

## **The Bittersweet Symbolism of Coffee**

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As I take a sip of my morning coffee, the bittersweet taste transports me back to the intense months leading up to the Chinese national college entrance exam, or gaokao. For many, coffee is a morning pick-me-up or a social beverage, but for me, it is a symbol of my identity as a Chinese student. My parents' emphasis on the importance of education and hard work shaped my upbringing and led to a demanding experience in my last year of high school, preparing for the Chinese national college entrance exam.

The college entrance exams, or gaokao, in China are a rite of passage for many high school students. It is an annual event that happens in June and is considered one of the most critical exams in the country. The exam determines whether a student is eligible to attend university or college and can have a substantial impact on their future opportunities based on their scores. For many Chinese students, like myself, the gaokao is a make-or-break moment, and the pressure to succeed can be overwhelming (Ma & Wang, 2016). It was during the final preparation period when I first started my coffee journey. I had to put in a lot of study time in the last few months before the gaokao in order to do well on the admission examinations. I was worn out and in need of a cool drink because my days were spent reading textbooks and doing practice tests. At that time, I started my coffee journey with a cup of Nescafé. Despite not enjoying the coffee's harsh flavor, I drank it nonetheless for its cooling effects.

Unlike the sweet taste of an energy drink, the bitterness that appeared to permeate every sip of coffee astonished me when I first tasted it. The taste seemed to linger in my mouth long after I had finished drinking, leaving me with a bitter and sour aftertaste. For a while, I didn't think I'd ever come to appreciate it. However, as time passed, I came to realize the amazing beauty and complexity that existed behind the seemingly simple beverage. I learned about



various brewing methods, roasting procedures, and bean kinds, each with its own distinct flavor profile. I experimented with numerous water-to-coffee ratios and brewing temperatures in search of the perfect cup. I discovered that the more I knew about coffee, the more I came to appreciate it.

As my fondness for coffee grew, I began to see parallels between my love of coffee and my experience during the gaokao. Like the bitterness of coffee, the gaokao was a difficult and challenging time for me. The pressure to succeed was intense, and I often felt stressed by the sheer amount of studying I had to do. However, there were successful moments that helped to make the struggle worthwhile. I was proud of myself when I solved a particularly difficult problem or achieved a good grade on a test. I also felt a sense of camaraderie with my classmates, and we

supported each other through the long days and nights of studying. These moments of success and friendship gave me the drive to persevere during the challenging gaokao period.

Despite the challenges, I was able to persevere and succeed during the gaokao, just as I was able to learn to appreciate the bittersweet taste of coffee. Now, whenever I enjoy a cup of coffee, I am reminded of the lessons I learned from gaokao, and the valuable qualities that allowed me to succeed. But more than that, I am reminded of the beauty and complexity that can be found in even the most seemingly simple things. And while the taste of coffee may be an acquired one, the lessons it has taught me will stay with me for a lifetime.

As I ponder my identity and its close connection to Chinese culture, I can't help but think about the larger significance of coffee in this context. For me, coffee is more than just a daily brew, it represents the struggles Chinese have endured in the past. One of the instances is the Nanking Massacre, it serves as a reminder of the inhumane acts committed by the Japanese army during World War II. Over a period of six weeks, the invading Japanese army slaughtered over 300,000 unarmed people (Wikimedia Foundation, 2023). They used the living as targets for bayonet practice and even used bayonets to pick babies directly out of pregnant women's wombs to showcase their war records. These historical scars run deep in the hearts of every Chinese person, but we cannot be stuck in history and stagnate. Instead, we must learn from history's lessons and move forward. The bitterness of coffee serves as a poignant reminder of the difficulties we have endured. For me, coffee is a tangible representation of hope, strength, and determination that is deeply ingrained in our collective identity.

In conclusion, the aroma, taste, and texture of coffee represent more than just a simple drink for me. It is a symbol of my identity, my culture, and the collective experiences of many individuals across different countries. As a Chinese student, I faced many challenges during the gaokao, but the lessons I learned from those experiences have shaped me into the person I am today. Similarly, for many Chinese, coffee represents the hardships and the unique flavors that they encounter or carry. In a rapidly changing global environment, we must balance the need for progress with the preservation of our cultural identity. The complex of coffee reflects this reality and serves as a testament to the resilience and adaptability of our people.

### Works Cited

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