# Contributions of Positive Psychology to Higher Education Across Asia: A Scoping Review and Unifying Thematic Framework

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**Abstract** Positive psychology offers a scientific window onto understanding and enhancing the welfare and growth of university communities, and as well as improving academic performance. This holistic approach is on the rise, yet most research is conducted in Western countries. This situation prevails despite the fact that two-thirds of the world's population live in Asia. This review collated and synthesised published work on applications of positive psychology in higher education conducted in Asia, to describe the current status, explore conceptual perspectives and identify knowledge gaps. A total of 147 articles (157 experimental studies), published since 2000, were included. These were descriptive explorations (12.1%), quantifying associations between positive psychology constructs (62.4%), interventions (19.7%), and psychometric evaluations (5.7%). Key topics were academic leadership, organisational commitment, student engagement and foreign language learning. The thematic framework centered on 'Optimal Functioning', with 'Personal Resources One Can Draw On' and 'How One Interacts With The World' as direct influencing factors, and 'Environment' as an indirect factor. Across the Asian region, positive psychology's major contribution is to identify what types of personal resources are associated with optimal functioning in higher education, but there is little high-quality evidence for intervention benefits, nor a deep understanding of how those resources can be effectively deployed to achieve well-being. As part of the third-wave positive psychology movement, scholars in Asia can play

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a greater leading role in re-evaluating traditional Western concepts to account for the socio-cultural context in which students and staff are embedded.

## Introduction

Education plays an important role in developing young people's knowledge, skills, attitudes and values, giving them the confidence and competence to thrive in an uncertain world. Many nations have formally recognised these personal development needs and a number of influential position papers and initiatives promote broader education goals that foster optimal functioning (e.g., UNESCO, 2016).

Positive psychology is a branch of psychology whose overall aims are consistent with this global educators' movement. Applied in the context of education, positive psychology advocates the development of well-being in young people, not simply traditional academic knowledge and skills (Seligman & Adler, 2019). For example, enhancing students' strengths in positive emotion, being engaged, seeking meaning in life, and promoting a growth mindset, all facilitate improved learning, increase life satisfaction and counteract the risk of poor mental health. There are numerous demonstrations of the efficacy of positive psychology interventions for students' well-being in schools. These are illustrated by systematic reviews which report quantitative analyses of the pooled effect size (Cilar et al., 2020; Francis et al., 2021; Mendes de Oliveira et al., 2022; Tejada-Gallardo et al., 2020). Positive education has had fewer inroads in the higher education setting. Here, only one systematic review could be identified, reporting the benefit of Acceptance and Commitment Training to students' well-being (Howell & Passmore, 2019).

A special issue in this journal has already highlighted the theoretical and practical importance of positive education research in Asia (King et al., 2016). While positive education is a growing global movement, most of the academic literature to date represents output from research conducted in WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, Democratic) societies. For example, the five systematic reviews cited above evaluated 95 studies, of which only 6 were conducted in non-Western countries (1 Chile, 4 China, 1 South Africa). Likewise, our understanding of students' conceptions of success and well-being is primarily limited to the American youth (Gill et al., 2021). What constitutes optimal functioning and what factors contribute to it may not necessarily be the same for Asian students and their Western counterparts because socio-cultural context plays an important role in learning and well-being (King et al., 2016).

In the context of positive psychology in higher education across Asia, it seems too premature to address specific research questions using a systematic review because there are many uncertainties about what defines optimal functioning and what factors promote it for Asian students. The paucity of included studies from Asia in the systematic reviews of positive psychology interventions also indicate a lack of high-quality evidence for data synthesis. In immature and evolving fields, a scoping review is recommended as the more appropriate first step (Munn et al., 2018). The scoping review approach uses the same comprehensive search strategy as a systematic review to identify the body of published work, but instead of addressing specific questions instead it provides a broad narrative overview of the field or map of the current evidence, without critical appraisal or meta-analysis (Munn et al., 2018). Presenting the results of our scoping review in an accessible summary format should assist educators, counsellors, students and parents to make effective use of the research findings and be a catalyst to drive future research in the areas of greatest need.

### AIMS

This scoping review had three research aims:

- to provide an overall picture of the current state of the evidence on positive education within higher education across South, East, and Southeast Asia (i.e., scoping the volume, nature and characteristics of work conducted),
- to clarify what positive psychology concepts and theoretical frameworks have been considered by Asian researchers working within the higher education context and to map those concepts into a unifying framework of what is needed to achieve optimal functioning in university students, and
- to identify knowledge gaps in the area.

## Methods

Methods followed the six-stage scoping review framework set out by Arksey and O'Malley (2005) and expanded by Levac et al. (2010).

### Stage 1: Identifying the Research Question

The research questions were developed in accordance with the population, concept, context, framework (Peters et al., 2020). Here, the population referred to students and staff, the concept referred to any contributions of positive psychology to understand learning and teaching, and the context referred

to any higher education institution based in South, East, and Southeast Asia. Three broad research questions followed from the aims. These were: (1) "What is the current state of the evidence on positive education within higher education across South, East, and Southeast Asia?", (2) "What positive psychology concepts and theoretical frameworks have been considered by Asian researchers working within the higher education context?" and (3) "What are the knowledge gaps?".

## Stage 2: Identifying Relevant Studies

The literature search considered peer-reviewed journals and grey literature (conference proceedings, postgraduate dissertations, etc.). To ensure comprehensive coverage of all relevant mainstream journals, the following databases were searched: SCOPUS, Web of Science, PsycInfo, Applied Social Sciences Index & Abstracts (ASSIA), and the Education and Social Sciences subjects in the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ). Grey literature was searched using PsychExtra, OpenAIRE and OpenDOAR registers.

The search strategy was developed collaboratively with a university librarian to identify positive educational practices in a university setting. Search terms were combined as follows: ('general concept') AND ('setting') AND ('positive education learning outcomes') AND ('Asian region) (see Supplementary file 1 for more details). In practice, in most databases only the first two were applied. To be eligible for inclusion, articles had to sample university students or staff, be published from the year 2000, and available online as full-text and in English. The publication date marked the emergence of positive psychology in a special issue of American Psychologist (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Database and registry searches were conducted during the period 25 June–02 July 2021 and were updated 30 May–07 June 2022. A snowballing technique was applied by hand-searching the reference lists of all included records.

## Stage 3: Study Selection

All authors contributed to screening, with training on five records to promote consistent decision making. For each record, two screeners worked independently, with any disagreements being discussed with the first author. Screening proceeded first by title and abstract and second by full-text. Exclusion criteria were be applied in the following order: (i) no Abstract available, (ii) not in English language, (iii) not in Asian region, (iv) school setting, (v) community setting, (vi) non-educational setting, (vii) review article, (viii) out of scope (e.g., general pedagogy, quality assurance, developmental psychology, cognitive/affective study, physical study, study of religion, etc.), and (ix) published before 2000. Fourteen grey literature full-text records could not be retrieved for screening (Supplementary file 2).

## Stage 4: Charting the Data

A standardised data charting form comprised year of publication, type of publication, country affiliation of the authors, geographical location of the work, main aim of the study, theoretical framework for positive education, psychological concepts assessed and their corresponding measures, study design, type of participants (students or staff), sample size, the important results that answered the main aim of study and interpretation of findings, and funding statement. In addition, it was recorded whether or not each study directly engaged with the field of positive psychology in terms of theoretical framework, research hypotheses and references. The assumption here was those studies might be more likely to offer a scientific advance to existing theoretical frameworks than descriptive studies. Studies rated 'partial' showed an awareness of positive psychology concepts (e.g., resilience (see Reivich and Shatté (2002), grit (see Duckworth et al., 2007)), but did not refer to theoretical frameworks post-2000 and did not formulate their research hypotheses accordingly. Research studies rated as 'no' tended to be grounded more strongly in pedagogical theory or social psychology and, while they mentioned positive psychology concepts, these were not conceptualised in a way that is consistent with the positive psychology literature. For intervention designs, further data items included the authors' description of the intervention, staff training and support, any steps taken to assess the fidelity of the intervention delivered, and the evaluation methodology used to quantify benefits. Data charting was independently extracted by two authors and the first author reconciled these into a single version.

## Stage 5: Collating, Summarising and Reporting the Results

Thematic analysis was used to determine emerging patterns, with content analysis to describe quantitative counts of the codes. The first author became fully immersed in the data to obtain the sense of whole, then coded and recoded the data to create meaningful categories. One set of results reported a numerical summary of studies across countries, study designs, funding and engagement to appropriate theories or models. Another set of results took the form of a visual thematic framework which mapped concepts into themes under four higher-order headings: optimal functioning, personal resources one can draw on, how one interacts with the world, and environmental factors.

## Stage 6: Consultation

Upon completion of preliminary synthesis of the unifying thematic framework, consultation with three independent experts (a positive psychology practitioner and two academic staff) with experience of higher education in South East Asia informed further refinement of this framework.

## Results and Discussion

A flow diagram of study records is given in Fig. 1. The initial database and registry searches identified 903 and 883 records, respectively, with another 115 potentially eligible records identified by searching selected databases for China, India, Indonesia, Japan and Taiwan from the OpenDOAR register (Supplementary file 1). After title, abstract and full-text screening, this was reduced to 109 eligible records. An additional 20 eligible records were identified after a hand

search on the reference lists of those included articles. Another 18 eligible records were added from an update of the search, one year later. In total there were 147 English language records reporting 157 experimental studies relating to positive psychology in higher education. A full list of references is provided in Supplementary file 3, while the completed data charting form is available as Supplementary file 4.

### Current State of the Evidence Within Higher Education Across South, East, and Southeast Asia

This section considers the first research question. A high proportion of the records (46.3%, 68/147) were 'hard-to-find' articles identified only using the OpenAIRE and OpenDOAR registers, with a sharp increase in the number of journal articles since 2015 (Supplementary file 5). Most experimental studies reported in the articles investigated students (82.9%, 136/164), not staff. The most common
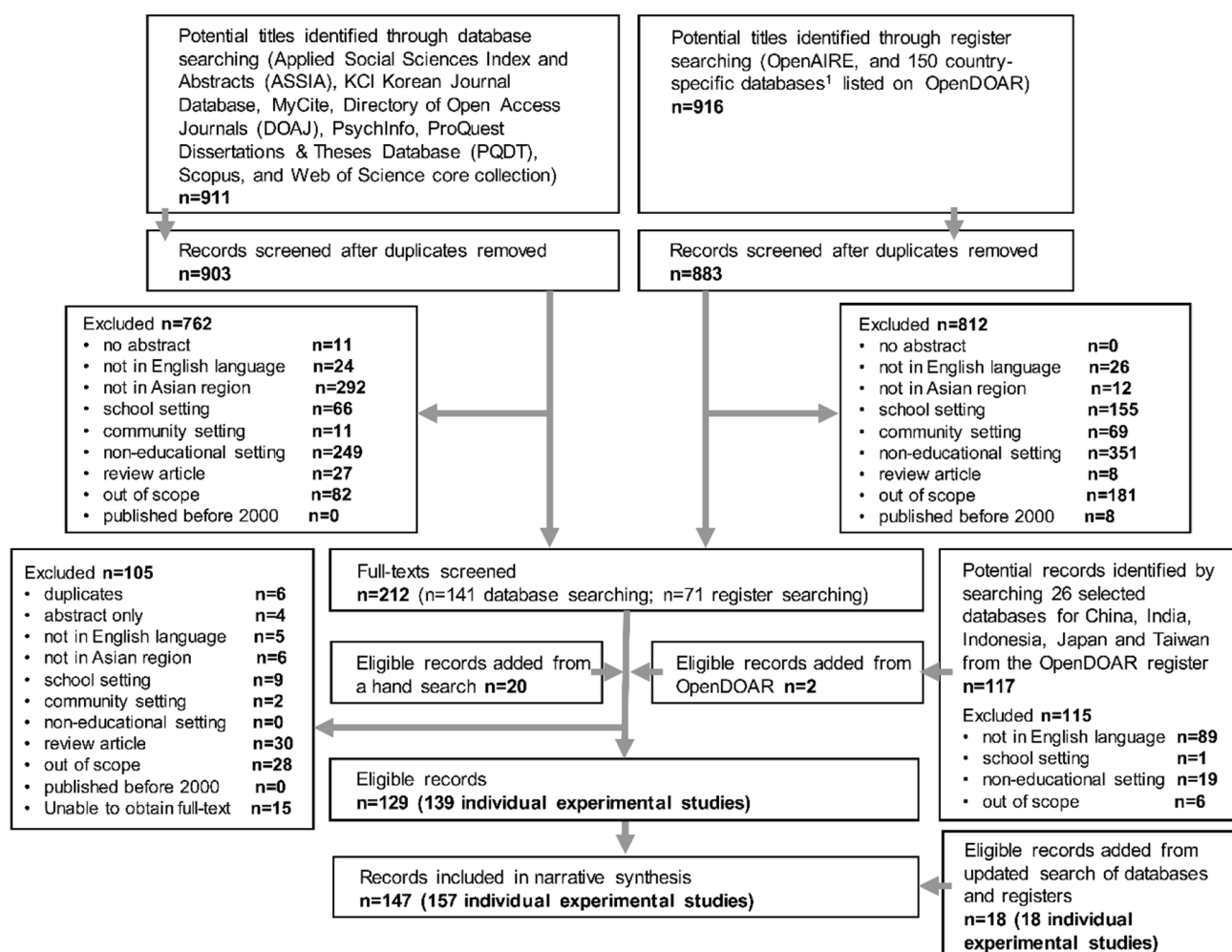


**Fig. 1** Flow diagram of the study records. In total, 147 records yielded 157 independent datasets for narrative synthesis

study design quantified associations with various positive psychology constructs (62.4%, 98/157). Some notable research topics were academic leadership, organisational commitment, student engagement and foreign language learning. Educational interventions based on positive psychology were the second most common (31/157, 19.7%). Interventions tended to be short-term and offered to relatively small groups of students as a compulsory part of the subject-specific curriculum or as an elective course, rather than embedded across the whole institution (but see Gan et al., 2022). Intervention studies were too heterogeneous and low quality to support further analysis, but the interested reader is referred to Supplementary file 6.

A majority of articles (81.6%, 120/147) were authored by academic staff working in public universities, but only 27.9% (41/147) were supported by funding. Quantifying the experimental studies reported, just under half were conducted in East Asia (44.5%, 73/164), with China dominating (Table 1). South East Asia contributed 38.4% of studies (63/164), with Malaysia dominating, while South Asia region contributed 17.1% (28/164), with Pakistan dominating. With the exception of Pakistan, those countries with a relatively high number of outputs tended to reflect availability of funding, either from within the university itself or awarded by external bodies (Table 1).

**Positive Psychology Frameworks and Concepts**

This section considers the second research question. Of those studies that directly engaged with the field of positive psychology (Table 1), the most popular conceptual framework encompassed Seligman's work on character strengths and the theory of well-being. For example, about one third of the intervention studies reported that this work had informed their curriculum design (Online Resource 6). Other theories and models are given in Table 2, and these are also Western-centric.

From the data, similar concepts were grouped together from the perspective of what is needed to achieve individual optimal functioning. The resulting unifying framework is presented in Fig. 2. At the centre is optimal functioning (the desired outcome) with two major pathways for achieving it: (i) personal resources one can draw on, and (ii) how one interacts within the world. Variables describing the teaching and learning environment at university were collated as contextual factors.

*Optimal Functioning*

Measures of optimal functioning typically reflected subjective (hedonic) well-being (i.e., living a pleasant life) (e.g., Diener et al., 1985; Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999) and

**Table 1** Brief summary of included experimental studies on positive psychology in higher education across Asia

| Region and country | #Studies conducted in the country | #Studies with funding | Study design | | | | Engages with the field of PP | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | Descriptive | Association | Intervention | Psychometric evaluation | Yes (%) | Partial (%) | No (%) |
| *East Asia region* | | | | | | | | | |
| China | 34 | 15 | 7 | 22 | 2 | 3 | 16 (40.0) | 8 (23.5) | 10 (29.4) |
| Hong Kong | 17 | 7 | 2 | 7 | 6 | 2 | 5 (29.4) | 2 (11.8) | 10 (58.8) |
| Taiwan | 5 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 1 | 0 | 3 (60.0) | 0 | 2 (40.0) |
| Japan | 4 | 2 | 0 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 2 (50.0) | 1 (25.0) | 1 (25.0) |
| South Korea | 13 | 4 | 3 | 6 | 3 | 1 | 4 (30.8) | 7 (53.8) | 2 (15.4) |
| *South Asia region* | | | | | | | | | |
| Bangladesh | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 (100) |
| India | 8 | 0 | 1 | 7 | 0 | 0 | 1 (12.5) | 3 (37.5) | 4 (50.0) |
| Pakistan | 19 | 1 | 0 | 15 | 3 | 1 | 6 (31.6) | 3 (15.8) | 10 (52.6) |
| *South East Asia region* | | | | | | | | | |
| Indonesia | 10 | 1 | 2 | 8 | 0 | 0 | 2 (20.0) | 1 (10.0) | 7 (70.0) |
| Malaysia | 32 | 11 | 3 | 20 | 9 | 1 | 8 (25.0) | 6 (18.8) | 18 (56.3) |
| Myanmar | 5 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 1 | 0 | 1 (20.0) | 2 (40.0) | 2 (40.0) |
| Philippines | 8 | 2 | 0 | 5 | 3 | 0 | 6 (75.0) | 0 | 2 (25.0) |
| Thailand | 5 | 3 | 1 | 3 | 1 | 0 | 1 (20.0) | 1 (20.0) | 3 (60.0) |
| Vietnam | 2 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 (50.0) | 1 (50.0) |

Data are reported in terms of overall number of individual studies carried out in each country, and where the same experimental study is conducted in multiple countries then these data are double counted. *PP* positive psychology

**Table 2** Brief summary of those articles engaging with theoretical models in the field of positive psychology

| Country | Theories and models associated with positive psychology |
|---|---|
| China | Broaden and build theory (Fredrickson, 2001) [1 count]<br>Character strengths and theory of well-being (various Seligman et al. citations) [10 counts]<br>Dualistic model of passion (Vallerand et al., 2003) [1 count]<br>Hope theory (Snyder 2000) [1 count]<br>Second wave positive psychology (Wong, 2011) [1 count] |
| Hong Kong | Broaden-and-Build Theory (Fredrickson, 2001) [1 count]<br>Character strengths and theory of well-being (various Seligman et al. citations) [1 count]<br>Hope theory (Snyder 2000) [1 count]<br>Self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan, 2000) [1 count] |
| Taiwan | Hope theory (Snyder 2000) [1 count]<br>Positive Education of Character Building: CasMac (Wong, 2019) [1 count]<br>Theory of optimal energy (Phan et al., 2019) [1 count] |
| Japan | Self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan, 2000) [2 counts] |
| South Korea | Broaden and build theory (Fredrickson, 2001) [1 count]<br>Character strengths and theory of well-being (various Seligman et al. citations) [2 counts] |
| Bangladesh | – |
| India | Broaden and build theory (Fredrickson, 2001) [1 count] |
| Pakistan | Broaden and build theory (Fredrickson, 2001) [1 count]<br>Character strengths and theory of well-being (various Seligman et al. citations) [1 count]<br>Sustainable Happiness model (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005) [2 counts] |
| Indonesia | Character strengths and theory of well-being (various Seligman et al. citations) [1 count] |
| Malaysia | Broaden and build theory (Fredrickson, 2001) [1 count]<br>Character strengths and theory of well-being (various Seligman et al. citations) [3 counts]<br>Hope theory (Snyder 2000) [2 counts]<br>Self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan, 2000) [2 counts]<br>Theory of optimal energy (Phan et al., 2019) [1 count] |
| Myanmar | Self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan, 2000) [1 count] |
| Philippines | Broaden and build theory (Fredrickson, 2001) [3 counts]<br>Hope theory (Snyder 2000) [1 count] |
| Thailand | Character strengths and theory of well-being (various Seligman et al. citations) [1 count] |
| Vietnam | – |

Data are reported in terms of overall number of individual studies carried out in each country, and where the same experimental study is conducted in multiple countries then these data are double counted

psychological (eudemonic) well-being (i.e., living a meaningful life) (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 2008). All studies used scales originally developed in the West.

*Personal Resources One Can Draw On*

This was subdivided into *beliefs* and *dispositions* which are relatively stable and enduring patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting, *states* which are more time-bound, and *skills and competencies* which can be developed through training (Fig. 2). A range of states, psychosocial skills and competencies were investigated, although no critical mass of research on any specific topic was apparent.

Beliefs and dispositions were often considered as multidimensional composites. For example, ten studies focused on the general topics of character strengths, with four of those using measures based on the Values in Action inventory (e.g., Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Thirteen studies explored generic motivation as a way of controlling one's own destiny, with four of those considering intrinsic and extrinsic factors (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 2000). Eight studies assessed personality, with four of those considering the "Big 5" (Goldberg, 1990). Only one disposition (*mental self-supporting)* was specific to Asian culture (Wu et al., 2017). This is a personality trait with Confucian origins which emphasises the tendency to be responsible for your own thoughts and actions and actively communicating with the outside world for self-development. Gratitude (e.g., McCullough et al., 2002) and grit (e.g., Duckworth et al., 2007) were the only other distinct dispositions reported and these both have Western origins in positive psychology.

Several of the positive psychology constructs reflect a mixture of dispositions and abilities and so, for the purposes of this thematic framework, these form a distinct set (see Fig. 2). Emotional intelligence and psychological capital (hope, optimism, resilience and self-efficacy) are two such examples. For example, 14 of the 157 experimental studies assessed emotional intelligence. Half of these ($n = 7$) assessed emotional intelligence using some of the classical trait measures (i.e., Petrides & Furnham, 2001; Schutte
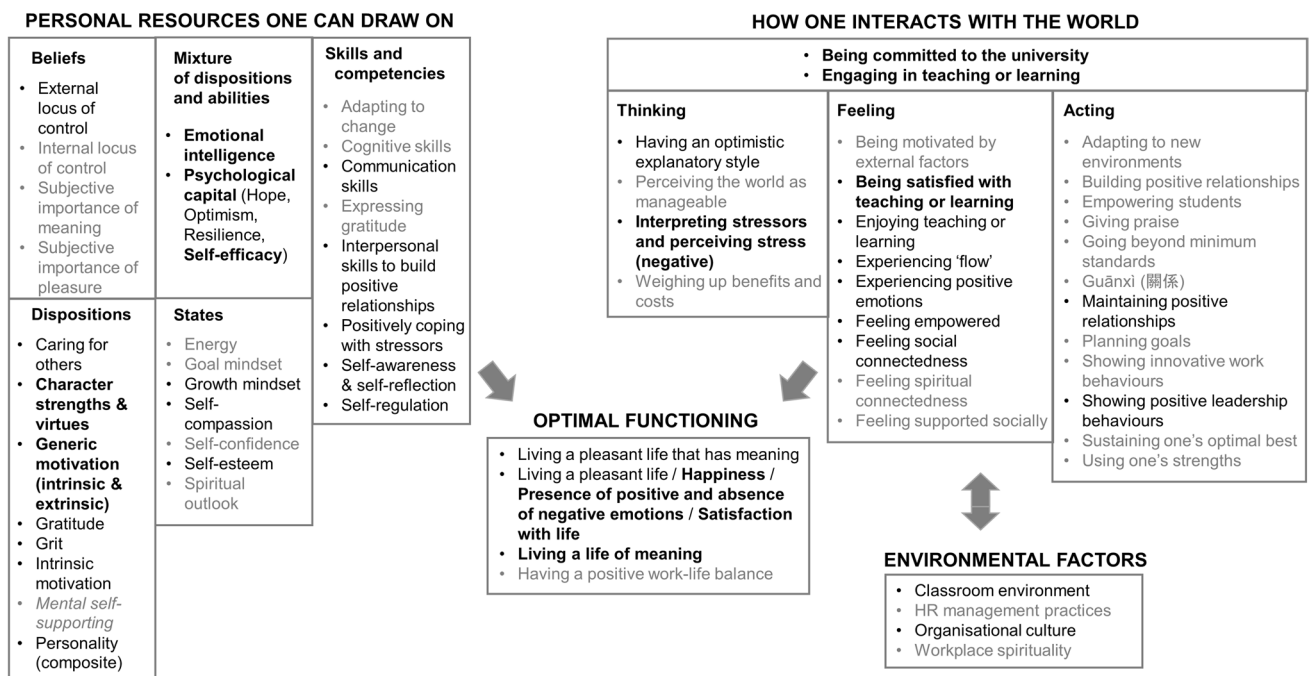
**PERSONAL RESOURCES ONE CAN DRAW ON**

**Beliefs**
- External locus of control
- Internal locus of control
- Subjective importance of meaning
- Subjective importance of pleasure

**Mixture of dispositions and abilities**
- **Emotional intelligence**
- **Psychological capital** (Hope, Optimism, Resilience, **Self-efficacy**)

**States**
- Energy
- Goal mindset
- Growth mindset
- Self-compassion
- Self-confidence
- Self-esteem
- Spiritual outlook

**Skills and competencies**
- Adapting to change
- Cognitive skills
- Communication skills
- Expressing gratitude
- Interpersonal skills to build positive relationships
- Positively coping with stressors
- Self-awareness & self-reflection
- Self-regulation

**Dispositions**
- Caring for others
- **Character strengths & virtues**
- **Generic motivation (intrinsic & extrinsic)**
- Gratitude
- Grit
- Intrinsic motivation
- *Mental self-supporting*
- Personality (composite)

**HOW ONE INTERACTS WITH THE WORLD**
- **Being committed to the university**
- **Engaging in teaching or learning**

**Thinking**
- Having an optimistic explanatory style
- Perceiving the world as manageable
- **Interpreting stressors and perceiving stress (negative)**
- Weighing up benefits and costs

**Feeling**
- Being motivated by external factors
- **Being satisfied with teaching or learning**
- Enjoying teaching or learning
- Experiencing 'flow'
- Experiencing positive emotions
- Feeling empowered
- Feeling social connectedness
- Feeling spiritual connectedness
- Feeling supported socially

**Acting**
- Adapting to new environments
- Building positive relationships
- Empowering students
- Giving praise
- Going beyond minimum standards
- Guānxì (關係)
- Maintaining positive relationships
- Planning goals
- Showing innovative work behaviours
- Showing positive leadership behaviours
- Sustaining one's optimal best
- Using one's strengths

**OPTIMAL FUNCTIONING**
- Living a pleasant life that has meaning
- Living a pleasant life / **Happiness / Presence of positive and absence of negative emotions / Satisfaction with life**
- **Living a life of meaning**
- Having a positive work-life balance

**ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS**
- Classroom environment
- HR management practices
- Organisational culture
- Workplace spirituality

**Fig. 2** Thematic framework mapping the positive psychology constructs assessed in published works from the Asia region, presented through the lens of what is needed for optimal functioning. The more common topics are highlighted in bold font (reported in at least 10 studies), while infrequent topics are represented in grey font (reported in no more than 2 studies). Arrows indicate the hypothesised direction of influences on optimal functioning

et al. 1998), and a lesser proportion ($n = 4$) using a mixed construct measure (i.e., Bar-On, 2004; Wong & Law, 2002).

*How One Interacts with the World*

Constructs relating to ways in which the individual interacts within the world were subdivided into *thinking*, *feeling* and *acting* (Fig. 2). Two multidimensional constructs encompassed all three components; organisational commitment (20/157, 12.7% of studies) and engagement (15/157, 9.6% of studies). One of the dominant perspectives on commitment considered obligation to stay, emotional ties, and the perceived cost of leaving, with most studies assessing commitment in academic staff rather than students (85%, 17/20). These came from Malaysia, Pakistan, Indonesia and China (in descending order). In contrast, studies on engagement in teaching or learning mostly focused on students (87%, 13/15), with no obvious geographical bias.

Very few experimental studies assessed positive thinking (3.9%, 6/157). Instead, more studies assessed negative thinking such as interpreting environmental stressors (1.9%, 3/157) or perceiving stress (6.4%, 10/157). Although positive psychology emphasises pathways to optimal functioning, a proportion of studies (15%, 22/157, not shown in Fig. 2) considered relationships with negative aspects

of emotional well-being, including poor mental health and burnout (e.g., Dong et al., 2016; Yang et al., 2021).

A greater number of studies investigated feeling and acting, although only a handful of studies on any particular topic were found (Fig. 2). For example, with regards to feeling, feeling satisfied with teaching or learning was one of the most popular emotions explored in this body of work (9.6%, 15/157). Studies came mostly from Malaysia, Indonesia, China and Pakistan (in descending order), and were balanced across academic staff and students. Six studies (3.8%) considered the experience of positive emotions in teaching or learning (e.g., Yang et al., 2021). With regards to acting, two studies considered prosocial behaviours that build positive relationships (Guo et al., 2021; Sharma & Tomer, 2018), while four studies considered actions that maintain positive relationships (e.g., Moirangthem & Thingujam, 2018). Four studies considered academic leadership style, mostly in the context of organisational commitment (e.g., Awang et al., 2010). Only one study measured people's deployment of their character strengths (Zhang & Chen, 2018), despite the large number of studies examining individual profiles of character strengths. One acting concept (guānxì,關係) is defined by Chinese people as the ability to create and make use of a personalised social network comprising influential relationships and it also grants individuals the bonding power in building a harmonious working environment. Such

relationships are quite specific to Asian culture (Wu et al., 2017).

## Knowledge Gaps

From the unifying thematic framework shown in Fig. 2, the major contribution by positive psychology to higher education across Asia underscores what types of personal resources are associated with optimal functioning. Notably emotional intelligence, psychological capital, character strengths and personal motivations are all associated with eudemonic and hedonic conceptualisations of well-being, consistent with the Western literature (e.g., Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2021). Nevertheless, there are insufficient high-quality studies to support a quantitative analysis of what positive psychology interventions work in the Asian higher education sector. The unifying thematic framework highlights two further knowledge gaps, notably the role of intentional activity to achieve well-being and the socio-cultural context. These are discussed in turn.

First, compared to personal resources, there has been much less emphasis on how those resources can be effectively deployed via intentional activities to achieve optimal functioning in higher education, and what the personal journey to self-actualisation might look like for academic staff and students alike. Western scholars consider mobilising personal strengths via intentional activity to be the most direct route to optimal functioning (e.g., Cantore & Cooperrider, 2013; Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2021), yet this study revealed a paucity of research in Asia on what those process of personal deployment and what the personal journey to self-actualisation might look like. Relatively few research studies assessed processes of positive thinking, feeling or acting (Fig. 2). For example, only one (unpublished thesis, Cheung, 2018) was found to directly address the process of supporting student growth and development through the use of affirmative language. One fruitful avenue for research could be to explore educators' use of conversational approaches for promoting positive change in students as a parallel to their use of communication skills to teach knowledge. But more generally, high-quality evidence for the benefits of any carefully designed positive psychology interventions would be welcomed.

Second, the analysis of conceptual frameworks revealed a pervasive bias towards conducting positive psychology in Asia through a Western perspective, which de-emphasises the role of the social collective. Chinese and other Eastern cultural values and expectations are considerably different from those of many Western cultures such as USA, Europe and Australia. Yet, from the 157 studies included in the scoping review, sociocultural concerns were missing from the list of environmental factors (Fig. 2), and cross-cultural

differences in concepts were rarely acknowledged by the authors. To understand and effectively support optimal functioning of their students, educators need to take into account the broader context. For example, large cross-cultural differences exist in how emotions are expressed (Scherer & Brousch, 2009). Sociocultural values and norms reward certain appraisal biases, leading people to suppress some types of emotions while cultivating others. The Confucian perspective encourages suppressing the expression of positive emotions, such as happiness and satisfaction, because this is seen as a way to show modesty and humility.

Values held by the young person (and their parents) reflect sociocultural values and norms, and they strongly influence how students think, feel and act. In Asia, both Confucianism and collectivism value social harmony and hierarchy. Confucian tradition across China, Japan, Korea and Vietnam prioritises family ties and values interdependence, filial piety and obedience, with individual decisions often putting the benefit of family and friends before personal needs and desires (Kagitcibasi, 2013; Rudy et al., 2007). Meanwhile, developing autonomy is part of the normal transition to adulthood whereby young people are growing in their abilities to think, feel, make decisions, and act independently.

While relatedness and autonomy are basic psychological needs, their coexistence in collectivist cultures can be particularly challenging for students (Rudy et al., 2007). A widely held belief is that people living in Asia inhibit autonomy more so than their counterparts in individualistic (i.e., WEIRD) societies (Olsen et al., 2002). While this stereotypical notion has some truth, it is somewhat simplistic. For example, there is a growing spirit of Chinese-style individualism which emphasises individual power in the context of one's connection and unity with external authorities of power, but still values connection with others and maintenance of social harmony. Thus, for example, Chinese people consider social contact as the most important aspect of happiness and they define happiness (幸福 xìngfú) as the fulfilment of a dream or achievement of a goal (Brailovskaia et al., 2022). In the thematic framework (Fig. 2), 'feeling social connectedness' and 'feeling supported socially' were classified under feelings about the world. However, the possibility remains open that such concepts could instead be treated as a core component of optimal functioning in Asian cultures.

The WEIRD perspective promotes individuals as sole, autonomous agents where thriving or failing is one's own personal responsibility. An alternative understanding of the self where an individual sees him or herself as a member of the community is not so congruous with traditionally Western positive psychology concepts such as grit (e.g., Duckworth et al., 2007) and resilience (e.g., Reivich & Shatté, 2002). Instead, the focus of the narrative might shift towards ways in which a collective could together work to challenge

or overcome systemic weaknesses in the system that are the source of the challenge or maintaining the need for perseverance of effort (Webster & Rivers, 2019).

Western theories and models of well-being (e.g., Lyubomirsky et al., 2005; Seligman, 2011) also fail to directly address realities of the 'tiger parenting' culture in which familial and societal expectations drive young people to fulfil moral obligations of social responsibility, despite this contradicting their pursuit of hedonic or eudaimonic well-being (Juang et al., 2013). Recent focus group findings reported by Brailovskaia et al. (2022) call into question the cross-cultural equivalence of some of the measures of subjective well-being (Diener et al., 1985; Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999) that have dominated the included articles in this scoping review. Brailovskaia et al. (2022) demonstrated how non-invariance stemmed from translation bias, as well as true cultural differences in how the constructs are conceived and experienced. This might be just the tip of the iceberg. If so, then it highlights a major and important research direction. Asian scholars are therefore encouraged to adopt a more critical cross-cultural perspective when considering the degree to which Western constructs in positive psychology are recognised and considered meaningful in the context under investigation. One way that this can be achieved in study methodology is to go beyond simple translation of instruments developed with a western perspective, instead using mixed-methods research designs to verify content equivalence (i.e., "is the construct recognised and meaningful in the culture?") and conceptual equivalence (i.e. "does the instrument measure the same construct in different cultures?"). Where existing instruments are found to be inadequate, then there is good reason to modify or develop new research tools better suited to the localised Asian context.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

There is a growing interest from Asian scholars in the disciplines of education and psychology to the potential benefits of positive psychology to higher education. This scoping review presents a narrative synthesis of relevant published research conducted in the most populous regions of Asia. This synthesis culminated in a unifying framework which places 'Optimal Functioning' at the centre, with 'Personal Resources One Can Draw On' and 'How One Interacts With The World' as direct influencing factors, and 'Environment' as an indirect factor. A significant proportion of the contributing work that has been published to date was hard to reach because it was identifiable only via national and university registers, rather than through easily searchable academic databases. Thus, key strengths of the study are the comprehensive search strategy and corresponding large dataset

which informed a unifying framework to highlight where most of the evidence currently lies and to pinpoint the gaps.

The theoretical and practical importance of positive education research in Asia is well noted. This study adds to the growing interest in this field in the higher education sector by examining the current status of the field and identifying knowledge gaps that can inform and guide future research on applications of positive psychology in the Asian higher education sector. By synthesising concepts into a unifying framework, its foremost contribution to empirical knowledge is in demonstrating a scholarly focus on the role of certain personal resources (e.g., emotional intelligence, etc.) in promoting well-being, at the same time as highlighting the paucity of high-quality applied research evaluating how those resources can be effectively deployed to optimise well-being. The bias observed towards conducting positive psychology in Asian universities through a Western perspective is perhaps unsurprising for a relatively young field. Nevertheless, as positive psychology enters its third-wave of evolution, scholars are beginning to approach research questions with a greater maturity; embracing greater complexity and paying more attention to the groups and systems in which people are embedded (Lomas et al., 2021). Collaboration between scholars in western countries (such as Europe) and Asia are beginning to bear fruit through the co-creation of new knowledge about cross-cultural influences on positive psychology concepts (e.g., Brailovskaia et al., 2022). This advancement presents an ideal opportunity for greater leadership in the field from Asia scholars, but requires a deeper level of critical thinking about the field than has generally been shown hitherto, as indicated by the included articles in this scoping review.

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