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# Chinese students' perspectives on learner identity

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**ABSTRACT**

To gain insight into Chinese students' perspectives on their education, this study examines how they construct their learner identities by navigating multiple subject positions both at school and in their families. Drawing on the frame of learner identity formation and the concepts of Western and Confucian ways of being, thematic analysis is applied to analyse the educational experiences of final-year students (N = 479) at a public middle school in China. The analysis shows the push and pull between various subject positions, such as the exam-oriented self, the enterprising self, the familial self and the free and happy self, around the theme of competition. It highlights the multiplicity and complexities of Chinese students' identification. This study illustrates the value of Western and Confucian ways of being as conceptual tools in identity studies and initiates a discussion on re-defining Chinese education through students' identity-formation experiences.

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Learner identity; Chinese learner; school transition; multiplicity; subject position; Confucianism

## Introduction

Over the last decade, the superior academic performance of Chinese students and East Asian students in general has led to considerable international interest in producing similar high achievers elsewhere (You and Morris 2016; Takayama 2017; Komatsu and Rappleye 2017). In contrast to this intense interest in the education system, educational policies and pedagogies of China, students' perspectives in their education have largely been neglected. Little is known about how Chinese students conceptualise themselves as learners, that is their learner identities (Coll and Falsafi 2010; Rees et al. 1997; Erstad et al. 2016). Forming learner identities are deeply rooted in learners' educational experiences across both the formal educational system and informal settings. In other words, learning is situated in social and cultural contexts. The inquiry into learner identity focuses on the complex process of identification rather than on representing a fixed belief or the capability to learn. When approaching identification, it is common to explore the interactions of many subject positions available to individuals (Wetherell 2010). A subject position is "a loose set of rights and duties that limit the possibilities of action" (Rom and Moghaddam 2003, 5) that offer "viewpoints and classificatory schemas" for individuals to identify themselves in certain contexts (Torronen 2001, 315). Thereby, exploring such processes of learner identity formation can open a window into students' educational

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experiences and the educational, social and cultural contexts in which they are embedded.

Chinese students are traditionally identified as "Chinese learners" distinctively subjected to exam-oriented education (Ryan 2010; Francis, Mau, and Archer 2017). Exam-oriented learning entails implementing certain strategies, such as emphasising personal diligence, outcome-driven evaluations, the authoritative roles of teachers, memorisation and repetition, the ethics of diligence and the importance of exemplarity (Dello-Iacovo 2009; Kim 2009; Tan 2017; Wu 2016). The exam-oriented self is a decisive subject position with which Chinese students may identify, but it is not the only one. An increasing number of studies have revealed the multiple subject positions that are available to young Chinese people when discussing their identification broadly (Hoffman 2006; Liu 2008b; Pun and Koo 2019). Thus, there remains a dearth of empirical research exploring this multiplicity with a focus on the field of education.

This article addresses this research gap by exploring how Chinese students construct their learner identities by navigating various subject positions at school and in their families. Drawing on the framework of learner identity formation (Chappell et al. 2003) and the concepts of Western and Confucian ways of being (Zhao 2009), this article analyses the educational experiences of final-year students (N = 479) at a public middle school in China to deepen the empirical understanding of Chinese students by giving voice to their lives and encounters in education.

## Compulsory education in China: exam-oriented pedagogical practices and selection system

China initiated a national "quality education" reform in compulsory education to replace the traditional "exam-oriented education" in 1999 (Zhao 2015). In pedagogical practice, however, exam-oriented education still plays a vital role. This orientation is commonly considered a Confucian legacy, although Confucianism comprises a much richer account of education, such as highlighting the interrelatedness of individuals' identification (Tan 2017; Kim 2009; Tu 1985; Rosemont 2015). This limited but dominant understanding of Confucianism is linked to the 1,300-year prevalence of the civil-service examination system (*keju*) in Imperial China (Curran 2014). The exam-oriented learning and teaching to pass this high-stakes exam has been maintained after it was abolished in 1903. For most contemporary schools, particularly those with few resources and those with students transitioning to post-compulsory education, these exam-oriented strategies are still considered the most efficient in helping students pass their exams and gain opportunities to continue their education (Wu 2016; You 2019).

The consistency of exam-oriented practices is also connected to the lasting exam-based selection system made notable by two high-stakes tests: the high school entrance exam (*zhongkao*) and the university entrance exam. Chinese compulsory education includes primary school and middle school. Final-year middle school students can take *zhongkao*, the result of which determines what kind of high school they can be enrolled in. Academic high schools have higher recruiting standards than their vocational counterparts, and schools in cities are more demanding than those in towns and rural areas. Schools with high recruiting requirements are favoured because their students have better chances of earning places at top-tier universities and acquiring good jobs (Zhao

2015). Despite many attempts to change the summative assessment of *zhongkao*, its "objective" judgement is still considered the most reliable and equitable method for selecting intellectual elites (You 2019), particularly among students with limited educational resources to gain a competitive edge in an otherwise subjective selection system (Dello-Iacovo 2009).

## Multiplicity in the identification of young Chinese people

Although empirical studies seldom focus on the learner identities of young Chinese people, the literature on identification provides useful related insights into their learner identity formation. A host of research about the identification of young Chinese people, particularly the generations born after the economic reform at the end of the 1970s, addresses their experiences of multiple and sometimes antagonistic subject positions in identifying who they are, as the following scholars illustrate.

The subject position of the enterprising self (Rose 1998) is the most commonly discussed issue in the identity-formation literature of young Chinese people (Hoffman 2006; Liu 2008a; Pun and Koo 2019; Woronov 2009). It is a position that "calculates about itself and that acts upon itself in order to better itself" (Rose 1998, 154). Young Chinese people who take this subject position calculate the options for their educational and occupational careers and hold strong beliefs in their self-efficacy and self-determination regarding these choices. Here, education is the necessary constitute of the enterprising position regarding its close relevance to personal prosperity in the future. Most studies highlight individuals' struggles to situate themselves between this subject position and others such as the commitments to improving the state's economic competence and to caring for parents (Hoffman 2006; Kipnis 2011; Pun and Koo 2019), while the nuances of their empirical data indicate opportunities to manage these struggles. Some young people maintain their personal aspirations and their patriotic duties by working for state-run companies or in the stable political–administrative system (Hoffman 2006). Others live in the same city as their parents to balance their family responsibilities with their future careers (Liu 2008b). Some young people choose to adhere to the position of the enterprising self over others in their identification (Hansen 2013; Liu 2008a). Such mixed results require further examination about the interactions between the enterprising position and other positions in Chinese young people's identification.

Another important but under-explained subject position is the familial self. As Liu (2008b) pointed out, when young Chinese people navigate their vocational pathways, they consider the issue of caring for their parents, which embraces a Confucian norm of family obligation. The interpretation of this traditional ethos has morphed from sacrificing for the family's benefit to maintaining parent–child interdependence (Qi 2016). Situating the self within the relationship with parents has been highlighted as one of the most "natural status" of being a person in Confucian classics (Zhao 2009, 401; Rosemont 2015; Ames 2010; Hall and Ames 1987). For school-aged children, their educational outcomes play crucial roles in interpreting this obligation (Huang and Gove 2015). Parents invest heavily in their children's educational success, and children respect their parents' educational guidance, like a "paying and repaying" circle. The more support adolescents receive from their parents, the harder they try to "repay" their parents by upgrading their academic performance. Thereby, Chinese students' academic achievements become

a primary form of family obligation, which can be highly motivating (Fuligni and Zhang 2004; Tao and Hong 2014).

Philosophical insights also underpin the multiplicity of identification addressed by these empirical studies. Identity construction can be broadly summarised by two ways of being derived from Western and Confucian heritages (Tu 1985; Rosemont 2015; Hall and Ames 1987). According to Zhao (2009), the Confucian way of being is relational, emphasising the significance of others and interpersonal relationships. The aforementioned subject position of the familial self demonstrates this way of being: identifying the self with parental requirements. In contrast, the Western way of being takes a disconnected form, emphasising universal values, such as autonomy, freedom and self-direction. The aforementioned enterprising self illustrates this. The current study uses these ways of being as conceptual tools to frame and analyse various subject positions and their interactions.

## Theorising learner identity

To conceptualise Chinese students' learner identities, this study employs Chappell et al.'s (2003) approach to identification: "Identity is formed in the dynamic interplay between reflexive and relational process of identification" (Chappell et al. 2003, 52). Although these two processes are entangled, this study discusses them separately and sequentially for the purposes of analysis.

In relational identification, individuals are circulated by one or more "social and cultural definitions of possible identities" (subject positions) (Chappell et al. 2003, 47). In given social-cultural practices, certain subject positions are more valid and powerful than others (Torronen 2001). Social relations play important roles in determining what subject positions are available to the individuals. The subject positions of learners are not only articulated within the confines of schools but also through relationships with families, teachers and friends (Coll and Falsafi 2010; Pollard and Filer 2007). Thus, when examining learner identities, it is necessary to include both the formal educational context and informal settings. As relational identification unfolds, the process of reflexive identification also begins.

In reflexive identification, individuals generate threads running through their (learning) lives to represent themselves as learners over time. This stability makes individuals recognisable despite the changeable, dynamic nature of identity. The stress of individuals' capabilities of being reflexive in this process does not imply that their created identities "wholly originate from and are unique to" the individuals themselves (Chappell et al. 2003, 53). Here, individuals shape and integrate the socially and culturally available subject positions through relational identification to clarify "who I am". Notably, even through such manipulation, these multifaceted subject positions may remain incompatible rather than achieving coherence (Wetherell 2010).

## Materials and methods

The data presented here are part of a larger qualitative study about the everyday experiences of adolescents in the last year of their middle school lives. The transition to post-compulsory education has a deep impact on students' educational and occupational

futures (Tang 2016), which may motivate young people to re-shape their lives and re-construct their learner identities. This situation provides an opportunity to uncover how learner identities are formed.

The fieldwork was conducted in a public middle school in a town in Hebei province. Hebei province has a population over 74 million, but it has fewer economic resources than the national average (National Data 2020). The selected town has two primary schools, two middle schools, one academic high school and one vocational high school. The students have the right to transition to any high school in Hebei province upon achieving the necessary academic requirements. According to the headmaster of the selected school, most students who completed the middle school programme in 2016 successfully transitioned to high school, but only half enrolled in the academic high schools they favoured.

During the first three weeks of fieldwork, all the final-year students (N = 546) in the selected school were asked to complete an open-ended survey about their family and school lives in a paper-and-pencil format. Open-ended questions give participants space to describe their experiences freely and provide researchers with access to a large amount of personal information in a short time (Popping 2015). The open-ended survey was used as a qualitative data-collection method (Morrow 2001). Each student had 45 minutes to complete the survey in their classrooms in Mandarin Chinese. The participants were asked to answer four open-ended questions: (1) the challenges they currently experienced in school, (2) the coping strategies they used for those challenges, (3) the support from and expectations for their school and (4) the support from, the expectations for and the relationship histories with their families. These experiences were collected to disclose how participants identified themselves as learners (Coll and Falsafi 2010; Pollard and Filer 2007). The data-gathering complied with the ethical standards of my university and meets Finnish standards (Finnish National Board on Research Integrity [TENK] 2009). Before the survey, I received oral permission from the local education bureau and the selected school. Information that could identify the participants was removed.

Surveys were received from 489 (90%) students. Ten surveys were deleted because of empty answers, unrecognisable handwriting, duplicate answers or irrelevant answers. In total, 479 answers were analysed. The age of the participants ranged from 13–17 years, 96% of whom were from 14–15 years old. The number of boys (N = 264) was slightly higher than girls (N = 201). Fourteen participants' gender information was missing. The participants' answers to the open-ended questions were presented both as short listings (e.g. the kinds of educational support the participants received) and detailed explanations (e.g. their critiques of the social expectations of education) (Popping 2015). There were 517 pages of transcripts.

A thematic analysis (Attride-Stirling 2001; Saldana 2013) was conducted with the help of the software Atlas.ti (version 8) to summarise the main patterns of the informants' answers. First, all the transcripts regarding their educational experiences were coded descriptively, such as school arrangements, learning strategies and parents' educational aspirations. Second, these descriptive codes were refined into clusters of categories. The existing literature on young Chinese people's identification and "Chinese learners" and the concepts of Confucian and Western ways of being were employed in this conceptualising stage. Five categories were outlined: four subject positions (the exam-oriented self, enterprising self, familial self and free and happy self)

and one learner identity (the "competitor"). Third, these codes and categories were used to summarise the overarching themes as framed by the theoretical lens of identification (Chappell et al. 2003): relational identification at school and in their families and reflexive identification. The following analysis is organised around these themes and categories. Each section describes the overall patterns across the participants followed by illustrative examples.

## Relational identification at school and in family

### *Intensification of exam-oriented strategies*

This section traces the subject position of the exam-oriented self that circulated in the participants' school arrangements, pedagogy practices and interactions with their peers. The participants typically experienced a shift from a "not-in-a-hurry" lifestyle in the first two years of middle school to an "intensive" learning atmosphere in their final year. For example, one boy provided his experience of this difference:

> In seventh and eighth grades, I always thought I was not in a hurry because there was still one or two years …. However, the lifestyle and the way of learning changes dramatically in ninth grade. I am overwhelmed with the intensive school atmosphere. The pressure from the school, my parents and myself make me very nervous.

Testing dominated their lives in their final year of middle school. All the participants had completed two school-standardised exams in each semester in their first two years of middle school; these exams were held every month during their final year of middle school. Alongside the increasing incidence of exams, the students were ranked by their grades relative to their peers. The rankings allowed the participants to predict their chances of gaining admission into high school. One girl described this practice of prediction:

> I need to be in the top ten of my peers [to go to my dream schools], but my current status is not very good. There are almost 80 students who rank in front of me …. I … planned to upgrade a few ranking positions in each monthly exam.

The testing and the rank-tracking system were more than just means for the students to evaluate their chances of getting into good high schools, however; they were tools to differentiate them (Wu 2016). Here, the exemplars of academic success, the "good" students, received preferential treatment at school. The participants could sense such unequal treatment from their teachers' overt favouring of the "good" students when teaching, for example. More often, however, the participants were exposed to this exam-driven school culture through interaction with their peers. For example, they gave examples of "bad" students having difficulties "integrating into [peer] groups", whereas "good" students were expected to "be separated from 'bad' students … during their courses". Few students attempted to challenge this inequality by believing that "no one should be discriminated against 'external' factors", as one girl stated, while the majority deliberately used this binary to include or exclude their peers. The following account vividly describes the marginalisation and shamefulness one can feel when being excluded from the "good" student group.

> Exams determine everything. When your grade is not as high as others, . . . there is a genuine fear of being looked down on.

The participants described a series of pedagogical strategies that their school had introduced to secure their academic success, as other Chinese schools do (Wu 2016; You 2019). First, only the subjects examined by *zhongkao* (the "major subjects") were worthy of being taught. School time was used to train students' learning skills in these subjects. As a result, physical exercise, class breaks and courses unrelated to major subjects were mostly replaced by self-learning and teaching activities in relation to major subjects. Second, teachers played primary roles in improving the adolescents' knowledge and skills for testing (Kim 2009), as evinced by the students' accounts that teaching was the most common support they received at school. The participants reported that their teachers explained "every exemplary question that *zhongkao* might test" and guided them to use "feasible" and "flexible" learning methods to "cope with exams" and "improve their grades". Third, repeated practice for testing was guaranteed by completing enormous amounts of homework in the participants' after-school time (Dello-Iacovo 2009). The intensity of this homework load could cause severe sleep deprivation. As one boy illustrated, he had to compress his sleeping time to complete his homework and "review what teachers taught". Such a daily routine made him "fatigued for the next day". Overall, these accounts show that the participants' lives were re-arranged and re-oriented around educational success.

### *Learning as a means of maintaining family connectedness*

This section discusses how the participants were informed by the subject position of the familial self, which requires positioning the self in relation to parents, a Confucian way of being (Zhao 2009). Like many other young Chinese people (Huang and Gove 2015; Liu 2008b), this position was easy to access in the participants' family lives. The students' increasing awareness of the familial ethos was connected to their parents' commitments to the same subject position. Parents' obligations to families were mostly evident in the considerable educational support they provided, particularly financial investment (such as purchasing practice books and paying for private tutoring) and guidance in coping with students' learning difficulties (such as answering academic questions and sharing learning methods). Amidst this support, supervision was a typical strategy to ensure that most of the participants' time was dedicated to learning, as illustrated by the following two accounts.

> My parents supervise my learning. They come into my room every now and then to watch what I am doing.

> My parents don't watch TV anymore. They usually sit with me [until I complete my homework] . . . . Even if I ask them to go to sleep, at least one of them will sit up with me into the middle of night.

The young people's interpretations of their parents' commitments to their families varied. On the one hand, the participants appreciated having family resources and sensed the good intentions behind their parents' engagement. As one girl interpreted, her parents' increasing concern in her academic performance was a genuine wish that she could

successfully "transition [to high school] without any trouble". Another boy also considered his parents "the most solid support". Parents' firm commitments to their children's education could even increase their relational closeness, as was described by a girl who felt "really happy" and "closer to my parents". These quotations indicate that these students favoured their parents' guidance and they were keen to forming the self in a Confucian and relational way (Zhao 2009; Rosemont 2015; Ames 2010).

On the other hand, parents' educational involvements could make students feel overwhelmed. For example, one girl shared that her parents were "more strict" and "often said that [she] disappointed them"; one boy sensed that his parents "showed their tremendous concern about [his] grades in exams"; and another girl's parents "put more pressure on her and had higher aspirations for [her] education". Even when students achieved excellent grades, "parents' expectations would grow", as one boy reported. Through these family experiences, these adolescents, including the girl quoted below, were aware that their parents were devoted to shaping them into excellent performers.

> [My parents] are more like bosses who love you very much. You know that they love you, but they always give [me] invisible pressure . . . . While I am in middle school, their expectations are even greater. It seems that they would have taken the exams for me.

This quotation demonstrates that identifying the self in relation to others may induce "the oppression of the individual and the deprivation of [his or her] rights and freedoms" (Zhao 2009, 401). These students were also aware of losing the peacefulness of their child–parent relationship if they rejected this position. More than half the participants admitted that the quality of their child–parent relationship had regressed since their final year of middle school. Many adolescents used metaphors like "cold war", "cracked glass", "leadership" and "familiar strangers" to describe their current child–parent relationships. These students increasingly found that their parents' attitudes towards them were aligned with their academic performance. For example, the attitude of one girl's parents "explicitly became better" after she upgraded her ranking position in the latest exam. Vice versa, one high achiever accidently made several mistakes in one exam in seventh grade, and she afterwards experienced dictatorial "Stalin-style" parenting. She generalised her child–parent relationship as being "grade-centred". Together, holistic parental support and changes in family relationships make thoroughly the familial position visible in the participants' everyday lives. If positioned to such a Confucian way of being (Zhao 2009), these adolescents understood that their role was to satisfy their parents' educational aspirations (Tao and Hong 2014; Fuligni and Zhang 2004).

### *Individual responsibility and significance of education to future prosperity*

This section describes how the participants were acquainted with the subject position of the enterprising self (Rose 1998), which highlights the universal value of self-responsibility and self-calculation (Zhao 2009). Except for the considerable efforts to ensure that the students had every advantage for the *zhongkao*, the participants received little support regarding the upcoming transitions from their school, such as worries about getting a job, confusion about the purpose of life and entrapment by daily routines. They struggled to cope with these crucial "non-academic" problems by themselves. A good example of such limited support was evident in the roles of the teachers. As mentioned above, the

adolescents' accounts of their teachers' support were filled with pedagogical practices. Even the teachers' emotional support, such as "motivating", "encouraging" and "being supportive", often had the purpose of increasing students' academic competence. Almost all the participants normalised such a narrow role of teachers and schools without expecting any radical changes. Further interviews with some of the participants confirmed this idea that school transition is part of their "private lives" (Wang, Satka, and Julkunen 2020).

One group of participants also claimed that they had barely received support or been insufficiently supported in their families. Dissatisfaction with parental engagement was particularly common in a group whose parents "lacked educational experience" or "hadn't been to university". Most adolescents in this group received their parents' constant suggestions or "nagging" about the learning strategy of diligence, but this advice was too general to be useful regarding their personalised needs for specific learning methods, for example. Lacking tailored parental help, these adolescents were more likely to view learning as an individual endeavour, as evinced by statements such as "facing the difficulties alone" and "relying on myself".

In addition, the participants' parents were keen to stress learning in terms of individual future prosperity. One girl said parents commonly believed and taught their children about the utilitarian purpose of education with the following line: "If you perform excellently in exams, you will be wealthy and go to university in the future". Similarly, another girl constantly heard about the instrumental value of education from her grandmother through a Chinese poem: "You can find not only gold but also gorgeous beauty in books". The parental belief in the promising economic returns of education manifested in their penchant for preferring academic high schools that gave students a greater chance of going to university and finding a good job than vocational schools. Otherwise, "it is difficult to survive in this society" and "the only future is to do physical work", as two girls were informed by their parents. Such suggestions by parents conveyed the future relevance of education. One girl even felt that "all the thoughts unrelated to learning are not worth a dime". Thus, school and family practices helped these adolescents understand a third valid viewpoint about being a learner: focusing on the Western and universal rationality of self-calculation and self-governing (Zhao 2009).

## Reflexive identification: coherence and tension around the theme of competition

This section explains how the participants told their own stories of who they were. They embraced and reshaped the multiple subject positions they were offered by their school and families. When asked about challenges at school, these students' biggest worries were related to the intensification of testing. They gave new meaning to exam-oriented strategies through the concept of competition. As one girl said, "There is intensive competition in all the aspects of school life, particularly on grades, which are presented through academic ranking". Through the lens of competition, being exam-oriented not only implies performing well in testing but also ranking higher than peers. This growing standard of high achievers offers more spaces to improve, as well as more stresses to struggle with.

The pressure of academic competition was apparent in the respondents' descriptions of their most common coping strategy: being diligent. While this strategy was easily explained through narratives such as "making an effort to learn" and "learning with all your effort", the students found it difficult to master this in their real lives. Even when the students put all their effort into learning, their ranking positions would still hardly improve. Such an experience revealed the hidden impact of competition. Giving 100% at work was not enough, as one girl highlighted, "When I am working hard, others are working hard too. I can only work with '180%' effort". Since "everyone works hard", as many respondents observed, they articulated being more diligent than their peers as the primary if not the only strategy to improve their educational outcomes:

> I am not a hard-working person. I only concentrate on the knowledge I think is important . . . . To teachers and parents, therefore, I could achieve high marks with little effort . . . . However, the results [from this method] were not satisfactory in the two exams in ninth grade. My continuous drop in rank . . . is very stressful. All I can do is work harder and harder.

These students not only sought to gain a competitive edge in the present assessment system in their school but also in their precarious futures. One-quarter of the informants cited the upcoming *zhongkao* as their biggest challenge; it superseded other worries, such as friendship, family life and student–teacher relationships. They intensively discussed the determinative role of this "first significant life transition" in differentiating their educational and occupational futures. As one boy intuitively related, his *zhongkao* result seemed "to determine [his] whole life". Another boy said, "Education is a shortcut to a promising future". Their life trajectories amounted to constant improvement to increase their chances of upward mobility because of their responsibilities to organise their lives in enterprising ways, which is imagined to be a dominant social norm, as the following two excerpts bluntly demonstrate.

> [I] have to study hard. My situation of not being advanced means I will take a beating. Today, only winners survive.

> You can only make yourself better; otherwise, you will be nothing and become one of those losers on the street.

A sense of familial obligation was another reason to be and become competitive. Quite a few accounts were related to meeting their parents' educational aspirations. For example, one girl wrote, "While I see my family' expectations, I make up my mind, and at the same time, feel stressed". Similarly, one boy sensed his parents were "in a dominant position" to "push" him to improve his academic competence. Another boy's experience was also an example of how his parents successfully "pushed" him: He was aware that his parents took his grades seriously, and he had not performed well on his latest exam. It was "extremely stressful" because of the possible punishment he would receive from his parents, and he immediately planned to "give my phone [to my parents] and improve my grades".

Rather than complying with their parents, a small group of respondents who privileged their familial positions disclosed slightly different interpretations. They sensed the support, and even the sacrifice, their parents made through their expectations, and they believed that their academic competence was their best "repayment" to their parents (Tao and Hong 2014). Such an understanding of maintaining family connectedness was

a powerful motivator for these participants, pushing them to compete for a better outcome:

> I have … known my responsibilities and what I am facing. To work against poor academic attainment and to cope with the academic difficulties, I must put all my energy into learning, repaying my parents' efforts for what they did for me … I wouldn't dare go home after exams. I would feel very sorry for my parents. They have placed all their hope in me … I have not repaid as much as one-thousandth of what my father has done for me in the past three years … . How can I go home when I am not the top [of the class]?

When synthesising their various positions around the concept of competition, many students felt depressed, anxious, constrained, overwhelmed and even afraid. Many expected emotional support from their parents and school, such as "being supportive", "being considerate", "encouraging", "respecting", "trusting", "being happy" and "being free", casting doubt on the prevalent narrative of being competitive. A small group of adolescents criticised this idea as trivial and narrow, producing "robots preparing for exams" in education. For example, one boy questioned, "Even if all the students can achieve the full marks, what does it mean?" Similarly, another boy deliberately explained why he thought his present education failed his "explorations of the whole world and life purpose":

> Although exams are important, it is a narrow view to limit the present life to test results. Navigating your life journey and solving your own problems is more significant … . We use our transcripts to demonstrate how much knowledge we have about certain subjects. However, we have not carefully considered their true purposes. More often, we fill our young lives with these unnecessary things.

While most struggled with this tension between different positions, a small group chose to privilege their individual freedom and happiness over others. They treated school as a place for socialising and entertainment rather than learning. In their school lives, they chatted, slept, ate snacks, smoked, had romantic relationships and spaced out. As one boy said, they did anything "but learning". Interestingly, there was only one girl in this group; boys seemed more eager to choose an alternative way to organise their lives. In the girls' imaginations, the future was demanding and uncertain, and education was the only tool that may lead them to decent lives. Some accounts helped uncover the gendered construction of the pursuit of academic success and illustrated how the girls felt frustrated, vulnerable and limited in the competition in education.

> Going to a good high school? It will be difficult! My grades are too low … . I hope I have a good fate and a promising future waiting for me, [like my aunt]. [She] hasn't been to high school but has a successful marriage. Now she has a stable job, two houses and a savings of around 30 thousand yuan. I don't know what to do. I can only move ahead without any direction. Go, go, go!

> I am a girl. If I can't win in exams, my whole life will be ruined.

> I know that as a girl, if I do not make an effort, I cannot be enrolled in a good high school. Thereafter, I cannot attend a good university. My life will be worse than others.

Altogether, the theme of competition regulates what and how these adolescents learn throughout their experiences and imaginations by referring to the subject positions articulated by their families and school. These identity accounts demonstrate how the students strive to balance their exam-oriented schooling, their precarious educational and

occupational futures, their parents' aspirations and their personal freedom and happiness, often with tensions and ambiguities.

## Discussion

This study demonstrates how the concepts of Confucian and Western ways of being (Zhao 2009) can be applied to categorise students' experiences into a series of subject positions in identity studies. The influence of Confucianism on Chinese students is broader than its common reduction to exam-oriented education (Kim 2009; Tan 2017). For individuals who identified themselves with a Confucian way of being, "goal of living, then, is to achieve harmony and enjoyment for oneself and for others through acting optimally appropriate in those … relationships that make us uniquely who we are" (Ames 2010, 151–152). Being relational is the ethical and "natural status" of being a person (Zhao 2009, 401) in Confucian terms. The most fundamental relationships for individuals are the intergenerational relationships within families (Zhao 2009; Rosemont 2015), which the subject position of the familial self in this study recognises. Being assigned this familial position, the students were aware of their expected roles of fulfiling their parents' educational aspirations, and they sensed their parent's exorbitant support for them. This finding of the interdependence between parents and children resonates with the ideal of the child–parent relationship in Confucian classics: the responsibilities of parents and children to each other are mutual (Liu 2008b; Tu 1985). Highlighting such interrelatedness expands our understanding of how Chinese students' academic motivations are connected to their families (Tao and Hong 2014; Fuligni and Zhang 2004).

However, these Chinese students were clearly not only oriented by the Confucian way of being but also the Western one, which emphasises individual autonomy, freedom and rationality without referring to surrounding relationships (Zhao 2009; Rosemont 2015). Young people commonly narrate this disconnected way of being as the position of the enterprising self (Rose 1998; Hoffman 2006; Liu 2008a; Yan 2010), as did the ones in this study. Both school and families underlined the necessity and significance of their individual responsibilities and plans for their educational careers. This study also recognised a new expression of this disconnected way of being: being free and happy. This quest for freedom and happiness challenges the standard images of students as calculators, planners or competitors, which may be far from who they really are (Ball, Maguire, and Macrae 2000). Being supported, having enough space and seeking leisure were all relevant to the students.

This study also points out the complexities of identification by uncovering the interactions of different subject positions (Wetherell 2010). Most Chinese students synthesise the positions available to them around the concept of competition. Such a synthesis does not entail simply summing up; each decisive subject position contributes to reifying the concept of competition, which in turn gives a new meaning to each subject position. However, not all positions can achieve consensus, and they may have to co-exist despite their differences. These students' passions for a competitive edge in education could not hide their fatigue, unhappiness and criticism of exam-oriented education. It is a negotiation of the students' own interests with their commitments to their schools and families. Highlighting such multiplicities, tensions and ambiguities paints a broad

picture of who these Chinese students are rather than reproducing the polished stereotype of "Chinese learners" (Francis, Mau, and Archer 2017; Ryan 2010).

This new understanding of Chinese students contributes to a wider discussion about how to re-conceptualise Chinese education (Zhao and Deng 2016). Chinese education and East Asian education in general have often been used as political tools to defend or attack the Western education model without an in-depth examination (Takayama 2017). This study proposes new imaginative horizons within which to situate East Asian education (Komatsu and Rappleye 2020, 2017): through the inquiry into learner identity. Interweaving learning and being in the concept of learner identity situates learning in its social-cultural context (Erstad et al. 2016; Rees et al. 1997). Students' identity experiences of being pushed and pulled between the Western and Confucian educational and ethical models correspond to Chinese modernisation, in which the old and new institutions co-exist and challenge each other (Yan 2010). Highlighting this special social and cultural meaning of Chinese education differentiates it from other education models (Takayama 2017). Thereby, this view of who students think they are and will become is valuable in re-envisioning Chinese education.

The participants were from a particular socio-historical context: during their transition to post-compulsory education. Here, the school transition is more than an educational routine of continuing to next-level education; it also involves decisive changes of identities (Amaral et al. 2016). It is a process of negotiating with rising pressure at school and in families (You 2019; Zhao 2015). While the participants' experiences cannot represent the situations of all Chinese students, they provide interesting insights into how the current generation defines their roles as learners. Chinese students are not the only ones reorienting themselves during transitions to post-compulsory education, but their uniform concentration on academic achievement may be unique. Their Western counterparts tend to make choices about varied education programmes following their employment interests (Amaral et al. 2016). Further studies may offer more evidence to compare changes in learner identity internationally.

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## Notes on contributor

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