

Isabel Heger

Understanding the Persistence of China's National College Entrance Examination: The Role of Individual Coping Strategies

The National College Entrance Examination, or *Gaokao* (高考), is not only a fundamental institution in contemporary China but also a major stressor and potential turning point in any Chinese student's career. The saying “*one exam determines one's whole life*” (*yi kao ding zhongshen* 一考定终身) gets to the heart of the matter. The aim of this study is to contribute to an understanding of why this institution has been able to persist despite of its many flaws, most importantly regional inequalities and intransparencies in the admission process. I propose the theory that the system has been able to persist, among other reasons, because students have found ways to cope with it individually.

In order to comprehensively examine Chinese students' coping strategies in dealing with the *Gaokao*, nineteen interviews with students from East China Normal University (ECNU) conducted in 2012 were analysed by means of qualitative content analysis. Following the theoretical framework by Lazarus and Folkman (1984; Folkman 2008), this paper distinguishes between problem-focused, emotion-focused and meaning-focused coping and further differentiates between prospective and reactive strategies. The results reveal that students are aware of the problems within the higher education entry system but simply consider them a given. Rather than protesting in a collective manner, students adapt to their individual circumstances and try to make the best of them: They show strategic reasoning and problem-solving skills to take matters into their own hands or find ways to cope with what cannot be changed in a positive way. Finally, to add to the discussion on the persistence of the *Gaokao*, students' coping strategies are interpreted as the individuals' ways to exert agency within institutional constraints.

Keywords

National College Entrance Examination (*Gaokao*), coping strategies, agency, persistence of institutions, qualitative content analysis

1. Introduction

The National College Entrance Examination, or *Gaokao* (高考), is a fundamental institution¹ in contemporary China, regulating access to one of China's most precious national resources: Places in higher education. At the same time, it is a major stressor and potential turning point in any Chinese student's career. Labelling the *Gaokao* a stressor does not only refer to the one-time event of taking the test but rather to the whole process of studying and cramming, taking the exam, choosing preferences, as well as anxiously waiting for and dealing with the outcomes—not to mention the social pressure to succeed.

Being admitted to university is something desired by most Chinese students and families. Furthermore, most people strive to attend not only university per se, but to enter a prestigious institution and study a promising major more likely leading to good employment

¹ “Institutions are the humanly devised constraints that structure political, economic and social interaction.” (North, 1991: 97).

prospects. The popular saying “*one exam determines one’s whole life*” (*yi kao ding zhongshen* 一考定终身) describes the heart of the matter.

Another crucial factor for the stressful nature of the *Gaokao* is the admission system with its contradiction between meritocracy in theory and highly unequal conditions in practice. Essentially, while there exists a unified entrance examination, chances of enrolment are determined by one's regional background.

From an outsider's point of view, it is puzzling why students, although complaining about it, generally accept the *Gaokao* and do not fundamentally question it in spite of all its flaws. However, during my studies in China from 2010 to 2011, at the time unknowingly conducting participant observation by taking part in the curriculum and everyday lives of a class of all Chinese students, I realised that instead of contesting the system, students seem to have developed a range of strategies to cope with their situation. In this paper, I thus propose that individual coping strategies play an important role in explaining why Chinese students' tolerance for deficiencies in the system is so high and why there is no potential for institutional change.

The aim of this paper is twofold: Firstly, I want to empirically examine which strategies Chinese students use to cope with their situation within the current higher education entry system—on the one hand to prepare for college entry (prospective strategies), on the other hand to cope with the outcomes of the *Gaokao* (reactive strategies). This study's approach, namely to treat the whole process of the *Gaokao* as a stressor and comprehensively examine related coping strategies, is unique. Secondly, I want to contribute to the theoretical discussion on the persistence of the *Gaokao* by interpreting the results from the point of view of individual agency in institutional contexts.

To set the scene, this paper begins with an overview of the current higher education entry system of the People's Republic of China (PRC). It then elaborates on theories about coping, choosing the framework by Lazarus and Folkman (1984; Folkman 2008)—which distinguishes between problem-focused, emotion-focused and meaning-focused coping—in order to systematically assess Chinese students' coping strategies in dealing with the *Gaokao*. Results were obtained through qualitative content analysis of interviews conducted at East China Normal University (ECNU; *Huadong Shifan Daxue* 华东师范大学) in 2012 with a sample of nineteen students. After discussing my empirical results, students' coping strategies are interpreted as a form of agency within the given structural constraints. I argue that this form of agency contributes to understanding why the *Gaokao* and, conceivably, other controversial institutions have been able to persist.

The results of this qualitative study can of course not claim complete generalisability. However, they nonetheless provide an excellent starting point for understanding the to-date under researched topic of Chinese students' coping strategies in dealing with the *Gaokao* as well as for theoretical reflections on factors that contribute to the persistence of institutions.

2. Higher education entry in the PRC

Higher education has always had great value in China, not least because successfully asserting oneself is connected to social status and upward mobility for the whole family (Fong, 2004: 101ff.). Corresponding to the high value of educational achievement,

academic examinations based on meritocratic ideals have a long history.² They go back to about 400 A.D. when the imperial examination system began to take shape that was only abolished in 1905. In the following decades—when initially Western-style and later Soviet-style higher education flourished before all enrolment was temporarily suspended during the Cultural Revolution—no unified, meritocratic admission system was in place. A unified higher education entrance exam, the *Gaokao*, was only reinstated in 1977 as a result of one of the first and most far-reaching decisions of the reform period. After the government had recognized the crucial role of higher education for China's modernisation, people were once again given the opportunity to strive for social mobility through education, which fostered social and economic development.

Since 1978, when the policy of reform and opening-up was introduced, college education has become a stepping stone to compete in the increasingly privatised labour market, which is why educational desire has gained a new fervour.³ Intensified by the only recently abolished one-child policy (Fong 2004), the desire to attend higher education is so strong that competition nowadays already starts in nursery school (Kai 2012: 9). This caused education to become more and more exam-oriented (Dello-Iacovo 2009; Li and Li 2010).

The first important challenge in the race for higher education is to successfully pass the High School Entrance Exam (*zhongkao* 中考). This exam decides whether a student gains admission into a regular high school where education is geared towards the *Gaokao*, or into a vocational high school, a stigmatised option considered superior only to directly joining the work force. Under the current circumstances, only about half the nation's youth gains admission to a regular high school. Although vocational students could take the *Gaokao* in theory, few attempt to do so and success rates for students relying on self-study are extremely low (Hansen and Woronov 2013; Woronov 2015).

The second and most important challenge in the race for higher education is to successfully pass the *Gaokao*. Nowadays—as China's higher education system has entered the phase of mass enrolment⁴ with a promotion rate from high school to higher education of 92.5 percent in 2015 compared to only 27.3 percent in 1990 (Ministry of Education of the PRC 2016)—chances to enter higher education seem promising. However, competition is still fierce because students are not only racing for college entry anymore, but increasingly for places at the most prestigious universities⁵ providing good employment prospects (Fong 2004: 87ff.; Liu 2008), which in turn go along with prospects of “*the good life*” according to middle-class standards (Liu 2008). Only about 10 percent of all candidates succeed to obtain places at one of these institutions (Tsang 2013: 654).

Thus, higher education still is a scarce public resource in China, which is why it requires an effective and just system of allocation. Except for a few other paths towards enrolment like

² A good overview of the history of higher education entry in China is provided by Yang (2004) as well as Fan Guangji (2011). For an overview of the entire education system of the PRC, see Schulte (2014).

³ For a comprehensive study of the unfaltering desire for higher education in the PRC, see Kipnis (2011).

⁴ The stages of elite, mass and universal higher education correspond to Gross Enrolment Rates (GER) of under 15, between 15 and 50, and over 50 percent (Trow 1973).

⁵ Regular, publicly funded key universities are considered most prestigious. For an overview of the structure of the Chinese higher education system, see Zhu and Lou (2011: 35–65).

“independent recruitment”⁶ (*zizhu zhaosheng* 自主招生) or recommendation of outstanding candidates, the unified *Gaokao* serves as the sole selection mechanism for prospective students (Zhu and Lou 2011: 22; Schulte 2014: 12ff.).

By allocating applicants to universities and majors based solely on test scores, the *Gaokao* has a meritocratic connotation. In practice, however, the system is highly unequal. This can be explained with regional differences in the requirements for college admission. While it is true that test scores decide over admission, the Ministry of Education (MoE) of the PRC has established a province-based quota system, which determines how many students from each province a single university can admit. It also determines the score needed to succeed with regard to one's regional background. Additionally, local applicants need lower scores for being admitted to local higher education institutions. Since the best schools are located in the more prosperous eastern provinces, people from these provinces have a distinct advantage, while people from less prosperous provinces are disadvantaged even more (Yao et al. 2010; Li et al. 2015; Li and Yang 2013). Regional and socioeconomic inequalities are thus perpetuated throughout all levels of education: Students who have better chances to attend good schools from the beginning are more likely to attend key high schools and elite universities (Y. Chen 2016) and therefore have better job prospects in the future (Bao and Li 2014).

However, within the mainland Chinese discourse, the *Gaokao* is considered most suitable to the national conditions—on the one hand because of its fairness (test scores are relatively unsusceptible to corruption), on the other hand because of its efficiency (being able to manage the enormous amount of applicants). This is why calls to abolish or fundamentally reform the system have failed so far and alternatives to the *Gaokao* are viewed just as critically (Zheng 2010; Qu and Li 2010). In the words of Zheng Ruoling: “*Clearly, in the absence of a better selection process, we should not rashly abandon but rather adhere to the existing entrance exam, which in relative terms is the most scientific, rational, and fair system we possess.*” (Zheng 2010: 19)

Surprisingly, students show the same kind of reasoning: “Though they complained about corruption and inequality in the educational system, students still saw that system as the most level playing field they would ever have.” (Fong 2004: 106) Thus, regardless of their sociodemographic circumstances, students generally hold positive attitudes towards entering higher education and its potential for upward mobility (Y. Chen 2016).

Owing to the fact that not everyone has equal chances of college enrolment, there is a quantity of information to digest in order to make informed decisions. In recent years, the government has tried to counteract this problem by making the admission process more transparent. The respective notifications of the MoE require all concerned departments and institutions to publish, among other things, information on admission policies, plans, procedures, and results (Ministry of Education of the PRC 2005, 2013a). In this light, the platform “Transparent *Gaokao*” (*yangguang Gaokao* 阳光高考) has been created to assist the applicants in their decision-making process (Ministry of Education of the PRC 2013b; Quan guo gaodeng xuexiao xuesheng xinxi zixun yu jiuye zhidao zhongxin 2016).

⁶ Some universities are allowed to recruit around 5 percent of their annual quota independently through enrolment procedures with criteria determined by the university itself, including written exams as well as interviews. However, students are only admitted under the condition that they also pass the *Gaokao* with the required minimum score (Zhongguo jiaoyu zaixian 2013).

Nevertheless, proceedings in the admission process are not entirely transparent. After taking the *Gaokao* and listing preferences⁷, government agencies allocate students to different institutions and majors according to quota—a remnant of the planned economy—with students having no insight into the exact allocation mechanisms (Zhang and Yu 2010: 43). Because of the fixed quota and of how a discrepancy between supply and demand is handled, students are often allocated to majors not listed in their preferences (the common phenomenon of *bei tiaoji* 被调剂; lit. “to be adjusted”), which is why “major satisfaction” among Chinese students is not very high (M. Fan 2011).

As a result of the systemic problems as well as the pressure and social aspirations connected with the *Gaokao*, students are under a lot of psychological stress (see definition below) which requires coping. But even though psychological research in China has already addressed the issue of coping with the *Gaokao*, existing studies (for example, Jiang et al. 2011; Wu and Jiang 2007; Zhang, Liu and Zhang 2005) have only ever quantitatively examined the relation between students' personality traits or mental health issues and their coping styles prior to taking the exam. Besides, a few Western studies (Fong 2004; Y. Chen 2016) have qualitatively, though not in terms of coping, explored the discipline, strategic considerations, beliefs and behaviours of students and their parents in preparation for college entry. Thus, so far no studies have looked more comprehensively into the manifold strategies Chinese students use to cope with the *Gaokao*, especially those strategies used to cope with the outcomes of one's efforts. In addition, no studies have yet examined how individual coping strategies might contribute to the exam's persistence. This is what the present study wants to provide first insights into.

3. Theoretical framework: Coping

Coping, which emerged as a distinct field of psychological research in the 1970s and 1980s (Folkman and Moskowitz, 2004: 746), is defined by Lazarus and Folkman (1984: 141) as “... *constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person.*” As this definition shows, coping fulfils important psychological functions in dealing with stress, which the same authors define as “... *a particular relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her well-being.*” (Lazarus and Folkman 1984: 19) More precise, stress occurs in relation to the perceptions of threat, harm, loss, and challenge (Carver and Connor-Smith 2010: 684).

In the above definition, chosen regarding the aims and practical implementation of this study, coping is process-oriented rather than trait-oriented.⁸ A process approach to coping means that research examines how people actually cope in a specific context rather than how they would habitually cope in any hypothetical situation (Lazarus and Folkman 1984: 141–43). A process approach presumes that the choice of coping strategy depends on the

⁷ In the process of application for higher education entry, students have to list preferences for colleges or universities as well as for majors they would like to study at the chosen institutions. The number of preferences available to each student varies from region to region.

⁸ Complementing the process approach to coping, much research has been done on the relation between coping strategies and personality traits regardless of the specific situational context. For an overview, see Carver and Connor-Smith (2010).

continuous appraisal and reappraisal⁹ of both the problem and its mutability as well as on one's abilities and resources to solve it (Lazarus and Folkman 1984: 141–43).

Over the course of time, a variety of models have been developed for categorising coping strategies. The most influential conceptualisation comes from Lazarus and Folkman (1984: 150–57) who, in 1984, drew the main distinction between problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping. The original model was modified in 1997 by Folkman (1997: 1216–17, 2008: 5–7) who, based on new findings about positive psychological states in the coping process, added the category of meaning-focused coping.

Problem-focused coping is targeted at managing the problem causing stress and is mostly administered when people feel that something can still be done about it. In general, problem-focused coping can be summarised as defining the problem, finding possible solutions, weighing the costs and benefits of alternative solutions, making a decision, and acting upon it. Depending on the problem, coping efforts can be directed at the environment or at the self. The latter, also called problem-focused cognitive reappraisals, can include motivational or cognitive changes like shifting one's aspirations, reducing ego involvement, adjusting one's behaviour, or learning new skills and procedures (Lazarus and Folkman 1984: 152–53).

Emotion-focused coping is directed at managing the emotional distress caused by a situation, whether it can still be changed or not. Emotion-focused coping can include cognitive strategies that have been observed by research on defensive processes¹⁰, such as avoidance, distancing, self-deception, and reality distortion. However, not all coping strategies in this category are defensive. Behavioural strategies and distractions like physical exercise, meditation, drinking, venting anger, and seeking emotional support are also forms of emotion-focused coping (Lazarus and Folkman 1984: 150–52).

Meaning-focused coping implies accommodating to the constraints of a situation while finding meaning in adversity (Carver and Connor-Smith 2010: 686). In situations that are appraised as unchangeable, it increases subjective well-being (Folkman 1997: 1216–17). Essentially, meaning-focused coping is the reappraisal of a stressful event as positive or meaningful by drawing on one's beliefs, values, and existential goals. So-called “situational meaning” is achieved in the interaction between a person's global meaning (enduring beliefs about world order as well as one's own purpose in it) and the circumstances of a particular person-environment transaction (Park and Folkman 1997). Folkman (2008: 7–11) includes five categories under this umbrella term: Benefit finding, benefit reminding, adaptive goal processes, reordering priorities, and infusing ordinary events with positive meaning.

Other useful models for categorisation shall briefly be mentioned. On the one hand, Schwarzer (Schwarzer and Luszczynska 2008; Schwarzer and Knoll 2003) differentiates coping strategies according to the time of coping with regard to the occurrence of a stressful event. Prospective strategies (coping with imminent stressors) include anticipatory, proactive and preventive coping, while coping with past or ongoing stressors is called reactive coping. On the other hand, some researchers distinguish between engagement/approach coping (efforts to deal with the problem and related emotions) and

⁹ Reappraisal is the reevaluation of a problem, its significance, as well as what can be done about it, which influences subsequent coping efforts (Lazarus and Folkman 1984: 143).

¹⁰ Although research on coping initially started as research on defense mechanisms, coping behaviour has to be clearly distinguished from defensive behaviour (Parker and Endler 1996: 8–9).

disengagement/avoidance coping (efforts directed at avoiding the problem or related emotions) (for an overview, see Holahan, Moos and Schaefer 1996: 27–29; Carver and Connor-Smith 2010: 685–86).

For the purpose of this study, the model by Lazarus and Folkman with a three-fold distinction between problem-focused, emotion-focused and meaning-focused coping is considered most useful. Within this framework, I am going to further differentiate between prospective strategies (coping with the imminent stressor of the *Gaokao* before knowing its outcomes) and reactive strategies (coping with past or ongoing stressors caused by unsatisfactory outcomes of the *Gaokao*) in order to yield multifaceted insights into the research question.

4. Data and methods

The data used for this study was acquired by means of semi-structured, qualitative interviews conducted with nineteen students from ECNU in Shanghai in the fall of 2012, eleven of them undergraduate and eight graduate students.¹¹ The informants were chosen through theoretical sampling. The first sampling criterion was to achieve homogeneity regarding Chinese ethnicity and regular student status at ECNU, which would provide for a common background of experiences. The second criterion was to reach a heterogeneous sample regarding all other indicators such as gender, age, field of study, year of study, degree program (undergraduate or graduate), as well as regional and social background.

It was possible to create a diverse student sample due to the special circumstances of the research location: ECNU is a comprehensive research university with a wide range of disciplines. Furthermore, the institution still puts an emphasis on teacher training (East China Normal University 2016), which means that disciplines geared towards the training of future educators have lower or remitted tuition fees and can thus accommodate students from weaker socio-economic backgrounds (Yang and Gale 2004: 14). As a national elite university, ECNU attracts students from all over the country.¹² In addition, since the graduate students in this sample had all completed their undergraduate degrees elsewhere, experiences of enrolment in other, mostly less prestigious colleges or universities were also at hand.

The interviews were originally conducted in the context of a study on the meaning and functions of the concept of *Yuanfen*¹³ (缘分). In order to explore the phenomenon within the social context of university students, personal narratives about students' experiences with university entry and student life were used both as warm-up questions and as anecdotal references during the interviews. While analysing the data with regard to the original research questions, I became aware that it also contained valuable, unbiased accounts of how students coped with their situation concerning the *Gaokao*. This inspired the present study. The advantage of using already existing data is the impossible influence and alteration by certain (research) questions or preconceptions. Compared to interview data collected specifically for the analysis of coping strategies, the disadvantage of the reactivity of self-reflective measures is non-existent, while the advantage of content versatility of

¹¹ For a table of participants, please see appendix.

¹² As compared to provincial universities or colleges which often have a very high proportion of local applicants.

¹³ *Yuanfen* can be defined as a kind of subjectively perceived chance that brings people or people and events together (Heger 2015).

narrative approaches is still given (Beehr and McGrath 1996: 78; Folkman and Moskowitz 2004: 750–51).

All interviews were recorded in Chinese and verbatim transcribed. The data was analysed using Mayring's (2010) method of qualitative content analysis, making it possible to systematically interpret students' narratives with regard to what is considered coping from a theoretical standpoint. The analysis was implemented with the software ATLAS.ti. The main categories “problem-focused coping”, “emotion-focused coping” and “meaning-focused coping”, as well as the temporal dimensions “prospective coping” and “reactive coping” were deductively derived from the previously established framework, while subcategories were inductively derived and had to be grounded in the material. Additionally, students' perceptions regarding university entry were openly coded in order to contextualise the reported coping strategies.

Of course, this study has some limitations: Considering the limited sample size, the results cannot be generalised at this stage. Furthermore, an additional analysis of the coping strategies of those who failed the *Gaokao* and never entered regular higher education would be needed to complete the picture. In order to draw more generalisable conclusions, larger-scale qualitative or quantitative studies with successful as well as unsuccessful applicants are called for in future research.

5. Results

Students' narrations made clear that the struggle of entering university was a topic still very vivid on everyone's mind. No matter how long ago my informants had taken the *Gaokao*, the experience was recounted in great detail. In many ways, entering university was described as a turning point in life: With the whole adolescence of Chinese students being defined by pressure and competition, studying at college or university was associated with a new kind of freedom. Regardless of the specific major or university students were enrolled in, everyone considered attending higher education very meaningful and important for their personal development. Some even mentioned the thereby provided chance to change their destiny and position in society. For many students, being accepted to university was something to be proud of because not everyone can succeed. By that logic, making it into a good university was accompanied by even more prestige.

The data also revealed that students possessed very clear knowledge of the processes and selection mechanisms concerning their individual situation, even if no one fully understood the often non-transparent workings of the whole admissions system. What stood out most is how conscious my informants were of their regional background, frequently bringing up their origins in order to elaborate what this meant regarding the constraints they faced and their chances to be enrolled. Interestingly, however, nobody mentioned these issues in terms of injustice or inequalities, but rather treated them as a given. For example, a male undergraduate student from Gansu province explained to me:

Actually, in China, there are differences among a lot of provinces—like our province is a relatively poor province, so the quota they give [us] is rather small, [but] if students from Shanghai or Beijing take the test, it's very easy for them to be enrolled.¹⁴

¹⁴ 其实在中国很多省都是有差异的，像我们省相对来算一个比较贫困的一个省，所以他给的名额就比较少，如果是上海，北京的学生去考试的话那他们就很容易被录取 (Interview no. 4).

This provides the backdrop against which the following coping strategies can be pictured and analysed.

5.1 Coping strategies used to prepare for higher education entry

In order to cope with the imminent stressor of college entry, problem-focused coping—strategies students used to maximize their influence on the outcomes of the *Gaokao* under their individual circumstances—was most common. In addition, the analysis brought to light some emotion-focused coping strategies aimed at alleviating the emotional distress of the upcoming challenge.

In general, prospective problem-focused coping strategies were targeted both at passing the *Gaokao* and at making the right decisions during the application process. While it is a well-known fact that preparations for the *Gaokao* include cramming and extensive studying routines, the interviews brought to light additional strategies to cope with the imminent stressor, many of which were tactical considerations regarding the choice of preferences.

Nowadays, the procedure of choosing preferences is fairly straightforward: A few days after the *Gaokao*, the scores are published, giving the applicants a palpable figure to base their decisions on. However, a few of my older informants still experienced the prior system where the *Gaokao* scores were not published. Instead, students had to go through a process of trying to estimate their scores by checking the published answers to the test questions (*gufen* 估分). Thus, they had to base their decisions of which institutions to aim for solely on estimates regarding their performance; this constituted an additional strain.

Regardless of whether or not they had reliable knowledge about their *Gaokao* scores, students generally coped with the pressure of choosing preferences by choosing preferences likely to succeed. As mentioned before, my informants were very conscious of their individual situation within the higher education entry system and they used that knowledge to make informed and strategic decisions. Apart from considerations regarding the advantages and disadvantages of one's regional background, the choice of preferences was based on the *Gaokao* score, the disciplinary background in high school, as well as on the knowledge of that year's enrolment quotas. Personal interests as well as the prestige and perspectives associated with a certain major or university were additionally taken into account. For instance, a male informant from Jiangxi province recounted how he made the decision to apply for his current undergraduate major:

[For] my first preference—because at the time I was quite interested in finance [and] I had taken the sciences-track in high school—I chose a finance major. Back then I also found out—because every college would display the number of people they would admit—I looked and the number of people this [major] would admit was pretty high, so you would probably not be squeezed out.¹⁵

A common feature of the narrations was the focus on safety and risk avoidance. Most students mentioned choosing at least one option likely to succeed, while hoping to avoid being allocated to a field of studies not even listed in their preferences. Some even mentioned choosing a “safety option”—a school that was most certainly going to enrol them, even if they had to make some concessions. Common safety options were institutions

¹⁵ 第一个志愿，因为当时觉得金融这一块还蛮感兴趣的，我高中时候是理科，所以就是填的金融专业，当时也发现，因为当时它们每个学校招的人数会显示，看一下这个[专业]当时招的人数蛮多的，然后可能不会被排挤掉 (Interview no. 14).

that conduct “early recruitment” (*tiquanpi luqu* 提前批录取) like military colleges or teacher training institutions. When listing an institution of this category, you only have to reach the minimum score required for admission and you will be enrolled, but subsequently, all of your regular preferences become invalid (Zhongguo jiaoyu zaixian 2010).

Erring on the side of caution though also bears its risks. For the male student from Gansu province mentioned above, his caution cost him entry into his dream university. Because his teacher suggested it and because everyone else did it, he also chose a university conducting early recruitment (ECNU) as his safety option. He was enrolled but later found out that his *Gaokao* score had sufficed to enrol at his first preference: The much more prestigious Peking University. This still fills him with regret.

Incidentally, following the mainstream as well as seeking and/or following advice, for example from teachers or parents, were also coded as strategies students used to cope with making difficult decisions and with their own insecurity.

For some students, not accomplishing to enrol in one of the elite schools constitutes a big disappointment or even a loss of face. In order to succeed, they therefore consider taking advantage of a risky loophole: They strive to get enrolled in an unpopular major of an elite university with the ulterior motive to change majors (*zhuan zhuan ye* 转专业) after one year. This means sacrificing one year in a major you are not interested in, doing well enough to be among the best 10 percent of the cohort who are given the chance to change majors, and finally passing the internally administered entrance examination for the desired major. However, if your plan fails, you might be stuck studying an unfulfilling major for the next four years. This form of extreme calculation was not used by anyone I interviewed, but an undergraduate student from Anhui province mentioned it to me. She had played with the thought but ultimately decided she was not equipped for dealing with this situation.¹⁶

Unlike the majority of my informants who talked about their tactical considerations, a female undergraduate student from Shanghai extensively narrated her experience of explicitly preparing for a set of special entrance examinations that would determine her admission to a graphic design major at ECNU. Her mother supported her decision to focus on one option only and encouraged her to pursue this goal. Similar to “independent recruitment”, in addition to the *Gaokao*, my informant had to pass an exam administered by the university itself (*xiaokao* 校考), as well as an art exam. For this purpose, she attended special preparatory classes. Although preparations were strenuous, it seemed to be a rather satisfying way of preparing for college admission because she could work towards a concrete goal, had a better idea of what to study and could show her skills in the process. By applying for a major directly at ECNU, she had somewhat more control over the admission process and results.

The few prospective emotion-focused coping strategies students implicitly brought up during the interviews provide insights into a probably much wider range of behaviours used to alleviate the emotional distress of higher education entry. Some students, rather than engaging with the upcoming challenge, distanced themselves from the pressure, for example

¹⁶ Such considerations illustrate the existing hierarchy among higher education institutions as well as among majors. The prestige of the former is paramount—higher education institutions can basically be classified as first-tier or key universities (*yiben* 一本), second-tier universities (*erben* 二本) or third-tier colleges (*sanben* 三本). The prestige of the latter, which is informally determined by the related employment perspectives, is of secondary importance.

through distraction with fun and games. Others tried to focus on their interests without letting mainstream expectations of what constitutes a promising major guide or deter them (even though expectations regarding the prestige of the institution persisted).

When facing the important decision of where to apply, receiving positive encouragement from others, for example parents or teachers, sometimes also played an important role. This helped students to emotionally face as well as make their own decisions. However, as will be illustrated with an example below, parents can also play quite the contrary role: Making decisions on behalf of their children instead of encouraging them to find their own path.

Lastly, positive thinking and self-encouragement can be very powerful. A female undergraduate student from Shandong province told me how differently she and one of her high school classmates perceived the challenges lying ahead when choosing preferences. While her classmate would always think of the obstacles, she herself faced the *Gaokao* and the future with a calm and positive attitude. She knew how much effort she had put into succeeding, so she believed in herself and was certain that nothing ahead could still divert her.

5.2 Coping with the outcomes of the *Gaokao*

Unsatisfactory and/or unchangeable outcomes of the enrolment process produce new stress that necessitates coping. In order to deal with those outcomes, problem-focused as well as emotion-focused and meaning-focused coping strategies were administered. Depending on the mutability of the situation, students either took action to change it, emotionally dealt with it, or found ways to make sense of it in a positive way.

In case of failure or dissatisfaction, students had two basic options: Either try to change things or try to accept them. The reactive problem-focused coping strategies reported by my informants were mostly targeted at effecting change, predominantly through repeating the *Gaokao* (*fudu* 复读) or changing majors within the same university.¹⁷

Students who repeated the *Gaokao* had either failed to be enrolled the first time and did not want to settle for alternative options such as entering vocational colleges or joining the workforce, or they had refused to accept unsatisfactory enrolment results and wanted to strive for something better.¹⁸ For that purpose, they spent another year in a special cram school where, from dawn till dusk, students work towards passing the *Gaokao*. Some of my informants also reported adapting their studying behaviour during that year, taking studying more seriously as well as forming healthier studying routines and sleeping habits. For those who told me about it, retaking the *Gaokao* and succeeding the second time was very empowering and something to be proud of, especially considering that they had risked failing again or receiving even worse enrolment results.

¹⁷ If just the major that was allocated to you is unsatisfactory, you can try to change majors within the same university, but if the university itself is unsatisfactory, you can only strive for improvement through repeating the *Gaokao*.

¹⁸ In my sample, three students repeated the *Gaokao*. A female student from Henan province and a male student from Sichuan province had previously failed to be enrolled at any of their preferred institutions. Through their narrations, it became clear that repeating the *Gaokao* was not so much a choice as something they felt obliged to do. In contrast, a male student from Anhui province would have been enrolled by a second-tier university, but he had aimed for a first-tier university. The fact that his girlfriend at the time also voiced her disappointment over his results contributed to his decision to repeat the *Gaokao*.

Students who decided to change their major had either been allocated to a field of studies not listed among their preferences, or found out that the major they had chosen was not the right fit after all. As mentioned above, you have to be among the best of your cohort during the first year in your original major for the school to allow you to take the exam to change majors, which also is very challenging. For a male graduate student from Jiangxi province who, during his undergraduate studies, successfully changed from an agricultural major to a major in chemistry, taking matters into his own hands was what he was most proud of during his time in university.

In a similar manner, but without abandoning your original major, you can also take an exam to enrol in a second major at the same university. This was done by the male informant from Jiangxi province quoted above whose original major, finance, turned out to be unsatisfying. At the expense of most of his free time, he additionally enrolled in law school.

The last problem-focused coping strategy that emerged from the data was problem-focused cognitive reappraisal—making motivational or cognitive changes that helped students adapt to their circumstances. My informants who reported this kind of behaviour had—either by themselves or through counselling—reached the conclusion that their situation was unchangeable and that they should try to make the best of it. They adjusted their motivation and studying behaviour and delved into the contents of the major that was assigned to them, thereby slowly starting to find the contents interesting.

However, before any kind of problem-focused cognitive reappraisal could take place, students had to have emotionally coped with their situation. Emotionally coping with unsatisfactory enrolment results was a difficult and sometimes lengthy process. A female student from Henan province recounted that she had spent the first three years of her undergraduate studies muddle-headed, distancing herself from the major she had been assigned—educational sciences instead of English, the subject she had listed in all her preferences. Only during her fourth year, mostly because her parents wanted her to continue with graduate education (although she stressed that this had been her own wish, too), she managed to overcome her state of disorientation and started to engage with the subject.

For some people in similar situations, finding comrades in suffering could lessen the emotional distress. A girl from Hunan province told me that when she first entered university for her undergraduate studies, she found out that literally no one in her cohort had chosen their major—preschool education—of their own free will. Since everyone was equally dispirited, they could get through the hard times together.

Still others were only able to emotionally cope with their misery through some kind of psychological guidance.¹⁹ A female graduate student from Shandong province recounted that she fell into a deep depression after her allocation to an educational sciences major that she had not chosen for her undergraduate studies. Eventually, she was only able to cope with it after receiving support and advice from older female students who had made the same experience.²⁰

At the time, I was really depressed, I didn't want to talk [to anyone] anymore, I just thought “In high school, I made such an effort for such a long time, but [now] I am studying a major like that [...]” Later, I went to see some fellow students, some girls who were older than me (lit. older study sisters; xuejie 学姐), and I just openly told them my thoughts: That I

¹⁹ Apart from informal guidance, there are often psychological facilities for these purposes on Chinese campuses.

²⁰ Later parts of the narration indicate that these girls had once gone through the same thing.

felt like it was really difficult to bear for me, psychologically [...]. Back then, these girls enlightened me, they said, “Now that things have come like this, make your peace with them (ji lai zhi, ze' an zhi 既来之 · 则安之). [...] Complaining is useless, [so] why don't you try to adapt [to your situation], to change yourself?”²¹

However, there was also one male graduate student from Shandong province who reported being just so used to things in China not going the ideal way that he was not deeply affected by those occurrences anymore—for example by the fact that he, too, had received a major he had not chosen of his own accord for his undergraduate studies. He was, in a manner of speaking, emotionally blunted by the normalcy of uncontrollable situations (in China and within the Chinese higher education system).

The last group of reactive coping behaviours was meaning-focused coping, most frequently benefit finding, which was defined by Folkman (2008: 7) as “*growth in wisdom, patience, and competence; greater appreciation for life, greater clarity about what matters, strengthened faith or spirituality; and improved quality of social relationships.*” Essentially, students whose narrations showed processes of benefit finding managed to make positive sense of initially unsatisfactory outcomes. For example, for the people in my sample who had to, or chose to repeat the *Gaokao*, sacrificing one more year was retrospectively not considered a year lost, but a year in which they gained experience, maturity, and close friendships—things they wouldn't have gained if everything had worked out the first time, especially since they could all achieve better results the second time around. Thus, they were able to find additional, positive meaning in their setback.

Another example of benefit finding comes from the girl from Hunan province who was allocated to the major of preschool education. She initially was not interested in this major and very frustrated with her circumstances, but with time, learned to love it, so much so that she even continued to study it in her graduate education. She retrospectively attributed her setback to *Yuanfen*, explaining it with the proverb “*a blessing in disguise*” (*sai weng shi ma, yan zhi fei fu* 塞翁失马 · 焉知非福; lit. “When the old man from the frontier lost his horses—how could one have known that this would not be fortunate?”).²² Her reasoning was as follows: When she prepared for college entry, she did everything she could to reach her goals, but ultimately, some higher power or “heaven” (*shangtian/laotian* 上天/老天) must have directed her to this unexpected major. That way, she does not hold on to what could have been, but focuses on the good this turn of events has brought her.

The second category of meaning-focused coping was benefit reminding, defined as “effortful cognitions in which the individual reminds himself/herself of the possible benefits

²¹ 我当时心情就很沉闷啊 · 就不愿意说话了 · 我就觉得我高中努力了那么长时间 · 但是学了这么一个专业 [...] 然后后来就是我也去找过一些同学 · 就是比我们大一些的学姐 · 就是坦率地跟她们说我自己的想法 · 就觉得就是自己心里就是确实挺难受的 [...] 然后当时师姐就开导说 · 就是：既来之 · 则安之 [...] 你抱怨已经没有用了 · 你为什么不就是想办法努力适应它 · 就是改变一下自己？[...] (Interview no. 16).

²² This proverb, which illustrates the unforeseeable causal connections between misfortune and fortune, exists in different variations. My informant explained it to me as follows: An old man in imperial China had a lot of horses. One day, they all ran away from him, which was a great misfortune. However, soon afterwards, a fire ravaged his farm—if the horses had still been there, they would have been killed. On another day, the horses all came back by themselves, alive and well. This is when the old man realized that his animals running away had actually been a blessing in disguise.

stemming from the stressful experience [not after, but during the experience].” (Folkman 2008: 8) An example for this comes from a female undergraduate student from Anhui province who had to accept the choice of major her parents had made on her behalf—a common occurrence since Chinese parents often have the authority in their child's decision-making process. Even though she herself was interested in studying mathematics, her parents made the decision for her to study teaching Chinese as a foreign language because, according to them, this major had more perspectives [for a girl]. Having accepted their decision, she sometimes reminded herself that even though she would have made another choice, the contents of the major her parents had chosen for her had also always been among her interests. So she was happy.

Similarly, in an act of benefit reminding, the girl from Shandong province, who had battled depression, told me that she sometimes pushed herself to accept and cherish the situation she was in by telling herself that she had done her best and this is what heaven rewarded her with—therefore it must have been heaven's will for her to study this major.

These ways of imbuing setbacks with meaning provide valuable insights into the common world view that emerged throughout the interviews. My informants all thought that personal effort was the most important and determining factor in life. However, they also acknowledged that some things were simply beyond their control—whether these were circumstances determined by birth, the education system, or higher powers.²³ A proverb commonly used in this context (in different variations) was “*planning lies with man, the outcome lies with heaven*” (*mou shi zai ren, cheng shi zai tian* 谋事在人·成事在天). Believing in personal effort was not at odds with accepting what cannot be controlled, instead, both complement each other. By finding explanations in nonmaterial beliefs, students did not escape their own responsibility, but managed to make positive sense of things for which rational explanations were hard to find.

Lastly, through adaptive goal processes—“the ability to determine when a goal is no longer tenable, relinquish that goal, and substitute a new goal that is both meaningful and realistic” (Folkman 2008: 9)—some students managed to adjust their goals to their actual circumstances and found meaning in pursuing these new goals. For example, a female graduate student from Jiangxi province relinquished the goal of doing a Bachelor's degree in medicine, which had been her first choice of majors, and substituted it with focusing her energies on studying English—her second choice of majors which she succeeded in attending. Instead of clinging to her original goal of becoming a doctor, she started to picture fulfilling jobs she could do as an English major. Eventually, it led her to graduate studies of higher education at ECNU.

Similarly, but on a more abstract level, the graduate student emotionally blunted by China's national conditions said that he had bigger goals in mind and the freedom to pursue them, regardless of his actual circumstances. He knew where he wanted to go in life—to become an academic, following his interests in philosophy and literature—and believed that, with

²³ A comparison to Liu's (2008) results on the question of how students perceive the role of fate in their lives yields interesting insights here. While my informants come from very diverse socio-demographic backgrounds, Liu interviewed students who grew up as only children in an urban middle class environment, which might have had an influence on their world view. Liu's informants perceived the future to be under their own control as long as they worked hard for it. Accordingly, they did not believe in fate—if anything, fate was perceived as something that can be changed through effort.

dedication, he would someday reach his goals no matter where or what he studied (at the time of the interview, he was pursuing his graduate studies in international relations).

6. Discussion

As demonstrated by the results, Chinese students are very aware of their own, particular place within the often non-transparent and unequal workings of the higher education entry system. However, in spite of this awareness, the system is simply considered a given and generally accepted by everyone. Rather than protesting, students adapt to their situation and use their knowledge to make the best of it, showing strategic reasoning and problem-solving skills to take matters into their own hands. Furthermore, they have found ways to cope with the emotional distress connected with higher education entry and find positive meaning in unchangeable circumstances. This coping behaviour conforms to a general world view and mind-set common to all interviewees, which can be summarised as “change what you can change, accept what you cannot change”. My informants all thought that personal effort in the pursuit of their goals was most important but also acknowledged that some things—whether determined by one's family background, the higher education system, or some kind of fate or chance—were beyond their control.

The observed behaviour—adapting as best as possible, coping within one's own scope of action instead of trying to collectively effect change—is no new phenomenon. In his historical work, Elman (2013, see specifically chapter 5) has written extensively about ways in which literati dealt with the imperial examination system. Among other things, he describes extensive preparation routines before the exams and making sense of failure after the exams by turning to local religion and mantic arts. Because too much was at stake for the individual trying to climb the ranks of state bureaucracy, the system was hardly ever questioned and could persist for centuries, with only occasional calls for reform before its final abolishment.

Regarding the *Gaokao* in contemporary China, people, like in imperial times, seem to have understood that the system is what it is and will not fundamentally change any time soon. Too much is at stake to not adapt—whether one is advantaged or disadvantaged by the current circumstances, there is, for the moment, no other resort. Currently, the only way to get ahead is to conform to the *Gaokao's* flawed logic and make rational choices because successful completion brings great personal gains: Entry into one of the elite universities means a much better chance at securing a job and reaching or keeping a certain social status. While entry into higher education at all may not guarantee a job anymore, it still separates those who make it from the vast population without a college degree.

People unwilling to conform to the rules of the system lose: “*This is the opportunity trap as few can afford to opt out of the competition for a livelihood.*” (Brown 2003: 142; see also Liu 2008) The exception are some privileged individuals who can make use of their social and financial capital to circumvent the constraints of the *Gaokao*. To secure their family's status through higher education, parents belonging to the affluent Chinese middle class either send their children abroad (Tsang 2013) or capitalise on the inequalities within the system: So-called “*Gaokao migrants*” (*Gaokao yimin* 高考移民) are families who move their place of residence and their *Hukou* (户口) from provinces or cities with less favourable admission conditions to places with more favourable admission conditions in order to provide their children with the most beneficial regional advantages (Li and Qiu 2015).

Such strategies (which are also a form of coping with the given conditions) emphasize the role of the parents who are often shaping their children's educational aspirations and are tightly involved in their college application process (Fong 2004; Y. Chen 2016). On the one hand, as illustrated with an example above, Chinese parents often make decisions on behalf of their children and thereby constrain their scope of action. On the other hand, they can be important sources of not merely emotional support. If they have the necessary socioeconomic resources, Chinese parents will do everything in their power to facilitate the attainment of their offspring's goals.

These insights into how people individually cope with the higher education entry system help explain why there, surprisingly, never has been a collective effort spanning all social strata to change the status quo, even though reports regarding the problems and inequalities in college admission appear in media every year. Moreover, those privileged by the system are keen to keep it in place²⁴, as a recent example shows (T.-P. Chen 2016; Hernández 2016). Alert to the potential of conflict stemming from regional discrimination²⁵, the Chinese government is making efforts to mend the problems within the existing quota system through affirmative action. In the spring of 2016, they announced plans to set aside 140.000 places at top universities (about 6.5 percent of the total amount) for students from disadvantaged regions. This ignited protests in at least two dozen Chinese cities by parents from more advantaged regions who felt their children's chances of enrolment threatened.

Hence, aside from the fact that the *Gaokao* in its present form is considered most suitable to China's national conditions, resistance from those privileged by the system presents one more obstacle to reform. Owing to the fact that the government will refuse to further disgruntle the powerful urban middle class, it is unlikely for the admission system to undergo more profound changes in the near future. For as long as the general policy framework is kept in place, I assume that small reforms will just give rise to new, adaptive strategies by those newly advantaged or disadvantaged by them. As mentioned above, the present study proposes that it is precisely these coping strategies which have allowed the institution of the *Gaokao* to persist despite its inherent problems. Coping strategies might explain why people's threshold of tolerating deficiencies in the system remains high.

In the final step of this paper, I am drawing on the concept of individual agency²⁶ in institutional contexts in order to examine how coping strategies contribute to the persistence of the *Gaokao*. If coping strategies are regarded as ways for students to exert agency within the existing structural constraints, four arguments can be made:

Firstly, by strategically and resourcefully coping with the *Gaokao*, students manage to reconstruct the conditions of their own life within the given institutional constraints. By drawing on patterns of action from personal or collective experience, inventing new patterns of action when needed, and making rational decisions within the contingencies of the

²⁴ See Brown's (2003) elaborations on the "positional conflict theory".

²⁵ Especially since 2001, when three regionally disadvantaged high school graduates sued the MoE, claiming that the province-based quota system violates the constitutional principle of equal access to education (Zhang 2010).

²⁶ Agency is a highly complex, much discussed concept in social theory. For an overview of the discourse, see Helfferich (2012). For the purpose of this paper, I draw on the definition by Emirbayer and Mische (1998) who conceptualise agency as informed by the past (through the habitual aspect of iteration), oriented towards the future (through the capacity to imagine and project alternative future possibilities), and used to make judgements in the present (through the capacity to practically evaluate emerging situations).

moment, they become active agents instead of passively relenting to their circumstances—even if agency, at times, just means to imbue a situation with a different, more positive meaning.

Secondly, at the same time, coping means conforming to the system, thereby reproducing its structures. Thus, it precisely might be these individual coping strategies which contribute to the persistence of the *Gaokao* by corroborating the government's adherence to a flawed system.

Thirdly, the observed coping behaviours indicate that the *Gaokao* is an effective institution, as described by North (1991: 98): “*Effective institutions raise the benefits of cooperative solutions or the costs of defection, to use game theoretic terms.*” As an institution, the *Gaokao* structures human behaviour by setting rules for competition, both enabling and constraining its actors. Although students find ways to maximise their own benefits, they still conform to the given constraints. The *Gaokao*, therefore, provides enough incentives for people to cooperate while the costs of defection are high. Hence, as long as people see the chance for upward mobility gained by successfully completing the *Gaokao* and can find ways to accommodate themselves with its constraints, there is no real potential for institutional change.

Finally, I think that the observed patterns are not unique to the *Gaokao*, but might be applicable to other Chinese or even global institutional contexts. For example, research by Alpermann and Yang (2015) revealed a similar logic: Results from their study on political attitudes in contemporary China showed that, contrary to assumptions based on Western theories, people belonging to the middle class do not see democracy as an ultimate end and do not contest the PRC's authoritarian leadership as long as they see social advancement to be realised or at least possible. Thus, the results of the present study might represent one more piece in the puzzle of the persistence of institutions.

References

- Alpermann, Björn and Katja Yang (2015), “Social Mobility and Political Attitudes in Contemporary China: Results from a Three-City Survey,” *Research Network „Governance in China“ and Association for Social Science Research on China (ASC) Joint International Conference*, Würzburg, Department of Chinese Studies, University of Würzburg, November 20.
- Bao, Wei and Binglong Li (2014), “Who is Unemployed, Employed or Admitted to Graduate School; An Investigation of the Employment Situation of College Graduates in China between 2003 and 2009,” *Chinese Education & Society*, vol. 47, No. 6, pp. 36–58.
- Beehr, Terry A. and Joseph E. McGrath (1996), “The Methodology of Research on Coping: Conceptual, Strategic, and Operational-Level Issues,” *Handbook of Coping: Theory, Research, Applications*, eds. Moshe Zeidner and Norman S. Endler, New York, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., pp. 65–82.
- Brown, Phillip (2003), “The Opportunity Trap: Education and Employment in a Global Economy,” *European Educational Research Journal*, vol. 2, No. 1, pp. 141–179.
- Carver, Charles S. and Jennifer Connor-Smith (2010), “Personality and Coping,” *Annual Review of Psychology*, vol. 61, No. 1, pp. 679-704.

- Chen, Te-Ping (2016), "Test Driven: Parents Protest Changes to University Entrance Exam," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 15. [online] <<https://goo.gl/MFbKET>> [date of reference: 18 May 2016].
- Chen, Yu (2016), "Beliefs and behaviours: accessing higher education in contemporary China," *Social attitudes in contemporary China*, eds. Yu Chen et al., London, New York, Routledge, pp. 153–185.
- Dello-Iacovo, Belinda (2009), "Curriculum reform and 'Quality Education' in China: An overview," *International Journal of Educational Development*, vol. 29, No. 3, pp. 241–249.
- East China Normal University (2016), "About ECNU: Overview," *Website of ECNU*, [online] <<http://english.ecnu.edu.cn/1714/list.htm>> [date of reference: 27 April 2016].
- Elman, Benjamin A. (2013), *Civil Examinations and Meritocracy in Late Imperial China*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- Emirbayer, Mustafa and Ann Mische (1998), "What is agency?," *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 103, No. 4, pp. 962–1023.
- Fan, Guangji (2011), "Woguo gaokao zhidu de lishi yanbian ji qi dui xiandai gaokao gaige de qishi [The Historical Evolution of China's College Entrance Examination System and Its Revelations for the Reform of the Modern College Entrance Examination]," *Fujian jiaoyu xueyuan xuebao*, No. 3, pp. 76-81.
- Fan, Mingcheng (2011), "Woguo daxuesheng zhuan ye manyidu diaocha fenxi [Analysis of an Investigation on Chinese College Students' Major Satisfaction]," *Jiaoyu xueshu yuekan*, No. 10, pp. 43-45+106.
- Folkman, Susan (2008), "The case for positive emotions in the stress process," *Anxiety, Stress & Coping*, vol. 21, No. 1, pp. 3–14.
- (1997), "Positive psychological states and coping with severe stress," *Social Science and Medicine*, vol. 45, No. 8, pp. 1207–1221.
- Folkman, Susan and Judith Tedlie Moskowitz (2004), "Coping: Pitfalls and promise," *Annual Review of Psychology*, vol. 55, pp. 745–774.
- Fong, Vanessa L. (2004), *Only hope: coming of age under China's one-child policy*, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.
- Hansen, Mette Halskov and Terry E. Woronov (2013), "Demanding and resisting vocational education: a comparative study of schools in rural and urban China," *Comparative Education*, vol. 49, No. 2, pp. 242-259.
- Heger, Isabel (2015), "The Meaning and Functions of the Concept of Yuanfen in Contemporary China: A Qualitative Study with Students from East China Normal University," *Vienna Journal of East Asian Studies*, vol. 7, pp. 129-163.
- Helfferrich, Cornelia (2012), "Einleitung: Von roten Heringen, Gräben und Brücken. Versuch einer Kartierung von Agency-Konzepten [Introduction: Of Red Herrings, Ditches, and Bridges. An Attempt to Map Concepts of Agency]," *Agency: Qualitative Rekonstruktionen und gesellschaftstheoretische Bezüge von Handlungsmächtigkeit [Qualitative Reconstructions and Socio-Theoretical Aspects of Agency]*, eds. Stephanie Bethmann et al., Weinheim, Beltz Juventa, pp. 9–39.
- Hernández, Javier C. (2016), "China Tries to Redistribute Education to the Poor, Igniting Class Conflict," *The New York Times*, June 11. [online] <<https://goo.gl/HkRrTz>> [date of reference: 23 June 2016].
- Holahan, Charles J., Rudolf H. Moos and Jeanne A. Schaefer (1996), "Coping, Stress Resistance, and Growth: Conceptualizing Adaptive Functioning," *Handbook of Coping: Theory, Research, Applications*, eds. Moshe Zeidner and Norman S. Endler, New York, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., pp. 24–43.

Understanding the Persistence of China's National College Entrance Examination

- Jiang, Zhenghua et al. (2011), “Gaosan xuesheng butong gexing tezheng yu gaokao yingfu fangshi de duibi yanjiu [A comparison of coping styles before the national college exam in senior middle school students with different personality],” *Sichuan jingshen weisheng*, No. 3, pp. 156-158.
- Kai, Jiang (2012), “The Origin and Consequences of Excess Competition in Education: A Mainland Chinese Perspective,” *Chinese Education & Society*, vol. 45, No. 2, pp. 8–20.
- Kipnis, Andrew B. (2011), *Governing Educational Desire: Culture, Politics, and Schooling in China*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Lazarus, Richard S. and Susan Folkman (1984), *Stress, Appraisal, and Coping*, New York: Springer.
- Li, Danping and Siwei Qiu (2015), “Gaokao yimin wenti yanjiu zongshu [Review of research on the problem of Gaokao migrants],” *Jiaoyu jiaoxue luntan*, No. 30, pp. 30-31.
- Li, Hongbin et al. (2015), “Unequal Access to College in China: How Far Have Poor, Rural Students Been Left Behind?,” *The China Quarterly*, vol. 221, pp. 185–207.
- Li, Mei and Rui Yang (2013), “Interrogating institutionalized establishments: urban–rural inequalities in China’s higher education,” *Asia Pacific Education Review*, vol. 14, No. 3, pp. 315–323.
- Li, Wei and Yuxin Li (2010), “An Analysis on Social and Cultural Background of the Resistance for China’s Education Reform and Academic Pressure,” *International Education Studies*, vol. 3, No. 3, pp. 211-215.
- Liu, Fengshu (2008), “Constructing the Autonomous Middle-Class Self in Today’s China: The Case of Young-Adult Only-Children University Students,” *Journal of Youth Studies*, vol. 11, No. 2, pp. 193–212.
- Mayring, Philipp (2010), *Qualitative Inhaltsanalyse: Grundlagen und Techniken [Qualitative Content Analysis: Basics and Techniques]*, 11th ed., Weinheim: Beltz.
- Ministry of Education of the PRC (2016), “Ge ji putong xuexiao biye shengxue lü [Promotion Rate of Graduates From Different Levels of Regular Schools],” *Website of the MoE*, [online] <<https://goo.gl/wN27x9>> [date of reference: 6 November 2016].
- (2013a), “Jiaoyu bu guanyu jin yi bu tuijin gaoxiao zhaosheng xinxi gongkai gongzuo de tongzhi [The Ministry of Education’s Notification Concerning the Work of Further Making Information for Higher Education Candidates Publicly Available],” *Website of the MoE*, [online] <<https://goo.gl/X6nDsK>> [date of reference: 29 September 2014].
- (2013b), “Shishi gaoxiao zhaosheng ‘yangguang gongcheng’ [Implementing the ‘Transparency Project’ in the Recruitment of Students for Tertiary Education],” *Website of the MoE*, [online] <<https://goo.gl/7FU1co>> [date of reference: 24 March 2015].
- (2005), “Guanyu gaodeng xuexiao zhaosheng gongzuo shishi yangguang gongcheng de tongzhi [Notification Concerning the Implementation of the Transparency Project in Higher Education Institutions’ Admission Work],” *Website of the MoE*, [online] <<https://goo.gl/GLT55z>> [date of reference: 14 November 2016].
- North, Douglass C. (1991), “Institutions,” *The Journal of Economic Perspectives*, vol. 5, No. 1, pp. 97-112.
- Park, Crystal L. and Susan Folkman (1997), “Meaning in the Context of Stress and Coping,” *Review of General Psychology*, vol. 1, No. 2, pp. 115–144.
- Parker, James D. A. and Norman S. Endler (1996), “Coping and Defense: A Historical Overview,” *Handbook of Coping: Theory, Research, Applications*, eds. Moshe Zeidner and Norman S. Endler, New York, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., pp. 3–23.
- Qu, Zhenhui and Peichao Li (2010), “Daxue zhaosheng tizhi gaige zhong de jiazhi bo’yi [A Study of Value-Conflicts in the Reform of China’s Higher Education Admission System],” *Hunan shifan daxue jiaoyu kexue xuebao*, vol. 9, No. 5, pp. 87-89.

- Quan guo gaodeng xuexiao xuesheng xinxi zixun yu jiuye zhidao zhongxin (2016), “Yangguang gaokao - jiaoyu bu zhaosheng yangguang gongcheng zhiding pingtai [Transparent Gaokao - the Ministry of Education’s Platform for a Transparent Enrolment Process],” *Yangguang gaokao*, [online] <<http://gaokao.chsi.com.cn/>> [date of reference: 22 December 2016].
- Schulte, Barbara (2014), “Chinas Bildungssystem im Wandel: Elitenbildung, Ungleichheiten, Reformversuche [China’s education system in transition: elite education, inequalities, attempts at reform],” *Länderbericht China [Country report China]*, eds. Doris Fischer and Christoph Müller-Hofstede, Bonn, Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung, pp. 499–541.
- Schwarzer, Ralf and Nina Knoll (2003), “Positive coping: Mastering demands and searching for meaning,” *Positive psychological assessment: A handbook of models and measures*, eds. Shane J. Lopez and Charles R. Snyder, Washington, DC, American Psychological Association, pp. 393–409.
- Schwarzer, Ralf and Aleksandra Luszczynska (2008), “Reactive, anticipatory, preventive, and proactive coping: a theoretical distinction,” *The Prevention Researcher*, vol. 15, No. 4, pp. 22-24.
- Trow, Martin (1973), *Problems in the Transition from Elite to Mass Higher Education*, Berkeley: Carnegie Commission on Higher Education.
- Tsang, Eileen Yuk-ha (2013), “The quest for higher education by the Chinese middle class: retrenching social mobility?,” *Higher Education*, vol. 66, No. 6, pp. 653-668.
- Woronov, Terry E. (2015), *Class Work: Vocational Schools and China’s Urban Youth*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Wu, Wenchun and Haobin Jiang (2007), “Gaokao xuesheng xinli jiankang yu yingdui fangshi de guanxi [Relationship Between Coping Style and Mental Health of Students for College Entrance Examination],” *Hanshan shifan xueyuan xuebao*, No. 4, pp. 63-67.
- Yang, Cunzhen and Trevor Gale (2004), “Policy Analysis: On Chinese Higher Education Entry Policy,” *AARE International Annual Conference*, Melbourne, Australian Association for Research in Education, November 29.
- Yang, Rui (2004), “Toward Massification: Higher Education Development in the People’s Republic of China since 1949,” *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research*, ed. John C. Smart, Dordrecht, Springer, pp. 311–374.
- Yao, Shujie et al. (2010), “The Impact of Higher Education Expansion on Social Justice in China: a spatial and inter-temporal analysis,” *Journal of Contemporary China*, vol. 19, No. 67, pp. 837-854.
- Zhang, Hesheng and Junmin Yu (2010), “Gaokao gongping wenti de shehui guiyin tanxi ji duice yanjiu [Analysis of Social Factors Behind the Inequality of China’s National College Entrance Examination and Research of Countermeasures],” *Jiaoyu celiang yu pingjia (lilun ban)*, No. 12, pp. 42-54.
- Zhang, Ran (2010), “Media, Litigation, and Regional Discrimination in College Admission in China,” *Chinese Education & Society*, vol. 43, No. 4, pp. 60-74.
- Zhang, Yujuan, Sufang Liu and Donghong Zhang (2005), “Gaokao qian yingdui fangshi yu xinli jiankang de guanxi [Relationship between coping style and mental health in senior high school students before matriculation],” *Zhongguo linchuang kangfu*, No. 8, pp. 70-71.
- Zheng, Ruoling (2010), “On the Rationality of the College Entrance Examination: Analysis of Its Social Foundations, Functions, and Influences,” *Chinese Education & Society*, vol. 43, No. 4, pp. 11-21.
- Zhongguo jiaoyu zaixian [Chinese education online] (2013), “Zizhu zhaosheng shi shenme yisi [What’s the meaning of independent recruitment],” *China’s Portal to Education*, [online] <<https://goo.gl/FPg6V5>> [date of reference: 20 November 2016].

Understanding the Persistence of China's National College Entrance Examination

--- (2010), “Shenme shi tiqianpi ci luqu? Gaokao zhiyuan baokao jiedu [What is early recruitment? Deciphering how to choose preferences during the Gaokao],” *China’s Portal to Education*, [online] <<https://goo.gl/Dzaaqj>> [date of reference: 20 November 2016].
 Zhu, Hong and Shiyun Lou (2011), *Development and reform of higher education in China*, Oxford: Chandos Publishing.

Appendix

Table 1: Overview of informants

No	date	m /f	age	degree program	field of study	province	Hukou
1	2012-08-26	f	24	MA 3 rd year	higher education	Jiangxi	rural
2	2012-08-30	f	24	MA 3 rd year	preschool education	Hunan	urban
3	2012-09-02	m	24	MA 2 nd year	neuroscience	Liaoning	rural
4	2012-09-02	m	22	BA 4 th year	physics	Gansu	rural
5	2012-09-03	m	24	MA 2 nd year	communications and information systems	Henan	rural
6	2012-09-04	f	21	BA 3 rd year	teaching Chinese as a foreign language	Jiangxi	urban
7	2012-09-05	f	22	BA 4 th year	musical education	Shandong	urban
8	2012-09-15	m	20	BA 2 nd year	special education	Sichuan	rural
9	2012-09-06	m	23	MA 3 rd year	international relations	Shandong	urban
10	2012-09-06	m	21	BA 3 rd year	psychology	Hainan	urban
11	2012-09-08	m	22	MA 1 st year	organic chemistry	Jiangxi	urban
12	2012-09-09	f	22	MA 2 nd year	history of Chinese education	Henan	rural
13	2012-09-10	f	22	BA 4 th year	psychology	Henan	urban
14	2012-09-11	m	21	BA 3 rd year	finance and law (double degree)	Jiangxi	rural
15	2012-09-11	f	20	BA 3 rd year	teaching Chinese as a foreign language	Anhui	urban
16	2012-09-12	f	23	MA 1 st year	special education	Shandong	rural
17	2012-09-15	m	19	BA 1 st year	logopedics	Anhui	urban
18	2012-09-16	f	19	BA 1 st year	educational psychology	Shandong	rural
19	2012-09-17	f	20	BA 2 nd year	graphic design	Shanghai	urban