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Navigating Cultural Differences in Education: Chinese Students' Perspectives on Classroom Dynamics and Mental Health in Traditional and International Settings

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Abstract: This study examines the educational experiences of Chinese students amid China's sociocultural evolution from Gemeinschaft (community with informal education, simple technology, rural residence) toward Gesellschaft (society with formal education, complex technology, urban residence, economic prosperity). Through qualitative interviews with 10 high school students (aged 15–16) in Wuxi, China, we investigated differences in teachers' interpretations of help, student–teacher dynamics, and mental health support across these educational settings. Findings reveal that teachers' cultural backgrounds more strongly influenced their perspectives on help than did institutional environments. Traditional schools maintained teacher-centered hierarchical structures reflecting collectivistic values, while international settings fostered student autonomy and more egalitarian teacher–student relationships aligned with individualistic principles. Though mental health awareness was similar across settings, international school teachers demonstrated greater concern for students' overall well-being. Students in international programs initially experienced unique transition stresses but ultimately reported feeling more relaxed than their peers in traditional schools. These findings highlight the complex interplay between educational systems and cultural values in China's evolving society while underscoring the need for enhanced mental health resources in Chinese schools.

Keywords: cultural transition, international education, mental health, teacher-student dynamics

1. Introduction

During the 2022–2023 academic year, over 1 million international students came to the United States for higher education. Among these international students, 53% came from China and India [1]. Each year, many young people come from less developed countries to pursue education in more developed countries such as the United States, Canada, the UK, and Australia. They vary across different academic levels, from K-12 to doctorate degrees. There are many reasons why people choose to come to Western countries to study: to obtain better educational resources, to escape the fierce competition within their own countries, and to pursue a learning environment that fits their educational philosophy. With increasing demand to study abroad, international schools have emerged to accommodate students' need for better preparation for their future study in Western countries such as the United States and Canada. These schools offer courses taught in English by foreign teachers, and the structure and format of the curricula are similar to that of comparable schools in the destination countries. Each year, countless students graduate from these international schools to pursue their dreams and continue their studies in their target countries.

Living and studying in a new country can be a challenge for many people. While language barriers, homesickness, and cultural adjustment can be especially challenging for new international students, cultural differences in educational settings are often masked by other academic hardships and consequently neglected. To examine the effects of cultural differences in educational settings on students' mental health, this paper reports on interviews with 10 Chinese students currently in China, five of whom had transitioned from a traditional Chinese middle school to a Western-style international high school in China, while the other five had both their middle school and high school in a traditional Chinese educational setting. We were interested in answering the following questions: (1) how do teachers' cultural interpretations of help, expectations about student roles in learning, and awareness of mental health issues and access to support resources differ in the two educational settings in China, and (2) how do these factors influence anxiety and stress levels among students across the two groups during their transitions?

2. Background

2.1. Cultural transition of China: Collectivistic versus individualistic

Greenfield [2] adopts two terms—*Gemeinschaft* (community) and *Gesellschaft* (society) from the German sociologist Tönnies

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(1887/1957) in her theory of social change and human development. Her theory suggests that there is a worldwide sociodemographic trend that ecologies are transitioning from Gemeinschaft (informal education, simple technology, rural residence, poor economy) to Gesellschaft (formal education, complex technology, urban residence, wealthy economy). With such a transition, cultural values shift from collectivistic values to more individualistic values [2]. One key difference between collectivistic values and individualistic values is that collectivistic values emphasize a sense of belonging to a close community and interdependence, while individualistic values underscore individual opportunities and achievements and independence. Such a cultural difference leads to marked differences in the learning environments. For example, a Gemeinschaft community with more collectivistic values is associated with more family-centered, less formal education, while a Gesellschaft society is associated with more teacher-centered, formal schooling [2].

China is one of the countries that has been experiencing the transition from Gemeinschaft to Gesellschaft. Since its economic reforms in 1978, the market economy has allowed the Chinese economy to grow at a remarkably fast pace. In decades, China has achieved astonishing growth in urbanization, gross domestic product (GDP), and enrollment rate in tertiary education. Specifically, from 1990 to 2022, the urban population percentage has grown from 26% to 64%; the GDP per capita has grown from $317.90 to $12,720.20; and the enrollment rate in tertiary education has grown from 3.4% to 59.6% [3–5]. Based on Greenfield's theory [2] with the ecological transitioning from Gemeinschaft to Gesellschaft, China's cultural values should transition toward a more individualistic direction. Specifically, it is expected that China should shift from a more interdependent, hierarchical, and close-knit society to a more independent and equal society with fleeting relationships.

Studies have confirmed the inference that cultural values in China have shifted toward individualism. Bian et al. [6] have found an intergenerational increase in Chinese mothers' adoptions of individualistic values regarding parenting. In terms of family and marriage, rising divorce rates and shrinking household sizes offer quantitative evidence of growing individualism in contemporary Chinese society [7]. However, it is challenging to categorize Chinese culture as purely individualistic or collectivistic, as it depends on the scale of measurement, and mixed values are often observed [8].

The coexistence of individualistic and collectivistic values in China makes it worth studying the cultural aspect of Chinese educational settings. In fact, Yiu et al. [9] have found a mix of collectivistic and individualistic values in school settings in China, with a trend toward individualism. Sociability and cooperation—both collectivistic traits—were still greatly valued in schools. Affiliation with peer groups, particularly those that are socially competent, is positively correlated with students' academic outcomes and negatively correlated with their psychological problems [10]. However, shyness, a traditionally valued trait in collectivistic cultures, was gradually devalued and rejected as it suggested the opposite of self-expression and exploration [9].

In the competitive environment brought about by China's market-oriented economy, individuals need more individualistic characteristics, such as assertiveness and self-expression, to thrive. The wave of studying abroad and the proliferation of Western-style international schools, which simulate the learning environments in highly individualistic Western-developed countries, demonstrate the new needs and expectations for education in China. Studies have shown that Chinese parents are motivated to send their children to international schools in China not only for overseas higher education but also for "a more liberal and globally oriented education," and teachers, administrators, and students favor international schools and curricula for their development of essential skills to thrive in today's world [11, 12]. However, since the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a shifting trend in international education in China. The pandemic has drastically impacted international education, leading to fewer Chinese students opting to study abroad and a move toward more cost-effective alternatives [13]. In the post-pandemic period, key pull factors for Chinese students and parents include cost, global rankings, and employment prospects within China, while immigration opportunities have become less significant [14]. These changes suggest that students and families have adopted a more pragmatic focus on cost-effectiveness, academic prestige, and domestic career opportunities.

On the other hand, China's nine-year compulsory education and high school education have been known for their exam-centric nature and intense competition. While it remains the mainstream education Chinese students receive and is effective in improving most students' academic competence, research suggests that the education system has many flaws that would negatively influence students' personal development, mental health, and understanding of education [15, 16]. In addition, exam-oriented education might not be suitable for top students, as it can cause a loss of creativity and vitality [17]. Given the distinct perspectives and expectations of the two educational settings, it is interesting to study the differences between the two learning environments in-depth and the impact they have on students.

3. Literature Review

3.1. Teacher's interpretations of help

Collectivistic cultures and individualistic cultures value help differently. Collectivistic cultures underscore the importance of interdependence and cooperation and consequently are more prone to encourage helping behaviors [18]. On the other hand, individualistic cultures focus more on individual achievements and are less likely to promote help, sometimes even discourage helping behaviors as the individual's performance might be attributed to the help instead of their own ability [19]. Studies have also shown that people from individualistic cultures value spontaneous, unsolicited helping, viewing it more as a reflection of personality traits and inner dispositions than as a social norm or obligation [20]. This illustrates how they frame helping behaviors as personal choices rather than actions that should be encouraged or promoted.

Based on a general cultural difference in how helping is viewed, it is reasonable to assume that teachers have different interpretations of help in different cultures. In fact, teachers from individualistic cultures discourage certain helping behaviors in academic settings, such as one child helping another child read and spell, and want students to learn independently [21]. They are more likely to accept support from students in other forms without compromising "academic integrity." In contrast, teachers with knowledge of collectivistic cultures view similar behaviors as "help" and "support" instead of "cheating" [21].

In more general school life settings, teachers from collectivistic cultures are also more likely to encourage helping and prosocial behaviors like lending and sharing. Isaac et al. [21] also found that teachers from individualistic cultures prioritize students' own decisions in sharing (not encouraging help), while teachers with knowledge of collectivistic cultures emphasize a concept of "communal property," which greatly facilitates sharing and collaboration. Thus, it is rational to expect that, in the traditional Chinese educational setting, Chinese teachers, who adopt collectivistic values, are

more likely to promote helping behaviors, while Western teachers in international education settings are less likely to encourage helping behaviors, in both academic and school life settings.

3.2. Expectations about the role of students in learning

Greenfield's theory [2] suggests that social relationships in Gemeinschaft communities tend to be hierarchical, while social relationships in Gesellschaft society are more egalitarian. Under the framework of social hierarchy, teachers, as seniors and experts, are supposed to be respected by students, whereas in a society emphasizing egalitarianism, teachers and students are prone to be placed in equal positions [22].

Chinese society, influenced by deeply rooted Confucianism and the value of filial piety, still emphasizes the social hierarchy between teachers and students, despite the changing ecology. A typical Chinese classroom is teacher-centered, and students are supposed to follow teachers' instructions or explanations without doubt, whereas in a Western classroom, students and teachers talk in an equal manner, and it is common for students to challenge teachers' words [23]. Moreover, Chinese teachers expect students to respect them as "authorities," sometimes even deliberately distancing themselves from students in order to maintain the hierarchy, whereas students from a Western background, for example, American students and Australian students, are "critical of authority, argumentative, and sometimes defiant" and "interrupting and disrespectful" [22, 23]. Another aspect of teacher-centered learning in collectivistic cultures is that teachers are in control of students' learning; in contrast, in a more individualistic learning environment, students have more autonomy in learning and have the opportunity to develop more skills. In collectivistic cultures, teachers give lectures and expect students to "take diligent notes, memorize the information, and then regurgitate the material on exams" [24], and teachers can be the only source of information other than the textbook. On the other hand, students in more individualistic cultures have more access to outside knowledge through technology and the Internet. They also have more hands-on experience, developing social skills through "self-learning and self-expression" while striving for high academic achievement [24]. The different modes of instruction in China and Western countries also support the above findings. Most Chinese classes use homework and exams as means to facilitate and evaluate learning; in contrast, in Western classrooms, it is not uncommon to see presentations, research projects, and group work as methods of assisting and assessing students' learning. Given these great disparities in cultural contexts and styles of instruction between collectivistic cultures and individualistic cultures, it is not surprising to see that teachers' expectations about students' role in learning can be hugely different.

3.3. Awareness and support of mental health

The ecological differences between Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft imply a discrepancy in the awareness and acceptance of mental health. Indeed, the concept of psychology originated in a Gesellschaft society, and knowledge of mental health is usually accompanied by formal education and a wealthy economy; both of these are traits of a Gesellschaft society.

The collectivist cultural value of interdependence and close community influences students' attitudes toward mental health, as they tend to seek help from their acquaintances and community. For example, East Asian students ask for study-related advice from teachers and relationship-related advice from friends or don't talk to anyone when in need of counseling instead of turning to mental health specialists for help [25].

Chinese students, like students from other Gemeinschaft societies, are less aware of mental health knowledge and are less likely to use mental health resources due to their collectivistic cultural values, as well as the lack of mental health resources. The awareness rate of mental health knowledge among Chinese adolescents was only 66%, especially low for middle school students (61%) [26]. Wu et al. [27] found that while 25% of the Chinese high school students in the study had a need for professional mental health support, only 5% of them had used school-based mental health services, and only 4% had used outside services.

Several factors help explain why Chinese students are unlikely to learn about mental health knowledge and resources and seek professional help. First, due to the cultural emphasis on morality, Chinese students tend to associate mental health issues with immoral thoughts and actions. Disclosure of problems and difficulties not only breaks their moral images but also symbolizes "immaturity and weakness" and consequently causes students and their families to "lose face" [28]. Moreover, the mechanism of "word-of-mouth" gossiping in the collectivism context facilitates the stigmatizing attitudes toward psychological disorders in society [29]. Such self-stigmatization is a strong underlying predictor of Chinese students' attitudes toward seeking professional mental health services [30]. While nowadays, new generations in China, influenced largely by Western individualistic values, have a changed picture of mental health illness—for instance, considering mental health illness more of a personal situation rather than a family tragedy, it is still not easy for them to get help from mental health professionals [31]. In general, as a country less developed in the field of mental health, China has scarce mental health resources, with only a small proportion of patients with nonpsychotic disorders receiving in-time referrals or appropriate treatment [32].

With the introduction and implementation of integrated hospital and community-based healthcare systems in China, the number of relapses and the chances of readmission to hospitals have been reduced [33]. However, the distribution of mental health resources is uneven. There remains a significant gap in medical resources between urban and rural regions. Southeast provincial hospitals concentrate on highly trained professionals and financial resources, while clinics in townships and rural areas—which form the core of the primary healthcare system—often lack adequate professionals and facilities necessary to deliver high-quality medical services [33]. Additionally, most of the funding provided by the government goes to psychiatric hospitals instead of community-based mental health facilities [34]. On the other hand, schools are one of the most common locations where mental health care is provided for youth with clinical diagnoses and heightened symptoms in the United States [35]. Compared to students in the United States who are offered school-based clinics with mental health services provided and other school-based mental health programs funded by the government, students in China have more difficulty finding accessible mental health services [36]. For cultural and practical reasons, Chinese students are likely to show increased awareness of mental health and greater help-seeking behaviors after transitioning to a more individualistic environment, as they begin to value autonomy in health management more and become more open to sharing personal information with practitioners [37].

3.4. Cultural transitions for students and mental health

When a Chinese student moves to the United States, cultural shocks can happen in nearly every aspect of life, including education. In an educational setting that possesses different cultural values from one's own culture, both teachers and students can get confused, especially when seeing conflicting cultural elements [21, 23, 24]. Studies have examined how students transitioning to a new cultural environment can experience stress and mental health issues, but most of these studies have only talked about the basic aspects of studying and living in a foreign country, such as language barriers, academic performance, interpersonal relationships, and financial burdens [28]. These aspects are of great importance, as they compose the majority of the lives of students. However, it is rarely considered that cultural values in the educational setting can cause disturbance and maladjustment. Therefore, it is worth exploring how cultural changes in educational settings can affect students' mental health.

3.5. The current study

The primary objective of this study was to explore the differences between Chinese and Western educational practices in China, with a particular focus on students' perspectives and the mental health challenges faced by students experiencing transitions. In this study, we focused on international schools in China that offer a Western-style education program and traditional Chinese high schools. The research questions guiding this study were: how do two educational settings in China differ in terms of (1) teachers' cultural interpretations of help, (2) expectations about student roles in learning, and (3) awareness of mental health issues and access to support resources, and how do these factors influence students' mental health across the two groups during their transitions?

To address these questions, a qualitative methodology was employed, comprising in-depth interviews with students who have undergone middle-to-high-school transitions. By controlling for variables such as age, region, previous education, and the grade the participants were in, the study took on a natural experiment design. This approach enhanced the capacity to isolate the impact of different educational environments in high schools. The qualitative analysis of the interview data would be able to provide rich, detailed insights into the personal experiences and perspectives of these students, highlighting the nuanced ways in which cultures could differ in educational settings and in which cultural factors influence mental health.

4. Research Methodology

4.1. Participants

Ten individuals from Wuxi, China, participated in the study (five females and five males; age range: 15–16 years). All of them were enrolled Grade 10 high school students studying and living in the city of Wuxi, China. All of them had completed their middle school education in a traditional Chinese middle school until Grade 9. Five students were enrolled in international schools in China that offer a Western-style education program, such as AP (Advanced Placement), IB (International Baccalaureate), or A-level (Advanced Level) curriculum; five students were enrolled in traditional Chinese high schools that aim to prepare for the Gaokao exam, which is the national college entrance examination in China. Participants were recruited through flyers posted on social media (WeChat Moments and Red). Adolescent assent and parental permission were provided as required by the UCLA Institutional Review Board, and participants received ¥50 in compensation.

There may be socioeconomic status (SES) differences between the two groups, as tuition and other expenses for international schools are significantly higher than those for traditional high schools. However, since all students are recruited from the same city, this minimizes regional SES disparities, such as differences between urban and rural areas.

SES was not explicitly controlled for in interviews, as high school students may not have a clear understanding of their SES, and direct questions about it could be sensitive. Nevertheless, SES differences may be less pronounced in this study because all students attended traditional elementary and middle schools. This situation contrasts with students who have attended international schools since kindergarten or elementary school, where SES differences might be more entrenched.

4.2. Procedures

Participants self-determined their eligibility based on the criteria listed in the recruitment flyer, and they provided adolescent assent. One of their parents was also required to provide parental permission. After getting assent and parental permission, participants were asked to schedule a 1-hour Zoom interview with the author, who is a native Mandarin speaker. The interviews were scheduled between February and April, as by that time, participants had finished their first semester of Grade 10 at their high schools and were in the second semester.

Before the interview began, confidentiality was discussed, and participants were required to turn on their cameras and provide consent to video recording. After getting permission from the participants, the interviewer started recording. Open-ended and reflective questions (see Appendix) were asked by the researcher. Upon completion of the interview, participants received ¥50 compensation through a WeChat money transfer within a week.

4.3. Materials

Because the study involved non-English speakers, the adolescent assent form and parental permission form were available in the Chinese Simplified version. Additionally, the interview was done in Mandarin Chinese.

The interview comprised five sections—*Positionality, Basic information, Help, Expectation about the role of student, and Mental health.* These sections and questions were designed based on the research topic and the specific research questions we were interested in. In *Positionality*, the researcher approached participants by addressing how the researcher was related to the participants and how the researcher's experience during the transition from middle to high school stimulated their interest in the research topic. Questions regarding participants' middle school and high school learning environments, such as daily schedules, teacher–student ratios, and enrolled courses, were asked in the Basic information section. After that, specific questions about each topic examined in the study were asked. These open-ended and reflective questions focused on participants' perceptions, feelings, and attitudes toward their learning environments, and follow-up questions might be asked. Sample questions were: *"Think about your experience in high school and middle school, do you think your teacher's attitude toward students helping each other in the academic setting was different or pretty much the same? What is the same? What is different? Could you tell me some examples?" "Do you feel that you are actively*

participating in your learning? If yes, how? If no, why not?" "How can a student access available mental health support in your school?" For a full list of interview questions, see *Appendix*.

4.4. Data analysis

We employed qualitative data analysis using hybrid coding. Transcripts were created from the interview recordings and systematically coded using a codebook with pre-established themes related to the research questions. Meanwhile, we conducted inductive coding to identify recurring themes, concepts, and patterns related to stress, anxiety, mental health, and learning environments. Thematic analysis was then used to organize and categorize the coded data into coherent themes. Relevant quotes and examples were utilized to support the developed themes.

To increase the inter-rater reliability, two researchers native in Chinese Mandarin independently conducted the data analysis, ensuring consistency in their interpretations and coding procedures. We coded the entire interview transcript, with a special focus on responses to interview questions related to our constructs, and highlighted sentences that supported our coding from the responses. After that, we compared our coding results to see if we had reached a consensus in our understanding of each student's thoughts and attitudes. To calculate our coding consistency, under each theme, we divided the number of the same coding results we had by the number of the total results we had for 10 students. During initial coding, we achieved 90% agreement for constructs under the theme of "Teachers' Perspectives on Help," 80% agreement for the theme of "Expectations about Student Roles in Learning," and 86.7% agreement for the theme of "Mental Health." After a more detailed definition of constructs and thorough discussions, our researchers reached a consensus on the interpreted outcomes.

5. Findings

5.1. Teachers' perspectives on help

We did not find any notable differences between the international school group and the traditional Chinese high school group regarding teachers' perspectives on help in school life settings. In school life settings, teachers across the two groups generally encourage their students to help each other or choose not to intervene when they do. The reasons behind teachers promoting help in school life settings are quite simple: there's no reason to forbid altruistic behavior that facilitates interpersonal relationships like helping, especially in a society with a long history of collectivism, and teachers believe that as high school students, students have already "grown up" and are capable of building their own networks through interactions with their classmates. Quotes from the students illustrate how teachers view help as a means to promote bonding among classmates:

> [Traditional] *"It is very good to help classmates. It can improve friendship. Teachers surely will support."[International] "My teacher praised me and the classmate for being very close [because] that classmate helped me."*

As a result, most teachers don't show a negative attitude toward students' helping behaviors in school life settings.

Despite teachers' uniform perspectives on help in school life settings, we found a clear divergence in their attitudes toward help in academic settings. This divergence is less about the educational institutions in which the teachers work (i.e., international high schools versus traditional Chinese high schools) and more about their cultural upbringing—particularly their views on academic integrity, shaped by collectivist or individualist cultural norms.

Teachers with a Chinese cultural upbringing, no matter whether they work in an international high school or in a traditional Chinese high school, are more likely to encourage or allow academic help in different forms from whispering answers to another student, discussions on homework, even to copying another student's homework. These teachers often view help between students as a collective strategy to ensure mutual academic success and understanding. Their attitudes reflect a more relational or outcome-oriented perspective on learning, where the primary goal is comprehension and completion rather than strict adherence to individual performance.

In contrast, foreign teachers with more individualistic cultural backgrounds in international school settings are less likely to allow help in academics and are more likely to require independent work, guided by a stricter interpretation of academic honesty. They often framed academic work as an individual responsibility intended not only to test knowledge but also to foster independent thinking and build personal merit. As a result, they were more likely to interpret actions such as sharing answers or copying homework as violations of academic integrity.

In our study, students in the international school group shared their experiences of how their Chinese teachers and foreign teachers could have different attitudes toward help in academic settings:

> [International] *"The Chinese teachers know that many students are copying homework, and they don't care. The foreign teachers, I think last semester my roommate helped another student with an art assignment, and they both got a zero on that assignment. I feel that the foreign teachers are actually very strict about this kind of thing."[International] "[Foreign teachers] will require us do [homework] by ourselves, and then they will talk about it, and if you have questions, you can actually ask the teacher or something like that...the Chinese teachers just want you to understand the problem, no matter what method you use, you can ask the teacher or ask the classmates. If you can understand it and figure it out, you'll be fine."*

Such a finding is in line with the findings of the previous study done by Isaac et al. [21], in which the teacher with a collectivistic cultural background who had also received training to better appreciate collectivistic culture in the school setting was more likely to understand and allow help in academics.

5.2. Expectations about student roles in learning

Regarding teachers' expectations of student roles in learning, all of the students in the international school group have witnessed a change in teachers' teaching styles and learning environments compared to their traditional Chinese middle schools. They perceived more interactions with teachers during class time, more technology usage at school, more diverse forms of homework and assignments, more self-learning encouraged or required by teachers, and an overall less exam- or grade-oriented atmosphere. All these Western-style school traits demonstrate the Gesellschaft-adapted nature of international high schools. For the traditional Chinese high school group, there's no significant change in teachers' teaching styles and learning environments, but two students reported that they felt their high school teachers had fewer interactions and cared less about their learning compared to their middle school teachers because high

school teachers thought that students were mature enough to be independent in learning. While traditional Chinese high schools remain mostly collectivistic, we do see some individualistic characteristics in the learning environment.

When examining students' current roles and feelings in learning, we employed two constructs— "autonomy" and "engagement"—to better illustrate our findings. "Autonomy" is defined as the extent to which students are able to pursue what they want to learn and get supported, while "engagement" is defined as the extent to which students learn spontaneously and with enjoyment. Both constructs are important and worth exploring, as they show the state of the students in learning and their enthusiasm and internal drive for learning.

In terms of autonomy and engagement, we found significant differences across the groups. All the students in the international high school group reported that they had autonomy in their learning and 80% of them reported that they were currently engaged in learning, while none of the students in the traditional Chinese high school reported either autonomy or engagement.

In the interview, students in the international high schools stated that they were willing to ask teachers questions and participate in class discussions and felt comfortable when doing so; their teachers also encouraged self-learning and self-exploration outside class, and students were willing and had time to explore the fields they were interested in:

> [International] *"[A classmate] He was reading psychology books by himself. And I have classmates who are very interested in physics, and they will study on their own. . . .I also have a friend who is very interested in mechanics, and he would search for videos about it. . . . He was searching for programming stuff, and he was taking notes on it."[International] "Many physics classes, and English classes, maybe one and a half of the two classes are given to us to do our own things [learning], write things, and then hand them in, and then the last period [the teacher] will summarize. Then the next class they will give it back to us, and then talk about it. It feels like a lot of the questions are answered just relying on our own feelings and thoughts, and there is no standard answer to any of these questions. I feel that we are allowed to explore on our own."*

On the other hand, students in the traditional high schools claimed that their teachers discouraged questions unrelated to the course content, and they were unwilling to ask teachers questions because of fear and embarrassment. They learned passively with no interest; the only drive to learn was to get a good grade. Some students mentioned that even though some of the teachers might want them to explore more knowledge outside class, the tight schedule and stressful coursework didn't allow it, and students would rather spend their precious free time on entertainment. Several quotes from the students illustrated their innermost thoughts:

> [Traditional] *"[Learning] It's all passive. It's all passive. . . . Twelve days, and there will be two days off. There's not a single child who is actively willing to say that "teacher I want to study a little bit more, to learn so that it's only four days off in a month." If a student is really asking for it, I think that student is crazy."[Traditional] "[The teacher] must not be happy. They think you are reading the kind of extracurricular things not helpful to learning at all. . . . I feel embarrassed to ask questions unrelated to learning. . . . I just do not like this kind of education. I feel very tired. I am forced to study. I have no other way to go."*

In terms of teachers' authority, while students from the groups said it depended on teachers' personalities to determine if they had a close or distanced relationship with the teacher, generally, students in the international high school group reported that their teachers were more approachable and less serious, and they perceived a more equal and intimate relationship with their teachers compared to their traditional Chinese high school counterpart and their own traditional Chinese middle school experiences. Many students thought they were "friends" with the teachers and could comfortably joke with the teachers or call them by their nicknames:

> [International] *"In high school, Mr. Hong we called Mr. Bobo, Mr. Shui, Brother Shui. When we greeted each other we also call him Brother Shui."*

On the other hand, two keywords often occurred when students from the traditional Chinese high school group talked about their interactions with their teachers—fear and embarrassment. Students felt distanced from their teachers—because they considered that their teachers cared only about their learning, teachers were authorities who had the right to punish students:

> [Traditional] *"Because they are teachers, what they say is always true. Students don't have the power to resist."[Traditional] "The status of a teacher is such that they can punish you for anything you do wrong. Then surely you will go to respect them."*

Some students might have teachers whom they could talk about more personal things to, but still, they felt there was a gap between the teachers and the students:

> [Traditional] *"He is always a teacher. The way I treated him, you can't say like a friend, just to say I might have offered to have a meal with him, and our relationship is okay. But absolutely not like friends who can talk about everything."*

In general, students of the traditional Chinese high school group were unwilling to talk to their teachers and would behave respectfully even though they might not like the teacher:

> [Traditional] *"[Facing a disliked teacher] There may be times when I can't help but roll my eyes, but I'm not going to call him names right in front of him, and I'm still able to show my humility and respect in front of him."*

Students from both groups mostly agree on the importance and necessity of respecting teachers, as the concept of "尊师重道" (zūn shī zhòng dào) (revere the teacher and his teaching) is a significant component of Chinese culture. However, in practice, we observed that students in international school settings had a more equal relationship with their teachers. In these settings, teachers were considered less authoritative, symbolizing an adaptation to a Gesellschaft environment. In contrast, Gemeinschaft-adapted values remain prominent among students in traditional Chinese high school settings.

Table 1
Support-Seeking patterns in international versus traditional students

	Self-regulate	Friends	Family	Teachers	Mental health professionals*
International	80%	80%	40%	20%	60%
Traditional	60%	60%	0	20%	20%

*Note that none of the 10 students in the study had gone to a mental health professional. The numbers only indicated the willingness (i.e., if the student had considered going or not).

5.3. Mental health

Across the 2 groups, 8 out of the 10 students indicated that there was no change in their awareness of mental health. Two students in the international high school group claimed that they might have increased awareness of mental health because they had classmates who were interested in psychology and would discuss related topics with them. However, in the majority of cases, we did not find differences between the two groups regarding awareness of mental health issues.

There was also no difference between the two groups in terms of mental health resources provided by the school. Some common resources offered by both types of schools mentioned by students were student mental health representatives who would receive trainings from the school and conduct activities related to mental health, school mental health counselors, and teachers. While one student in the traditional high school group reported that their teachers cared about their mental health, most students in the group stated that their teachers cared more about their grades and usually didn't intervene with the students' lives. On the contrary, four out of the five students in the international high school group stated that their teachers cared about their mental health and would regularly check in with them, ask them about their life and moods, and provide extra resources if needed. Therefore, we concluded that generally, teachers in international school settings cared more about their students as people.

Students in the two groups also showed different support-seeking patterns when having negative emotions. Table 1 illustrates to whom students usually went for support and help when in need.

While the results were consistent with previous studies showing that generally, students from collectivistic cultural backgrounds were more likely to be self-reliant, go to friends for help, and not use mental health services [38], the differences between the two groups in terms of going to family for support and going to see mental health professionals was particularly interesting. The discrepancies demonstrated that students in the international high school group were more open to talk to their parents about mental health and more open to mental health services, which were both individualistic traits. In contrast, none of the students in the traditional high school group was willing to talk to their parents about mental health issues, fearing that their parents wouldn't understand or feel ashamed to talk about negative feelings.

Across the groups, there was one common belief and two major hindrances preventing students from receiving mental health services. The common belief was that students thought their negative emotions were not "serious enough" to see a mental health professional. It was believed that a person needed to have psychiatric disorders in order to qualify for the severity required to see a mental health professional. Everyday negative feelings and school-related stress and anxiety didn't qualify for going to see a counselor or a psychiatrist. Even though a student might want to see a mental health professional, there were still two major hindrances preventing them from doing so—"trouble" and "mistrust." In our study, most students considered going to a counselor a troublesome experience. It cost time and money, especially when routine sessions were needed every week or every two weeks, while free time was very scarce for high school students, especially students in the traditional Chinese high schools, and students needed to find a financial source to pay for the services. Additionally, even though schools offered on-site counselors, they didn't really allocate time for students to use the services or make the services relatively accessible to students. Recess was too short, and most teachers wouldn't allow students to use class time for counseling. As a result, even if resources were available, students wouldn't actually use them because they were not able to. Another major hindrance was students' mistrust of counselors. Students in the interview mentioned that they were afraid that the school counselors would tell their "secrets" to their teachers and parents. Some students also didn't trust the professionalism of mental health counselors and would rather go to hospitals to see psychiatrists. These findings are consistent with past research on barriers to mental health service seeking among Chinese adults, as a perceived low necessity for seeking help, financial constraints, and unfavorable attitudes toward, or negative past experiences with, mental health services have occurred as common themes [38].

During the transition from middle school to high school (i.e., the first semester of Grade 10 in high school), we found distinctive patterns for the mental health of the students in the international high school group. At the beginning of the transition, they differed from the other group in showing anxiety and stress related to language barriers, new fields and courses never encountered before, different teaching styles, and lack of experience of being active in class. At this stage, many students showed maladjustment to the new learning environment. In fact, when asked whether they feel more relaxed in middle school or high school, three out of the five students in the international high school group said that they were more comfortable with the teaching styles of teachers in traditional Chinese schools and disagreed with the teaching practice of some foreign teachers at the beginning. However, after the transition, all students in the international school settings felt more relaxed in high school compared to middle school, while only one student in the traditional Chinese school settings felt the same way (Fisher's test $p = 0.04$*). According to the students in the study, the relaxation was associated with lighter academic work, better teacher–student relationships, more extracurricular activities, and flexible and less exam-oriented learning environments. On the other hand, students in the traditional Chinese high school settings didn't show any maladjustments during the transition. Later, most of them felt that high school was more stressful due to the more competitive nature of high school and more difficult coursework.

6. Discussion

Our qualitative research has provided in-depth and consistent findings regarding students' perspectives on their learning environments and mental health, despite the fact that our sample size is quite small—only 10 participants were interviewed. This demonstrates

the advantage of qualitative interviews—yielding rich outcomes from in-depth communication with the participants. Moreover, during the consent process, we discovered some interesting patterns that could be related to our findings and research questions. We found that it was hard to recruit students from traditional Chinese high schools not only because of their busy schedules and lack of access to electronic devices at school but also because their parents were more likely to intervene and persuade their children to quit their study, because they thought it is a waste of time and energy to be a participant. Such a recruitment issue is actually very interesting because it also shows a more collectivistic relationship between the families of students in traditional Chinese high schools, as they have less independence and privacy while their parents have more authority [18]. Additionally, this reluctance may highlight a broader lack of awareness or understanding of mental health among some Chinese parents. Participation in studies related to school experiences and psychological experiences might be seen as unnecessary or even stigmatized, reflecting limited knowledge or misconceptions about mental health issues. This conclusion resonates with our finding that while the students in the international school settings showed more individualistic traits, especially toward authority, the students in the traditional Chinese high school settings still embraced collectivistic values.

Our findings are also consistent with previous research done on cultural comparison in education and cultural influence on mental health knowledge. Teachers from individualistic cultures are more likely to oppose certain types of academic assistance that may compromise academic integrity in academic settings [21]; in Western educational settings, students and teachers have more egalitarian relationships compared to Eastern educational settings, where teachers are viewed more as authorities [22, 23]. Moreover, with increased contact with individualistic environments, people from collectivistic cultures show increased awareness of psychology and mental health [37]. By studying Chinese high school students in international high schools in China and traditional Chinese high schools, we add cultural diversity to the existing research on collectivistic and individualistic cultures. The study's natural experiment design also allows us to isolate and examine the impact of different educational environments, enhancing the robustness and validity of the findings. Furthermore, this study also provides novel evidence and perspectives regarding contemporary education in China by comparing the school environments of traditional high schools and international schools, as well as their students' attitudes and well-being.

In addition, our research on students' perspectives on school mental health services and their experiences of transition from middle school have implications for how schools in China can better support students' mental health. As many students reported, even though services were available at school, they were not accessible enough, and in reality, few students used them. Besides providing more professional and accessible resources, schools should also work to get students to actually use these resources by engaging students or providing dedicated time or accommodations for students to utilize the resources.

Moreover, our findings highlight the importance of supporting students' social-emotional well-being alongside mental health. Social-emotional assets refer to the set of interpersonal and intrapersonal skills—such as self-awareness, emotional regulation, empathy, and relationship-building—that are critical for overall psychological resilience. These competencies are deeply connected to mental health and play a vital role in how students cope with academic pressures, make decisions, and engage in learning. Students in international school environments reported more positive and supportive teacher relationships, more opportunities for self-expression, and a greater sense of autonomy—factors that contribute meaningfully to their social-emotional well-being. Recognizing and fostering social-emotional skills in both international and traditional school settings can thus serve not only as a preventative approach to mental health challenges but also as a foundation for cultivating lifelong learning, personal growth, and adaptive functioning.

Lastly, people might be concerned by our findings that the international educational settings described by students in the interview sound too relaxed for high academic achievement. The "light academic work, extracurricular activities, and flexible and less exam-oriented learning environments" seem to promote students' mental health at the expense of academic competitiveness. Our response to such a view is that perhaps these students in the international educational settings were not as competitive in terms of exams or competitions as their counterparts in the traditional Chinese educational settings, but the environment has allowed them to explore, and they have gained a very valuable trait in learning—curiosity. Students' responses to how they learn with enjoyment and questions and how they spontaneously wanted to learn more about the fields they were interested in are so touching and thought-provoking that it is not hard to believe that, later in life, when there are no tests to measure their achievements, they will still maintain their passion for learning. This outcome fits in with why they or their parents chose international education—not only for becoming educated but also for mastering skills to thrive in the future.

7. Conclusion

This study explores the differences between traditional Chinese and Western-style international high school settings in China, focusing on teachers' cultural interpretations of help, expectations about student roles in learning, and awareness of mental health issues and access to support resources and how these factors influence anxiety and stress levels among students across the two groups during their transitions from traditional Chinese middle schools. While international schools help students prepare for their future education abroad by improving their English and familiarizing them with the course structure and teaching styles of Western countries, they also equip students with essential skills like self-learning, exploration, and initiative. These crucial skills will not only help them to better adapt to new learning environments in the future and enhance their academic performance but will also enable them to thrive in today's competitive world. Future research should further investigate strategies to enhance mental health support in both educational settings and examine the long-term outcomes of students in the two distinct learning environments, taking into account the different career paths and future expectations placed on them by their families that might shape their academic choices, stressors, and mental health needs.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that she has no conflicts of interest to this work.

Ethical Statement

This study has been approved by UCLA Institutional Review Board (IRB#24-000022). All participants of the study provided their written consent before participating in the study.

Data Availability Statement

In accordance with the stipulations of the UCLA IRB and to protect the identity of the 10 participants who provided the qualitative data reported in this paper, the data are available only to the research team.

Author Contribution Statement

Ruochen Yang: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation, Resources, Data curation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Visualization, Project administration.

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Appendix

Full list of interview questions

Basic information	Current grade Your middle school and your high school. What's your middle school like? What's your high school like? Specifically, what courses did youtake/are you taking? How many students and teachers are there in your classroom? What's a typical school day like for you?
Help	Think about your experience in high school and middle school, do you think your teacher's attitude toward students helping each other in the academic setting* is different or pretty much the same? What is the same? What is different? Could you tell me some examples? *If different*—Did you expect to be this different? How do you feel about it? (Follow-up questions might be asked) *If same*—Overall, how do you feel* about your teacher's attitude about students helping each other in the classroom? When you try to help a fellow student, how does your teacher react? (Follow-up questions might be asked) Think about your experience in high school and middle school, do you think your teacher's attitude toward one student helping another student at school* is different or pretty much the same in middle school and high school? Or is it different in high school? What is the same? What is different? Could you tell me some examples? *If different*—Did you expect to be this different? How do you feel about it? (Follow-up questions might be asked) *If same*—Overall, how do you feel* when you help another student at school? How does your teacher feel about one student helping another in school? (Follow-up questions might be asked)
Expectation about the role of student	Think about your experience in high school and middle school, do you think the expectation about your role as a student* is different or pretty much the same? What is the same? What is different? Could you tell me some examples? *If different*—Did you expect [whatever student has named] to be different? How do you feel about? (Follow-up questions might be asked) *If same*—Overall, how do you feel about your current role as a student? (Follow-up questions might be asked) Does your teacher want you to receive and remember knowledge from teacher? Or does the teacher want you to search for knowledge yourself? Do you feel that you are actively participating in your learning? If yes, how? If no, why not? Do you think you should always revere your teacher and be humble? Why? Or why not? Do you ask your teacher questions? Why or why not? Do you ask your teacher to help you? Why or why not? (For the above questions, follow-up questions might be asked.)
Mental health	Think about your experience in high school and middle school, do you think your awareness of mental health issues and resources for mental health support are different now or pretty much the same? What is the same? What is different? Could you tell me some examples? Do you think your classmates and your teachers care about your mental health? How can a student access available mental health support in your school? If you felt sad or depressed, what would you do? Who would you go to for help? *If different*—Did you expect to be this different? How do you feel about it? (Follow-up questions might be asked) *If same*—Overall, how do you feel* about your school's awareness of mental health care and resources? (Follow-up questions might be asked) Overall, I wonder if you feel more relaxed in middle school or high school? Or pretty much the same? Why do you feel that way? (Follow-up questions might be asked)

*Clarification on "helping others in the academic setting": share answers, discuss homework, help do homework, etc.

*Clarification on "helping others in the life setting": share stuff (book/food/stationery, etc.), help with cleaning, etc.

*Clarification on "the expectation of student": how you interact with your teacher, how you learn the material, and how you do your assignments, etc.

*Clarification on "feel": can be opinions, feelings, attitudes, etc.