Mind the Gap: A Thematic Analysis of the Chinese Gap Year and the Formative Perception of Meritocratic Life Sequence

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MSc in Education (Comparative and International Education), 2024

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Acknowledgement

As I complete my dissertation, my year at Oxford is also drawing to a close. I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to my supervisor, Liam Gearon. His rigorous scholarship, wit, and kindness have been a source of inspiration throughout the writing process and beyond. Every meeting with him has been a breath of fresh air.

I am deeply grateful to my cohort and to every teacher I encountered this year. The experiences I've had at the Department of Education at Oxford have far exceeded my expectations. My passion and capabilities for educational research have been continually nurtured here, allowing me to engage with many esteemed scholars and ignite sparks of intellectual exchange that will benefit me for a lifetime. The Department of Education has given me a warm, home-like feeling, and I have made lifelong friends here. This place not only nourishes the mind but also enriches the soul. I cherish everything I have been fortunate enough to gain or have yet to gain.

I would like to thank each of my interviewees for generously sharing their experiences with me. Their wisdom, enthusiasm, and kindness have made me realize how rewarding it is to engage in dialogue through research topics. Although my research process and analysis are not perfect, this months-long journey has been an invaluable growth experience for me.

I am immensely grateful to my parents for their constant care, support, and love. I am also thankful to my friends for their unwavering companionship and comfort during difficult times. Lastly, I appreciate my own growing mental strength, which enables me to take on more challenges with confidence.

Life is not a track, but a wilderness. This belief inspired my research topic, and now I want to remind myself of it. I hope to always stay vibrant, remain curious about the world, and live freely, with a love for the specific people around me, leading an undefined life. Even if life feels like Sisyphus pushing the stone endlessly, I will find joy in defying the absurdity of existence and cherish every moment of engaging with the world.

Abstract

Meritocracy is a system that emerged post-World War II, where performance serves as the primary means of social selection, emphasizing effort as the main way individuals achieve success. Under the invisible pressure of this system, individuals consciously regulate their behavior. In a meritocratic society, success and failure are highly standardized, and through socialization, individuals internalize these norms, leading to strong self-expectations. In China, the pursuit of meritocracy manifests as an obsession with educational attainment, with everyone living under a strict social clock, continuously striving for higher achievements without a moment's pause. This predetermined life path significantly restricts people's imagination of success. Therefore, this study aims to analyze the feasibility of this self-motivation logic and the burnout and reflection induced among individuals systematically controlled by performance-oriented systems in the Chinese context.

This study uses the concept of pausing the social clock—gap years—as a starting point to investigate how individuals who temporarily step off their tracks perceive the established societal evaluation standards. Through narrative research and semi-structured interviews, the study explores how the perspectives are formed and whether they are reshaped during the gap.

The findings reveal that the gap year group cannot be treated as a whole. They can be categorized into active and passive gaps, further divided into five types based on their reasons. Their perspectives range from adhering to the advanced social clock to breaking away and establishing their own life rhythms. This offers intriguing data for studying meritocracy in China. By integrating expectancy theory, meritocracy is no longer a vague, macro concept but gains new significance in specific contexts, illustrating its stratified impact in China. This study also lays the groundwork for further international comparative research.

Keywords: Meritocracy; Temporality; Social Clock; Gap Year

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1. Introduction

1.1 Research context

Merit has different underpinnings and leads various trajectories in the global context (Bell, 1973). Since China implemented a market economy system in the 1990s (Wu, 2007), the strong performance-oriented work ethic derived from Protestant ethics has significantly influenced the younger generation's perception and pursuit of success (Lall & Vickers, 2009). In a highly stratified society with limited resources and intense competition, under the influence of neoliberalism, people believe that hard work can lead to wealth and even social mobility (Wang, 2006). Hansen (2015) cites that Chinese young people adhere to a fixed ideal sequence where each stage demonstrates a clear objective, and any pause or slowdown carries the risk of losing control over one's life. Over time, young people may inevitably feel worried and restless (Jin, 2020).

The Chinese place great importance on education for three main reasons: culture, governing, and emplacement (Kipnis, 2011). These aspects are often complementary and tend to converge in their objectives. The cultural context of "filial piety" in Chinese culture builds on the domestic desire for striving individuals (Chan, 2004), which translates into a workplace emphasis on extreme regard for educational credentials (Colins, 2019) and a clear aspiration to join the civil service (Bai & Jia, 2016). For decades, the Chinese have been placing significant importance on educational qualifications, considering them a prerequisite for accessing better job opportunities (Mok, 2016) and a superior quality of life (Mu, 2019).

Although students are expected to carefully manage their time, a number of them choose or are forced to take a gap year either during or after their undergraduate studies (Li, 2023). Their step-by-step prescribed life sequence is thus put on hold. A gap year offers an opportunity to break free from the accustomed mode of living (Jones, 2004). This paper aims to investigate and analyse the pressures and motivations faced by students who grew up in China and have taken a gap year through semi-structured interviews. It seeks to uncover the political, economic, and cultural factors underlying

their experiences, as well as the tensions between personal choices and social environment in the context of meritocracy. Just like the bold, capitalised warning on the yellow line at London Underground stations, "Mind the Gap."

1.2 Rationale

In an era characterised by the simultaneous occurrence of multiple crises, the employment landscape is undergoing significant transformations (Peng et al., 2024). The post-pandemic work environment, coupled with a widespread economic downturn (Czery, 2021), poses numerous challenges for both recent graduates and young professionals in the workforce (Chen, 2021). The exacerbation of the meritocratic mindset has resulted in an increasingly severe trend of burnout and the instrumentalisation of people (Han, 2018). Although the temporal sequence of advancement suggests that the current mental and physical overexertion is a temporary sacrifice (Luo, 2016) aimed at securing attractive employment, it will instead turn out to be a perpetual state of existence: a future of unending urgency (Hansen, 2015).

Based on this fact, In a post-neoliberal era when diligence no longer guarantees success (Davies, 2021), it is of great significance to reshape and reconstruct the concept of merit and life goals within each striving individual. I will extend the concept of "temporality" into all forms of gap, thereby contributing to the previous literature on the evolution of meritocracy within the socio-cultural context of China. It serves not only to reflect on how the pursuit of education shapes life choices but also to address the risks of alienation stemming from the obsession with success and relentless striving in an increasingly competitive society. Additionally, this study will provide an individual-level perspective on the localisation of meritocracy in China, laying the foundation for subsequent comparative research.

1.3 Research purpose and aims

Based on the above background, the primary aim of my research is to collect data on how Chinese youth form and change their views on meritocracy and to explore

whether there are ways to break this cycle. The secondary aim is to provide a new dimension of analysis and synthesis for the Chinese-style gap year. Studying gap year takers involves examining those who have stepped away from the meritocratic social clock; they are both participants and a crucial entry point for researching societal perceptions. Consequently, my core research question is:

How do Chinese gap year takers form their perception of meritocratic life sequence?

1.4 Organisation of the study

The main content of this study is divided into five sections. In the literature review, I will systematically examine the concept of meritocracy, its implications and applications, and how it is used to explain people's pursuit of education. Following this, I will explore China's higher education selection mechanisms and graduates' career choices, summarising the optimal life paths under the Chinese social clock based on empirical research. Subsequently, I will analyse why China has developed such an educational meritocracy from cultural, political, and economic perspectives. After analysing the context and background of meritocracy, I will expand from temporality to the gap, explaining the basic definition of the gap year, its uniqueness in China, and the pressures associated with choosing a gap year. The study will further introduce the key concepts used in this paper.

In the second chapter on methodology, I will outline the research design based on the philosophical underpinnings of the study, the chosen methodology, specific research methods, and my position as a researcher. This will be followed by an explanation of the data collection and analysis process and, finally, a reflection on the rigour, ethical considerations, and limitations of the research. In the third chapter, I will present my findings according to the five gap year themes. In the fourth chapter, the discussion section will critically engage with the literature and make sense of my findings by connecting them with social clock theory, expectancy theory, and temporality theory. The conclusion will address the contributions and limitations of this study.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Meritocratic life sequence

2.1.1 Meritocracy: A review of the concept

The theory of meritocracy in Western society emerged after World War II, evolving from mechanisms that allocated social resources favouring those from privileged or aristocratic origins (McNamee & Miller, 2004). Meritocracy emphasizes hard work as the primary means of achieving success, encapsulated in the concept of "advancement by merit" (Young, 1958). Initially, this idea was primarily used to study social stratification and mobility, suggesting that selection and reward based on merit were a "functional necessity for modern industrial societies based on technical and economic rationality" (Davis & Moore, 1945, p.39).

Merit was interpreted as educational qualifications in the 1970s (Bell, 1973), and it is regarded as a key selection mechanism that measures and rewards merit (Goldthorpe, 1996). Despite its surface appeal of promoting fair competition and equal opportunities, meritocracy often reinforces existing social inequalities in practice (Young, 1958). Bourdieu (1998) explored how the education system maintains and reproduces social inequality. Through tutoring and intensive education, parents aim to convert economic capital into cultural capital.

In recent years, meritocracy has faced considerable criticism. Markovits (2019) argued that meritocracy exacerbates social inequality while imposing excessive demands and pressure on the elite class. Sandel (2020), in *The Tyranny of Merit*, contended that meritocracy overlooks the inequalities of luck and opportunity, overemphasizing personal effort and ability, thereby leading to social division.

The aforementioned scholars critically analyze social inequality through the lens of meritocracy. This study, however, aims to explore the feasibility of the self-motivation mindset inherent in meritocracy. Additionally, it examines the exhaustion and reflection induced among individuals systematically controlled by performance-oriented systems in the Chinese context.

2.1.2 A brief introduction to contemporary Chinese meritocratic selection

Educational meritocracy focuses on how merit is measured by educational outcomes and how it is related to social destination (Bell, 1973). It involves a set of mechanisms for how exams are conducted to distribute social power and achieve social reproduction (Bourdieu, 1996). China primarily selects talent through the national standardised examination known as the Gaokao, and Chinese higher education has expanded at an unprecedented rate since the mid-1990s. The project of building 'world-class' universities has prioritised the provision of funding and resources to elite universities (985 project universities) and key universities (211 project universities) (Liu, 2013). Higher education has become a principal definer of social status (Goodman, 2014). The ultimate goal of entering elite universities is to achieve social mobility through the transformation of capital or to accomplish the self-replication of social classes to strengthen elite status (Shen et al., 2022).

In 2023, a record-breaking 12.91 million students in China participated in the national Gaokao examination, while the 985 project universities (39 in total) and the 211 project universities (112 in total) admitted approximately 100,000 and 300,000 students, respectively (Global Times, 2023). Obtaining a degree from a prestigious university signals a greater probability of becoming a manager (Hu & Vargas, 2015). While STEM and Law degrees are associated with income advantages, all disciplines confer higher status (Marginson, 2018). Consequently, parents place significant emphasis on their children's education from kindergarten onward (Chen et al., 2021).

After graduating from elite universities, such as Tsinghua University, 28.3% of fresh graduates choose to pursue further studies domestically, 7.1% go abroad for further studies, 52.5% secure formal employment, and 10.1% opt for flexible employment (China Daily Youth, 2023). However, the employment rate for all national college graduates in 2024 is only 48% (Zhilian, 2024). To increase their opportunities to attend more distinguished universities, improve job prospects, and establish themselves as permanent urban residents (Yan, 2013), an increasing number of

graduates are choosing to pursue postgraduate studies. In 2023, China enrolled 760,000 postgraduate students, while the amount of applicants reached 4.74 million (Xinhuanet, 2023). As most companies now require postgraduate degrees, the trend of postgraduate entrance exams is progressively coming to resemble that of the Gaokao (Qing, 2023). Elite graduates generally enter high-paying industries such as finance, technology, and the Internet, which offer rapid career advancement opportunities. However, following the pandemic, stable positions in state-owned enterprises and government jobs have become desirable among graduates (Chai, 2023).

2.1.3 A pivotal life sequence: Emprical studies on Chinese context

In *Higher Education, Meritocracy and Inequality in China*, Liu (2018) systematically reviews the potential social stratification and the socioeconomic, cultural and sociodemographic barriers to a meritocratic selection that may result from the Gaokao system (Liu, 2018, p.85). Kipnis (2006) states that ambitions for individual development among young people are channelled in particular ways in contemporary China and are spurred by the fear of falling behind. Derived from Confucian and Communist ethics, Yan (2013) reviewed the drive for success and the desirable route for striving individuals, which for Chinese youth is seemingly based on individual diligence and securing good test scores. Further to Yan's research, Hansen (2015) employed "temporality" to examine Chinese top university students' experiences of self-development abroad that although the temporal sequence of advancing "promises mental and physiological overexertion in the present is a passing sacrifice with the goal of eventually obtaining attractive employment, it will instead prove to be a constant mode of being: a future of ceaseless urgency" (p.53).

Hansen (2015, p.57) cites that Chinese young people adhere to a fixed ideal sequence that they "attend preschool, primary school, middle school, and high school, all while doing extracurricular activities; sit for the gaokao; go to university; study abroad; find an internship; become a member of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and do the Civil Service Examination (optional); obtain attractive employment" . This

individual-advancing sequence is highly competitive as it is the mainstream pathway to "success" constructed by the popular discourse (Goodman, 2014). This paper will critically further examine the meritocratic life sequence, focusing on the choices of university students and recent graduates who pause their school studies (took a "gap"). It will analyse the formative mindset of young individuals who, highly domesticated by the social clock, dare not pause. Subsequently, I will explore the deep-rooted reasons for the formation of the meritocratic educational system in China from cultural, political and economic perspectives.

2.1.4 Governing educational desire: Construction and fascination with imagined success

a) Deep rooted culture: The Confucian meritocracy

In imperial China, meritocracy was guided by Confucian philosophy and implemented through an examination-based system for recruiting civil servants (Liu, 2018). Emerged in the seventh century BC, the examination system (the Keju, 科举) was the main vehicle of meritocratic social selection (Yao, 2000) until 1905. The selection covered classical Confucian contexts with the five ethical principles - Benevolence (Ren, 仁)， Justice (Yi, 义)， Propriety （Li，礼), Wisdom (Zhi, 智), Integrity (Xin, 信) - was instrumental to the imperial political order (Ho, 1962).

According to Turner (1960), the system allows individuals to put effort into bureaucratic elite status. However, it was functionalized in a degree of contest mobility among the culturally advantaged class (Elman, 2013). As a result, the competitive civil service exam leads to a complicated process of social reproduction. The desire to maintain or obtain cultural capital triggered the considerable accumulation of social capital and corporate initiative (Hymes, 1986).

In addition to the bureaucratic selection system, Confucianism also fostered a strong sense of filial piety, which is regarded as the core idea of Confucian ethics for ordinary people (Hwang, 1995). It is believed that individuals' lives are the continuation of their parents' physical lives, as "Our body, with hair and skin, is derived from our

parents. One should not hurt one's own body in any situation" (Hsiao Ching 2007, Chapter 1). This filial piety is demonstrated through both showing respect and care for parents and elders, as well as achieving academic success to bring honour to the family. By passing exams and entering officialdom, individuals can secure high positions and substantial salaries, which not only improve the family's economic situation but also elevate the family's social status, thus repaying the family's nurturing (Hsu, 1963).

In *The Analects*, it is stated: "A father instructs his son to be loyal ministers and filial sons." Parents' education of their children aims not only at personal achievement but also at cultivating them to be filial and to bring glory to the family. Confucianism emphasizes the collective interests of the family and clan, with members supporting each other (Cheng, 1991) to pursue collective prosperity. In managing the relationship between individuals and the collective, Confucianism advocates for "cultivating oneself, managing the family, governing the state, and bringing peace to the world," placing personal achievements within the context of striving for national interests (Ho, 1997).

In a nutshell, the deep-rooted reasons behind the Chinese emphasis on examinations and the high regard for education can be traced back to the imperial examination system (keju) and Confucian culture, which values respect for teachers, filial piety, and collectivism. Confucian culture underscores the importance of education for personal virtue and social stability. These historical and cultural factors collectively shaped the Chinese societal belief in the transformative power of education —— not only as a means of acquiring knowledge and skills but also as a crucial way to achieve personal value and social responsibility (Angle, 2013). This enduring tradition continues to be significant in modern China, adapting to new contexts as society evolves.

b) Political change and Chinese higher education expansion

Higher education responded to dramatic changes in the political, ideological and economic domains during different historical periods of the socialist regime (Liu, 2018). The state's distribution of higher education opportunities reflects its political agenda.

Since the founding of the PRC, social development has undergone four distinct historical periods (Selden, 2016), namely: The Socialist Transformation (1949-1957) when the ideological loyalty marked the early stage of the socialist regime (Walder, 2009); The Socialist Construction (1958-1965) with the radical aim of attaining full communism in fifteen years (Zhou, 2004); The Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) when the intellectual became the victims of vicious political movements and enforced a devastating effect on higher education selection (Seybolt, 2016); and the Reform and Opening-up (1978-present) when the communist regime dumped feudal class-consciousness and replacing it with egalitarian ideologies (Li, 2001). It is evident that "education-based meritocracy facilitates the Party's overall strategy of modernisation and development" (Sheringham, 2018, p. 5) and serves the political and social order.

The boundary between merit and political affiliation has long been blurring (Liu, 2018), and economic development gave way to political campaigns (Walder, 2016) until the enforcement of the "Opening-up" policy. The restoration of the Gaokao marked the rise of merit-based selection in higher education (Liu, 2013). In conjunction with the collapse of the communist regime in Eastern European countries and the Soviet Union (Wang, 2016), the Party proposed the agenda of "Development and Stability" to unify different social groups and justify the incoming market reform, ultimately resulting in the expansion of higher education in the 1990s (Nee, 2012).

Over the past few decades, individual success is mainly measured by economic wealth and political power due to the legitimisation of individual desires (Rofel, 2007), where materialist understanding of success also derives from a crisis of beliefs caused by the rise and fall of Communist ethics (Ci, 1994; Wang, 2002). Communism and egalitarianism were replaced with a patriotic orientation (Walder, 2009), a renaissance of traditional values (Spence, 2008) and the widespread belief in meritocracy. By underlying the meritocratic principle of selection, people from lower socio-economic backgrounds believe they can enhance their status through higher education, therefore consolidating political stability and integrating social interests (Nee & Opper, 2012).

In contemporary China, a person's relationship with the party-state plays a key role in determining access to and success in careers and affects housing and education (Goodman, 2014; p. 52), and "social power and status determines life outcomes, rather than property ownership or income" (p.183). Young Chinese today are encouraged on a national scale to "develop the nation by developing individually". Students at elite universities are met with the further expectation that they, owing to their outstanding talents, "shoulder a particular responsibility for future national prosperity" (Hansen, 2015, p. 54).

c) Urban-rural stratification and material pursuits

Geographical stratification in contemporary China manifests itself in all dimensions—interprovincial, interregional, and urban-rural differences (Li, 2021). The tremendous rise as a promising economic power has exacerbated inequality between different regions (Liu, 2015), as from 1996 to 2008, the surge in incomes in urban areas was double that in rural areas (Treiman, 2012, p. 42). Although by the end of 2023, China had an urbanization rate of 66.2% (Statista, 2023) with prominent growth in the middle class (Marginson, 2018), China remains a country that naturally tends to 'low social mobility and high intergenerational transfer of privilege and disadvantage' (Goodman, 2014).

Due to China's system of registration based on residence (namely, the Hukou system), urban residents (Gustafsson et al., 2011) have deeply entrenched advantages while limiting the entitlements of rural migrant workers and their families to services such as schooling (Treiman, 2012). The difficulties and benefits, including access to education, health care, housing and retirement (p.33) of changing residential classifications have become the drive for Chinese youth (Yao, 2018). This mobility is driven not only between rural and urban areas but also within first-tier and second-and third-tier cities. Settling in top-tier cities means access to a variety of benefits and guarantees available to local residents (Hung, 2022). Having a degree from a prestigious university directly reduces the barriers to obtaining residency. For instance,

Shanghai offers direct residency opportunities to graduates from universities ranked in the top 50 worldwide (China Daily, 2023).

If the economic impetus for fleeing rural areas and acquiring urban hukou is to obtain social security, then the pursuit of material conditions is the driving force for young people to engage in educational hyper-competition and intense competition for degrees and jobs. Materialism has grown alongside the Reform and Opening-up policy, gauged the level of individual success and defined individual identity (Yan, 2009).

Now, with the expansion of the middle class and the prevalence of consumerist culture (Ioane, 2016), people purchase goods to reinforce their cultural values (Lindridge, 2012) and favour the pursuit of status and identity through consumerism. Material indicators of success include home ownership, which has gained the moral meaning of defending one's personhood (Zhang, 2010). Another driving factor is that recent college graduates are the objects of China's one-child policy, whose parents spent most of their time and financial resources on providing them with the best possible life (Xin, 2013). Over time, educational elites with the most abundant resources are drawn to industries such as finance and technology, hoping to convert their capital and achieve social mobility or consolidation (Mu, 2019). Under the strong influence of state developmentalism and global consumerism, material objects have gained more weight in shaping the ethics of the striving individual in China (Yan, 2013).

2.2. Gap year in China

In the previous sections, I analyzed the concept and causes of meritocracy within the Chinese context. Existing literature either empirically demonstrates the hidden inequalities within the higher education selection mechanism or focuses on the temporal experiences of overseas exchange students to analyze the struggles of Chinese university students. I will extend the concept of "temporality" to include a broader range of "gaps" in education, considering various forms of pauses. Additionally, I will relate this phenomenon to the societal context of meritocracy, emphasizing the pursuit of stability and success.

This chapter will review the basic definition of a gap year and its unique characteristics in China, discussing the types of gaps and the pressures faced by students taking voluntary or involuntary gaps. The aim is to provide a macro-level overview to support subsequent individual cases and to expand the concept of a gap year based on academic research.

2.2.1 Gap year in general and concept definition

A Gap Year, or Year Out, is a break in an educational career that is usually taken between leaving school and beginning study at university (Jones, 2004). A "gap year" is commonly taken by young individuals between completing their education and starting their professional careers. It typically involves spending a year experiencing a new way of life, which may include travelling, volunteering, and internships (Ao, 2012). This is a proactive choice to temporarily step off the conventional life track and explore different opportunities (Chen, 2014). The meaning of a modern gap year derives more directly from relatively privileged young people in the UK before engaging in a more settled career (Heath, 2006). It was first seen in the UK (Jones, 2004; Simpson, 2004) but gradually gained acknowledgement in Oceania (Curtis et al., 2012), then North America (Qian, 2013), and later in South Africa (Coetzee & Bester, 2009) and then other parts of the world, including China.

There are location, structure and activity choices in taking a gap year (Jones, 2004). A gap year can be taken within the country or overseas - which is highly promoted, especially in the UK (Snee, 2013). There are industry bodies in the UK that provide various commercial packages for school leavers, which include overseas voluntary and community service (Wu, 2015). This structured gap here opportunity offers a relatively risk-free, supervised, and controlled experience (Wearing & Neil, 2012). One can also choose not to rely on service providers and unpack their individual experience by starting independent travelling, doing paid work, and other leisure activities (Vandome, 2002).

Studies suggest that a gap year experience can help the participants become more mature and independent (Coetzee & Bester, 2009). As Simpson (2004) put it, it can also

enable young people to acquire soft skills and cultural capital needed in the modern world. A gap year is also a good opportunity to develop social values and experiences to better adapt to university life (Birch & Miller, 2007), improve personal status (O'Reilly, 2006), and, ultimately, build employability in the job market (Heath, 2006).

Jones (2004) offers a well-cited definition of the modern gap year. He suggested that a gap year is "any period of time between 3-24 months which the individual takes out of formal education, training or the workplace, and where the time out sits in the context of a longer career trajectory" (p. 8). According to Jones, "year" can be a loosely defined concept and refers to a break-away time from the sequence. It includes both pre-university gap years and post-graduate gap years (consisting of career breaks and study breaks) (Wu, 2015). This paper will adopt Jones's definition to study the choices and experiences of Chinese university students' gaps.

2.2.2 An overview of the introduction and rise of gap year in China

In 2009, Sun Dongchun introduced the concept of the gap year to China through his personal experience in *My Late Arrival Gap Year*, which immediately garnered enthusiasm and popularity among the youth (Liu, 2013). Specific websites (e.g. freegapper.com) and focused online discussion groups promoting a gap year tour have been established (Wu, 2015), and the attention to this topic has been boosted by social media commentary and discussion threads ever since.

In reviewing the existing literature on the gap year phenomenon, it is noted that most discussions appear in the form of news reports and topical debates. Although the academic community in China has touched upon this subject, comprehensive studies are still scarce. Two representative empirical studies interpret the gap year as an outcome of structural employment challenges (Li, 2023) and use ethnographic analysis to depict the profile of Chinese gap year takers (Wu, 2015), attempting to present an overall understanding of the gap year situation in China.

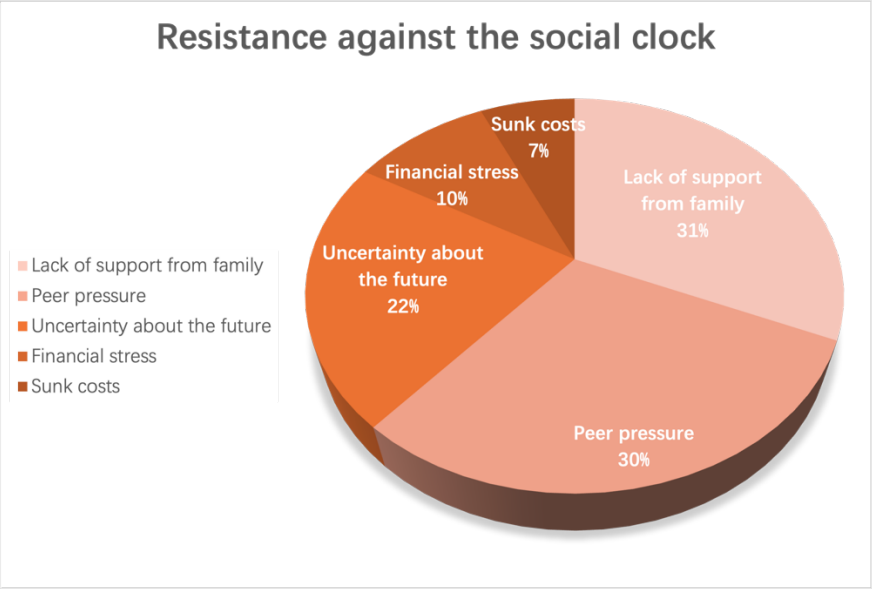
Wu (2015) analyzed 103 blogs and found that the popularity of gap years is increasing, as evidenced by the rising number of online blogs each year. Unlike gap-

year participants in Western countries, most Chinese participants are not pre-university students (Wu, 2015, p.65). Two-thirds of the gap takers are actually on a career break or recent graduates with disposable time before starting their professional careers (p.66). Geographically, the gap year concept is more popular in economically developed coastal regions of China (p.66). During the gap, travelling is considered the dominant activity, though working and volunteering are sometimes undertaken (p.67).

Having the courage to choose an intentional gap year remains a minority behaviour because it goes against the "social clock." Analyzing the frequency of words in posts under the categories "need encouragement" and "need advice" from the "Anti-Social Clock" group on Douban, I used samples up to April 15, 2024, and calculated the word frequencies with the highest frequency indexed at one hundred reveals five main reasons for hesitating to choose a gap year.

Figure 1

Resisting Factors of Deviating from the Social Clock among Chinese Youth



2.2.3 Perception of striving individual

Unlike the relatively mature and accepting attitudes in Western countries, the social context in China towards the "gap year" phenomenon remains polarized, with

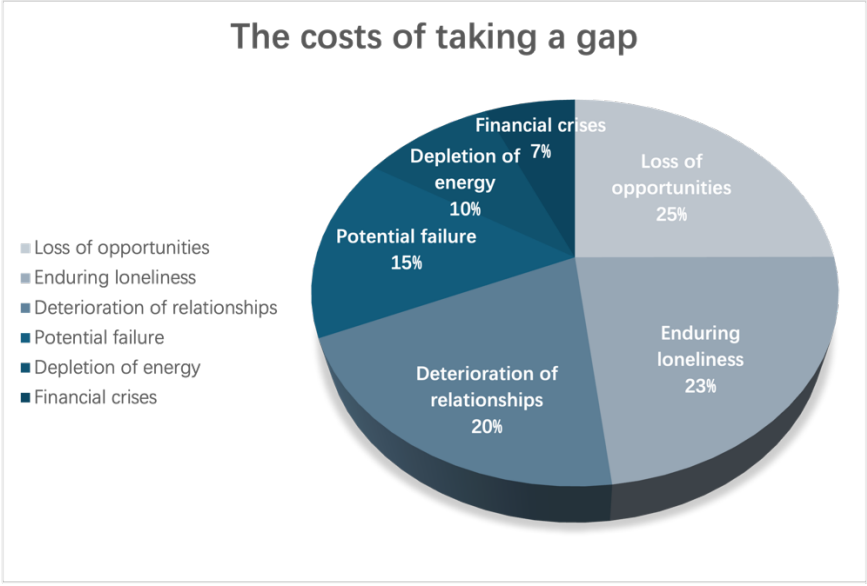
contentious voices dominating public discourse (Li, 2023). The gap year is often viewed as aimless and unsettling long-term "adventurous wandering" (Wang, 2020). While it may appear appealing, the significant feeling of disparity when reintegrating into normal life post-gap year makes it difficult for individuals to adapt and integrate (Rao, 2013). Additionally, the gap year is sometimes seen as synonymous with "wasting time" and "self-abandonment" (Tian, 2019), perceived as an excuse to escape reality and indulge in idleness.

On the popular Chinese social platform RED, a post titled "I Quit 985 to Travel, My Gap Year Ruined Me" received tens of thousands of likes. The author describes how leaving a top-tier university to travel to over 50 countries led to an existential crisis, a loss of control and planning for the future, and a significant amount of energy spent dealing with family and societal doubts. This experience led to feelings of loneliness, anxiety, and profound uncertainty, making it difficult to return to the structured environment of school. Many people joke about not being able to afford a gap year, both in terms of energy and consequences, opting instead for a "gap day" or "gap hour" to find brief respite from their busy lives (CNA, 2023).

Moreover, the job market has policies favouring fresh graduates, such as special campus recruitment events and residency processing benefits. This makes the status of a fresh graduate a hidden advantage during job hunting (Liu, 2014). Conversely, job seekers who do not qualify as fresh graduates face discrimination and must compete in a more challenging job market (Qian et al., 2022). Specifically, the employment gap resulting from a gap year often leads to scrutiny from recruiters, who question why the individual did not work immediately after graduation and what they did during that time. This gap can result in early elimination during resume screening and stigmatization as "unambitious, unable to endure hardship, lacking capability, and not good enough" (Li, 2023), thereby increasing job search difficulties. According to a survey by 51job (2022), 40% of young people reported losing job opportunities due to employers questioning their "employment gap."

Figure 2

The Types of Costs if Taking A Gap Year



Note: Word frequency analysis of Douban group on deviating from the social clock. Analysis based on the word with the highest frequency as the benchmark index 100.

2.3. Theoretical framework

Based on the analysis of existing literature and current social media trends, this study aims to address the research question: Formative Perception of Meritocratic Life Sequence Among Chinese Gap Year Takers. Specifically, it explores how individuals aged 18-25 negotiate with social clock expectations during this temporal experience and shape their perceptions to either adhere to or reject the meritocratic pursuit. In the following sections, I will introduce some core concepts relevant to this research.

2.3.1 Expectation theory and self-formation

Expectation Theory is primarily associated with Victor Vroom, who developed the Expectancy Theory of Motivation in 1964. This theory posits that individuals are motivated to act in a certain way if they expect that their actions will lead to a desired outcome and that the outcome will be rewarding (Vroom, 1964). It emphasises three

components: expectancy (the belief that effort leads to performance), instrumentality (the belief that performance leads to reward), and valence (value of the reward). Individuals are motivated to exert effort when they believe it will result in favourable performance (Colyvan, 2008). In the context of meritocracy, people believe that hard work leads to success, which in turn brings higher social status and respectable income (Biddle, 1957). Thus, many individuals are willing to study diligently to achieve upward social mobility and improve their circumstances. The appeal of such rewards reflects the value they place on worldly success. The self-efficacy and beliefs shaped by Expectancy Theory underpin this study's theoretical foundation, highlighting how expectations influence behaviour and personal self-formation.

2.3.2 Key concepts

a) Emerging adults

Emerging adults is a term coined by psychologist Jeffrey Arnett (2000) to describe individuals roughly between the ages of 18 and 25. This developmental phase is characterised by exploration and instability, as individuals often undergo significant changes in identity, relationships, and career choices (Munsey, 2020). Unlike adolescents, emerging adults have more independence and are typically out of the parental home but are not yet fully immersed in adult responsibilities such as long-term careers or permanent relationships (Wood et al., 2018). This stage is marked by a sense of in-between status and a focus on self-discovery (Reifman, 2007). This study focuses on the age range of 18-25 and adopts the concept of emerging adults, an in-between age, to analyse and understand their gradually forming self-identity and social perceptions.

b) Social clock theory

Social Clock Theory refers to the concept of socially and culturally set timelines that dictate the expected timing of major life events such as marriage, parenthood, and retirement (Peterson, 1996). This theory, largely developed by psychologist Bernice Neugarten in the 1960s, posits that societal norms and cultural expectations influence

individuals' perceptions of the appropriate age for achieving these milestones (Rook et al., 1989). The primary focus of the life sequence of this study derives from the timing of major life events, specifically a "gap year" as a transitioning period to examine the adherence and nonadherence of the social clock.

c) Liminality and temporality

The in-between stage of the gap could be further interpreted as liminality. In *The Rites of Passage,* Arnold van Gennep (1909) first introduced this concept to describe the transitional phase, where individuals are no longer in their previous status but have not yet transitioned to the next stage (Thomassen, 2016). This "in-between" phase is characterized by ambiguity, openness, and transformation (Beech, 2011). Individuals feeling detached from their previous identity while not yet fully integrated into their new one could be beneficial in explaining the transition from on track to the gap.

Bourdieu's central thesis on temporality notes "Practice is not in time but makes time" (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 206), that "stable employment is the primary source of self-assurance regarding the future, the casualisation of labour implies that this temporal assurance is no longer the norm." His work offers profound insights into how time and temporal structures influence social practices and individual actions. Applying the concept of temporality can better integrate the historical context in analyzing individual choices.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

3.1.1 Philosophical underpinnings: Interpretivist paradigm

The research design process begins with the philosophical assumptions the inquirers make in deciding to undertake a study (Lewis, 2015). This paper examines students who experience gaps in the meritocratic evaluation system. These students, as firsthand witnesses, perceive and navigate the process of following the predetermined optimal life path, including staying on track, stepping off (gap), and getting back on track. Their perspectives provide significant insights into societal perceptions. The approach I choose is to focus on an individual's experience to unpack a social phenomenon, which is coherent with the qualitative research assumption that reality is subjective and multiple, as seen by participants in the study (Creswell, 2003). . By studying people's life experiences and perceptions, the aim is to describe, explore, understand and interpret the phenomena (Finlay, 2011).

To set the study in context (Hennink, 2011), I adopt the interpretive research paradigm to generate meaning from a value-laden, socially constructed perspective (Laverty, 2003). The central endeavour in the context of the interpretive paradigm is to understand the subjective world of human experience (Cohen et al., 2009). Based on the paradigm, my ontological assumption is that realities are multiple and socially constructed (Cuthbertson, 2020), and epistemologically assumes that knowledge is gained through personal experiences and perceptions (Kivumja, 2017); therefore, a reconstruction is being made of the culture or groups being studied (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). The interpretivist paradigm also determined that I would adopt methodologies and methods focused on the individual experiences of a specific group.

3.1.2 Methodology: Narrative and interpretive phenomenological analysis

There are several qualitative methodologies that have differing ontological and epistemological principles of various designs of enquiry (Pring, 2020). The interpretive

phenomenological analysis (IPA) aims to offer insights into how a given person, in a given context, makes sense of a given phenomenon at a given moment in time (Reid et al., 2005). It provides rich detail and a thick description of individual accounts, which affords in-depth analysis whilst paying close attention to context and process (Smith et al., 2019). This paper draws on how students who have taken a pause in their studies perceive the track-based evaluation system, as well as their views on this period of "gap". This involves both describing the individuals' subjective experiences to capture the phenomenon itself and interpreting these experiences within their cultural contexts.

IPA offers an established, systematic approach committed to understanding the first-person perspective from the third-person point of view (Tompkins, 2012); this meant that there is risk of misinterpretation (Reid et al., 2005). Therefore, narrative methodology can serve as a complementary approach. Narrative analysis is a design of enquiry in which the researcher studies the lives of individuals and asks them to provide stories about their lives (Reissman, 1993). It focuses on how the narrators make connections between events and how they place themselves within them (Barone, 2007). Although there is no construction of themes (Reissman, 1993), it is a noteworthy tool to show the intention of the individual (Coulter & Smith, 2009). This paper examines the formative process of perception among young people. The individual differences in specific situations must not be overlooked before attributing them to broader social phenomena or specific social contexts.

Narrative research provides specific individual stories (Clandinin, 2020), while phenomenology helps identify and analyse the common themes and core experiences within these stories (Smith et al., 2009). Combining these two methodologies allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the research questions from different perspectives.

3.1.3 Methods

Consistent with narrative and interpretive phenomenological analysis methodology, I adopt the retrospective visual method (journey plot) and semi-structured interviews to

gather respondents' experiences, contextual beliefs and expectations of a meritocratic life sequence.

a) Journey plot

Since not all knowledge is reducible to language (Eisner, 2008), the inclusion of non-linguistic dimensions in research, which rely on other expressive possibilities, may allow us to access and represent different levels of experience. As Elliott (2005, p.53) suggests, "allowing respondents to provide narrative accounts of their lives and experiences can help to redress some of the power differentials inherent in the research enterprise" and can also provide good evidence about the everyday lives of research subjects and the meanings they attach to their experiences (Eisner, 2018).

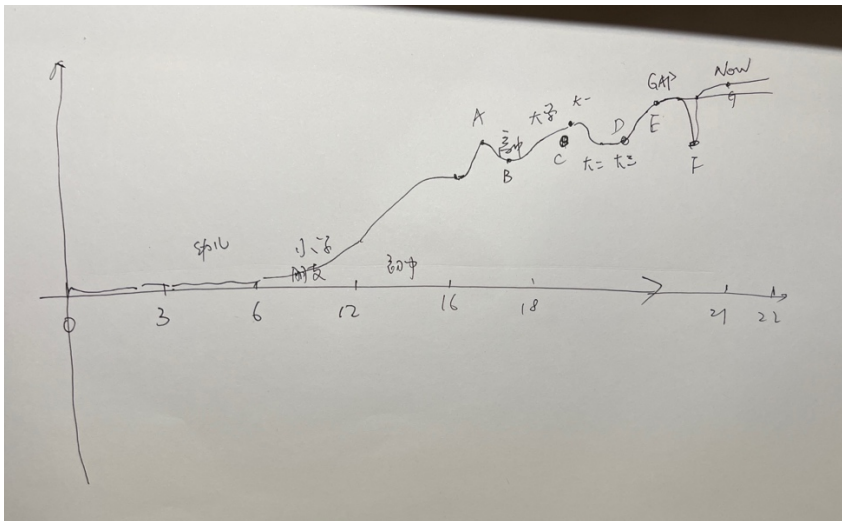
The use of visual and creative methods can generally facilitate investigating layers of experience that cannot easily be put into words (Gauntlett, 2007) and allows participants to reflect about the issues being explored (Bagnoli, 2009). In my research, the respondents' shifts in perspective are examined through the stages of past, present, and future. Reflecting on past personal experiences and understanding how these experiences shape individual beliefs is of great importance (Connelly, 2000). This approach allows for categorisation and analysis based on each individual's unique developmental and educational backgrounds while also providing support for a more comprehensive longitudinal timeline.

My focus is on the participants' narratives of the present and the past; at the beginning of my interviews, I ask each respondent to draw a life curve. The horizontal axis represents age, from birth to their current age, while the vertical axis represents the perceived highs and lows of their life. This method aims to capture the most significant turning points and biographical events from the perspective of gap year takers. My research particularly focuses on young people's perceptions of success. By examining how they view the high points in their lives, I can assess whether these moments align more with a meritocratic evaluation system or their personal peaks of mindset. Using drawing as an icebreaker and starting point for the interviews helps respondents feel more at ease (Finley, 2008). Below are two life curves drawn by respondents,

illustrating their past experiences.

Figure 3 & 4

Two Journey Plots Samples During the Interviews



b) Semi-structured interviews

Interviews have the potential to provide rich and highly illuminating material (Kvale, 1996). The use of semi-structured interviews encourages cooperation and rapport and allows researchers to make a well-funded assessment of what the

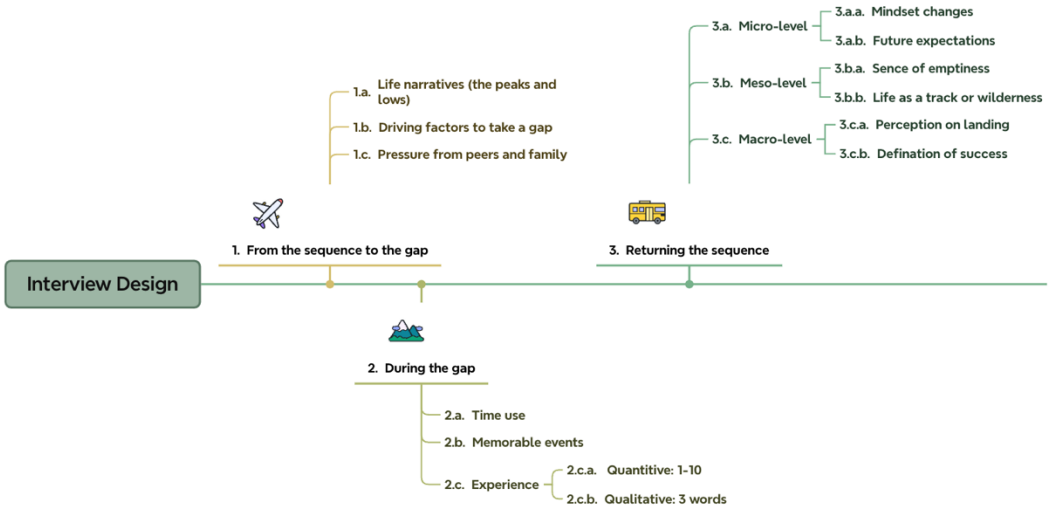
respondent really believes (Wengraf, 2001). As conventional approaches to interviewing treat respondents as epistemologically passive and as mere vessels of answers (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995), the role of the semi-structured interviewer should be to "activate narrative production" (Arksey, 1999) and to "stimulate the interviewees' interpretive capacities" (Elliott, 2005). This open-ended approach also facilitates the transition from the journey plot to specific interview questions. It allows for an in-depth exploration and structured supplementation of the respondents' personal experiences and perspectives (Seidman, 2013), thereby ensuring that I adhere to the tradition of narrative inquiry in the design of my research questions.

Three main types are mostly used in research interviews: closed (or fixed-alternative'), open, and scale items (Robson & McCartan, 2016). My interviews encompass three types of questions and are designed in a longitudinal timeline sequence. To study whether the concept of life sequence among students is reshaped by a gap year, I explore three phases: the transition from the sequence to the gap, the period during the gap, and the return to the sequence.

All interview questions aim to uncover respondents' views on the meritocratic life path, incorporating both their emotional perceptions of personal experiences and their rational reflections on social phenomena. The design of questions for the three phases is illustrated below, with a detailed list of questions provided in the appendix.

Figure 5

Interview Design in A Liner Format



3.1.4 Reflexivity and positionality

Whereas much of quantitative research strives to reveal fundamental truths that are as free as possible from researcher "bias" (Young & Ryan, 2020), qualitative researchers engage in reflexivity to account for how subjectivity shapes their inquiry (Rees et al., 2020). Researchers act as research instruments, through which they become intimately involved with the participants, their stories, and their lives (Moore, 2008). Both I and my participants have been through the Chinese education system all the way to college. We have shared endogenetic perceptions of the grade-oriented evaluation system and are familiar with Chinese political, cultural, societal, and economic contexts. I personally have not taken any "gap" so far, and my education and overall life experience (if reflected on a curve) have been rather smoothly rising without any significant lows and setbacks.

I come from a middle-class family in a second-tier city. My parents supported my decisions, and I have always been seen as a well-behaved and excellent student in the eyes of my teachers. I have attended prestigious schools and achieved good grades. Consequently, my perception of the future has been influenced by this mindset, believing that a successful life follows fixed standards. I lacked the courage to deviate from societal expectations and norms.

However, the reflections on self-limitations emphasized in my classes at Oxford, along with the Oxford China Forum I organized on the theme of anti-involution, have made me realize the privileges I possess. I began to reflect on my identity and the high expectations placed upon me by those around me due to my educational background. As described in *The Tyranny of Merit* (Sandel, 2020), I realized that my "success" was not solely based on my efforts. Therefore, even though I have never paused my studies in any form, I refrain from judging or being prejudiced against others.

As a researcher, I strive to avoid letting my identity and preconceived beliefs influence the design and analysis of my interviews at every stage of my research. I also make a concerted effort to retain the original meanings conveyed by the respondents. I kept a fieldnote during and after the interviews to capture the interpersonal dynamics impacting the participants and their data. When dealing with participants from completely different backgrounds, I am patient and meticulous in my questioning to ensure I do not misinterpret their responses.

I am aware of my multiple selves and their potential impact on my research; I am a Chinese college graduate, an international student, a student who has been praised as "excellent" since childhood, a person who has always moved forward on the "right" track, and most importantly, an educational researcher. By engaging in reflexive dialogues with my participants and myself throughout the lifecycle of the research, these multiple selves have emerged in confronting and honing my interpretation of the data (Smith, 1994). I try to use reflexivity as a hall of mirrors to keep sight of the alignment between the research question and the study's theoretical and conceptual grounding and balance the participant and researcher voices in the results section (Day, 2012).

3.2. Data collection

Qualitative samples tend to be purposive rather than random (Miles, 2020). As I aim to study the perspectives of the Chinese gap year cohort on the meritocratic life sequence, it is necessary to define "gap year" before commencing sampling.

This study seeks to reflect on the life sequence. Thus, the term "gap" here is defined more as a break or pause from uninterrupted study, regardless of the reasons for the gap or how the time is spent. The standard for inclusion is simply the act of "pausing." The age range for the study is 18-25, targeting emerging adults (Arnett, 2000), specifically those who have experienced a gap during or after their university years.

Given the significant heterogeneity within the gap year population, and as Cohen et al. (2009, p. 105) state, "where there is heterogeneity in the population, then a larger sample must be selected on some basis that respects that heterogeneity," I chose to use snowball sampling. I posted recruitment posters on social media platforms and asked friends to help disseminate them, which allowed me to quickly contact over 30 students with gap year experiences. After reaching a certain number, I categorized the respondents based on the type of gap year they had taken and used purposive sampling to ensure a similar number of participants in each category. A total of 25 respondents agreed to participate, and ultimately, 20 were interviewed.

Given that my respondents are distributed across various regions of China, I opted for online interviews. These interviews are conducted in real-time and synchronously through chat rooms, allowing for anonymity for both parties if desired and enhancing the ability to contact respondents at mutually convenient times (Cohen et al., 2009). To protect participants' privacy, all interviews were conducted on Microsoft Teams and were recorded or videoed according to the respondents' preferences. The journey plots were drawn by the respondents, who then took photos of their completed plots and sent them to me. Each interview lasted for one hour.

3.3. Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis involves organising, accounting for, and explaining the data (Cohen et al., 2006). In this study, I first used narrative analysis to process the journey plots. I created low-inference cameos to sketch encapsulated experiences, contextualise any thematic analysis, and provide a first-order analysis before seeking cross-case similarities and differences. In presenting the data, I used first-person

statements to reconstruct I-Poems (Phadke, 2023) from the cameos. Before delving into specific thematic analysis, I transformed the initial interview text into new narrative forms (Barone, 2007) to ensure that the narrated self was represented in the findings, providing more individual contexts for subsequent analysis.

This study adopts the methodology of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which involves "analysing participants' stories from their 'life-worlds,' or individual experiences and perceptions, with a focus on meaning" (Papathomas & Lavallee, 2010, p. 357). Specifically, I examined students' gap year experiences, categorically discussing their different experiences and identifying common themes. For each type of experience, I applied thematic analysis, identifying themes from coded data (Robson, 2011, p. 475). Before formal coding, I organised scattered data into necessary positions, a process referred to by Richards and Richards (1994) as indexing and by Rapley (2011) as labelling.

Based on the literature review, I pre-set common concepts and categories such as "exam swots," "the exemplary child," and "credential obsession." During the first pass of organising interview transcripts, I focused on related keywords for initial screening and categorisation. As "first-level coding mainly uses these descriptive, low-inference codes, which are very useful in summarising segments of data and which provide the basis for later higher-order coding" (Punch, 2014, p. 74), I maintained an open attitude towards emergent codes during initial coding. Consequently, codes such as "concern about the social clock," "emptiness of returning to the track," "endure loneliness," and "lack of choice" emerged. These are all in vivo codes as they move the researchers "towards the voice of participants" (Creswell, 2015, p. 160). The second round of coding was more interpretive, requiring some degree of inference beyond the data (Punch, 2014). I integrated the results of the initial coding to form larger themes, extracting themes from the codes such as "curved life sequence," "resume-enhancing gap," and "wilderness exploration."

The use of coding software such as NVivo or MaxQDA has the potential to simplify the coding process, as it may "proliferate codes beyond the level at which you will be

able to remember them all or deal with them usefully" (Richards, 2015, p. 118) and may overlook the overall context with concentration on specific data (Elliot, 2018), I start from creating and keep a sight on the low-inference cameos with all coding. I created different rows for various topics In an Excel spreadsheet, including each respondent's basic information, educational background, qualifications, gap year arrangements, and a brief personal biography. Following these are common labels extracted from the interview transcripts, organised in chronological order of past-gap period-future expectations for comparison.

3.4. Research rigour

Qualitative research criteria include the credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability of the work (Denzin et al., 2018). Multiple coding sessions ensured temporal reliability. Inter-coder reliability is crucial and notably absent from (Creswell, 2015). In this study, coding was conducted three times: immediately after each interview, two weeks after the interview, and before the final drafting of the report. I have made horizontal comparisons to ensure valid engagement with the data. In terms of transferability, I used thick description by adopting I Pomes to provide detailed descriptions of the research context, participants, and processes so that readers can determine the applicability of findings to other settings (Shenton, 2004). I used a stratified sampling method to ensure that each gap year group had similar demographic features and selected participants that were rich in information and relevant to my research question, therefore enhancing the potential for broader applicability (Tracy, 2010).

Reflexive researchers are constantly making decisions and reacting to their data or unforeseen circumstances (Varpio et al., 2020). I used an iterative approach (Morse et al., 2000) in data collection and analysis to refine and adjust the research design based on emerging insights and findings. In analysing the data, I restructured my subsidiary research questions based on the interview information from gap year takers, choosing to discuss my data from the perspectives of background, experience, and expectations.

In terms of dependability and confirmability, I realised I was in a multi-layered position to ensure the findings were shaped by the participants and not by researcher bias, which has been elaborated in the reflectivity section.

3.5. Ethical considerations

This study has passed the ethical review of the Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC) with approval reference C1B-24HT-Educ-030 (CUREC forms can be found in the appendix). Each participant reviewed the Participant Information Sheet and signed the Written Consent Form before the formal interview. At the beginning of each interview, I confirmed their verbal consent. The information sheet detailed that the study would include creating a life curve, which might require participants to share some low points. As Elliott (2005) notes, even when research focuses on seemingly non-sensitive topics, unexpected distressing accounts can emerge once interviewees are given the space to share their experiences. Therefore, I ensured that all participants were aware of potential risks and were willing to participate and share information. During the interviews, I refrained from probing into any personal information that the participants were reluctant to discuss. All interviews were anonymised and recorded according to the participants' preferences.

In my research, I explore participants' family backgrounds, educational experiences, and life histories, some of which may be sensitive or involve individuals who identify as marginalised groups. Participants may feel vulnerable due to their role as subjects in the research and may perceive a risk of exploitation or misrepresentation (Iphofen, 2018). I fully respect participants' silences and define my role during interviews as a reflexive listener to mitigate the risk of power asymmetry. During data analysis, I aim to reduce misinterpretation by adopting the participants' first-person perspectives.

3.6. Limitations

Despite efforts to ensure rigour and balance the power dynamics between the researcher and participants, there are still certain limitations in data collection and

analysis. Firstly, implicit biases in convenience and purposive sampling may influence the diversity and representativeness of the participants (Marshall, 1996). Although a sample size of 20 is not too small for qualitative research (Patton, 2002), it still may not capture the all-round diversity of gap types and reasons. Additionally, all interviews were conducted online. While the use of online interviews carries the risk of lack of body language, spontaneity, intimacy, and vulnerability (Brinkmann, 2015), face-to-face interviews offer the possibility of modifying one's line of enquiry (Rumin, 2012).

In terms of the triangulation of data, I did not enlist others to help with coding, which makes it challenging to ensure between-researcher consistency (Corbin, 2015). Although I am aware of my biases as a researcher, qualitative analysis inherently carries a high degree of subjectivity (Bryman, 1994). It is more advisable to use multiple data sources and methods to complement the analytical perspective. In terms of research methodology, greater attention shall be paid to the importance of understanding cultural contexts and adapting research methods accordingly (Bray et al., 2014) and incorporating insights from sociology, anthropology, and history (Epstein, 1994) in the framework of comparative and international education.

4. Results and Findings

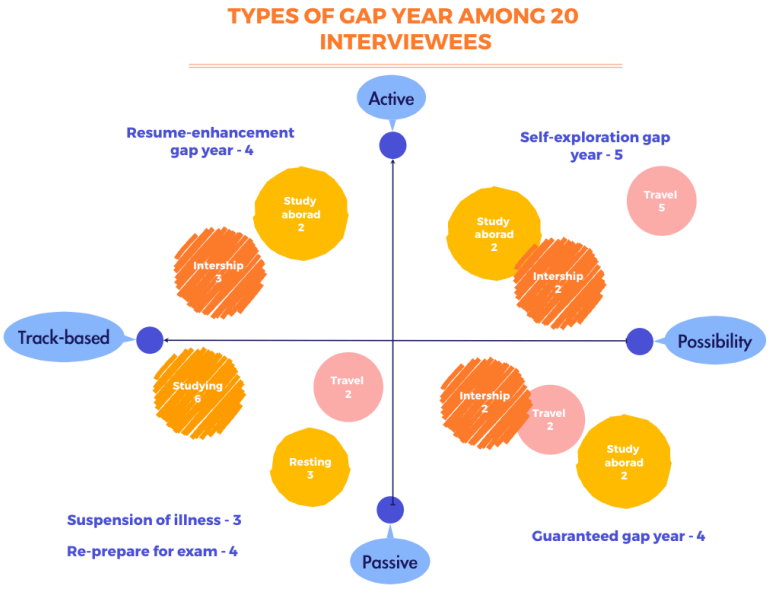
My 20 interviewees can be categorized into seven types based on their gap year activities: “preparing for postgraduate exams,” “doing internships,” “recovering from illness,” “resting,” “travelling,” “studying abroad,” and “starting a business.” Each interviewee engage in 1-3 of these activities during their gap year. To ensure the classification is mutually exclusive and collectively exhaustive, I choose to categorize them base on the causes of their gap year.

Gap years can be divided into *active* and *passive* types. Active gap years are further divided into two categories. The first type involves those who choose to enhance their resumes by spending six months to a year interning, starting a business, or participating in an exchange program abroad, perceiving the gap year in terms of its “feasibility.” The second type includes those who start their gap year without a clear plan or with plans that do not directly contribute to their resume, driven by a desire for self-exploration, perceiving the gap year in terms of its “possibility.”

Passive gap years are categorized into three types. The first type is suspension of schooling caused by depression or other illnesses. The second type involves those who did not pass the postgraduate entrance exams and chose to take a gap year to re-prepare. The third type is a guaranteed gap year, where individuals are forced to temporarily diverge from their current path to achieve a certain goal, taking a “detour” before officially starting a job or postgraduate studies. Below, I will present my interview findings according to these five classifications.

Figure 6

Types of Gap Year in Two-dimensional Quadrant Chart



4.1. Resume-enhancement gap year

Lina (23, currently pursuing a master's degree in Vancouver, intern during the summer term)

I come from a third-tier city, from a family not well-off,

Believing that studying hard could change my fate.

I worked diligently, ranked 16th in the city,

A ticket to a top university.

Yet fate had other plans,

My deskmate excelled in grades and relationship,

Overshadowing me in everything,

Affecting my state,

Landing me in an ordinary place.

In college, I worked tirelessly,

Achieving high grades, winning awards countlessly,

Interning and doing field research by day,

Taking international summer courses by night,

All the hardships and resentment from high school were smoothed over,

Yet inside, I still felt unworthy,

Fragmented.

Abroad, surrounded by classmates with family businesses to inherit,

Dressed in designer clothes, backed by wealthy parents,

No one truly understood my situation,

They isolated me, but I didn't care.

Achieving social mobility was my driving force.

When my body or emotions broke down,

I took short breaks - doing internships, that's what I'm longing for.

My goal was clear,

My efforts paid off,

But only I knew, beneath the bright titles,

I felt like a garbage dump.

I am in therapy,

Trying to make peace with myself,

Knowing that broken stones can also bloom.

One day, the kid from a small town

Will have the freedom to choose.

Mei (22, about to enter a top-tier college-base program as a "gap")

I come from Shenzhen, an excellent student since childhood,
With a clear goal in mind,
In both studies and life, I sought only the best.

Against my parents' wishes,
I took a year off to prepare for art school exams,
The failure and the return to school,
Marked the lowest point in my life.

My four undergraduate years were richly diverse,
Interning at Goldman Sachs,
Rehearsing for the Winter Olympics,
Launching women's entrepreneurship forum,
Publishing papers, attending events,
Instead of walking a single path to the end,
I want to try everything I can.

Stepping off the track this time,
I am more determined than ever,
I understand more clearly that instead of seeking the perfect choice,
I look forward to constantly expanding my boundaries,
Exploring endless possibilities.

Jia (22, took a year off to study at a business school in Milan, then returned to China for a finance internship）

From middle school, I was the class monitor,

My high school motto, "Free and Useless,"

Fostered a pursuit of a rich spiritual world,

So I chose archaeology as my major.

I never thought my choice was unconventional,

Yet, in college, I realized I yearned for the world of finance elites,

Once despising their profit-driven visions,

Now regarding them as the true drivers of societal progress.

With a newfound desire to change paths, I took action.

I had no background in math or finance,

Internships were hard to come by,

But if I took a break and went to SDA Bocconi,

I could bridge my gaps.

Six months of classes, with travel on the side,

Six months back home interning,

A low-cost trial to switch directions.

That's what I planned.

In Italy, life was joyful and free,

From Lake Como to Athens and Switzerland,

The pressure of studies was also lighter at hand.

But back in China, internships were elusive,

After failing the fourth round interview with McKinsey,

I sank into despair,

"Was this year of preparation a 'useless' choice?"

Archaeology or finance, faced with two paths,
I grew increasingly confused.
I saw the urban elite being trapped as meaningless PowerPoint machines,
While the books I read and the protection of relics in ancient Japanese temples
Struck me deeply.

With the publication of an archaeology paper,
I realized my true passion lay there.
To fill the gaps of unfinished regrets,
I bravely pursued a PhD, accepting the outcome without fear.

Hao (23, took a semester off for an internship and entrepreneurship, then took another to work as a research assistant）

Life has always been orderly and structured.
From middle school, I actively participated in school activities,
Served as class monitor,
Collecting many shining titles.

In college, I maintained my entrepreneurial momentum,
"Business Administration" without a second thought.
Unwilling to take online classes during the pandemic,
I opted for an internship to enrich my experience,
Starting a business with friends,
Exploring the real commercial world,
Making my gap year to the fullest.

Gradually, I discovered my passion,

Not in the cold, unfeeling numbers,

But in empowering through education,

Understanding people and the emotions they bear.

Despite doubts from those around me,

I switched from business to psychology.

In an era dominated by finance,

Where everyone aspired to high-paying jobs,

My shift felt lonely.

I questioned myself, "Was my choice truly right?"

To make a gap year count,

I took every internship, every research assistant job,

Gathering experience and resources,

And finally, Harvard heard my voice.

4.1.1. Making the most of time: The striving inertia among exemplary students

These four interviewees come from top-tier universities in China and have been top students since their middle school years. Like many emerging adults of their age, their self-assessment is derived from external recognition, and they have benefited from a meritocratic system. Jia noted that despite the ups and downs in her personal journey, others regarded her life trajectory as an exponential rise. She performed well in the *gaokao*, maintained a high GPA in university, and had the opportunity to travel widely during her exchange program, living a life of freedom that others envied.

Unlike traditional "exam machines" that focus solely on studying, they excelled in various aspects. They are skilled at organizing events, mobilizing resources, and were adept at gathering information at college. They strived to enrich their resumes through internships, entrepreneurship, and exchange programs, designing an optimal career path for themselves. All four interviewees, directly or indirectly, chose finance as their major.

Given that the finance industry highly values student qualifications and is at the top of occupational discrimination, it naturally became the preferred career choice for these top students.

Maintaining excellence became their source of security. Hao, who engaged in entrepreneurship, believed that this drive for perfection did not stem from external pressure but from internal demands. All of these top students found inspiration and rewards in this pursuit of excellence, creating a positive feedback loop which fueled their continuous pursuit of high standards. If the Chinese context of meritocracy outlines a clear, unidirectional path, they spontaneously explored all possible routes to this goal, diligently preparing for each one.

Lina stood out among the four interviewees. Her motivation to maintain excellence was driven by a desire to break free from class constraints and gain the freedom of choice.

> My current life motto is to predict the trends of the era, forecast its cycles, and map out my life trajectory in advance so I can plan ahead and become the person with the best choices, ultimately living better than anyone else. (Lina, 2024)

It is evident that the positive feedback received by high-achieving students and their desire to achieve social mobility can both serve as driving forces behind their success.

4.1.2. Purposeful gap year：A restless trail to break the chain

When asked about their gap year experiences, all four interviewees rated them above 8 out of 10, with keywords such as "enriching," "reflective," and "explorative" describing their journeys. For them, past experiences unfolded sequentially, and they followed the inertia of competitive conformity. However, through practical engagement, they gradually realized that seemingly glamorous industries did not align with their expectations. Instead of abandoning prestigious titles outright, they chose to excel in these fields before reassessing their fit. Even during the relatively free period of their gap year, they chose to try everything without reservation. "Otherwise, there's always

this feeling of something unfinished. As long as you try, you eliminate that regret," Jia shared. They are experiential learners who adhere to the principle of purposeful effort, constantly adjusting their trajectories.

Despite the outcomes of the gap year potentially diverging from their initial pursuit, they all expressed a greater acceptance of uncertainty. They gradually established their own rhythm and order. "I always have a worst-case scenario in my mind, and I feel I can handle it, so I generally feel I'm on an upward trend," Hao explained. Using a video game metaphor, he continued,

> You can imagine your life as a world map in a game, and you're the main character who needs to unlock different side quests, and experiences. The uncertainties you encounter are like adventures in the game, bringing you experience points and rewards. It contributes to your growth, so I now welcome it. (Hao, 2024)

This nuanced approach to gap years and the diverse experiences of these students highlight the complex interplay between individual aspirations and societal expectations, underscoring the multifaceted nature of personal and professional development in contemporary China.

4.1.3. Reflections on the life sequence: The disenchantment of titles

Unlike many young people struggling to secure stable futures, these aspirational elites possess credentials that provide long-term motivation and support. Prestigious internships and degrees from top universities make them the envy of others. When asked about the Chinese obsession with achieving a secure status, all four interviewees offered reflective responses.

Lina observed, "During the college entrance exam period, you feel your life has a clear direction, guiding you towards what seems like the highest state of being," She continued, "But this might be fragile, maybe just a beam of light, not something substantial." It is only after achieving these goals that one realizes life has no endpoint; it resembles an infinitely ascending staircase. The reason we look up to higher goals is that we are currently at a lower stage, and our imagination of success is limited.

"And after you've made it, then what?" Jia questioned. Although she appears to lead a successful life, she is acutely aware that once the initial excitement fades, the real issues surface. Without the pressure of exams or the pursuit of a specific goal, how should one navigate life? This is a challenge everyone faces, regardless of their level of "success." Chinese children's lives are filled with critical nodes, where every step seems to allow no room for error. "Even if a choice seems right now, an unforeseen event could suddenly bring you down," Mei's response reflects a pragmatic compromise with reality. She believes that in this unpredictable world, the only thing we can control is our mindset towards imperfection.

With impressive credentials and titles, these interviewees can separate their personal pursuits from societal evaluations. They leverage external resources to their advantage, accumulating the capital and bargaining power for choice. Excellence is both a resource and an invisible limitation, and the gap year allows them to temporarily step off the conventional track. Rather than merely securing a stable status, their challenge is to turn outward from the involution and seek self-realization.

4.2. Self-exploration gap year

Yang (24, participated in an exchange programme in Italy and travelled extensively)

Not like the typical small-town swots,

My parents, not affluent,

Yet often took me on travels,

My student years flowed smoothly,

Ending up in a reputable 985 university,

Yet my heart yearned to explore the world,

I undertook five internships, geared up for finance,

Feeling drained and purposeless,

Perhaps it's time to breathe.

"What do I seek from this gap?"

Unclear, yet a powerful urge stirs within.

Without exchange programs at hand,

I embarked on my own quest,

My parents stood by me,

Seeing it as a rare chance.

In Italy, I glimpsed life's vast possibilities,

Conversing with travellers from faraway lands,

Witnessing a world beyond imagination.

Returning home, I found it hard to resume my old path,

The relentless pursuit on a singular track faded,

Now I'm in a void.

I aspire for financial freedom,

To chase true liberty once more.

Jing (24, participated in a short-term Christian mission in Turkey and served as a social worker)

I studied at a local university,

Life was plain, unremarkable,

Steeled my resolve to escape,

To flee my family, that is my desperate drive.

The gruelling intensity of college entrance prep

Made me recoil,

If no other choice, I'd settle for a job,

A means to survive, not live.

Leaving the fierce competition and family pressures behind,

Time alone, abundant and precious.

Searching for work at my own pace,

Engaging in social services that truly moved me,

I felt profoundly fulfilled, realizing dreams one by one,

Now, back home,

In a sea of anxiety and relentless competition,

I hope to grasp my lifeline,

To stay afloat amid the surge.

Tao (23, took a six-month leave of absence and volunteered at a guesthouse in Lhasa; now serves as a volunteer in animal protection after dropping out)

My grades were good, life smooth until the admission test,

A crucial failure forced me to switch path.

To secure a desirable job.

I prepared for competitions, handled four papers and five exams.

One day, I broke down, suffocated by the pressure,

A hospital visit revealed moderate depression,

I started skipping classes, my father finally noticed.

But I couldn't fall behind,

Missing half a year of classes,

Growing more anxious and tense.

I prepared for graduate exams out of habit,

Somehow, I passed, but I was still lost,

The day I quit grad school, the sky seemed brighter,

I saw someone at 29 boldly follow their passion,

"Why not now?", I thought.

I love nature, joined a research team in Henan,

There, I found a life that truly interested me.

Observed owls and lizards on the grasslands.

We identified birds, searched streams with flashlights,

Now, I plan to pursue a master's in ecology,

Since venturing outdoors, my life has slowly improved.

I used to fear regret, striving for perfection in everything,

But through all the good and bad,

I've learned to manage my life.

Life is a vast wilderness,

I will walk on with unwavering courage.

Bing (23, took a gap year in senior grade to connect with the digital nomad community in Dali and travelling around)

My hometown is a place where ease fills the air.

My grades were always good,

Leading me to a prestigious university in the West,

But there, I felt out of place, exhausted,

Lost among brilliant peers,

Pushing myself to study, yet struggling to find my way.

One day, I noticed a senior who took a gap year due to illness,

Her journey of self-discovery inspired me deeply.

After repeated persuasion with my parents and advisor,

I began my gap year in my junior year.

Sailing from Dali's digital nomad community,

Then travelled to Guangzhou and Zhejiang,

Meeting people from various walks of life.

I felt the possibilities of my life unfold,

My mindset grew calmer than before.

Returning to school for my senior year,

Anxiety about getting back on track lingered,

But the experiences during my gap year were like a harbour for my soul,

Revealing that although the future is uncertain,

It is also full of hope.

Zhen (23, travelled to six countries as a digital nomad, worked in exchange for accommodation and is also an influencer)

Born in a loving family,

My academic journey was always bright,

But entering the city's best high school,

I struggled with the pressure,

I became a learning machine,

Obedient, compliant, without a distinct self.

In college, I learned to dress up and take photos,

Gaining external recognition, and confidence grew.

Yet, to secure a dream graduate school offer,

I needed stellar grades, language scores, internships,

I joined the ranks of the overachievers,

Living under the illusion of "productive effort."

By junior year, disappointment struck:

A math modelling contest didn't yield the expected results,

IELTS and GRE scores lagged behind,

And I faced emotional and relational turmoil,

Pressure from all sides.

In my confusion, I pondered deeply,

"What kind of person did I want to be?"

I was fortunate to secure a work visa for New Zealand,

Alongside scholarships from several dream schools.

"Why not set out and see what's next?"

Convincing my parents, securing my funds,

I embarked on the fastest growth year of my life at 23.

In a year, I travelled through six countries, twenty cities,

Working for lodging, witnessing diverse lives,

Documenting my journey through social media,

Experiencing digital nomadism with a finance internship,

Encountering beautiful stories, and even finding true love.

These are days I will never forget.

My next destination is clearer now,
Having admired the wilderness,
It might be time to hone my skills,
Find a suitable job in finance,
Build networks and capital,
And eventually, create my brand,
Living a truly rich and self-fulfilled life.

4.2.1. Escaping the track: Negotiating the imagined success with self and parents

These five interviewees, who engaged in self-discovery during their gap year, do not have more freedom than others in choosing their paths. Each interviewee mentioned that their family is not particularly wealthy, with three interviewees having parents employed in the public sector. "They couldn't support me attending an international school; I had to follow the traditional path of small-town swots" (Yang, 2024). They come from relatively less developed cities, where parents expect their children to graduate smoothly, secure a civil service position like themselves, and lead a stable life.

Growing up in such family environments, they have always led lives that align with their parents' expectations, following a step-by-step approach. "I didn't know what kind of person I wanted to be; as long as I stayed on the track, I couldn't go wrong" (Yang, 2024). Exam-oriented education didn't teach them to care about their own feelings or to explore their passions. They are not among the top performers in the merit-based evaluation system and cannot derive satisfaction from the relentless pursuit of grades. Tao mentioned that he followed the trend of taking postgraduate exams and inexplicably began a master's program.

> Family and friends around me said I would adapt once I started studying, but after enrolling, I realized I lacked problem-solving skills and would

> flinch at the slightest issue. I could already foresee the outcome, and I didn't know why I'm even doing this...

The imbalance between their cognition and reality spurred an urge to leave their environment, prompting them to escape the track.

Convincing their parents was a difficult process. "In my parents' minds, the idea of a gap year simply doesn't exist. They were puzzled, asking, 'Why would you suddenly stop going to school?'" Ultimately, Zhen's parents compromised on the condition that they would not provide any financial support. When Bing proposed the idea of taking a gap year, he faced strong opposition from his parents as well.

> They were like, 'If you take a year off, what are you going to do? How are we supposed to explain it to our relatives and friends?' My uncle didn't get it either. He straight-up said if I took a year off, I shouldn't stay in our hometown because it'd be embarrassing for me to be around.

Therefore, the seemingly freestyle detachment of life sequence was not achieved overnight. Instead, gap year takers underwent a process of reshaping their own perspectives and gaining parental understanding through practical experiences. Several interviewees mentioned that during their gap year, they spent more time with their parents, which provided opportunities for communication, gradually improving their relationships in the long run.

4.2.2. Gap as "ephemeral fireworks": Feeling of emptiness when returning to the track

All five interviewees described their gap year as "a means to broaden my horizons" and an "unforgettable experience," with growth, acceptance and exploration as their key themes. They either studied or travelled abroad, engaging with people from all walks of life, or experienced the digital nomad lifestyle domestically, distancing themselves from conventional routines. In familiar places, there are no new vistas, and the brief gap year experience represents their pursuit of what Milan Kundera describes as *Life is Elsewhere*. It reflects a longing for an idealized life and an escape from present realities.

"You know it's a temporary state that can't last forever, so you're less anxious about income or long-term returns" , Jing shared.

While the temporal nature of a gap year may alleviate anxiety, it can also lead to more intense withdrawal symptoms. Yang recalled：

> After returning from Europe, I became a bit too laid-back. I initially thought my gap year would help me solve my sense of emptiness, but I realized it made me even more nihilistic. I experienced a lifestyle that I probably can't have back home, and it made me feel more slack-off. It's like I'm not as driven to push myself anymore.

Although the wilderness lifestyle is appealing, it is a temporary, ideal state bound to a specific time and place. Having seen infinite possibilities in life, they no longer buy the logic of meritocracy and are disenchanted with high-paying careers and stable lifestyles. They are clear about what they do not want in life and refuse to continue the relentless pursuit. However, replicating the short-term experiences of their gap year into their original lives presents many challenges in the long term.

Jing has just returned to China after her gap year in the UK to prepare for job applications, "My gap year could only happen abroad; as soon as I get back to a familiar environment, there are so many things that distract me and make me feel like I have to do things a certain way" (Jing, 2024). This illustrates that venturing into the unknown requires a psychological cost, and returning to the conventional track involves a sense of loss. It requires adjusting one's mindset: either reintegrating into the performance-driven system or letting go of unattainable aspirations to avoid being swept away by the environment, ultimately finding one's own rhythm in life.

4.2.3. Wilderness aspirations: The endless pursuit of freedom

Although this incredibly free and happy lifestyle cannot be achieved in the short term, the five interviewees have an open mindset when discussing their expectations for the future, hoping to pursue a self-consistent way of living. They now have a clearer understanding of the environments that nourish them. Tao shared:

> I stayed at a guesthouse in Lhasa for two months and met many people. What trapped me before was the belief that I could only live a certain way. But after going there, I saw all kinds of people—some hadn't finished high school, others had already worked but felt unsatisfied with their lives and left to try something new. I realized that life is pretty forgiving; no matter what, you can always find a way to get by.

Several interviewees mentioned that the greatest benefit of their gap year was the opportunity to reflect on the life sequence dictated by the social clock. Zhen, a high-achieving student who experienced many life possibilities during her travels, said:

> I used to think that if I didn't get into a good graduate school or find a good job, I'd fall behind my peers and be a loser. Now, I don't think that way at all. I believe that no matter what happens, my life won't fall apart.

Despite being in a "critical period" for pursuing higher degrees and job hunting under societal expectations, they refuse to accept a pre-designed life path. The freedom and possibilities they experienced during their gap year have become the model for envisioning their futures.

They also reflected on the concept of freedom. Constantly traveling to different destinations may not be as enjoyable as imagined and is often quite exhausting. Zhen resonated and said:

> True freedom is feeling free even during the morning rush hour on the subway in Beijing because your inner self is calm. It's a state of truly loving yourself. Over the past year, I've gradually become more self-consistent, listening to my inner thoughts rather than being swayed by the surrounding environment.

In the face of the pursuit of freedom and a competitive societal environment, they hope to gradually build their financial capability, landing better platforms to gain more choices rather than being confined to a predetermined track. Amidst overwhelming pressure, staying true to one or two passions is their in-built resistance against the social clock and societal norms.

4.3. Exam-repreparation gap year

Wei (23, prepared for a second attempt at the graduate entrance exams while working on applications for graduate programs)

I come from a normal background,
Longing for a stable life,
My sense of security drawn from certainty.
Throughout school, I was a top student,
But I hate my language major, yearning to escape.

I set my sights firmly on law school,
Preparing with all my might for the entrance exam.
But the pandemic struck,
I missed my goal by just a few points.
I was despondent,
Feeling like a failure,
Afraid to talk to those who knew my story.

Watching classmates find their paths,
Some securing jobs, others further studies,
I felt increasingly inadequate,
Stuck at home, relying on my parents,
As a former top student,
I struggled to accept my dashed dreams,
The pain was deep.

So I studied by day,
Worked on grad school applications by night.
Persistence paid off,
Now I can choose freely,

Regaining control over my life.

Lei (25, resigned to prepare for the graduate entrance exams)

I come from a small county,
Early on, I got into the best local high school,
But the college entrance exam was a turning point,,
And I ended up at a private college.

After graduating, I longed for a top-tier university for my master's,
Believing it was where I truly belonged.
But my family, under financial strain,
Asking me to dive into jobs,
A stable position without joy.
I felt I could have a better future,
A graduate degree could be the best answer.

Every year, I signed up for the entrance exams,
Using my income to support my academic dreams,
Until I finally quit my job to stay focused.
My direction was clear,
My heart was calm.

Finally securing a position
Teaching English at a middle school.
I no longer judge solely by grades;
I treat each student with kindness,
Valuing them for who they want to be.

Ling (24, two gap years to re-prepare for the college entrance exams and graduate exams)

I was born in a family that favoured sons over daughters,
In a household with little means.
I always dreamed of having my own princess dress,
But only had balloons my mother blew up from condoms.

Poverty was not the worst of it,
But the fear of domestic violence was.
My father often beat and cursed me,
Calling me stupid and worthless.

At school, I was often bullied,
Given insulting nicknames,
While teachers turned a blind eye.

In high school, my father forced me to study science,
This compromise led me to despair,
Scoring seven in physics.
My last-place rank was posted for all to see,
The teacher mocked me,
Saying I wasn't worthy.

The pressure was immense,
Depression and insomnia set in.
Their predictions came true—
My first college entrance exam

Fell short of the passing line.

After a period of silence,
I pushed myself to study relentlessly,
Finally gaining admission to a university.
Seeing classmates waste their chances pained me deeply—
I once yearned for a college seat
While they took theirs for granted.

In college, I won every scholarship,
Placed first in my major.
I interned in the United States,
Walking miles daily,
Eating cheap dry bread,
Drinking free water from street fountains.

Enduring countless disdainful looks,
I resolved to get into a top university for my master's.
Yet, during my first trial, anxiety and sleeplessness
Led me to vomit in the exam hall,
I received offers from seven schools,
But my aim was clear—
I wanted the best of all.

Despite my family's objections,
I used my scholarship savings,
Studying all night in the library,
Finally, I was admitted to the school of my dream.

Everything is slowly improving,

The voices of criticism growing faint.

I strive to protect the timid, insecure child within me,

Embracing her, telling her,

“You’ve done wonderfully.”

Yao (22, studied for over half a year, then travelled to relax after passing the exams)

From kindergarten to high school,

I attended the best schools locally.

Everyone around me was exceptional,

But I was insensitive and felt no pressure.

The college entrance exam was a setback,

In an average university,

Following my parents' advice to study accounting,

A practical choice for job hunting.

The first time I felt true pressure

Was during my attempt at graduate exams.

I chose a field I loved,

Though my parents disapproved.

On my 21st birthday, I faced failure,

Feeling as if I'd hit rock bottom.

Slowly, I began to adjust,

Preparing for a second chance.

Finally, I received a provisional acceptance

From the school of my dreams.

I felt the brightest moment of my life had arrived.

4.3.1. Credential worship: A commoner's path to breaking through

All four interviewees once attended well-known local high schools but later experienced a decline in their academic performance, leading them to universities they felt did not match their capabilities. They are firm believers in the meritocratic evaluation system, feeling a sense of disparity and attributing their setbacks to the lack of credentials from prestigious universities or advanced degrees. When discussing why they persist in taking the postgraduate entrance exams every year, Lei recalled:

> My motivation was that I graduated from a top high school, so how could I end up at such a mediocre university? It was disappointing. There's this Chinese proverb that 'All trades and occupations are inferior and only studying is superior'. We thought that if we studied hard, we'd land a great job. Honestly, undergraduates often blame any career setbacks on not having gone to grad school.

Ling, who excelled in her undergraduate studies, faced discrimination during her graduate school applications due to her academic background.

> I told them I had 110 certificates and won 30,000 RMB in scholarships, and they thought that was great, but they'd still ask, 'Which university did you attend for your bachelor's?' When I told them, they'd say, 'Your school isn't good enough; we don't want you.'

Confronted with a societal bias toward educational credentials that they couldn't change, they felt compelled to return to the system, pursuing academic achievements and degrees with even greater intensity.

In addition to credential worship, two interviewees specifically mentioned their family's difficult financial conditions, making education the only way they envisioned changing their destinies. Without access to top-tier resources through their parents, they relied on resourceful universities as platforms. "You must work extremely hard just to live an ordinary life," said Wei. He noted that, aside from wealthy kids with family connections and those with no ambitions, ordinary people adhere to the ethic of hard work, believing that enduring hardship is the path to success.

4.3.2. Bearing the burden: The pressure of pausing the social clock

In a competitive social environment, pursuing a graduate degree seems essential for them to have a viable future. However, the passive gap year spent focusing solely on exam preparation is not fondly remembered. The four students rated this year as a 6 out of 10, burdened with anxiety, pressure, and confusion. The pressures they faced can be categorized as stemming from themselves, peers, family, and societal expectations. Reflecting on the social clock, Ling felt that her passive gap year was wasted time. "When I see people in my research group, I don't want to call them senior because I feel like I'm on the same level, and I'm very sensitive about that. It always makes me feel like I'm falling behind."

Under parental pressure, the social clock becomes magnified. Yao recalled:

> After my first attempt at the graduate exams, I felt like I didn't do well in English. When I told my parents, my mom started panicking before I even had a chance to process it. She said, 'How could you do poorly? You've been studying for so long.' She didn't speak to me at all over lunch. Even when I said goodbye to leave for the next exam, she remained silent and just complained, 'How could you not do well?'

Wei also mentioned that studying at home, compared to peers who were financially independent, felt like he was mooching off his parents, which generated a lot of psychological pressure.

This year was incredibly tough, unlike the college entrance exams where everyone battled side by side; preparing for a second attempt at graduate school was isolating. By seven in the morning, students were already lining up at the city library, with the queue stretching almost to the subway station. When the doors opened at eight, a rush of students would sprint inside to grab seats. A table meant for four would be crowded with three or four extra chairs, and those who couldn't find a seat would study on the floor, bookshelves, or staircases. Every candidate was facing immense pressure with no room for failure. The mental strain of not succeeding was far more difficult to bear than the physical exhaustion of the year, so everyone chose to endure the hardships, remain

steadfast in their goals, and ultimately achieve success.

4.3.3. Adapting to the rules: Pursuit of a stable future

When discussing their expectations for the future, all four interviewees mentioned their desire for a steady, predictable life without high aspirations, hoping for stable employment within the system, such as becoming a teacher or lawyer. "I just want to live a stable life where I can see the end in sight and face no risks," said Lei (2024). Compared to the uncertainties of a gap year, they prefer returning to their original path. "To be honest, I want the gap year to be over soon. It's been a bit too long, and I like being pushed by others," said Yao, who had recently secured a place in graduate school and had four months of free time, expressing some frustration.

They adhere to the logic of meritocracy, believing that gaining admission to a prestigious university's graduate programme is the optimal solution to combat employment pressures. Unable to change the system, they choose to accept it without questioning the legitimacy of this structure or the possibility of alternative life paths. Consequently, they opt to conform to their surroundings. In their view, securing a place at a reputable institution provides basic assurance for survival and a sense of security, as if achieving this milestone means a life free of further worries. "However, some people are born without such concerns, perhaps because their parents are extremely wealthy or they possess exceptional talents. Some people are born already on the 'shore'," Lei remarked, summarising the pursuit of going on shore as the result of having "no other choice."

From the perspective of the followers of a predetermined life sequence, the world operates according to certain rules, and what is termed success is the ability to fully embrace and adapt to these societal rules, adhering to them sincerely. They believe that one must first achieve conventional success to have the freedom of choice. This belief is rooted in their personal experiences and represents a self-reinforcing epistemology.

4.4. Suspension of illness gap year

Tian (23, taking a leave of absence due to bipolar disorder, staying active with exercise and travel during the break)

Growing up in a world of exams and grades,
I felt the fierce pressure of peers all around.
My mother urging me not to repeat her path,
Setting high expectations for me to achieve.

Yet over time, I crumbled under the weight,
With no outlet, the pressure manifests physically.
I fell ill, emotions swung wildly,
At home, I envied classmates with their orderly lives,
Their everyday social bonds I longed for but never had.

I no longer chase endless degrees,
I've made peace with who I am,
I believe, like in "The King's Avatar," I will rise from the depths.
I strive to minimize the impact of illness,
Running, eating vegetables,
Bit by bit, my grades and health slowly improved.

I realized that life's lessons often come through pain,
Rising from the fall, we learn what truly matters.
When you're at rock bottom,
Every direction leads up.

Jie (23, took a two-year leave of absence after freshman year, resting at home)

My grades were good, my family's hopes high,

Yet I found no joy in study, no love for the crowd.
In high school, isolation wrapped around me,
Others saw me as distant, difficult to know,
While I struggled to find energy for social smiles.

Fortune placed me in the finest teacher's college,
Though the subject left me cold.
Far from home, I felt more alone,
Roommates on different schedules,
Teachers demanding more effort,
None understood my silent pain.

The illness dragged me down, homesickness gnawed,
The pandemic stretched my healing time,
One year became two at home,
Still, my spirit languished.
Fearful of returning to school.

At home, I felt powerless,
Unwilling to play, as if unworthy,
Finding solace only in books and my little dog.
Literature of suffering resonated deeply.

Before returning, fear of falling behind loomed,
Yet my classmates surprised me with kindness,
Their warmth unexpected.
Illness changed my perspective,
Grades matter less, a smooth graduation will suffice.

Dong (21, Took a leave of absence due to an eating disorder, staying actively engaged during the break)

From kindergarten, I delved into Olympiad math,
By fourth grade, pressure from teachers and parents
Pushed me to excel swiftly.
Prestigious schools vied for me.

In my final year of high school, the pandemic hit,
My father faced a job transfer,
And I was beset by immense academic pressure
Amidst swirling uncertainty.

Despite faltering in the college entrance exams,
I narrowly secured a place at a top university.
But the pressure I bore exacerbated my eating disorder.
I couldn't accept just passing grades,
Surviving on two hours of sleep,
My life unravelled, and I took a leave of absence.

During my break, I engaged in therapy,
Volunteered, tutored,
Trying to connect with the world,
Communicating with my parents.

Returning to university proved harder than I thought,
Eager to fit in, loneliness lingered,
I learned to coexist with my illness,
No longer sacrificing all for a PhD,

Actively helping younger students facing similar struggles,

A journey of self-healing for me.

4.4.1. Broken strings: The pain of staying on track and the anxiety of isolation

All three interviewees were once top performers in the exam-oriented education system, gaining entry into prestigious secondary schools through their own efforts and joining the ranks of the elite. However, achieving high grades did not bring them relief; instead, it resulted in higher expectations from teachers and parents, which increased the pressure even more:

> My high school head teacher placed great emphasis on every student's performance because we were in an advanced class. His assessment of a student's value was largely based on academic achievement. Honestly, I found my middle school years to be quite oppressive. (Tian, 2024)

Jie shared similar impressions of her teachers, recalling that during her school days, teachers showed preference towards well-behaved, high-achieving students. If two students made the same mistake, the teacher would not blame the high-achieving one.

Dong, who excelled in mathematics from a young age, bore the weight of her parents' expectations of her as a gifted child:

> Initially, my parents were very keen for me to persevere and thought giving up was a terrible thing. However, I found it unbearable. I vividly remember sitting through math Olympiad exams with over 100 students for more than three hours. It was truly painful; there were only a few questions, but I couldn't solve them and just sat there. The teacher would walk around, and it was very torturous for me.

Despite their efforts to gain the respect and approval of their teachers and parents, living under the discipline expected of good students left them physically and mentally exhausted, leading to anxiety, depression, and ultimately, the need to take a break from school to recuperate.

When reflecting on their gap year experiences, the three interviewees rated it only 2 to 3 out of 10, making it the lowest-scoring group among all gap years. What is often seen as an enviable period of freedom was, for them, a time of isolation and pressure.

"Everyone else was going to school while I was out shopping, painting, and travelling. People were jealous of me, but I was actually quite sad. I really looked forward to taking exams with them," said Tian. Before taking a leave of absence, he never realized how fortunate it was to be in the same grade as his peers. He envied classmates who maintained a normal study schedule and graduated on time. "Everyone has their own timeline, but if I could be like everyone else, I would really appreciate it."

Even during illness, they strived to keep up with societal expectations. "I did some preparation and study, reading books I hadn't had time for before. I don't feel like I achieved anything significant this year, but at least I didn't waste the time," said Dong. Despite their dislike for the elitist environment and the achievement-oriented evaluation system, they still experienced anxiety about academics and employment, characterized that the year had been "a year lost."

4.4.2. Phoenix rising: Finding balance in the tide of hyper-competition

Despite the painful process of the gap year, all three interviewees described their leave of absence as a process of "phoenix rising," leading to significant changes in their mindset. Illness forced them to let go of certain obsessions and reconcile with themselves and societal expectations, serving as both a lesson and a transition. Tian shared:

> In the first half of my life, I drifted along with the safety of following others, driven by societal norms. However, illness intervened. During my gap year, I had plenty of time to reflect on this. I want to live life in a way that I enjoy, rather than pursuing things that are widely recognised but ultimately seem meaningless to me.

When discussing their hopes for the future, all three interviewees mentioned their desire to find a balance between work and life. They expressed a wish to return to their hometowns and find jobs that do not require excessive overtime, such as teaching positions, allowing them time to spend with friends and care for their families. They do not seek high salaries or social status but rather a regular and orderly life. "It will

probably be quite ordinary, with regular work hours and some free time. The life I want is on a track, but not as oppressive," said Jie.

After a year of confronting themselves and societal expectations, they gradually realised that, while hyper-competition is a product of the times and an environmental inevitability, individuals should not blindly engage in it, as it can lead to unbearable stress and be counterproductive. The important thing is to understand one's own needs, avoid conforming blindly, and try to shield oneself from external pressures.

4.5. The guaranteed gap year

Lan (23, gained guaranteed postgraduate admission by spending a year volunteer teaching)

As a "poor student," barely noticed at home.
My father thought I was mischievous,
Blaming my struggles on my playful nature.
I paid it little mind until I met an English teacher.
She encouraged me, saw my progress,
If one has dreams, I wished to be like her.

In high school, I fought hard, climbing from below
To break into the top thirty,
In the final crucial exam, securing my place.
My parents' attitude shifted completely,
I felt, for the first time, their love was conditional for me.

Before graduation, chance brought me to teach voluntarily
At a primary school in southern Xinjiang.
In this harsh climate, I read Camus,
Tutored children at the orphanage,

Hoping to pass on the support and kindness
That as long as you don't give up on yourselves,
No one else can give up on you.

Soon, graduate school will begin,
And I will return to the path laid out for me,
Hoping one day to meet the expectations
Of myself, my family and society.

Yue (23, being delayed six months' onboarding)

I hail from Shanghai, always excelling academically.
My parents, strict with themselves, lenient with me.
From my mother, I learned to manage tasks efficiently.

Balancing internships and volunteer activities,
I meticulously planned my university days,
Each step falls within my designed routes.
With stellar grades, I began exploring finance.

In my junior year, while on exchange at Berkeley,
I received an offer from BCG.
Going abroad was never aimless for me,
Each step was a bid to rid myself of anxiety.

My gap period was unforeseen,
The company delayed my start by half a year.
Accustomed to comprehensive plans,
I didn't dare to relax,

Prepared for grad school applications, domestic and overseas,
Always ensure a backup plan.

While travelling in beautiful villages, I prepared for the CFA at night,
Interned in finance,
I spent evenings with drinks and rice cakes.
Work hard, play harder.
That's what I called a life.

My relaxation hinged on staying "on track,"
Every step calculated, no detail slack.
I've planned each year up to thirty,
Marriage, children, career – everything step by step.

Perhaps there's an easier way to live life,
But just like the lyrics:
Some long for a life simple and planned,
Tied with a ribbon, safe on land,
But I'd follow you to the great unknown,
Venturing to a world we call our own.

Ruo (23, chose to delay graduation due to not finding a suitable job)

Moved to the provincial capital in fifth grade.
In a new and unfamiliar place,
I quickly caught up, clever as I was.
Before high school, I easily topped my class,
Ranked seventh in the city in the entrance exam.
My life reached its peak in those first eighteen years.

At college, among brilliant peers,

I felt immense pressure.

Shanghai classmates spoke fluent, clear English,

While I, from a small town, had to work twice as hard.

The library, classroom, and dormitory became my daily cycle,

As I struggled to make up for my disadvantaged start.

I was fortunate to secure an exchange opportunity at Harvard,

Where I found like-minded friends,

Ventured into entrepreneurship,

And secured project funding through fierce competition.

But after my startup failed,

I returned to China, forced back onto the track,

Struggling to secure a suitable position.

Faced with reality, I delayed my graduation.

In this extra year, I began to reflect on what I truly wanted.

I did not see the failed venture as a defeat,

But rather as time granting me space,

And a calmer mindset to explore myself.

Though I followed the path mapped by relatives,

I knew in my heart,

That if finance was my current choice,

It was solely because it promised quick earnings,

Enabling me to pursue my true passion.

Yuan (24, dropped out after one year of undergraduate studies in China, then completed a foundation year in the UK)

I come from Haidian, Beijing,
Where education resources abound.
My mother, a professor at a top university,
And my father, a senior at a publishing house,
Both love books and debate,
Subtly influenced me throughout childhood.
Wished for me to develop the habit of lifelong learning.

My grades were always strong,
In fifth grade, selected as a gifted child,
Later joining science and humanities experimental classes.
Yet, in the college entrance exam,
I fell short by a few points,
Missing my dream university.

My life did not fall apart;
I attended another top university to study a major I love.
Later, I quit and ventured to the UK,
Maintaining a positive outlook,
Knowing these changes were steps
Toward a nurturing academic future.

After months in the depths,
I finally secured PhD offers from two top-tier universities.
I once feared rejection would force another gap,
Felt guilty about my parents' investment and support,

But now I have a promising future.

I hope to make progress in the academic field,

Continuing my journey of passion and growth.

4.5.1. Strict life paths: A passive pause is not the same as lying flat

The four interviewees, much like the first group of students who took gap years to enhance their resumes, have outstanding backgrounds. They are top performers under a meritocratic system, following an elite path of growth in China that sets high expectations for themselves. They have detailed plans for the future and even seemingly liberating choices like studying abroad are carefully calculated in terms of time and opportunity costs. Their way of combating anxiety and gaining a sense of security involves thorough preparation and methodical action. Rather than actively taking a year off to fill gaps in their experiences, they prefer never to deviate from social timelines. Each year, they have specific goals to achieve, and the uncertainty implied by a gap year could potentially disrupt their future progress.

Their gap years are more certain, with clear expectations that by the end, they will achieve a meritocratic goal such as further education or employment. This assured gap period offers them the rare opportunity to arrange their time relatively freely. Even as the train of their lives slows down momentarily, their mindset remains inclined towards keeping busy. Yue said:

> Although the gap is a relatively chill phase, it's not primarily aimed at achieving something specific. I need to accomplish certain goals to justify this period. I set milestones for myself so that I don't feel I've achieved nothing due to complete indulgence.

Yuan also mentioned that instead of completely relaxing, she maintains a certain level of productivity. "Spending a year in undergraduate studies, even if it doesn't result in a degree, feels different from lying around at home. At least it feels like you're doing something worthwhile; otherwise, I would feel utterly useless." Although all four interviewees considered their gap years to be an incredibly fulfilling, free, and worry-

free experience, they also acknowledged that such an experience is unique and not something they plan to repeat in their future life plans.

4.5.2. Concrete expectations: Internalized self-demands under path dependence

Among all the interviewees, those who took a guaranteed gap year had the most specific expectations for their future, with detailed plans for each year's employment and expected income. In the early stages of their careers, they aim to accumulate skills and resources. After reaching their thirties, they plan to enter a more mature phase, either by changing career paths, developing a personal brand to pursue socially impactful entrepreneurship, or returning to family to achieve a work-life balance. Ultimately, they aspire to attain a middle-class lifestyle and live with a sense of dignity.

In their view, freedom is a luxury that must be earned through hard work. They carry the high expectations, which prevent them from relaxing and drive them to push themselves to the limit with every choice. "I suffer from impostor syndrome. All the achievements I have attained so far do not reflect my capabilities or meet my personal standards. I am constantly self-reflecting." Yuan shared. They fear disappointing their parents, and their reputation for excellence has become a burden.

> The pressure to survive is not as significant; what I fear is not thriving. I think society's evaluation of me is very important. Of course, I could become a private tutor, but within China's evaluation system, people generally see that as a waste; there's always a hierarchy of disdain. (Ruo, 2024)

They fear that their results will not justify the investment, that they will fail to achieve elite status, and that they will not be able to repay their parents' substantial educational investments. It is not that they do not long for the life of a distant, poetic individual; rather, they believe that the influence and economic returns they seek are more easily achieved by staying on a predetermined path. Beneath the specific future expectations, thorough preparations, and actions with fallback options lies a deeper drive: the radical pursuit imposed by the logic of meritocracy on each individual.

5. Discussion

5.1. Societal changes in perception of the social clock across five types of gap years

Table 1

The Transformative Attitude Toward Social Clock Among 5 Types of Gap

	Types of Track		**Attitude Toward the Social Clock**	
	Before the Gap	After the Gap	Before the Gap	After the Gap
Resume-Enhancement Gap Year	Track Under the Social Clock	Forge a New Track	Concerned, Will Refer to It, and Feel Anxious	Let it Be
Self-exploration Gap Year		Go Off Track	Blindly and Passively Follow	Conceptually Break the Clock
Exam-repreparation Gap Year		Track Under the Social Clock	Believe in and Follow	Believe in and Follow
Suspension of Illness Gap Year		Track Under One's Own Clock	Chased and Oppressed	Achieve Self-Consistency
The Guaranteed Gap Year		Pre-designed Track	Establish Order in Life Through the Social Clock	Have a Macro Vision, but Must Follow in the Short Term

This article aims to examine the changing perceptions of the social clock, or life sequence, in the context of a meritocratic society. Taking a year as a marker of success for life milestones, the social clock serves as a tool to unpack age-related social expectations (Neugarten, 1976). In the previous chapter, I analysed the shifts in mindset and future expectations of interviewees with different types of gap years. As shown in the table, before the gap year, individuals were largely controlled by the social clock. However, after the gap year, except for those with an exam-oriented focus, most

individuals exhibited varying degrees of reflection on the social clock, influenced by their experiences during the gap period.

Unlike the simple linear narrative of "on track-off track-back on track," it is essential to recognise that, life sequence presents in a way that not simply as socially prescribed age norms as Helson (1994) argued. Instead, it is a flexible conceptual map that depends on individual agency. It marks a transition in *for-itself* beyond *in-itself* (Neilson, 2018), constantly projecting itself toward future possibilities, acknowledging one's freedom, and making choices that are true to oneself rather than conforming to external pressures or definitions.

The concept of the social clock reflects tendencies towards individualism and collectivism in different cultural contexts. Individualistic cultures are inclined to prioritise self-reliance, uniqueness, and emotional distance, whereas people from collectivistic cultures are more likely to place a stronger emphasis on social obligation and interpersonal responsibilities (Triandis et al., 1985; Jagers & Mock, 1995). Accordingly, people from more collectivist societies may consider the timing of their lives secondary to societal objectives, such as the expectations of their family and community (Lu, 2024). In interviews, more than 85% of respondents specifically mentioned family expectations, reflecting the influence of Confucian filial piety on the formation of the social clock concept.

However, collectivism is not immutable. In *The Individualization of Chinese Society*, Yan (2009) argued that driven by economic reforms that encourage personal ambition and the pursuit of personal goals, people are increasingly seeking self-expression and personal fulfilment. This has generated tension between serving personal objectives and meeting family or societal expectations. In some cases discussed in this study, taking an active gap year is regarded as a successful escape from social constraints, reflecting the conflict between meritocratic values influenced by neoliberalism and ancient Confucian ethics.

Rook (1989) argued that being on time does not offer psychological advantages, and it is likely to occur in more individualistic cultures with a presumably more flexible

social clock. However, in my interviews, it is observed that the social clock within collectivist societies also exhibits stratification and differences. Some individuals reject the social clock, positioning themselves in opposition to societal norms, while others strongly adhere to it, using it to establish order in their lives. Horizontally, groups from different backgrounds may develop varying perceptions of the same phenomenon. Vertically, this represents an in-making stage of emerging adults' perspectives, necessitating consideration of each individual's upbringing and family environment rather than making generalisations.

5.2. Self-efficacy in five types of gap years through the lens of expectancy theory

Table 2

Social Expectations Post-Gap for Different Groups

	Expectancy	**Instrumentality**	**Valence**
	Agree that effort leads to good performance?	Believe that a higher level of education can lead to higher social status?	Value success in the conventional sense?
Resume-enhancement gap year	✓	✓	✗
Self-exploration gap year	✗	✗	✗
Exam-repreparation gap year	✓	✓	✓
Suspension of illness gap year	✗	✓	✗
The guaranteed gap year	✓	✓	✓

Expectancy theory is also a crucial tool for analysing the societal perceptions associated with different types of gap years. The concepts of expectancy, instrumentality, and valence, as proposed by Victor Vroom (1964), are widely used to understand employee motivation and assist managers in designing incentive strategies. This logic is equally applicable to self-motivation within a meritocratic framework, where students' perceptions of the relationship between effort and academic success influence their learning behaviour and career expectations.

Specifically, do respondents agree that effort leads to good performance? Do they believe that a higher level of education can lead to higher social status? And do they value success in the conventional sense? I have aligned respondents' backgrounds, self-motivation, and beliefs, resulting in the findings shown in the table. Following the interpretations of Chinese meritocracy by Yan (2013), Kipnis (2016), and Liu (2019), this study further suggests that meritocratic beliefs are not fixed but stratified internally and can be influenced by exposure to different social concepts and personal experiences.

Self-efficacy under expectancy refers to the belief in one's ability to successfully execute actions to achieve goals (Bandura, 1997). In a meritocratic system, "good students" who receive higher evaluations tend to have higher self-efficacy. Their efficacy stems from external incentives and positive feedback (Zimmerman, 2000). In my interviews, I found that these students, as beneficiaries of the system, may reinforce their identification with the meritocracy, maintaining a relentlessly driven and goal-oriented approach. At the same time, they are often more capable than less recognised students of deep insight and reflection, leading them to question the fairness of a system that prioritises grades or efficiency maximisation.

Students marginalised by the meritocratic system may navigate peer pressure more effectively, transforming it into motivation and investing more effort under the ideology of academic achievement, demonstrating greater resilience (exam-repreparation gap year takers). Others may break down in the face of intense competition (suspension of illness) or escape (self-exploration), seeking alternatives outside the meritocratic framework.

Contrary to Zimmerman's (2000) assertion, this study suggests that academic performance and self-efficacy are not entirely equivalent. The equivalence assumes an individual's acceptance of a grade-oriented evaluation system and the pursuit of a singular standard of success and advancement. In fact, the underlying issue of self-efficacy relates to whether society is "experiencing burnout" or is "driven by stimulants" (Han, 2018). It requires consideration of each individual's background within the broader socio-economic and cultural context, supplemented by aspects of self-perception, past experiences, family background, and school experiences.

5.3. Gap as a temporal experience: Liminalities and possibilities

In the analysis above, I utilised the social clock theory and expectancy theory to examine changes in perceptions of meritocracy across five types of gap years. Here, I wish to go beyond these five classifications and discuss the inherent characteristics of the gap itself. As Wu (2015) pointed out and as analysed by Li (2023), the gap year is characterised as a temporary experience. On the one hand, as many respondents noted, a gap year is an unrepeatable experience bound to a specific time and place, and returning to the traditional path often brings significant anxiety, uncertainty, and feelings of emptiness. At the same time, as emerging adults whose perspectives are still forming, the impact of the gap year is reflected in some fundamental shifts in their underlying logic. Although these shifts may not manifest immediately, they subtly influence future choices over time.

The gap year, as a liminal period in the anthropological sense (Turner, 1960), is a transition phase. This study reinterprets the ambiguous boundaries of liminality from the perspective of the gap year, regarding the development of these perspectives as an ongoing process in which individuals continuously explore and transform their understanding through practice.

Hansen (2015) argued that the temporal anxieties of aspiring young Chinese are rooted in the temporality of self-projection and ceaseless striving. Meritocracy is the context of this study, and within this larger environment, I have chosen to focus on the

gap year as a specific, limited temporal and spatial environment. According to socio-cultural theory, the environment influences human perceptions through social interactions (Rahmatirad, 2020). Before taking a gap year, individuals typically follow the guidance of the social clock, feeling anxiety and unease. However, perceptions can also exert a powerful counter-effect on the environment. Reflective thinking, catalysed by the gap year, prompts individuals to consciously critique the meritocratic evaluation system. As perceptions guide behaviour, this study suggests that within a larger sample and broader context, we may observe generational-scale shifts in choice preferences, which could eventually influence societal environments.

6. Conclusion

6.1. Research background and findings

By adopting gap year as a period of temporality, this article examines the formation and evolution of perceptions regarding meritocratic evaluation systems in the Chinese context. Influenced by Confucian values such as respecting teachers, filial piety, and national consciousness, China has long believed that education can change one's destiny. Since the founding of the People's Republic of China, education and talent selection have served the Communist Party's overall strategy and are regarded as key measures to address social inequality.

With the expansion of higher education and the development of the market economy in the 1990s, a growing number of young people entered universities. The expansion of the middle class and the rise of consumerism led graduates to pursue high-paying jobs. Meanwhile, the imbalance between urban and rural development gradually surfaced, resulting in the phenomenon of involution, where limited resources are continuously accumulated. Today, intense social competition has led to a devaluation of academic degrees, leaving many graduates unemployed and swelling the ranks of those seeking government jobs or further education. Under the meritocratic social clock, people relentlessly pursue efficiency and performance, with anxiety and depression rates rising yearly.

This study explores individual experiences within a meritocratic society by interviewing 20 students who took a gap year during their relentless life journeys. Based on the different initial motivations for their gap years, the students were classified into five categories, ranging from passive to active, and from structured to exploratory. The research further employs social clock theory and expectancy theory to critically analyse their backgrounds, experiences, and future expectations, revealing that three of the five categories showed significant changes in their views of the social evaluation system. This finding reflects both the deep influence of the meritocratic evaluation system on

individual choices and indicates a shift from the norm of high self-efficacy in a stimulant-driven society.

Many individuals, despite their efforts, cannot change their position within society and choose to "lie flat" in a state of "striving but unattainable," questioning and rethinking singular societal standards. Others find themselves unable to escape, swept along by the involution of the era. Some recognise that resisting this logic requires re-entering the system, learning through the struggle between social expectations and personal pursuits to reconcile with themselves and live an unrestricted, freely consistent life.

6.2. Contributions and innovations

The academic field has extensively explored the origins and criticisms of meritocracy. This empirical study adopts a context-specific perspective advocated by comparative and international education, focusing on analysing and reflecting on the implications of meritocracy in contemporary China. The research incorporates macro-level discussions of political, economic, cultural, and social factors as the backdrop while utilising narrative analysis and I Poems to focus on individual experiences.

The fundamental ontological assumption of comparative education research is that the way we construct the world is governed by national characteristics, and the purpose of education differs across societies (Bray & Mason, 2014). Thus, the study draws particular attention to the evolution of regional and national education systems and policies. However, grand policies and narratives often struggle to impact individuals, and personal experiences can be generalised or overlooked in comparisons. By carefully unpacking individual experiences and exploring their perspectives on social phenomena based on their experiences, we can skillfully place individuals within a multi-layered historical and cultural context.

At the same time, individuals are products of their environments. Examining the broader social and economic background provides context for the micro-environments

of different types of gap year groups. By analysing both macro and micro-environments, we can socially construct the meaning of individual experiences in a more effective way.

This paper also incorporates concepts and analytical methods from psychology, sociology, and anthropology, extending beyond the confines of educational studies alone. By appropriating these concepts, the study not only provides new empirical cases for theoretical expansion but also strengthens the rigour of discussion. Building on previous literature, this study innovatively combines the analysis of gap years with meritocracy, addressing the lack of theoretical research on gap years in China and offering a new perspective for critically analysing meritocracy beyond social equality and stratification.

6.3. Limitations and implications

From a methodological perspective, using interviews to present the basic situation of gap years in China is insufficient. Despite the intention to balance the naturalist paradigm and the social structuralist paradigm, the discussion and analysis may still hold biases. This offers inspiration and possibilities for future research, where using a mixed-methods approach can enhance the rigour of the data. Additionally, incorporating a broader social context in the discussion section allows for a more comprehensive analysis of the societal forces that influence individual choices.

As a researcher, I inevitably introduce my subjective judgments and emotions into the analysis process. My research is an exercise in defamiliarising what I know well. Social concepts gradually take shape through human actions and social interactions. "The savage lives within himself; social man lives always outside himself; he knows how to live only in the opinion of others" (Rousseau, 1985). In this society dominated by pragmatism and utilitarianism, I hope this research serves as a warm dialogue, enabling more people, including myself, to glimpse a bit of idealism and ultimate concern. It encourages us to pause from the hustle and bustle of daily life to savour the whisper of the wind and the patter of the rain and to cherish every fleeting moment that life offers. It invites us to transcend time, transcend ideas, and move beyond the

repeated lament of life's harsh realities. Life is but a dream, and fully experiencing it is its true meaning.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. Briefly introduce your personal background.
    a) Where are you from?
    b) What is your educational background?
    c) When did you take a gap year?
2. Drawing a life trajectory curve, identify the peaks and troughs and explain why.
    a) Do you think these ups and downs are more influenced by societal standards or by your own mindset changes?
    b) What do you think has been the most significant experience in shaping who you are?
    c) How did you feel during the drawing process?
    d) Did you experience any pressure during your time as a student?
    e) Do you consider yourself a beneficiary of this evaluation system?
3. Reflect on gap year experience
    a) Why the gap? What were the fundamental drivers?
    b) What did you do during the gap period?
    c) How did you feel at the time? What was the most memorable thing?
    d) Personal: What concerns did you have before the gap?
    e) Family: Did your family put any pressure on you when you took a gap?
    f) Society: How do you balance societal expectations with your own choices?
    g) Do you think your mindset has changed after your gap? Have your desires or goals shifted?
    h) How would you characterize this experience in a scale 1-10?
    i) How would you characterize this experience in three words?
    j) How did you feel when you got back on track after your gap?
4. How do you perceive landing a position/ the pursuit of "going ashore"?
5. Do you consider life more of a wilderness or more of a track?
6. What is your definition of success?

7. What do you envision your life to be like in ten years?

Appendix B: Participant Information Sheet

Study Title: Exploring College Students' Gap Year Choices

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Central University Research Ethics Committee Approval Reference: **C1B-24HT-Educ-030**

1. **Introductory paragraph**

You are being invited to take part in a research project. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether you wish to take part.

2. **Why is this research being conducted?**

In China, there's intense competition for jobs and a big focus on education. People often feel pressured to go to top universities, do tough internships, get high grades, and land good jobs. Some individuals may believe that the path to success, as defined by society, is quite rigid, and that deviating from this prescribed sequence can pose certain challenges. But another trend is that it seems many students are choosing to take a break from the usual life order. In this paper, I want to look closely at how the system of rewarding people based on their abilities and achievements works in China. By listening to people's life stories, I want to figure out how this system affects the choices they make, and how people try to balance what society wants with what they want for themselves.

3. **Why have I been invited to take part?**

You are being invited because you have experience with taking a gap year during or after your undergraduate studies in recent years, and you are familiar with China's policies and background, we believe your personal experience will align well with the research focus. This study aims to recruit approximately 10 participants from diverse backgrounds.

4. **Do I have to take part?**

No. It is up to you to decide whether to take part. You can withdraw yourself from the research, without giving a reason, and without negative consequences, by advising me of this decision. The deadline by which you can withdraw any information you have contributed to the research is 15/07/2024.

5. **What will happen to me if I take part in the research?**

- The study will mainly be conducted online, except for participants based in Oxford who will be interviewed in the Department of Education or any place agreed upon by both

interviewer and interviewee. All the online interviews will take place on Microsoft Teams and will be video recorded (you can turn off your camera if you wish).

- You will fill out an information sheet and provide written consent before the interview.
- Each participant's involvement will consist of two interview sessions.
- The interview questions I plan to ask will mainly focus on personal experiences, educational and family backgrounds, and life choices, presented in a storytelling style. The interview style will be open-ended. You will be invited to reflect on your gap year experiences, the challenges you encountered, and to draw a line that represents the highs and lows of your life experiences.
- With your consent, I would like to audio record you so I can have an accurate record of our conversation.
- The interview with each participant will last approximately 40 minutes including 2 sessions.
- You can ask to pause or stop the research activities at any time.
- The first session is for you to draw a line that reflects the highs and lows in your life and we will discuss about it. The second session will focus around your gap year experience. You will be offered a regular break during the sessions.

6. **What are the possible disadvantages and risks in taking part?**

During our conversation, we will look back on your life experiences together. Some memories might make you feel uneasy, and sharing low points in your life might not be helpful for you. I will fully respect your wishes, and you can decide what information to share or not to share. If you feel uncomfortable at any point during the interview, you can stop it. As more details are shared, you might be identifiable. I will use pseudonyms for all the key information like schools, hometowns, and your full name unless you specifically choose, when giving your consent, for direct quotations to be attributed in your name. You can let me know during the interview or within a week after it ends.

7. **Are there any benefits in taking part?**

While there are no immediate benefits for those people participating in the research, it is hoped that this research will lead to an open discussion with your contribution.

8. **What information will be collected and why is the collection of this information relevant for achieving the research objectives?**

I am interested in your experiences of gap year and your views of struggles and success. The information you provide will help me better understand the personal feelings in order to answer my research question on to what degree does this trend show a change in society's ideas about what success means.

The researcher and the supervisor will have access to the research data.

Research data (including consent forms) will be stored by OneDrive for 3 years after publication/public release according to University of Oxford research data policy.

9. **Will the research be published? Could I be identified from any publications or other research outputs?**

The findings from the research will be written up in a dissertation. Your responses will be pseudonymised unless you consent for the quotes to be attributed to your name.

I would like your permission to use direct quotations in any research outputs. The quotations will be based on the transcription of the interviews and you have every right to indicate your quotation preference in the written consent form.

10. Data Protection

The University of Oxford is the data controller with respect to your personal data, and as such will determine how your personal data is used in the research. The University will process your personal data for the purpose of the research outlined above. Research is a task that is performed in the public interest. Further information about your rights with respect to your personal data is available from the University's Information Compliance website at https://compliance.admin.ox.ac.uk/individual-rights.

11. Who has reviewed this research?

The application was reviewed and approved by my supervisor on behalf of the Departmental of Education's Research Ethics Committee. (Ethics reference: **C1B-24HT-Educ-030)**.

Appendix C: Written Consent Form

Consent to take part in Gap Year Experience Research

Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC) approval reference: **C1B-24HT-Educ-030**

Purpose of Study: To what degree does this trend show a change in society's ideas about what success means.

	Please initial each box if you agree with the statement
I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet version for the above research. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.	
I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any point until **15/07/2024**, without giving any reason.	
I understand who will have access to personal data provided, how the data will be stored and what will happen to the data at the end of the project.	
I understand the extent to which I could be identifiable from any publications or presentations.	
Optional: I consent to being audio recorded.	
Optional: I consent to being video recorded.	
I understand how the transcripts of audio recordings will be used in research outputs. (I will use Microsoft Team's auto-transcribe for online interviews and use Microsoft Word's dictation for in-person interviews).	
Use of quotations: Please indicate your preference (select *one* option): a) I do not wish to be quoted. **or** b) I agree to the use of quotations in research outputs if I am not identifiable. **or** c) I agree to the use of direct quotations, attributed to my name, in research outputs.	
I give permission for you to contact me again to clarify information.	

I understand how to raise a concern or make a complaint. ☐

I agree to take part.[1] ☐

_____	dd / mm / yyyy	_____
Name of participant	Date	Signature
_____	dd / mm / yyyy	_____
Name of person taking consent	Date[2]	Signature