cornerstone to career success (Afarian and Kleiner, 2003). From the perspective of existence theory, the completion of academic attainments and educational milestones has become a prerequisite for wealth and career milestones, motivating and even forcing Chinese students to pursue higher grades and obtain a better life. In addition, Student L's answer shows grades can also bring good admiration, providing an alternative connection between good grades and reputation. North and Ryan (2017) posit that this phenomenon of improved academic performance leading to enhanced peer reputation is rooted in the perception of peers regarding a student's characteristics and abilities. As such, when a student exhibits academic excellence, it reflects positively on their comparability and skills. Peers take notice of this progress and form a favourable impression of the student. As a result, good grades can improve the student's reputation and attract admiration from their peers, thus encourages the unbridled growth of academic obsession among Chinese students.

Parents

All of the study participants who were asked what inspired their academic pursuits mentioned the role of parents.

My parents always told me to study hard and strive for good grades. And they definitely have this kind of academic pursuit on me. (Student L)

My parents just wanted me to have a good education. I felt like as long as my ranking and score were high, they would be fine. (Student G)

My parents taught me that education is important, but it's not the only way. But it is a relatively safe road as we know it. This makes me feel that education is important. [...] My parents would also put pressure on me. They will force me to get the scores and rankings at the level they think I can achieve. (Student D)

My parents told me that I could do well in the exam, and I had to take the exam well. My parents have great expectations about my grades. They always ask me after the exam how I feel, how was my score? (Student Z)

If I fail to do well in the exam, others such as my parents may be disappointed. My parents didn't seem to push me or anything, but I can sense that they feel happier after I got good marks in exams. (Student Y)

Based on the responses provided, it can be noted that a portion of the participants' parents conveyed the significance of attaining educational milestones and achieving academic success through direct communication, while the remainder indirectly expressed their concern and expectations for their children's academic performance through their emotional responses upon learning the score. Although the situation described in the article by Qin et al. (2021) involving parents utilizing psychological control, such as withholding love and attention, to elicit children's obedience and promote learning did not arise, Chinese parents still place great value on educational accomplishments (Sharma, 2013; Wang et al., 2018) through verbal communication and emotional expression. These words and sentiments ultimately become a form of mental pressure placed upon Chinese students in their pursuit of academic achievement. Consequently, Chinese students are compelled to prioritize the completion of educational milestones and strive for high grades and rankings in order to avoid disappointing their parents.

In addition, Student G added in the follow-up interview the specific ways in which her parents strategized her learning, confirming the idea proposed by Li et al. (2019) that parents enable their children to intensively focus on learning and achieve their academic expectations through intervention and control.

My parents were extremely nervous about my grades. Originally, my family lived in Xuhui District, and then in high school I entered the High School Affiliated to Fudan University in Yangpu District. In order to keep an eye on my studies and not let me live on campus, my parents rented a house in Yangpu District to study with me. They wanted to watch me do my homework every night

and monitor whether I read extracurricular novels. [...] Even though they have to go to work for an hour every day after moving, they still insist on supervising my studies every day. They urge me to study and say they must look at me. (Student G)

Student G's parents do not hesitate to extend their commuting time to avoid the opportunity for Student G to live on campus. This limits students' learning autonomy. In addition, the way parents and children study together by watching Student G does homework every night and controlling the types of books she reads reflects the deep involvement and control of Chinese parents in their children's education (Li et al., 2019). Parents use this method to urge their children to learn, forcing their children to focus on grades and strategizing their children's educational milestones fulfilment externally, thus leading to the educational obsession of Chinese students.

The college entrance examination

Last but not least, the College Entrance Examination (Gaokao, 高考) in China's educational examination system, has also been proposed by participants as one of the root causes of their academic obsession. By summarizing interviewees' answers, the college entrance examination promotes their preoccupation with grades in many aspects. The first aspect is the strong competition and selectivity of the college entrance examination as mentioned in the responses below.

I pursued high scores because the College Entrance Examination is a highly comparable exam. [...] During the college entrance examination, I forgot whether I had revised the answer to a multiple-choice question worth five points. I am very entangled in these points because one point can eliminate tens of thousands of people in the college entrance examination. In addition, students need extremely high scores to enter first-tier universities such as Fudan University and Jiaotong University, meaning all multiple-choice and fill-in-the-blank questions must be answered correctly. Therefore, in order not to be eliminated by others and to avoid being unable to enter a good university, I particularly care about these five points. (Student Y)

The college entrance examination for senior high school students is coming, and it is necessary to pursue scores and rankings. I cannot fall behind because the college entrance examination competition is very fierce, and the school's ranking threshold is relatively high. So, I struggled for a good grade at that time. (Student Z)

Student Y's college entrance examination experience and Student Z's description reflect the fierce competition in China's college entrance examination. Each point on the overall score may mean that thousands of people lose the opportunity to enter college. In addition, the minimum eligible score of top universities is still very high, which further increases the selectivity of the college entrance examination. Ultimately, as Chen (2018) pointed out in his research, in this college entrance examination environment with limited opportunities, limited resources, and fierce competition, Chinese students frantically pursue high scores in order to stand out, which ultimately leads to educational obsession. Noticeably, Student Y's experience described in the interview also mentioned the existence of inequality in the social phenomenon of educational pursuits.

Students from other provinces are definitely under more pressure than us. They need to work harder to get higher scores, so they start preparing for the college entrance examination from the beginning of high school, thus they pursue scores more. Because their examination papers are different from ours, their provincial college entrance examination papers are more difficult than ours in Shanghai. And they have more people, so their competition is greater. [...] For example, in Henan Province, students there must reach the top ten in the college entrance examination before they can enter Fudan University. In contrast, in Shanghai you only need to be in the top few hundred. (Student Y)

Student Y described that students in other areas face greater competitiveness due to larger numbers and more challenging test papers, showing that the motivating effect that the competitiveness of the college entrance examination brings to students' academic obsession is not equally distributed across the country. Scholars such as Hamnett, Hua and Bingjie (2019) also added in their study that the teaching quality of different provinces would cause some candidates not to be as competitive as candidates from other provinces. In addition, the allocation of quotas in different regions may result in students who achieve the same score being less likely to gain admission to prestigious universities compared to their peers in more developed regions. For example, in 2016, candidates from Beijing were three times more likely to be admitted to Peking University than those from Qinghai Province. These regional disparities in test paper difficulty, number of students, education quality and admission opportunity quotas can create significant challenges for students from less developed provinces, who may unequally struggle to gain admission to top universities and achieve educational milestones. Therefore, students from less developed provinces in inland China will suffer more from the selectivity of the college entrance examination, and their educational obsession will be even more severe.

In addition, participants also describe the relationship between further educational stage, future career and financial milestones and

college entrance examination scores. This close connection prompts them to pay special attention to the college entrance examination and pursue high scores and rankings.

In the college entrance examination, failure in any test may result in being kicked out of the target group of my dream school, so I felt extremely stressed and nervous. (Student L)

If your college entrance examination scores are not ideal, you may not be able to enter the university you want to enter. In addition, college entrance examination scores will also have an impact on your choice of major and pathway after entering universities. Some universities, such as Jiaotong University, will consider students' college entrance examination scores when choosing a major direction. If the grades are not enough, the student will not be able to enter the college and the relevant pathway he wants to study in. (Student Y)

I was very nervous during the college entrance examination because I was worried that I would not get into Fudan University if I did not score enough. Also, because Fudan University relies on students' college entrance examination score to determine whether they can enter the majors and colleges they want, I am also worried that I will not be able to enter medical school. [...] For example, after being admitted to Fudan University, many students wanted to enter the popular chemistry major, but because their scores were not high enough, they ended up becoming my classmates and studying medicine major with me. I think it will definitely affect his future development. I think he may not be able to do the chemistry-related work he wants to do in the future. (Student G)

The above statements align with the image of China's college entrance examination: "One test determines everything (Heger, 2017)." According to students' descriptions, the college entrance examination scores determine which university they can enter to study and their major. In the actual case given by Student G, her classmate entered Fudan University through unremitting efforts. However, she still missed out on the major she was interested in and the future chemistry career she aimed for because her score was not high enough. This account underscores the far-reaching impact of the college entrance examination scores, as they not only determine the university to which one is admitted and affect the completion of educational milestones but also have a bearing on one's career milestones. The research of Yang et al. (2023) deepens and agrees that the college entrance examination scores determine the colleges and universities admitted and the ranking of the colleges, which further determines the student's future job, salary level, social status or class, thus affecting his life. Finally, this deep relationship between the college entrance examination and higher education and subsequent milestones emphasizes the importance of college entrance examination results and puts pressure on students, thus making students preoccupied with academic performance, leading to educational obsession.

Thirdly, the grand occasion of China's national college entrance examination has always been known to scholars. The students interviewed also said that such an exam organization inspired them, making them feel the importance of the college entrance examination and pursue academic achievements.

The arrangements for the college entrance examination, such as road closures to prevent candidates from being affected, make me excited. Because it makes me feel like the college entrance examination is like a spectacular arena, and I will participate in it. Everyone worked hard for this, which made me feel the importance of the college entrance examination, and also gave me a protagonist feeling, which inspired me to strive for high scores in the exam. (Student D)

I have seen the college entrance examination broadcast on TV since I was a child. This made me feel that everything will make concessions to the college entrance examination, and once again made me deeply realize the importance of the college entrance examination in my life. (Student L)

The expressions of two students showed that China's college entrance examination is organized with a high degree of social salience, such as traffic control for candidates (Yan, 2023). This grand exam organization makes students feel that everything is for the college entrance examination, emphasizing the position of the college entrance examination. In addition, the contribution and effort of the whole society also motivates students to strive for high scores and rankings in examinations, thereby strengthening academic pursuit.

Finally, the possible honours and stigma brought by the college entrance examination scores and rankings also motivate students to pursue high scores. Student D provide a very specific explanation and example of this.

In my school, the names of students with high scores in the college entrance examination will be posted on the red list, and the teacher will also give them praise and some small prizes, usually books. This is all proof of honour. I also want to be rewarded, so I will pursue results very much. And those with poor grades may be expelled from the experimental class (a class that is better than the ordinary class). [...] If you fail the college entrance examination, you may face the humiliation of repeating the exam. It scares me. I

was worried that a poor score in the college entrance examination might disappoint my teachers and parent. And my friends are very capable, and I don't want to fall behind and be laughed at. So, there is a relatively large source of tension and fear. I need high scores. (Student D)

It can be seen from the above statement that students with good college entrance examination scores will be publicly praised and receive prizes. This kind of honour attracts students to pursue high scores constantly. Conversely, poor college entrance examination scores may also mean sanctions, such as being expelled from a superior class and entering a subpar university (Sum, 2017). These consequences may disappoint teachers and parents and even attract scolding. Moreover, Student D also mentioned that students who failed the college entrance examination may face the option of repeating their studies. The choice of grade retention may lead to social stigmatization, labelling students as incapable poor performers and even increasing the risk of bullying victimization (Lian et al., 2021), resulting in the fear expressed in Student D's statement. Finally, peer comparisons will also cause discrimination among students who failed the college entrance examination. Consequently, students are understandably apprehensive about the negative repercussions of failing the exam, while simultaneously striving for the recognition and accolades that come with exceptional scores. Thus, the educational obsession among Chinese students is produced.

To sum up, according to the responses from the interviewed students, they pursue grades and rankings to a certain extent. The reasons behind this are manifold. Firstly, education is experienced by some as a milestone in itself. Secondly, the academic pursuit is connected to superior job opportunities in the future. Thirdly, parents have clear expectations and even strategize on behalf of their students; the children feel the pressure not to disappoint their parents. Fourthly, the strong competition and selectivity of China's college entrance examination force Chinese students to strive for high scores so that they can defeat competitors and gain further educational stage and career opportunities. Furthermore, the glory associated with doing well in the college entrance examination and the stigma that may be incurred by failing also motivate Chinese students to pursue good results in the exam, thus fuelling educational obsession.

Existential fluidity

To answer the second research question, late modernity has indeed had an impact on the cognition and pursuit of educational existential milestones in the minds of Chinese students. First of all, just like the changes in existential milestones in late modernity proposed by Baert, Morgan and Ushiyama (2021), Chinese students revealed different interpretations of educational milestones in interviews, reflecting the trend of existential fluidity.

I don't think grades are the entire goal of a student's education. Everyone is different. A person's excellence is not necessarily reflected in his grades but depends on his overall ability. (Student L)

Education is to impart many common sense and useful skills, and to enhance these personal skills. (Student Y)

I believe that the goal of education is to enable me to acquire medical knowledge relevant to my target career and to enable me to master my professional skills. Also, education will help form my personal characteristics, shape my personality and cognition. Good grades, rankings and degrees are not everything. (Student G)

I plan to study for a master's degree, but only if there is a master's program that matches my interests. I just hope that what I study is what I want to study. If it doesn't suit my interests, I will skip the master's degree and go to work. (Student L)

Students' answers all mentioned that the goal and meaning of educational milestones cannot be reduced to scores, rankings and degrees. In Student L's answer, education is for comprehensive development, which confirms Wang (2022)'s finding that modern Chinese students care more about all-round development than grades as the ultimate goal of education. Meanwhile, for Student Y, the articulation of educational milestones is for the improvement of common sense and interpersonal skills. Meanwhile, Student G's answer emphasizes the individual's characteristics, personality and cognitive formation. Her answer also had a clear career focus, simplifying the skills mentioned by the first two students to work-related skill development, such as the mastery of medical knowledge. For Student L, her interpretation of educational milestones focuses on her own interests rather than the master's degree. This also reflects that the traditional interpretation of educational milestones as good grades, good schools and high academic qualifications no longer fits the understanding of modern Chinese students. Instead, Chinese students have broken the traditional explanation of educational milestones and created many diverse individualistic articulations.

Temporal and sequential flexibility

When asked whether they could accept working for a period of time before continuing their studies, participants' answers also

reflected temporal flexibility.

Both my parents and I could accept the path of working for a while and then continuing our studies. I think as long as that time is effective and not wasted, I think it's a good thing. (Student Y)

I think it's fine as long as you finally complete your study career, whether it's contact or intermittent. (Student L)

I can accept working first and then continuing to study. After all, learning is always the same, it is about improving yourself. (Student G)

It can be seen from the students' responses that they have no specific obsession with when to study. This means that they do not have a rigid age expectation for completing educational milestones, nor do they think that they must first complete educational milestones before entering a career. For them, as long as they can complete the educational milestones in the end, they can also get promoted. Therefore, modern Chinese students have broken the traditional age urgency and existential ladder for milestones (Baert, Morgan and Ushiyama, 2021) and achieved temporal flexibility and sequential flexibility.

However, through analysis, we discovered new phenomena about Chinese students' educational milestones and educational obsessions that are different from existing studies. Indeed, Chinese students' concepts of educational milestones have changed in late modernity, and they are aware of the Chinese education system and the social pressure they are under. However, it is not difficult to see from previous discussions that students are still deeply influenced by traditional factors, such as the college entrance examination system and family, thereby maintaining academic preoccupation. The answers of Student D and Student G reveal the reason behind it, that is, the involution that Chinese society is currently experiencing, which is the *Nei juan* (内卷) phenomenon. *Nei juan* is defined as irrational and involuntary internal competition for high-quality resources in the context of China's huge pressure and fierce competition (Yin, Ji and Ni, 2023). This environmental factor suppresses the relief of educational obsession from the existential problematization in late modernity, making the phenomenon still prevalent among Chinese students. As Student D said below:

Nei juan actually brings a lot of fierce competition, which will push you to pursue higher scores or bear more pressure and devote money and energy. [...] I originally hoped that through education, I could become a more critical and freer person. But under the pressure of *Nei Juan*, I can only care more about standardization things, such as my GPA and ranking. I had to join *Nei juan* to maintain my competitiveness. For example, I had no rest at all during this summer vacation. I had to complete two internships during this vacation. (Student D)

China's high-pressure and hyper-competitive society drives people to work hard. With the emergence of *Nei juan*, more and more competitors take hard work to the extreme (Wang and Wang, 2021) and become more educated and capable, making it increasingly difficult for Chinese students to stand out in China's selective education system. As a result, Chinese students suffer from the extra pressure and competition brought by *Nei juan* and are forced to put in more efforts to pursue higher academic results to ensure that they will not fall behind and be eliminated, just like Student D was forced to give up rest and freedom to pursue two internships during the summer vacation.

Student G also expressed similar views. She believes that the *Nei Juan* trend creates a social expectation that forces her to pursue academic achievement.

I just want to be a doctor. What I expect to evaluate a doctor is how many patients he has treated and how many surgeries he has performed. But because of *Nei juan*, the threshold set by the current social expectation is how many papers a doctor has published. This added a lot of academic pressure to me, forcing me to enter the lab to do research during the summer vacation and pursue higher scores during the semester to stand out. (Student G)

The phenomenon of *Nei Juan* in Chinese society imposes excessive social expectations on students, which can be inconsistent with their own expectations and goals. Consequently, students may feel compelled to conform to societal standards in order to attain educational milestones, resulting in a stubborn educational obsession. It can be seen from Student G's answer that modern Chinese society places a greater emphasis on academic achievements in the medical industry, creating a disparity between societal expectations and Student G's personal expectations. This social expectation forced Student G to comply and adjust her behaviour to pursue publishing papers, despite recognizing the expectation gap, in order to integrate into society and successfully enter the medical profession she longed for. As a result, Student G is under significant pressure from society and pursues academic achievements such as high scores and rankings.

Moreover, scholars such as Yin, Ji and Ni (2023) pointed out the lying flat movement, which as an antonym of *Nei Juan*, many

modern Chinese young people adopt to give up their efforts and withdraw from various competitions to openly resist excessive social pressure. But such existential politicization did not appear in interviewees. Moreover, according to their responses, such movement cannot defeat *Nei juan*, and academic obsession will still exist.

I know lying flat, which is a trend of fighting against *Nei juan*. But those who lie flat will not get the results they desire. Because the society does not accept and tolerate lying flat and *Nei juan* and competition have always existed. As a result, people who lie flat will only become more and more lazy, and then be replaced by people who work harder. (Student D)

From the students' perspective, lying flat is a form of resistance. However, due to the intolerance of Chinese society and the continued existence of *Nei Juan* and competition, lying flat is surrounded by many negative side effects. For example, if students lie flat and do not study hard, they will not be able to get a good job and salary, then facing the household expenses problems in the future (Teh's, 2021). This concern, together with the competition and social expectations mentioned earlier, makes students influenced by late modernity while trapped in traditional factors. This dilemma leaves students to follow fatalism, completing traditional educational milestones and maintaining their obsession with academics.

Conclusion:

In summary, this article is based on the existence theory of Baert, Morgan and Ushiyama (2021) and explores the reasons behind Chinese students' academic obsession by reading relevant literature, conducting literature review and organizing qualitative research. We believe that this article can answer the questions international educators have about Chinese students' academic pursuit, increase their understanding of Chinese students, and help them create more inclusive classrooms. In addition, we also hope that through this research, more scholars will pay attention to this field and find solutions to the educational obsession of Chinese students, so as to alleviate the side effects such as high depression and suicide rates among Chinese students.

Firstly, students pursue academic excellence because Confucius' heritage has made educational success an important existential milestone in Chinese people's lives. In order to achieve self-completion, Chinese students pursue grades and rankings and have completed educational milestones. Secondly, in China, educational success and the completion of educational milestones are closely related to future career and financial milestones. Therefore, Chinese students pursue academic success in order to obtain good jobs and high incomes in the future, gain a higher social status, and live a better life. Thirdly, Chinese parents' emphasis on educational achievements has also driven Chinese students' educational obsession. Parents' parenting method also strategizes students' educational milestones by controlling and intervening in students' learning and life. Finally, Chinese students are forced to focus solely on educational attainment. Fourthly, China's educational examination system, especially the college entrance examination, emphasizes the importance of grades and inspires students' academic obsession through high competition and social salience. China's regional educational inequality may also exacerbate this impact. Finally, Chinese students are worried about the possible sanctions and stigma caused by failure in the college entrance examination, making them more concerned about grades and rankings.

Additionally, students in modern China have been influenced by late modernity in their concepts of educational milestones. Although it did not appear among the students in the interview, in the literature review, scholars pointed out that some Chinese students began to rebel against following traditional educational milestones, focused more on their interests and hobbies and defined their own milestones. In addition, qualitative research has found that Chinese students no longer stick to the traditional explanation of educational milestones: good grades, good schools and high diplomas. Instead, they perform individualistic articulation according to their own focus. Finally, Chinese students' obsession with the timing and sequence of completing educational milestones has also disappeared.

During the research, we also discovered the new status quo of Chinese students' educational obsession in modern Chinese society. Although the cognition of Chinese students has changed with the trend of late modernity, the educational obsession of Chinese students has not been alleviated. Through semi-structured interviews, we believe this is due to the high-pressure and competitive environment caused by the prevalence of *Nei juan* in China. Because everyone works extremely hard, students who do not join will face the risk of being eliminated by society. This prevents Chinese students from following modern cognition and reducing academic pursuits, so educational obsession still exists among Chinese students.

Limitation:

This article uses semi-structured interviews when conducting qualitative research. This method inevitably causes the interviewer

to be biased during the interview, which leads to the interviewee being guided when answering questions and expressing his or her opinions (Kakilla, 2021), affecting the objectivity of the data. In addition, the sample size of this article is only five people, which is very limited. Although the research design makes the results very accurate for a specific group of people, it also reduces its reliability and generality (Hackshaw, 2008). In order to provide recommendations for future research in similar areas, researchers may consider incorporating quantitative methods, such as utilizing questionnaires to collect data, to achieve triangulation, thereby reducing the impression brought by the subjectivity of the interviewer on the data. Furthermore, researchers can expand the sample size to encompass students from varied social classes and regions, such as those from working-class backgrounds or different Chinese provinces, which could improve the credibility of the results. Additionally, conducting comparative studies between students in the traditional Chinese education system and those participating in international education may allow for a more comprehensive exploration of the educational fixation observed among Chinese students from the perspective of the education system.

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About the author:

Yanxuan Wu (January 8th, 2003), Female, Han, Shanghai, China, Undergraduate Student, Bachelor of Science (Hons) in Education, Research Direction: Sociology in education. Use the existence theory of contemporary sociology to reveal the cultural, social and political reasons behind Chinese students' obsession with educational outcomes, including factors such as Confucian culture, social pressure, future work and China's education monitoring system.