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Perceptions of recreation and leisure in the context of the Chinese compulsory education perspective held by Chinese living in the U.S.A

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ABSTRACT

The objectives of this study were to explore the perceptions held by Chinese students and scholars residing abroad regarding the meaning of "recreation" *(yu le)* in the Chinese language and to what extent it is similar to or different from the Chinese concept of "leisure" (*xiu xian).* The understandings of these terms were explained in the context of the compulsory education participants had received in their home country. The study employed the Leisure Ten Statements Test (LTST) to collect data. The findings showed that *xiu xian* was characterized by individual activities, low-intensity activities, a feeling of recovery, and a sense of moderation. *Yu le* was characterized by outdoor, group, and high-intensity activities, a feeling of exertion, a sense of indulgence, and a sense of happiness. There were no significant differences between *xiu xian* and *yu le* regarding non-work time, indoor activities, and a sense of satisfaction.

KEYWORDS

Recreation; leisure; education; China

The field of leisure studies has developed and significantly expanded in the last 60 years; however, the meanings of the very foundational concepts of leisure scholarship – leisure and recreation – are still being debated. Much emphasis has been placed in classical and modern Western literature on defining the concept of leisure (e.g., Brightbill, 1960; de Grazia, 1962; Dumazedier, 1960; Heintzman, 2007; Kuentzel & Heberlein, 1997; Morgan, 2006; Pieper, 1948/1998; Shaw & Dawson, 2001). Leisure has been conceptualized in the West in different ways. In its classical understanding, Aristotle considered leisure to be "freedom from the necessity of being occupied" (de Grazia, 1962, p. 11), which included freedom from the necessity of physical labor and any activity that people may find necessary to perform. For Aristotle, leisure meant being occupied in something performed for its own sake or as its own end - listening to music or poetry, interaction with friends, and contemplation. Pieper (1948/1998) considered leisure as the foundation of Western culture. de Grazia (1962) noted that the changes in the concept of time brought by the Industrial Revolution that swept Europe and North America in the nineteenth century, redefined how we conceptualize, experience, and manage leisure. In his attempt to capture leisure's multidisciplined and interdisciplinary

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nature, Murphy (1974) developed a holistic leisure model categorizing it according to temporal, functional, and spatial/environmental dimensions. This framework allowed him to define leisure "as time or discretionary time; as activity fulfilling behavioral, social, and psychological functions; and as behavior related to a spatial/environmental framework" (p. 35).

Kaplan (1975) identified six leisure models, including the classic humanistic model, the quantitative model, and the therapeutic model, which considered leisure as an instrument helpful in achieving other goals such as a status symbol or a tool of social control. His views on leisure's function as a status display have their roots in the works of Veblen (1899) and were further elaborated on by Scott (2010). Following Murphy (1974), Heintzman (2007) summarized the contemporary understandings of leisure in the West in terms of seven concepts:

1. Classical leisure (a state of being; an attitude)
2. Leisure as activity (non-work activity)
3. Leisure as free time (time after work and existence tasks)
4. Leisure as a symbol of social class (conspicuous consumption)
5. Leisure as a state of mind (an optimal psychological experience)
6. Feminist leisure (meaningful experience; enjoyment)
7. Holistic leisure (leisure in all of life) (p. 3)

Others have proposed alternative definitions to account for the subjective experiences of leisure in distinct contexts, such as that of a family (Shaw & Dawson, 2001).

The concept of recreation is as multifaceted as that of leisure, although there is much more consensus in terms of how to define it. Fairchild (1970) described recreation as "any activity pursued during leisure, either individual or collective, that is free and pleasurable, has immediate appeal, and is not compelled by a delayed reward beyond itself or by any immediate necessity" (p. 251). In addition, recreation has been conceptualized as being carried out in leisure time, having a restorative purpose, and having the same inherent freedom orientation as leisure (i.e., being usually chosen voluntarily by the participant, typically enjoyable, primarily for pleasure and satisfaction) (Brightbill, 1960; Kraus, 1966; Pigram, 1983; Yukic, 1970). Cushman and Laidler (1990) considered recreation to have social purposes that allow for the realization of constructive and socially valuable goals for individual participants, groups, and society.

With the increasing amount of research being conducted on leisure in cross-cultural contexts in the last 15 years, studies began to investigate the meaning of leisure from East Asian perspectives. These studies included research undertaken in the context of China (Gui et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2008) and Japan (Ito & Walker, 2014). For instance, Liu et al. (2008) conducted a systematic study of the meanings of leisure in China by dissecting the etymological interpretations of pictographs and drawings from the traditional Chinese culture of Taoism and Confucianism. Ito and Walker (2014) developed a Leisure Ten Statement Test, employing it as a tool to examine the similarities and differences in how leisure is perceived in Japan and Canada. Modifying Ito and Walker (2014) Leisure Ten Statements Test, Gui et al. (2022) investigated the meanings of leisure and an equivalent Chinese leisure-like term (*xiu xian*) from laypeople's perspectives.

Compared to the growing number of studies that explored the meaning of leisure from a cross-cultural perspective, there remains a paucity of studies investigating the meaning of recreation in non-Western countries. Only Chinese scholars have investigated the meaning of recreation in China, using historical research and incorporating Chinese cultural influences. Wan (2012) conducted a historiographical study on the development of recreation (*yu le*) in Beijing, China, from 1912–1928, analyzing the changes in the recreation activities and offerings from the late Qing Dynasty to the early Republican period. The study found that new recreation settings, such as parks, playgrounds, and movie theaters, began to appear during this time. Jiang's (2012) study on the changes in folk recreation (*yu le*) in Henan, China, during the Republic of China period indicated that drama, acrobatics, dance, and sports emerged in Henan with distinctive characteristics of the era.

However, studies have not revealed how the concept of recreation is defined and taught in Chinese compulsory schools and how it is distinct from or similar to the concept of leisure. Considering that the study of leisure is gaining momentum in China (Liu & Chen, 2023) and that recreation service delivery is rapidly expanding, a thorough understanding of these concepts, their origins, and applications is needed. The objectives of this study were to explore: (1) how Chinese students and scholars residing outside of China perceived the meaning of the word "recreation" (*yu le*) in the Chinese language and (2) the extent it is similar to or different from the Chinese concept of "leisure" (*xiu xian*). The understandings of these terms were explored in the context of the compulsory education participants had received in their home country.

Literature review: Meaning of the Chinese leisure-like term

The concept of leisure is not limited to Western countries (Yeh & Chick, 2021). The last two decades have seen a steady increase in leisure studies conducted in non-Western contexts (Ito et al., 2014). The meaning of leisure in China has been explored in at least two studies that found that the concept of *xiu xian* (休闲) is very similar to the Western idea of leisure (Gui et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2008).

From an etymological perspective, Chinese writing originated from pictographs (Zhao & Wu, 2022). Over the next 3,000 years, the pictorial script evolved through pictographs, oracle bones, gold script, great seal script, small seal script, and other writing styles to become the script used in modern China (Lu & Aiken, 2004). Single Chinese characters can be formed into words by combining two or more characters (Pae, 2020). The Chinese term *xiu xian* is comprised of two characters: *xiu* and *xian*.

The character *xiu* can be traced back to the oracle bone inscriptions and was derived from a drawing of a person resting against a tree (Liu et al., 2008). According to Xu (1979), in the gold script and small seal script periods, an additional meaning was added of resting inside an open house (see Table 1). While analyzing the Chinese etymological meaning of this word, Liu et al. (2008) further interpreted the character *xiu* (休) in the context of China's agricultural history. In an agricultural setting, leaning against trees usually signified taking a break or resting after hard work, which could help individuals relax and recharge.

The character *xian* (闲) does not have as long a history as *xiu*. It first appeared in the gold script. Yang et al. (2020) noted that *xian*  refers to a wooden door and

Table 1. Character *xiu* (休) in Chinese etymological history.

	Main character forms	Meaning and other non-primary forms
oracle bones		The structure on the left is a person (人), and the form on the right is a tree (木). It means that people rely on trees to rest.
gold script		Adding an open house, has the expanded meaning of resting in place.
small seal script		A variation of the open house with the same sense of resting in place.

Note: This table has been collated from *Shuo Wen Jie Zi* (Xu, 1979), which features explanations of simple graphs and analysis of composite graphs. It examines the evolution of the character *xiu* in *Shuo Wen Jie Zi* from the perspective of the civilizational process, as described by archeologists.

to closing the door to sleep. According to *Shuo Wen Jie Zi* (Xu, 1979), *xian* means free time, which occurs between two periods of busy time. In China's agrarian society, *xiu xian* expresses the idea that arable land cannot be indefinitely planted with crops but needs to be taken out of cultivation for some time to regain its fertility. In existing studies (Xu, 1979; Yang et al., 2020), the discussion of *xian* (闲) has focused more on the cultural and philosophical significance and has expressed a period of restoration of physical strength and energy.

According to historical records, *xiu* and *xian* were first combined during the Three Kingdoms period. In volume six of *Cao Zi Jian Ji*, the author wrote: "The roots are gone, and there is no leisure (*xiu xian*) from morning to night" (Cao, 2015, p. 21). The author compared himself to a falling leaf in the fall, leaving the branch forever and flying away with the wind, not being able to do anything he wants, and having no leisure (*xiu xian*) at all. In this context, leisure was considered the opposite of loneliness, representing a feeling of stable happiness and warmth that a family can give. Thereafter, in the *San Guo Zhi* of the Jin Dynasty, "No leisure (*xiu xian*) from morning to night" appeared again, emphasizing that there is no time that belongs to oneself (Chen, 1871, p. 369). The meaning of leisure (*xiu xian*) was enriched by poet Meng Haoran who wrote in the Tang poem *Tong Zhang Ming Fu Bi Xi Zeng Da*: "Autumn is full of leisure (*xiu xian*) days, and spring is full of scenery and harmony" (Sheng, 1703, p. 69). Autumn and spring, in this context, were a metaphor and referred to the fact that after retiring, the author can live a day of leisure and enjoy the natural scenery in any season and at any time (Ning, 2023, pp. 203–220). To summarize, the consensus among scholars is that *xiu xian* is the Chinese term that most closely resembles its English equivalent of "leisure."

The meaning of the Chinese recreation-like term (*yu le*) is not presented in this literature review section because its systematic discussions of it are not found in the existing literature. Only two Chinese papers that focused on Beijing and Henan have examined the history of *yu le* in China and translated it as "recreation" in the text (Jiang, 2012; Wan, 2012). Jiang (2012) expressed that *yu le* is a social activity that possesses regulatory, cathartic, disciplinary, and compensatory functions. This concept is different from "entertainment," which represents an action of providing or being provided with amusement or enjoyment (Zhang & Pan, 2007). Therefore, we suggest that *yu le* is the Chinese term that is closest in meaning to the English word "recreation."

Background: Leisure and recreation-like terms in the Chinese education system

In China, all children aged 7–16 are required to attend nine years of compulsory education (Song, 2012). During their compulsory education, they study subjects such as Morality and the Rule of Law, Chinese, math and English. The state issues uniform textbooks for all subjects that apply to all grades, and the Ministry of Education has issued the Compulsory Education Curriculum Program and Curriculum Standards. Among them, Chinese is an instrumental and humanistic course designed to teach the national common language and script (Ministry Of Education, 2022). In addition to classroom instruction, schools also organize extracurricular activities, which are useful supplements to classroom learning. Overall, however, the Chinese language course guides students to accumulate language experience through active language practice in authentic language use situations, and these experiences, in turn, contribute to students' understanding of other course content as well as extra-curricular activities (Ministry Of Education, 2022). Therefore, this study will explain Chinese people's use of the language and their understanding of relevant practical situations in the context of the Chinese language compulsory education.

After a systematic study of the language curriculum in China's nine-year compulsory education, students should be able to master and use almost all of the commonly used characters in the national standard interchange code *Character Set for Information Exchange - Basic Set* (Wu et al., 1999). In this set, Chinese characters were selected and divided into two levels (Feng, 1995). In daily life, the cumulative frequency of use of the first-level characters is 99.9%. Both *xiu* and *xian* are included in this character set and thus have been selected for the current study as a Chinese leisure-like term.

The character *xiu* first appears in the second-grade rhyme: "The oriole sings endlessly" (Primary Language Room at the People's Education Publishing House & Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 21). The character *xiu* in this context expresses stop. A third-grade lesson about the landscape of Guangdong Province describes that there are many trees in a park and stone benches under the trees, which are always full of people on rest days (Lin, 2017, p. 80). The character *xiu* here refers to non-working days and implies a sense of well-being. One of the fourth-grade lessons is about a cricket building a house; if the cricket feels tired, it will rest for a while and then continue working (Huang, 2017, p. 39). *Xiu,* in this context, refers to the cessation of work and the recovery of physical strength.

Xian first appears in a grade three lesson about a flock of swallows resting idly on a wire (Zheng, 2017, p. 5). A fourth-grade lesson describes *xian* as a good day with images of clouds aimlessly wandering in the sky, symbolizing a feeling of freedom and carefreeness (Dai, 2017, p. 43). Another lesson in the fourth grade tells a story of a Chinese family. During winter, when there is no farming to be done, all family members gather together to make shoes out of reed flowers and sell them to supplement the family's income (Cao, 2017, p. 91). This activity reinforces the family relationship. In addition, stories children learn in grades five and six consider *xian* as a non-farming time, which is understood as a non-working time. For example, everyone is busy planting seeds and hardly anyone is idle in April. January is the idlest time, and it is then when people celebrate the Chinese New Year (Liang, 2017, p. 74). The lessons

that pertain to the meaning of *xiu* and *xian* are summarized in Table 2. There are clear similarities between the meaning of *xiu xian* and leisure in Western cultures (see Mobily, 1989 for a thorough discussion of the meanings of leisure in Western contexts). For instance, they both refer to non-working time, emphasize that there are no established rules, and improve people's well-being.

When it comes to the Chinese recreation-like terms, we found in the *Basic Set* two words with similar meanings, *you qi(游憩)* and *yu le (娱乐)*. Based on the frequency of use, *qi(憩)* does not appear in the first-level set, and *you qi* is rarely used in daily life. The word *yu le* consists of common Chinese characters and is more relevant to daily life. Thus, we selected *yu le* to represent the Chinese recreation-like term. The character *yu* was written as  and, according to *Shuo Wen Jie Zi* (Xu, 1979), originated from the great seal script period, where it meant "to give pleasure."

The combination of *yu* and *le* began to be used in the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods (Wang, 2004). In the first volume of *Meng Zi*, it is said that King Liang Hui was standing by a pool and was looking at geese and moose (Wang, 2004). At this point, King Liang Hui asked, "Do you also feel that this is a kind of recreation (*yu le*)?" (as quoted in Wang, 2004, p. 24). During the Han Dynasty, the combined usage of *yu le* began to proliferate. On the one hand, *yu le* still had the meaning of making people feel happy. For example, in *Lian Po Lin Xiang Ru Lie Zhuan*, it is written, "Please play the basin for the king of Qin for recreation (*yu le*) (Si, 1959, p. 856)." On the other hand, *yu le* can have negative connotations cautioning that it can make people lose their ambitions. For example, *Han Shu* mentioned the use of the "Five Baits" as a tactic of defense against the Hsiung-nu, in which *yu le* was considered one of the five lures, along with food, music and women, and was used as a strategy to defeat the enemy (Barfield, 1981). In other words, *yu le* could weaken the will and lead to defeat.

The explanation of *yu le* in the Chinese education system is quite complex. In the seventh grade, students are first exposed to the character *yu* through a story of people and a cat peacefully living together (Zheng, 2016). The recreational activity of playing with a pet takes place during free time. The character *le* is taught in the first grade and refers to something joyful. *Le* describes playing games or sports that brings pleasure, whether done individually or with a group of people (Ren, 2017a). A second-grade lesson depicts a flood that overwhelms the fields, followed by a man designing a water management system to counteract the flood, and the villagers live happily ever after

Table 2. The meaning of *xiu* and *xian* in the Chinese educational system.

Character	Categorization	Meaning	Time first appearance
Xiu	Stop	Stop	Grade 2 (Ages 8-9)
Xiu	Non-working time	Not a working day	Grade 3 (Ages 9-10)
Xiu		Cessation of work	Grade 4 (Ages 10-11)
Xian		Non-agricultural time	Grade 4 (Ages 10-11)
Xian		Forced to stop work	Grade 4 (Ages 10-11)
Xiu	Activity	Rest on a bench under the tree	Grade 3 (Ages 9-10)
Xiu		Linked with the city park	Grade 3 (Ages 9-10)
Xian		Family-oriented activities	Grade 4 (Ages 10-11)
Xian		No standards and rules	Grade 3 (Ages 9-10)
Xiu	Internal psychological states	Recovery of physical strength	Grade 4 (Ages 10-11)
Xiu		Sense of well-being	Grade 3 (Ages 9-10)
Xian		Practical orientation	Grade 4 (Ages 10-11)

(Anonymous, 2017). This meaning is expressed more clearly in a fifth-grade lesson about a child who helps his neighbor, an older man, retrieve newspapers and letters from a mailbox (Ren, 2017b). *Le* here expresses the happiness of the helper and the person receiving help. Another lesson in the second grade depicts a Water Festival of the Dai people, a minority group in China, and describes how people celebrate the festival (Zhong, 2017). In a fifth-grade lesson about children and parents picking ripe laurels from trees, a fragrance fills the air when the osmanthus flowers are in full bloom (Qi, 2017). *Le* here depicts a scene where the whole family interacts to enhance the bond between family members. The school lessons that pertain to the meaning of *yu* and *le* are summarized in Table 3.

The term *yu le* has many similarities to the meaning of recreation in the English language. First, they both occur during non-working time and involve playing games, sports activities, festive celebrations, and playing with pets. Second, they both have a social purpose and lead to satisfaction and increased well-being from helping others and receiving help. Third, the internal psychological state of *yu le* is positive and associated with feelings of fun, pleasure, happiness, enjoyment, satisfaction, and well-being. In this study, we examined Chinese adults' understanding of the terms leisure and recreation, including differences and similarities in the meaning of these terms.

Method

Study procedures

The data were collected using an online survey, distributed via a mobile Internet-generated URL for online questionnaire distribution. The current study employed the Leisure Ten Statements Test (LTST) (Ito & Walker, 2014) to examine the meanings of Chinese leisure and recreation-like terms. The LTST, adapted from the Twenty Statements Test (Kuhn & McPartland, 1954), asks individuals to offer 10 open-ended responses to a prompt (e.g., "Leisure is_____"). Gui et al. (2022) used LTST to compare the meaning of leisure and *xiu xian* and concluded that the leisure phenomenon was applicable cross-culturally.

This study further extends the application of LTST by employing it to investigate the understanding of the meaning of Chinese leisure and recreation-like terms among

Table 3. The meaning of *yu* and *le* in the Chinese educational system.

Character	Categorization	Meaning	Time first appearance
Yu	Non-working time	After lunch	Grade 7 (Ages 12-13)
Le	Activity	Individual or group behavior	Grade 1 (Ages 7-8)
Le		Play games	Grade 1 (Ages 7-8)
Le		Participate in sports activities	Grade 1 (Ages7-8)
Le		Helping others	Grade 2 (Ages 8-9)
Le		Being helped by others	Grade 2 (Ages 8-9)
Le		The festive celebration	Grade 2 (Ages 8-9)
Le		Family activities	Grade 5 (Ages 10-11)
Yu		In the yard of the house	Grade 7 (Ages 12-13)
Yu		Playing with pets	Grade 7 (Ages 12-13)
Le	Internal psychological states	Fun and happiness	Grade 1 (Ages 7-8)
Le		Sense of satisfaction	Grade 2 (Ages 8-9)
Le		Sense of well-being	Grade 2 (Ages 8-9)

the Chinese people living overseas. In our study, the respondents were asked to give 10 free responses to "*xiu xian* is___" and 10 responses to "*yu le* is___." Upon the completion of the LTST, participants were asked about their country of birth, whether they had received nine years of compulsory education in China, their educational attainment, and their socio-demographic background (e.g., gender, age). The questionnaire was prepared in English and back-translated to Chinese by a person fluent in both languages. The accuracy of the translation was verified by another bi-lingual individual. Since the survey concerned the understanding of Chinese-language terms, only the Chinese version of the questionnaire was distributed.

The project was approved by the second author's university's IRB (protocol number 23097). Participation in this study was completely voluntary, and participants did not receive compensation for participation. After clicking on the URL link, participants were directed to the consent form, and if they agreed to participate, they were asked to respond to the survey questions.

Study sample

Subjects were recruited through a snowball sampling beginning with the Chinese students and scholars at two large universities in the Midwestern United States (termed "University A" and "University B"). In the first phase of data collection, the questionnaire was distributed through the Chinese Students and Scholars Association (CSSA) of the two universities. University A's CSSA invited us to the WeChat groups for the departments of dance, photography, music, and journalism. Each of these WeChat groups has over 100 Chinese students and scholars. We explained the project on the WeChat groups, shared the questionnaire URL link, and invited group members to fill it out and forward the questionnaire to their acquaintances who met the selection criteria (were born in China and completed at least nine years of compulsory education in this country). As a result of this process, 90 questionnaires were collected from students and scholars at University A and 42 from their friends and acquaintances. We followed the same process with the University B's CSSA. As a result, we collected 44 surveys from faculty and students at University B and 28 from their friends and acquaintances.

A total of 204 properly completed questionnaires were collected. However, 11 respondents indicated that they had not received the nine years of compulsory education in China and thus had to be excluded from the analysis. As a result, 193 questionnaires were collected from Chinese students and scholars who had completed at least nine years of education in China and were currently studying or working in the United States. Their demographic characteristics are included in Table 4.

Data analysis

Drawing upon the approach adopted by Gui et al. (2022) and Ito and Walker (2014), our data analysis consisted of five steps. First, an initial coding scheme was developed. As Neuendorf (2017) suggested, 10% of the responses should be coded first to ensure that the categories are appropriate and also to help clarify the subcategories. Thus,

Table 4. Demographic characteristics of the study sample.

Indicators	Total ($N = 193$)	%
Gender		
Male	85	44.0
Female	108	56.0
Age		
< 20	7	3.6
20-25	58	30.1
25-30	69	35.8
≥ 30	59	30.6
Highest education		
Less than elementary school	0	0
Completed elementary school	2	1.0
Completed junior high school	7	3.6
Completed high school	18	9.3
Graduated from a 4-year college or university	52	26.7
Some graduate work	62	32.1
Completed graduate work	52	26.9

the first author developed the initial coding scheme by independently coding 10% of the LTST of *xiu xian* and *yu le* responses. *Xiu xian* and *yu le* were coded separately, using the same coding process. Based on the leisure and recreation-like terms in the Chinese education system (see Tables 2 and 3), a coding scheme with three major categories (i.e., time, activity, and internal psychological states) and 16 subcategories (i.e., stop, non-working time, outdoor activities, indoor activities, individual activities, group activities, low intensity activities, high intensity activities, agricultural activities, functional activities, feeling of recovery, feeling of exertion, sense of indulgence, sense of moderation, sense of happiness, and sense of satisfaction) was developed, as shown in Table 5.

Second, after developing the initial coding scheme, the first and third authors coded the remaining *xiu xian* and *yu le* responses, respectively. Both the first and third authors are bilingual English and Chinese speakers. Before fully engaging in the coding process, the two coders met and discussed the coding process and clarified how the responses would be coded. Notably, our unit of analysis was meanings rather than individual responses since a single response could encompass multiple distinct meanings (Kanagawa et al., 2001). For example, a participant's response of "*Xiu xian* is lying around at home" was coded as two units (Indoor activities and Low intensity activities). Repeated responses were coded only once. If responses did not make any sense, we categorized them as uncodable and excluded them from further analysis. We referred to the Compendium of Physical Activities to identify what constitutes high-intensity (≥ 6 METs) or low-intensity activity (1–1.5 METs) activities (Ainsworth et al., 2011). Running, jumping rope, swimming, skating, soccer, and basketball were identified as high-intensity activities. Sleeping, reading, sitting still, and lying down, were identified as low-intensity activities. We did not identify moderate intensity activity (3–5.9 METs). This approach helped to ensure the consistency of coders' coding procedures. In addition, it helped to examine the similarities and differences between *xiu xian* and *yu le*. Furthermore, when the response reported that energy was restored during the process, the coders recorded the response as "feeling of recovery." When the response reported that energy was expended during the process, the coders recorded the response as

Table 5. Summary of the final coding results for *xiu xian* and *yu le*.

Categories	Descriptions	Some typical answers
Time		
Stop	A stopping point	*Xiu xian* is stopping in your tracks, being still. *Yu le* is as if time stands still.
Non-working time	Stop working, time for yourself	*Xiu xian* is a nice weekend, something you do in addition to your work and studies, a vacation. *Yu le* is time off from work, something you can't do when you study and work.
Activity		
Outdoor activities	Travel, seaside, beach, park, etc.	*Xiu xian* is lying in nature, enjoying the outdoor scenery, going outdoors to regulate body and mind. *Yu le* is driving far away, a trip.
Indoor activities	Resting at home, watching TV, etc.	*Xiu xian* is lying around at home. *Yu le* is watching TV.
Individual activities	Without socialization, self-conditioning, etc.	*Xiu xian* is not too much socializing, self-reflection, and enjoying time alone. *Yu le* is sleeping, making oneself happy.
Group activities	Activities with social characteristics	*Xiu xian* is playing chess and mahjong. *Yu le* is to communicate with others, a place to make friends and to share with friends.
Low intensity activities	1-1.5 METs activities	*Xiu xian* is lying down. *Yu le* is reading.
High intensity activities	≥ 6 METs, activities	*Xiu xian* is running. *Yu le* is playing soccer.
Agricultural activities	Experiencing agricultural activities	*Xiu xian* is to go to the farmhouse to experience life, raising fish. *Yu le* is to raise flowers.
Functional activities	Cooking, housework, etc.	*Xiu xian* is organizing furniture and doing housework. *Yu le* is making favorite foods for the family.
Internal psychological states		
Feeling of recovery	Physical and energy recovery, non-stimulating, relaxing and stress-free	*Xiu xian* is to relax and to recuperate for subsequent study and work. *Yu le* is to make people happy and relaxed, relax the body and spirit.
Feeling of exertion	Physical and energy exertion, easily fatigued.	*Xiu xian* is the feeling of sweating a lot after exercise. *Yu le* is noisy and physically demanding.
Sense of indulgence	Reckless enjoyment, etc.	*Xiu xian* is overeating high calorie foods. *Yu le* is hedonistic, impetuous, and quick gratification.
Sense of moderation	Moderate, etc.	*Xiu xian* is good for balance, good for mental health. *Yu le* needs to be controlled.
Sense of happiness	Having fun and being happy, etc.	*Xiu xian* is happy. *Yu le* is an activity that brings joy to people, laughing with friends.
Sense of satisfaction	Fulfillment, satisfaction, etc.	*Xiu xian* is the satisfaction of body and mind, fulfilling a heart's desire. *Yu le* is the life of satisfaction.
Other		
	Premised on a certain economic level, a necessary component of life	*Xiu xian* represents the affluent class *Xiu xian* is an extravagant accessory *Yu le* is a necessity *Yu le* is a luxury

"feeling of exertion." According to the final coding scheme, the two coders then coded all *xiu xian* and *yu le* responses.

Third, coding results from the two coders were compared, and coding consistency was assessed. We assessed the Cohen's kappa coefficients at the category-level to ensure

Table 6. The Cohen's kappa coefficients at the category-level.

Categories	Kappa for *Xiu xian*	Kappa for *Yu le*	Categories	Kappa for *Xiu xian*	Kappa for *Yu le*
Stop	0.83	0.79	Functional activities	0.72	0.75
Non-work time	0.84	0.86	Feeling of recovery	0.77	0.74
Outdoor activities	0.83	0.82	Feeling of exertion	0.74	0.74
Indoor activities	0.81	0.81	Sense of indulgence	0.72	0.74
Individual activities	0.79	0.81	Sense of moderation	0.73	0.75
Group activities	0.82	0.83	Sense of happiness	0.79	0.71
Low intensity activities	0.76	0.78	Sense of satisfaction	0.78	0.71
High intensity activities	0.73	0.78	Other	0.72	0.74
Agricultural activities	0.81	0.77	—	—	—

that each category produced reliable results. Specific results for assessing coding consistency are presented in Table 6. A kappa coefficient of 0.61–0.80 is deemed to indicate a substantial agreement (Landis & Koch, 1977). The Cohen's kappa coefficients at all category levels in this study met this condition. The two coders discussed all discrepancies and reached an agreement on the final coding scheme.

Fourth, the data were tested for normal distribution, and skewness and kurtosis were calculated using R software version 4.0.3. The data with skewness and kurtosis higher than 1 in the *xiu xian* and *yu le* groups were subjected to arcsine transformation. To avoid the effect of multicollinearity on the results, we used Pearson correlation analysis to calculate the correlation between the transformed data conforming to the normal distribution in the *xiu xian* and *yu le* groups separately and removed one of the categories when the correlation coefficient between the two categories was higher than 0.5.

Fifth, independent samples *t*-tests were performed to compare the differences between the two groups for the retained categories. To reduce Type I error, we corrected the significance level using Bonferroni correction, which was considered statistically significant when $p < 0.05$/number of categories.

Results

After the arcsine transformation and excluding the categories of "stop," "agricultural activities," "functional activities," and "others," the remaining 13 categories conformed to a normal distribution. Subsequently, Pearson correlation analysis was performed, and the results showed no multicollinearity among all categories. With 0.004 (0.05/13) as the significance threshold, the results of the paired samples *t*-tests for 13 categories in the *xiu xian* and *yu le* groups are presented in Table 7.

The results showed that 10 categories were significantly different. *Xiu xian* was characterized more by individual activities, low intensity activities, a feeling of recovery, and a sense of moderation. Conversely, *yu le* was characterized more by outdoor activities, group activities, high intensity activities, feeling of exertion, a sense of indulgence, and a sense of happiness. All categories showed high effect sizes, with the feeling of exertion showing the most significant effect, followed by a sense of happiness and individual activities. There were no significant differences between the two groups regarding non-work time, indoor activities and sense of satisfaction. This result indicates that the characteristics of *xiu xian* and *yu le* in these three categories are very similar.

Table 7. Proportions of *xiu xian* and *yu le* categories of the paired-sample t-tests.

Categories	*Xiu xian* (%)	*Yu le* (%)	*t* value	*p*	*Cohen's d*
Non-work time	16.43	15.38	2.338	0.020	0.23
Outdoor activities	4.15	6.19	−8.035*	<0.001	−0.7
Indoor activities	5.98	4.40	3.072	0.006	0.5
Individual activities	9.13	4.37	12.944*	<0.001	1.44
Group activities	4.14	7.21	−10.360*	<0.001	−1.08
Low intensity activities	11.03	5.61	13.035*	<0.001	1.41
High intensity activities	3.63	7.11	−12.016*	<0.001	−1.33
Feeling of recovery	7.36	3.87	10.846*	<0.001	0.97
Feeling of exertion	0.04	0.08	−15.581*	<0.001	−1.86
Sense of indulgence	3.41	6.01	−10.557*	<0.001	−1.35
Sense of moderation	5.80	4.44	4.279*	<0.001	0.45
Sense of happiness	4.59	9.11	−15.053*	<0.001	−1.47
Sense of satisfaction	3.88	4.14	−1.598	0.112	−0.13

Note. The calculation of *t* values was based on arcsine-transformed percentages of categories.
*$p < .004$.

Discussion

The objectives of the study were to explore the meaning of recreation in the Chinese language and the extent to which it is similar to or different from the Chinese concept of leisure. First, we will explore the similarities between these two concepts and, subsequently, their differences, thereby illuminating the unique meanings of the term "recreation."

Similarities between Xiu Xian and Yu Le

Based on the previous literature (Gui et al., 2022; Jiang, 2012; Liu et al., 2008), *xiu xian* was selected in this study to represent the Chinese concept of leisure, and *yu le* to represent the concept of recreation. After comparing and summarizing leisure and recreation-like terms in their Chinese education system, we found that both *xiu xian* and *yu le*, which Chinese children learn in the nine-year compulsory education, can be characterized as time, activities, and internal psychological states. Thus, *xiu xian* and *yu le* are comparable in these three major categories. This finding corroborates claims that the traditional Western understanding of leisure as time, activity, and psychological experience (Brightbill, 1960; Henderson, 2008) is applicable not only across races and ethnicities but also cross-culturally (Gui et al., 2022; Ito & Walker, 2014; Iwasaki, 2008). Our study also provided further evidence for the usefulness of the Leisure Ten Statements Test (LTST) in helping to understand leisure and recreation across cultural contexts (Ito & Walker, 2014).

Chinese elementary education often emphasizes that *xiu xian* occurs during non-working hours. In contrast, non-working time is only mentioned in one seventh-grade lesson referring to *yu le*. Despite these differences, the results of our study showed that Chinese respondents emphasized the concept of non-working time when interpreting both *yu le* and *xiu xian*. This finding can be related to the fact that when children learn about *yu le,* school lessons repeatedly refer to enjoyable activities such as games, play, and holiday celebrations. Therefore, it is likely most Chinese respondents associate *yu le* with non-working time. In addition, in recent years, the Chinese government has utilized non-working time to strengthen the

association between leisure, recreation, tourism, and industry (Statistical Office, 2019). For example, the General Office of the State Council issued a circular on Several Measures on Unleashing the Potential of Tourism Consumption and Promoting the High-Quality Development of Tourism (State Council (PRC), 2023), which mentions that people can make better use of their non-working time to practice a variety of leisure and recreational behaviors in the form of tourism, which will in turn increase the output value of the related industries.

Respondents mentioned indoor activities, such as watching television, when providing examples of *xiu xian* and *yu le*. Similarly, Yin (2005) found that the most common home-based pastimes among mainland Chinese included watching television, reading books or newspapers, listening to the radio, playing mahjong, and engaging in conversations with family members. Gui et al. (2022) also showed that mass media, such as watching television and variety shows, were more popular among Chinese than European Canadians. In Chinese education, *xiu xian* was considered the opposite of agricultural work, which required reliance on physical labor that took place outdoors. Similarly, when traced to its hieroglyphic origins, *xiu xian* depicted a situation away from outdoor farming (Liu et al., 2008; Yu, 2005). In its etymological origin, *le* derives from a musical instrument played mainly indoors, which can partially explain *yu le*'s association with indoor activities. The State Council's Circular on the issuance of the 14th Five-Year Plan for Tourism Development mentioned that the accelerated integration of online and offline tourism products and services would be the next opportunity and challenge for the industry's development (State Council (PRC), 2021). The fact that the Chinese have a tradition of *xiu xian* and *yu le* activities conducted indoors, was likely one of the motivations for the Chinese government's consideration to promote online tourism. Interestingly, however, when illustrating *xiu xian* and *yu le,* respondents also provided examples of activities that took place in nature and involved experiencing agricultural life. In fact, rural tourism has begun to emerge in China as a popular new form of leisure (Fang, 2020) and, as Liu and Chen (in press) indicate, agritainment (农家乐, Nong jia le), a leisure engagement similar to a farm stay, has become a growing fashion in many areas of China.

The results also revealed no statistically significant differences in how respondents perceived *xiu xian* and *yu le* with respect to generating a sense of satisfaction. This study contends that whether they engage in *xiu xian* or *yu le*, people can gain satisfaction by participating in their favorite activities. For example, by enjoying a good meal, they gain sensual and psychological satisfaction; by exploring outdoors, they gain the satisfaction of conquering nature and challenging themselves; by having a good night's sleep, they gain the satisfaction of a fully rested and recovered body.

Differences between Xiu Xian and Yu Le

The respondents provided significantly more examples of outdoor activities when referring to *yu le* than to *xiu xian*. This finding is likely related to the fact that, when learning about *yu le*, Chinese children are exposed to examples of various forms of physical activities (e.g., sports, playing games) and participation in festivals. Research has suggested that, in the past, Chinese people rarely engaged in outdoor leisure activities and sports (Walker & Wang, 2008; Yu, 2005). However, in recent years, as

Liu and Chen (2023) claimed, new urban sports such as cycling, hiking, and marathon running have become a way for urbanites to unwind and relax.

The current study's findings showed that respondents more frequently referenced individual activities when describing *xiu xian* and more often mentioned group activities when describing *yu le*. In Chinese education, *yu le* has been used with reference to playing with friends, helping others, playing with pets, and doing family activities. This portrayal of *yu le* is similar to how "recreation" describes social activities (Stokowski, 1990). In contrast, in Chinese education, *xiu xian* places more emphasis on individual behaviors and feelings.

The findings also showed that *yu le* was more often associated with high-intensity activities and *xiu xian* with low-intensity pastimes. This finding is also consistent with previous studies that showed that relaxation and enjoyment were the primary leisure motivations of Chinese people (Freysinger & Chen, 1993) and that, traditionally, Chinese preferred quieter and more passive leisure (Yu & Berryman, 1996). Tsai et al. (2006) also suggested that such preferences could be attributed to Chinese people favoring low-arousal positive affect, whereas Westerners prefer high-arousal positive affect. Based on the findings of this study and the compulsory learning process in China, we argue that it may not be the case that the Chinese possess less high-arousal positive affect, but rather that they are more often aroused during *yu le* activities.

The findings suggested that Chinese respondents believed they should rejuvenate their body and mind through *xiu xian*. At the same time, *yu le* was affiliated more often with physical and mental exertion. The roots of these differences can be found in the Chinese education that depicts *xiu xian* as a state of being at the end of a farming period. People needed to engage in subtle forms of activity such as rest and relaxation. By contrast, in China's compulsory education system, *yu le* is associated with physical activities, games, and celebrations that involve energy expenditure. Interestingly, Gui et al. (2022) found cultural differences in the definition of leisure/*xiu xian* between European-Canadian and Chinese students. One of their study's findings was that European-Canadians mentioned sports and physical activity more frequently than their Chinese counterparts. We believe a different conclusion might have been reached if the Chinese survey version used the term *yu le* instead of *xiu xian*.

Our study has also revealed that *xiu xian* was significantly more often associated with a sense of moderation, while *yu le* was more associated with a sense of indulgence and happiness. We believe that the association of *xiu xian* with moderation may be traced to traditional Chinese philosophy. For example, Walker (2008) stressed the importance placed on emotional moderation in Chinese culture. A sense of moderation may also be affiliated with a feeling of guilt associated with absorptive media activities (Walker & Deng, 2003). The feeling of indulgence and happiness associated with *yu le* can be derived from individuals' actions that provide joyful emotional experiences. For example, when listing examples of *yu le* activities, respondents reported alcohol consumption, attending clubs, and sexual behavior, which could be associated with a sense of indulgence. Nowadays, China's Ministry of Culture and Tourism emphasizes in its *Measures for the Administration of Recreation Venues* that healthy and beneficial content should be disseminated, and that some entertainment should be accompanied by signs warning against its use by minors (State Council (PRC), 2022).

Conclusion

This study provided unique contributions by examining the understanding of two Chinese leisure-like terms: *xiu xian* and *yu le,* from the Chinese education perspective. While previous studies have traced the etymological roots of *xiu xian*, an understanding of how children are taught this word was missing. This study also examined the Chinese understanding of the recreation- like term *yu le* and how it is taught in Chinese schools. Lastly, it explored the similarities and differences in people's understanding of these two terms.

Although this study provided unique contributions, it has several limitations. First, due to the university-imposed restrictions and the long approval process required to conduct research in Mainland China, the data were collected from Chinese adults residing in the U.S. Although all our respondents had obtained full compulsory education in China, their residence in the U.S. might have affected their Chinese language proficiency and familiarity with the recent changes in this language. Thus, the results of this study are applicable to the understanding of leisure and recreation among Chinese people in the United States. Future research should be conducted in China and possibly compare the understanding of these two terms among Chinese residing in their home country and abroad. Second, the snowball recruitment method that originated from university students and employees limits the generalizability of the study results.

Third, translation issues need to be considered when interpreting the results of this study. The term "recreation" is usually translated as *yu le*, but in some academic studies, it has also been expressed as *you qi* (Vu, 2024). Although *yu le* is often interpreted as "recreation," occasionally, it has also been translated as "entertainment" (Zhang & Pan, 2007). *Yu le* was chosen as the Chinese recreation-like term in this study after considering the most common cases of English-Chinese translation.

Fourth, the difference between daily and official language usage of the terms "leisure" and "recreation" deserves further research in the future. *Xiu xian* is more often used in administrative regulations, whereas both *xiu xian* and *yu le* are often used in daily expressions. For example, the 2016 *Guidance Opinions of the General Office of the State Council on Accelerating the Development of the Fitness and Leisure Industry* uses the word *xiu xian* as an official term and emphasizes the development of daily fitness, outdoor sports and special sports components of leisure (State Council (PRC), 2016).

This study was conducted in response to the call for more studies on leisure in non-Western countries (Iwasaki et al., 2007) and a more thorough understanding of leisure and recreation in the context of China (Liu & Chen, in press). Considering the rapid development of the leisure industry in China, sparked by people's desire to live healthy and meaningful lives as well as government and private investments in the leisure sector, a thorough understanding of the foundational concepts of leisure and recreation in this country is necessary.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Ethical approval

Ethical approval was granted by the second author's Institutional Review Board, which approved the study as exempt (Protocol # 23097).

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