Unpacking the Emotional Experiences of English Majors Preparing for Postgraduate Entrance Exam in China

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Abstract

As a neoliberally-driven test, China's postgraduate entrance exam is gaining an increasing attention nationwide due to the intense competition in the local market and the dramatic size of Chinese students taking the exam. Under the neoliberal mechanism, Chinese candidates are ideologically self-regulated and emotionally-driven to mobilize their resources and maximize their opportunities to pass the exam. Seeing emotion as sociopolitically loaded and ideologically driven, this study unpacks the emotional experiences of Chinese students preparing for postgraduate entrance exam. Findings indicate that, despite their successful performance, Chinese postgraduate students have experienced a series of negative emotions imposed by various socioeconomic factors. Findings also show that their emotional experiences are intertwined with their different identity construction and negotiated between social relations and power. Overall, this article highlights the importance of addressing the need of studying the emotions and language learners from the sociopolitical perspective. The study is closed by the implications for language education and language policy.

Keywords: emotion, Chinese postgraduates, postgraduate entrance exam, English, neoliberalism

1. Introduction

The Postgraduate Entrance Exam (Hereinafter referred to as "the Exam"), one of the most important national exams in China, is gaining an increasing importance now in mainland China. According to the data published by Education Online in 2022, the population of candidates taking part in the Exam has been surging rapidly, with the population in 2021 of around 4.5 million almost one time bigger than that in 2017 (EOL, 2022). The number of students who gains admission to their dream universities, however, has only reached 990 thousand in 2020 (EOL, 2021). That is to say, almost every candidate who wants to receive a satisfying result has to at least compete with 4 rivals. The Exam, therefore, is not only an exam of merely academic performance, but also an exam of resilience, determination and perseverance. Students have to face pressure from themselves as well as their social surroundings, tackling with various emotions and feelings, be it positive or negative. It is noted that not all of the students can successfully pass the exam given the intense competition. Those who fail to the exam do not necessarily see themselves as failure, which is different from those who are retained and have to repeat the same grade. Many students who used fail the exam decide to take the exam again and suffer from more challenges than those who prepare for the exam the first time. As one of the students who "fail" the exam once, I have gone through many emotional struggles while preparing for the exam the second time. When I took courage to prepare for the exam, I realize my personal experience is not uncommon and any of my peers share with me many similar mental, economic and cultural struggles.

Following the poststructual approach of seeing emotions as ideologically constructed, this study aims to investigate the emotions and feelings of a special group of Chinese students who have repeated taking the exam for various reasons. It is hoped that stakeholders may pay more attention on this special group of people with recognition of their emotions and experiences related with foreign language learning (hereinafter referred to as FLL), underlying the enmeshed issues of identity and power.

2. Research Context

2.1 The Wave of Taking Part in the Postgraduate Entrance Exam

According to statistics published by EOL (Cao, 2020), in 2017, the number of postgraduate candidates in China exceeded 2 million, while in 2020, the number increased to 3.41 million, and in 2021, the number of postgraduate candidates reached 3.77 million. In the past five years, the number of applicants for postgraduate entrance examination has nearly doubled. At the same time, among the students taking the exam, the proportion of former year's graduates is also rising. A bulk of existing literature (Lamb, 2013; De Costa, 2015; Anne Li Jiang & Lawrence Jun Zhang, 2019; Wang C. et al., 2021; Chen et al., 2020) have examined the English learning experiences and motivations of English learners of diverse backgrounds. However, it still remains little known about the emotional experiences of Chinese English learners, especially those who fail the exam but choose to take the Exam. By examining their emotional experiences, this study can contribute to the body of research upon their emotions, especially negative feelings such as anxiety, frustration and inferiority, and this study may also reveal the impact of emotions on learners' trajectories.

2.2 Two Stages of Emotion Studies

There are two stages in the development of emotion-based studies. The early stage is that after years of being overlooked, emotions in the late 20th century, became one of the new-born concerns related with various fields such as sociology, anthropology, etc. The topic on emotion was believed to play an important role while exploring human issues. Bearing those concerns over and focuses on human emotions, in recent years, instead of regarding emotions simply as static and examining emotions in ways of positivism, a more dynamic research lens on emotions has been employed, deeming them as influenced by social surroundings and power relations (Benesch, 2019; Prior, 2019). Emotion is further regarded as being shaped in discourse or culturally constituted by norms and rules deriving from social settings and values (Sebrant, 2006). Emotion-based studies actually experienced two phases through which a better and deepening understanding of emotions is actually gained.

According to scholars like Swain (2013), he once argued that "emotions are the elephants in the room- poorly studied, poorly understood, seen as inferior to rational thought". Prior (2019) mentioned that "the study of emotion is fundamentally a *human* issue, in that no corner of human activity is free from affect". He (2019) also confirms the importance of combining the studies on emotions together with "spirituality", regarding the argument of Harrison et al. (1990) that "research into the live of ethnic minority children, for example, has shown that spirituality is often a salient part of their socialization into family and community ecologies". Studies on emotions had long been in an imbalanced relationship with those on cognition. The status of "elephant in the room" and appealing from scholars finally led to an "affective turn", redressing the lack of attention on emotions. During the affective turn, scholars question the cognitive way to analyze emotions. Since Guiora (1984), the assertion on importance of treating emotions as dynamic, social and contextual is given, considering the statement that "The task of learning a new language is profoundly unsetting psychological proposition". According to Dörnyei and Ryan (2015), "the greatest omission of the classic individual differences paradim is that it barely acknowledges the central role of emotions in human thought and behavior". Through those studies, the long-ignored significance of emotions began to be informed and researchers turned to examine human emotions together with social surroundings and contexts, which deems emotions as socially conditioned responses.

The significance of emotions then has further been underscored in the studies upon language learning, teaching, etc., considering that "to manage the conflict and distress, enjoyment and hope that accompany language learning, teaching, and use, the ability to cope, self-regulate, and find meaning in one's internal and external worlds is essential (Prior, 2019)", echoing with Goodson & Gill (2014): "The emotional life is profoundly influential in the education of the whole person because it is in and through emotional experiences that we develop the unity and action (both individually and socially)" For educators and researchers, such affective and emotional turn may in the future opens up a new space for pedagogy, including a pedagogy of hope (Freire, 1992), a pedagogy of pain (Ennser-Kananen, 2016), a pedagogy of discomfort and empathy (Zembylas & Papamichael, 2017), and a pedagogy of love (Darder, 2002), offering a bridge between emotions and language learning, as well as between emotions and language itself.

As mentioned earlier, the previous studies on emotions also have experienced a further development towards taking emotions as socially constructed rather than as static disposition. Instead of theorizing individual differences in cognitive and psychological terms and defining emotions as personality traits, Lemke (2000) analyzed desire and anxiety from a scalar perspective, illustrating that participants' desires were co-constructed with peers and teachers. To date, emotional-based studies have focused on emotions as embodiment and actions.

Pavlenko (2005) described emotions as "both as inner states and as relation phenomena". Furthermore, the dynamic turn in second language emotion research have led to the underscoring of the idea that emotions are inextricably linked to identity. Relatedly, the Douglas Fir Group (2016, p. 36) asserted that second language learning is an "emotionally driven process at multiple levels of experience," and emotions are "enmeshed with identity, agency, and power". In a similar study, De Costa (2019), investigating the emotional experiences of two South Asian English language learners, adopted the idea that emotions and experiences need to be valued examined in relation to the discourses in various social settings and finally confirms that their learning experiences also help building their identities.

All of the aforementioned statements underscored the significance of studying emotions in social contexts, presupposing its changing and dynamic nature, and they proposed for future studies a revised research agenda. Given its increasing significance, it is worthwhile to examine the emotions of language learners, contributing to the body of research focusing on FLL learners. Based on the acknowledgement that emotions are dynamic, changing with social contexts, constructed through social discourses, this study may also contribute to the global studies on language learners' emotions.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Theorizing Emotions

According to Prior (2019), if emotions are used to be seen as an elephant in a room, another elephant, then, is how to define and theorize emotions. Emotions are different from what people actually communicate and give response to. Therefore, there is often a definitional dilemma on emotions. Neuroscientists, considering such problem, once suggested that it is more feasible to define emotions from a functional perspective:

> *By confining our attention to neural circuitry alone, or to conceptual thought alone, we risk focusing on the proverbial tail of the emotional elephant. Its trunk and body may lie further afield, in the social and cultural environment in which emotional episodes unfold and emotional phenotypes develop.* (Griffiths & Scarantino, 2009, pp. 449-450)

Such assumptions that studying emotions based conversation analysis and discursive psychology helped advance an action-oriented approach (Tileagă and Stokoe, 2016). The definition and explanation of emotions then relies on how emotions are socially shared and grounded in situ (cf. Kasper, 2009; Prior & Talmy, 2020). In terms of emotional studies related with pedagogy, apart from theorizing and analyzing emotion itself, Ahmed (2010) developed the research objects of such emotion-based studies, with a statement that "good and bad feelings accumulate 'around' objects, such that those objects become sticky". This idea was then extended by Benesch (2012), she confirmed that while dealing with emotions related with FLL, the sticky objects are actually anything in the classroom, including teachers' feedback, assignments, textbooks, texts as well as grades, so that they all become integral part of emotional studies.

The statement that emotions are regarded as being socially shared and co-constructed via social interactions and settings can also be found in post-structural scholarship. By rejecting mind-body dualism and biologizing emotions and emotional actions, emotions are examined by presupposing that they are regulated by social discourses. The revealing of emotion implicates the networks of power that tacitly expect and legitimize some emotions but not others. In Butler (2004)'s statement, emotions are not something we *have* but "a way of being *for* another". Analyzing from a post-structural view, emotions are inevitably entwined with identity, power, as well as social settings. Benesch (2017), adopting a critical approach, asserted that emotions are "contextual, relational, and the effects of contact among people, ideas, and objects" and the idea of "power and resistance to power" is also integral to this critical approach. This study will follow a post-structural perspective in understanding emotions, which mainly examines the nexus of the self and the social, cultural, and political structures of schooling, an idea that is often forgotten in emotion research (Schutz & Zembylas, 2009; Zembylas, 2011). As Leavitt (1996) writes:

> *We would have to see emotions as primarily neither meanings nor feelings, but as experiences learned and expressed in the body, in social interactions through the mediation of systems of signs, verbal and nonverbal. [...] But we would equally recognize in theory what we all assume in our everyday lives: that emotions are felt in bodily experience, not just known or thought or appraised. (p. 526)*

Given the aforementioned literature, this study is grounded on the assumptions of emotions provided in a post-structural perspective. First, emotion emotions are treated as both matters of personal dispositions and social and political experiences. Secondly, power relations are ingrained in all aspects of emotions. Due to the power relations, some emotional experiences are permitted while others are suppressed. Emotions, from this

point of view, should be seen as complex, multifaceted experiences in a variety of sociopolitical contexts and situations (Zembylas, 2005).

3.2 Previous Studies on Postgraduate Entrance Exam

Given the increasing social impact of China's postgraduate entrance exam, previous studies are basically upon motivations, emotions and strategies of candidates (Liu, Du, & Zhu, 2006; Liu, 2013; Li, 2002). The methods employed are mostly quantitative, with the studies on emotions carried out from psychological perspective and those upon motivations from economic one. Regarding emotions as psychological phenomena, in Tan's (2009) bachelor thesis, Tan, investigating the sample from university students with multilevel sample model, found out the relationship between positive emotions and psychological resilience. From a economic perspective, Xiong, Zhao and Shi (2005), calculating the comparative advantages of getting a master degree by introducing various quantitative indices, including Cost-Benefit Net Present Value, Internal Rate of Return and Mincerian Rate of Return, revealed that candidates take part in the Exam not only for satisfying their own self-expectations on qualifications but also for their desire towards raising their social status. In studies carried out by Pan (2000), Pan examined the motivations of candidates by using questionnaires. The statement gave out six mostly-referred-to factors hidden behind candidates exam-taking, with self-expectations the most important factor. Other factors such as their thirst for knowledge, personal interest, working condition, view of life and external influence though relevantly less considered than self expectation by most candidates, still play an important role while candidates planning for their career and making decision. Compared to the number of quantitative studies upon candidates of the Exam, that of qualitative studies is quite few. Weng (2011), by having interviews with 16 postgraduate students, analyzed the motivations of the candidates, found out that motivations are complex and dynamically constructed.

Despite having an increasing number of empirical studies on Chinese postgraduate studies, our knowledge on Chinese students' emotional experiences in preparing the exam and overcoming various challenges remain little known. Given the enormous population of exam candidates and importance of paying attention to their FLL emotional experiences, this study aims to give an in-depth analysis of emotions of candidates from a post structural perspective with a particular focus on their navigation between the nexus of emotion, language, identity and power.

4. Methodology

4.1 Participants

In this study, five participants are included. They are all candidates of the Exam and planned to continue their study as an English major and gain a master degree. Participant A, a 21-year-old girl who was graduated in July, 2021. She is preparing for the exam at home, living with her parents. Both Participant B and C decided to take part in the Exam after working for a couple of years. After resigning, they rented a room and prepared for the exam alone. Participant D and E, after getting married, decided to take the Exam. They had to prepare for the exam and take care of their young child at the same time. A summary of the participants' background is presented in Table 1.

4.2 Researcher Positionality

The selected participants are the classmates of the author. Right from the beginning, the author has clarified the research intention and asked for their permission to participate in the project. The author did not collect the data until she has established a good rapport with the participants to ensure that they felt comfortable while sharing their feelings related with their FLL and exam preparation.

4.3 Data Collection and Data Analysis

Data were collected and noted from face-to face semi-structure interviews and informal conversations. Before the interview, the participants would provide their background information, such as gender, ethnicity, age, language proficiency and educational background.

During the data analysis, the content analysis (Shardakova & Pavlenko, 2004) is adopted to scrutinize their given information. Member checks were then conducted to ensure validation of the data. The participants can read and comment on the preliminary analysis. Audio, notes and supplementary interviews are adopted during the analysis procedure.

Table 1. Background Information of the Participants

	Gender	Age	Region	Marital Status	English Proficiency
Participant A	F	22	Hubei	Unmarried	TEM4/TEM8
Participant B	F	27	Yunnan	Unmarried	TEM4/TEM8
Participant C	F	28	Yunnan	Unmarried	TEM4/TEM8
Participant D	F	29	Yunnan	Married with Child	TEM4
Participant E	F	33	Yunnan	Married with Child	TEM4/TEM8

5. Findings

This research explores what emotions those participants have about their exam preparation and what are those factors hidden behind those emotions.

5.1 Emotions While Deciding to Prepare for the Exam

5.1.1 Unsatisfied with the Status Quo

Many of the participants have mentioned that before preparing for the exam they were unsatisfied with their status quo, no matter what they were doing. Participant B used to have a job which has no relevance with her major in university. Tedious and frustrating, she wants to take part in the Exam and through such FLL change her life.

Excerpt 1 gloomy future

Participant B: I don't like my previous job so I have to strive for a new life through English. I want to escape there.

It can be demonstrated that her previous job makes her under great pressure and she considered this further English learning as a way to change her life trajectories. Such feeling is also shared by participant E who deems her previous job as gloomy and unpromising. Participant E mentioned that she regards continuing her study as a way to become more competitive and flexible so that she can re-plan her future.

Participant E: One of my reasons to take the Exam is that the field of my previous job is at dusk.

As mentioned in the excerpts, neither Participant B nor E enjoys doing her previous job so that they chose to prepare for the Exam to change their life trajectories as an English major. Participant D, though her job seemingly comfortable and satisfying, still wanted to give up her previous job and take part in the Exam, for she believes that life needs challenges and comfortable job is not everything.

Excerpt 2 The job is comfortable but life needs challenges

Participant D: People think my job is satisfying and comfortable, but I do think that after you've already had a family and it seems like all your "life tasks" have been finished. Then you begin to think something different. You want to make a difference and you need challenges.

It can be seen from Excerpt 2 that though she has already owned a nice and decent job which is dreamed of by many people in the job market, she still believes in the thought that life needs challenges and changes. Passing the Exam and continuing her English learning as an English major is her way to make a difference. Such risk-taking attribute conforms to the characteristics of a neoliberal subject and such attribute led her to embracing challenges of becoming a postgraduate student. All the three participants treat continuing their English study as their future capital to make a promising life.

5.1.2 Desire to Invest Both for Oneself and for the Next Generation by English

Before making up their mind to take part in the Exam, all participants mentioned that taking the Exam and continuing their studies is the method to make educational investment. There are two types of investment: one is the investment for themselves and the other is the investment for their families.

Excerpt 3 Unfinished task at youth

Participant C: In early years I failed this Exam once... It's a crying shame for me. I always feel that I have to fulfill my dream in youth... Also I have an obsession with continuing my study. I want to keep improving myself.

As mentioned in the excerpt, participant C regards her early failure in the Exam as a crying shame so that she wanted to fulfill her dream at youth in her late twenties. Besides, she regards continuing her English study as a way to improve herself. English learning for her is a method of investing her own future.

Excerpt 4 I have to fight for my child

Participant D: Once I heard that one of my colleagues invited professional teachers to help her child with learning. It's hard to explain... I just ask myself, why is that I cannot make it? I also have to make more educational investment for my child so first of all I have to improve myself.

Different from participant C's self education investment, participant D underscored the importance of investing the future of her child. Such desire of making education investment for families are also implicated by another married participant, participant E, who added that a master's degree may help her with her child's future education.

5.1.3 Anxiety due to the Financial Status of the Family

Anxiety due to the financial status of the family is also mentioned by participants. Participant A and C mentioned that "I have no financial contribution to my family so that I have mixed feelings on preparing for the Exam devotedly".

Excerpt 5 Economy and its function

Participant C: I cannot help carry the financial burdens on my parents during exam preparation. Sometimes I felt like, maybe I should give up and help my parents. I was also anxious, thinking "what if I cannot make it then my parents spend too much money, how can I afford my life afterwards".

Although all the participants were determined during their exam preparation, the financial condition of their families become a factor that added up to their anxiety. All Participant B, C, D and E confirmed that they had a difficult time to give up their previous job because they would not like to have their families carry most of the financial burdens for them. Participant A, younger than the other four, lived with her parents and mentioned that though her parents would not orally judge her for her full-time exam preparation, she would still care about how much money she had spent every time she needed to purchase textbooks and online courses. Regarding FLL and continuing their study as an English major as a way to improve their life, their financial status at that time was inextricably with their distress and anxiety towards the Exam. Participant E mentioned that such financial burden even stirred her from the resolve at first, which took her time to overcome such distress over financial conditions.

5.2 Emotions during Exam Preparation

5.2.1 Lack of Confidence from Deficit Discourse

All the five participants mentioned that during their English learning experience and exam preparation due to their English deficit discourse they had quite a difficult time, even though according to their grades of TEM4 and TEM8, all the five participants can be considered as "qualified" English learner. Many of them regarded themselves as "not very good students" due to their early failure in the Exam as well as the deficit discourse when they tried to express their own idea in English. While talking about the impact of their first failure in the exam, Participant A sighed and said that after her first failure, she lost her self-confidence on her English performance and would not dare to apply to the university she had applied to for the first time.

Excerpt 5: I was not that good.

Participant A: I think... maybe I overestimated my English performance. I was not that good...

Excerpt 6: My English Performance may be laughed at.

Participant B: Even though I've tried my best to prepare... I still wouldn't dare to speak aloud in front of people. Even during the presentation before class will I presume that people may laugh at my bad English accent. My oral English is not good as other peers.

Participant A's first failure in the Exam eroded her confidence and she even equated her failure in the Exam with her failure in her life. She found herself feeling inferior to her English-proficient rivals and peers. Participant B mentioned that she would not dare to speak in front of people for her "bad" English accent and she think maybe both professors and students cannot understand her and laugh at her. It is also noted by Participant E that "I will stumble while speaking English to others in public places. I will blush and my brain just turns blank." The excerpts clearly show that through comparison with peers, the participants are suffering from inferiority complex which leads to even less pleasing learning experience and worse performance. Participant B once added that her

unwilling to speak in public leads to her lagging behind in oral English performance. Such lack of confidence firstly derives from deficit discourse during foreign language learning and then throws even more learning problems back at those learners.

5.2.2 Frustration from Others' Misunderstanding

As mentioned by all my five participants, English learning and English major is deemed as the way to change their present condition, make a more promising future and gain higher social status. Their self-expectations and desire comprises of their motivations to take part in the Exam and continue their FLL. Their surrounding people, however, sometimes fail to understand them and even regard their efforts to learn English and become a master of English major as worthless. Some of my participants, therefore, are frustrated due to others' misunderstanding and distrust.

Excerpt 7: I lost many of my friends and my parents don't trust me.

Participant C: It's hard to say... My parents don't think I may make a difference by taking part in the Exam and becoming a master... Some of my friends... They've already found a job and had their own life to live... I cannot be among them anymore... They cannot understand my perseverance and I cannot convince them. I am an outsider.

As disclosed, Participant C was saddened and frustrated by her parents' distrust from her old friends and their misunderstanding towards her commitment to receiving higher education. Though she regarded FLL as her attempt to improve their lives, distrust and such incomprehension made her frustrated. In order to prepare for her exam and receive a satisfying result she even lost some of her friends. The differed living experience and view of life from others make her regard herself as an "outsider". Among voices that doubt her efforts and choices, she has to ignore those noises and stick to her own choice determinedly. This clearly shows that emotions are socially co-constructed and shared. Even though all these participants are confident enough to prepare for the Exam, they still suffer from negative feelings due to the judgment and various voices in their life.

5.2.3 Anxiety from Self and Social Expectations

Anxiety, a major topic of emotion-based studies, has been widely studied globally. The factors that cause anxiety are various and complex. In this study, the anxiety of the participants mostly result from self and social expectations. Social expectations are mostly from parents, friends and teachers.

Excerpt 9: Only universities whose ranks are higher than my undergraduate university can be the goal.

Participant B: I cannot stand that the rank of my postgraduate university is lower than that of my undergraduate university, so I have to struggle a lot because the higher the rank of a university is, the more severe the competition is. I almost cannot sleep several days before the Exam.

Participant B's anxiety is mostly from her own self-expectation. She regards her English proficiency as "ordinary and even below average". While expecting herself become native-alike as much as she can so that teachers and people around her would not underestimate her efforts and learning capacity, her anxiety before the Exam was accumulating generally. Except for self expectations, expectations and judgment from others also help construct participants' anxiety, no matter whether the original purpose of those voices are for encouragement or just some no-position noises.

Excerpt 10: I was afraid of failure and other people's eyes

Participant D: By the time I made up my mind to prepare for the Exam. I told my family not to tell anyone and keep it a secret... It's just... On the one hand, I've heard enough the voice like "At this age, you are so childish to take the Exam"... On the other hand, if I failed the Exam, I would be afraid of facing other judgment.

Excerpt 11: My families' caring and expectations made me afraid of failure

Participant E: I am actually lucky enough to have such a happy family... They tried a lot to help me and carry my burdens... They are so caring... But somehow their caring and expectations make me afraid of failure in the Exam.

As demonstrated through excerpt 10 and 11, self expectations, positive or negative, can contribute to the accumulation of participants' anxiety. According to the statement given by participant D, the social judgment around her may be positive or negative but those voices added to her anxiety.

5.2.4 Anger from Gender Constraints

All the participants in this study are female and some of them also suffered from gender discrimination from surroundings during exam preparation. Questioned whether a woman should receive higher education and she is

able to balance the character of being a mother and a student. While talking about gender discrimination, Participant C underscored that many of her relatives said that she should care more about her marriage and "task of becoming a mother" rather than spending her parents' money and receiving higher education, which made her angry.

Excerpt 12: The "natural" primary object of women

Participant C: There are noises that "A girl needs no higher degree" or "What a woman should do primarily is to get married and give birth to children"... I don't know why people are so strict to females. If I were a man, would they say something like "You should get married as quickly as you can"? Definitely No.

As disclosed, females are, most of the time, facing more social judgment when they are determined to stick onto her own career. While preparing for the Exam, the participants have to tackle with not only problems on learning but also structural discrimination. This reveals the underlying unreasonable social norms and structure that still exists.

5.2.5 Alienation from Pressure

While talking about alienation caused by exam preparation, many participants confirmed that they've suffered from alienation to some extent for they are too busy studying to keep in touch with the outside. The long stretch of time not only added up to their anxiety but also their sense of alienation and loneliness. While trying to vent those negative feelings, some of my participants that they might take it out on their families, which further added to their guilty, other participants that have no access to venting their anger or anxiety, then bored those emotions on their own, carrying more emotional burdens. Sometimes some of the participants, in order not to become over sentimental, would refuse to communicate with others and actively cut off contacts with others.

Excerpt 13: The flow of time seems to "stop" and contact with the outside was cut off.

Participant A: I don't want to vent my depression on friends... For I have nothing to do except learning during exam preparation, I think the flow of time almost stop... because you can see other people doing things from which one can actually gain something, I don't know which result I may receive. I don't think they can understand us and in order to become more concentrated, I have to alienate myself from the outside world.

Such sense of "alienation" is actually consistently experienced by those participants. As demonstrated in the excerpt and during the interviews, it is noticed that the construction of such "alienation" is dynamic, socially-shared and two-sided. As added by participant D, she had to lock herself in a rented room over a month for she was overloaded by learning tasks, taking care of child and other workloads. Her families help her take care of her child during that time. Such alienation was at first caused by their pressure on studies and life, losing contact with the "rapidly changing" world. In order not to be affected by the demoralization caused by pressure, they then chose to actively alienate themselves from others so that they can become more concentrated. Alienation, consequently, is divided into two types: one is the loneliness caused by exam preparation, the other is their active choice on their way to strive for success. This actually confirms the theory of Prior (2019) that researchers are not supposed to follow the path of reductionist binaries that characterize positively charged emotions as 'good' and negatively charged emotions as 'bad, ignoring the dynamic reality of emotional life.

5.2.6 Precarity from Little Achievements and Little Academic Support

During the exam preparation, many of the participants have met a period of precarity. Since students have to spend almost a year to prepare for the exam, their academic achievements cannot be proved until after their grades have been given out. Therefore, many participants are demoralized due to their self-suspicion that their English learning is not making progress. The long-lasting FLL lead them to the condition that they do not know where they are heading to, success or failure. They have to struggle all by themselves.

Excerpt 14 The progress cannot be counted but the mistakes can

Participant A: Maybe I'm just over pessimistic. During this long stretch of time, it's hard for me to feel "Oh I'm making progress" because I'm afraid that such "complacency" may lead me to failure, but every time when I make a mistake or face a problem, I will feel "I am definitely doomed if I cannot figure that out before the Exam".

Apart from the experience of Participant A that during exam preparation she cannot evaluate her own learning, many participants mentioned that even though they have some problems during exam preparation, they have no access to academic help or support because they are learning all alone. The condition that within there is insufficient sense of achievement, without there is little academic mutual support, the participants, more or less, would suffer from precarity since their learning results and "present" learning condition cannot be evaluated and

quantified, whereas every learning problem during the preparation is explicit, adding to their emotional burdens and self-evaluation of deficit discourse.

Excerpt 15 No one to give a hand

Participant E: While preparing for the Exam, while learning the literary history and other major courses, every time I have a question I have no one to ask for help. I have to face problems during learning alone.

As demonstrated in the excerpts, these English learners actually have no access to timely and effective academic support. Also, their inability to evaluate their learning progress add to their sense of precarity.

5.2.7 Anxiety and Guilty from Peer Pressure and the Media

Apart from anxiety from others' voices and expectations towards the participants, actions of others which seem irrelevant with them also contribute to the construction of their anxiety. While noticing others' differed life trajectories, the participants may see them as mirrors of those of themselves, judging whether their choices are right. Once they felt inferior, others' seemingly irrelevant actions add up to their anxiety.

Excerpt 16 Seeing other people's life, I doubt whether I've made the right choice.

Participant E: Sometimes I noticed that many of my colleagues and friends, they've already made enough money and found a promising job. Then I will ask myself whether it is right for me to give up my job and take the Exam.

Apart from others' choices and actions, "sticky objects" such as slogans appearing on social media, especially those of education, also result in the construction of anxiety of participants. Regardless of their learning, once seeing the boosting and powerful slogans and words, they feel anxious that they are still not trying hard enough and they may fail the Exam only due to their own lack of "capability", even though they were already exhausted. Also, sentences like "You are not supposed to say 'you're exhausted' because others are still learning" make them even feel guilty for their "being exhausted".

Excerpt 17 Everywhere on the media says "you failed because you didn't try hard".

Participant A: While preparing for the Exam, there are words everywhere saying that "It is irresponsible to say you are tired" and "Do not rest too much for others are still learning". Really I think I am tired but those words adds up to my anxiety and guilty.

From the excerpts, it is noticeable that participants' anxiety and guilty is also constructed by those which have no direct interaction with them as well as what social media has posted to them. From social media, there is implicit emotional rules which actually permits the venting of some emotions but suppress that of others. Some of the participants were dominated by those emotional rules and believe that it is irresponsible for a student to easily express their exhaustion and other negative feelings. As participant E has mentioned that she "would feel bad when she could not help expressing her anxiety and anger during exam preparation to her families", it is revealed that emotional rules actually exist in learning process of language learners. Those emotional rules and slogans on social media together contributed to their bottling up their emotions, leading to the gradual accumulation to their anxiety and guilty during the exam preparation.

5.2.8 Pressure from Institutional Power

Another significant factor that drive most of participants to pressure is institutional power and it is actually multi-layered. First of all, it is common for participants to encounter the discriminationatory and hierarchical practices of Chinese universities, many institutions "have" to select "better" students so that those candidates might be turned down, sometimes for their "elder" age, sometimes for the inclination that those universities tended to choose students who graduated from the very university they've applied for their postgraduate studies.

Excerpt 18 I feel being treated "differently".

Participant B: When I took the Exam for the first time, after submitting my CV, the interviewer asked me a lot about my experience during undergraduate years rather than things about exam... I guess he just didn't like my background.

From the excerpt it is shown that to some extent, some universities may treat candidates according to the ranks of undergraduate college of the candidates rather than their own performance. There are over 3000 universities and colleges in China but only 116 of them are regarded as "elite and key universities", so that it can be boldly estimated that a lot of students that are not from those elite and good universities and colleges may be judged by universities on top of this educational pyramid unreasonably and merely because of their "inferior" background.

Such hierarchy in Chinese educational system finally leads to emotional burdens on exam candidates because from the beginning they are more inclined to be labeled as "less-promising student".

6. Discussions

6.1 Relational and Contextual Emotions

Previous studies (Charalambous, 2013; Rawal & De Costa, 2019; Benesch, 2020;) conducted in emotions of foreign language learners and relevant theories demonstrate that emotions are basically dynamic and socially constructed. This study is in line with these studies in that English learners who repeat to prepare for their exam preparation experience various emotions that are related to different identities. It conforms to Norton (2013, p. 2) that affective or psychological factors are often "socially constructed in inequitable relations of power, changing across time and space." As noted, the themes that emerged from the data illustrated that emotions (such a lack of confidence, nervousness, sadness, loneliness, etc.) all contributed to an overall anxiety, frustration, sense of alienation and those emotions are relational and contextual. A plethora of emotions as experienced by all the five participants emerged throughout their exam preparation, social interactions with parents, friends, and acquaintances, as well as social phenomena around them such as others' actions and news on social media. All their social surroundings and "sticky objects" related with their FLL contribute to the co-construction of their emotions.

While their emotions are entwined with the power relations existing in various social settings. As participants mentioned that "they felt guilty while venting their negative feelings due to social expectations", this fear and reluctance of venting their feelings, which can be regarded as types of emotional rules, disclose the power relations between them and their surroundings. This actually echoes with studies carried out by Sebrant in 2006 and Benesch in 2020. In Sebrant (2006)'s ethnographic study, it is found that emotions are conditioned and organized by social settings and power relations which hastened a feeling of envy and stopped participants from expressing negative emotions overtly, adding up to the increase of negative feelings while working and learning. Benesch (2020)'s work also demonstrated that institutional power leads to discourse of injustice which mostly manifests as frustration and anger. This study, based on differed participants, namely, exam candidates, responded to the argument that emotions can be caused by power relations. In this study, participants such as A and B are also not allowed to speak out their negative feelings for social expectations and domestic rules. Other participants such as C are confronted with gender discrimination and other social judgment from surroundings, which also includes implicit power relations. Such subtle, sometimes imperceptible power further added up to their accumulating anxiety and sadness. Through the aforementioned studies, it is revealed that emotions are socially conditioned and social surroundings may prompt and re-frame individual's emotions.

7. Implications and Conclusions

The present study investigates the emotional experiences of Chinese university students preparing for their postgraduate exams. The study can contribute to the emotion-based identity study in that Chinese English learners, though already have long English learning experience, still face various emotional challenges deriving from individual, social, economic and cultural factors. These factors range from personally and socially constituted discourses, expectations, others' misunderstandings and judgment, structural discrimination to other emotional rules. Studying their emotions related to their exam preparation can help stakeholders identify what may further help candidates and English language learners like them deal with learning problems. It is insufficient merely to provide them with more educational access to improve their FLL. It also matters to identify what emotional challenged they might encounter. Some institutions should also help those candidates who have limited access to enough English learning materials required by their target universities with their English learning, information exchange as well as mental help. It is worthwhile to set up some platforms of information exchange and psychological counselling for those "outsiders". There is still much more help that institutions and stakeholders can offer and candidates can have more room to play their own agencies. Besides, some power relationships and emotional rules among those social interactions are revealed. The author expects that in the future, the analysis such underlying structures can enrich the previous studies and shed some light on future studies.

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