

# ***The Continuation of Reproduction in Higher Education***

## ***- Exploring the Impact of Social Class on the Aspiration of Students Taking Postgraduate Entrance Examination in China***

**Tingxuan Ding<sup>1,a,\*</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>*School of Sociology, Politics and International Studies, University of Bristol, 11 Priory Road, Bristol, UK*

*a. hs22789@bristol.ac.uk*

*\*corresponding author*

**Abstract:** Along with the expansion of higher education in China, on the one hand, academic qualifications are depreciating at an alarming rate, and on the other hand, the competition for employment is becoming more and more competitive, thus, the graduate school fever has become an emerging social phenomenon in China. In order to understand the mechanism of reproduction of this new-emergent phenomenon, this study try to focus on the aspiration of students who would take part in the postgraduate entrance examination in 2023 with different family background. With Bourdieu's toolkit (habitus, capital, doxa, etc.), the aspiration can be set in the individua's lifeworld, but also help us to bring macro structure in discussion. In the study, the influence of institution, family, peer group will be discussed. The study concludes that Postgraduate Entrance Examination is similar to the college entrance examination in that it serves the function of social reproduction in society.

**Keywords:** Postgraduate entrance examination, China, aspiration, Bourdieu

### **1. Introduction**

Recent years, a dramatic increasement has been witnessed in higher education system in China. In 2015, the number of students enrolled in higher education system was 26.250,000, which is five time that in 1999 [1]. With such changes, pursuing a higher degree after a bachelor's degree through Postgraduate Entrance Examination (PEE) has become a major choice to stay competitive in the job market [2]. This phenomenon is closely intertwined with a traditional thought in Chinese culture: Education can bring one success [3]. However, existing studies have shown that in China, along with the expansion of higher education, the mode of entering higher education using the college entrance examination as a mediator still has large class differences in terms of educational resource holdings [4], higher education adaptability [5], and post university outcome [6].

As an emerging social phenomenon, there are still relatively few studies related to PEE in China. Therefore, this study attempts to explore the social reproduction mechanism of the higher education from individual aspiration with the help of interviews with candidates who intend to take the PEE at the end of 2023.

## 2. Theoretical basement

Choice is an important part of individual's life, in the process of growing up, individuals with similar trajectories will make similar decisions, while on the other hand, due to the diversity of growth trajectories, different social groups will have different choices when facing the same problem. In these heterogeneous and homogeneous choices, a great deal of social inequality is reproduced [7].

Currently there are two main types of research on decision making, one is Rational Action theory (RAT) advocated by Goldthorpe et al. and the other is the theoretical system of habitus advocated by Bourdieu. Compared to the former, the latter is better to help us bring into the discussion the more subtle factors that individuals consider when making decisions [8].

According to Bourdieu [9]: "habitus is a system of lasting transposable disposition which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations and action." Specifically, habitus is constituted on the one hand by the circumstances of past and at the same time shapes aspirations and expectations for the future in the present. In Bourdieu's theoretical framework, habitus is conditioned by an individual's position in social space, which is determined by the total amount of capital and the structure of capital. Habitus varies according to its position in the social space, and because individuals accumulate different amounts and types of capital (majorly economic, social, and cultural) at different times in their lives, habitus also changes accordingly. Through a categorisation of what choices are right for them and what choices are unthinkable and impossible, there is "a feel of game" when individuals make decisions [10]. Therefore, with the help of habitus, we can try to explore the social inequality behind the decisions related to the examination from the individual's aspiration.

In terms of research related to higher education decisions, existing studies have been more comprehensive with the help of Bourdieu's toolkit in higher education decision making. Reay [11] and McDonough [12] introduced familial habitus, institutional habitus, and organisational habitus to discuss the influence of family and school on individual decision making in higher education.

All three concepts suggest that the similarity of circumstances and shared past history (other family members, former students) in a given environment (family, school) in turn shape a similar predisposition among individuals within that environment. From this perspective, existing research has revealed that the decision to attend college and expectations about attending college are influenced by family, school, peer group and media to a specific degree. From this perspective, research has revealed that the decision to attend university and the expectations about attending university are influenced to a specific extent by family, school, peer group and media.

However, such a discussion would lose the diversity of perspectives and individuals within a specific environment. Therefore, this problem can be solved with the help of the concept of doxa proposed by Atkinson [13], which refers to those things that are shaped in the environment and considered to be the right thing to do, that can be shaped and maintained by the production of cultural capital, and that, when the doxa is not being established, it can be shaped and maintained with the help of orthodoxy (a symbolic system dominated by the school) and one or several opposing heterodoxy (dominated by teachers, students, etc., as opposed to the school-dominated system). At the same time, in the absence of doxa, it is possible to reserve the possibility of discussing the existence of different messages in the school through the concepts of orthodoxy (school-dominated symbolic systems) and one or several opposing heterodoxy (symbolic systems dominated by teachers, students, etc., which are in opposition to the school-dominated system) [13, 14].

Therefore, with the help of the above theoretical tools, this study has the following two hypothesis: a). Family circumstances will still affect students' aspiration to graduate school to some extent, although the extent may vary depending on the school they attend. b). Students attending elite universities have a more specific aspiration than those attending regular universities.

### 3. Method

In order to ensure that during the course of the interviews, respondents will be able to discuss as many of the factors that influence their life-world expectations regarding the future as possible, semi-structured interviews will be used in this study. The interviews will be conducted with students who are preparing to take the 2023 PPE exam and will last approximately 30 minutes.

A total of 15 interviewees were recruited for the study, 8 males and 7 females. Two respondents were recruited by the researcher's undergraduate school and the remaining 13 were recruited online. Of the 15 interviewees, 3 were from elite universities and the remaining 12 were from ordinary universities.

On the other hand, regarding the respondents' socio-economic status, Lu's (2002) criterion of judging the respondents' socio-economic status from their parents' academic qualifications and occupations was mainly referred to. In this study, the working class mainly includes the unemployed, peasants, factory workers, service workers, and small entrepreneurs, while the middle class mainly includes teachers, scientists, workers, civil servants, and self-employed industrial and commercial workers. As mentioned earlier, students with a better socio-economic status than the middle class are more likely to choose to go abroad, so only the middle class and working class were considered in the sample of this study.

Table 1: Respondents' school rank and social class

|                   | The intermediation | The dominated | Overall |
|-------------------|--------------------|---------------|---------|
| Elite university  | 1                  | 2             | 3       |
| Normal university | 3                  | 9             | 12      |

The information collected from the interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed at the end of the interviews. During the transcription process, I will record the information in Chinese based on the contents mentioned in the literature review, including the aspiration of post-graduate education, as well as relevant institutional doxa, familial doxa, academic interest, career prospect, and other important messages highlighted by other interviewees, and translate them into English for presentation in the thesis. During the transcription process, I will record in Chinese the important messages highlighted in the literature review, including the aspiration of post-graduate education, as well as the related institutional doxa, familial doxa, academic interest, career prospect, etc., with other interviewees, and translate them into English for presentation in the thesis.

### 4. Discussion

#### 4.1. Postgraduate state as concrete life in aspiration

A is one of the working class survivors who successfully passed the entrance exams to enter an elite university. While A's parents were not able to help him directly with his studies when he was a child, they did emphasise the importance of studying and nurtured A's interest in reading during his leisure time - an interest that continues to this day, A's parents were not able to help him directly with his decision to go to graduate school, but due to the rich academic resources provided by Elite University, A had already entered the laboratory for research during his undergraduate studies and had developed an interest in research and an interest in graduate school. However, due to the rich academic resources provided by the Elite University, A had already entered the laboratory for research during her undergraduate studies, and had developed an interest in research and a very detailed aspiration for graduate school and future life plans. In the course of the conversation, A was able to point out that most of her time in graduate school was spent on experimentation in her field of study, and that if she

had produced better results in her master's degree, she would have been able to achieve a better result in the labs. L, like A, also entered the laboratory at a very early age to conduct research.

In an Elite university, not only are the academic resources relatively more abundant, but the university also tries to create a relatively academic doxa as much as possible, and in the dialogue with A, it was found that the content of these shaping includes factors such as the means to deliver lectures, revision lectures related to exams, successful alumni from previous years, Peer groups, and conversations with professors, etc. The latter is very influential because, as teachers, they are often regarded as experts in a particular field. The latter is very influential because as professors, they are often regarded as experts in a particular field, and being able to get life planning advice directly from such people is very influential to some students. I talked about the influence of her teachers. I was originally confused about her own planning, but after the tutor who supervised her thesis talked to her, I made up her mind to sit for the exams.

Another student, M, from an elite university, had a more utilitarian reason for taking the examination. M believed that she was influenced by people around her, on the one hand, and the employment orientation of her major, on the other hand.

A, L, and M are all studying in an elite university. The families of the first two are relatively in the working class, while the family of the latter is in the middle class. Compared to the former two, M has the option of studying abroad for a master's degree when he takes the exams, and his expectations are very specific; for A and L, although they are both from the working class, A's family has more cultural capital, which makes A's expectations more specific than L's when he makes his decision. However, the advantage of cultural capital brought by the Elite university to the three respondents makes their expectation of the master stage more specific than the other respondents.

#### **4.2. Postgraduate state as uncertainty but necessary future**

For those who studied in normal universities, their Aspiration for master's life was more uncertainty than their peers who studied in elite universities, and these students knew relatively less about master's life due to the fact that the school had fewer academic resources. For B, the master's life was considered to be painful and only enjoyable when he received his acceptance letter and diploma, while for G, he did not even envisage what the master's life would be like.

Although there are some promotional attempts to encourage further education in these schools, such as the symposium mentioned by E and the sharing session of exams done once a month mentioned by C, etc., however, for these programmes, they more often said that they were only aware of them and did not have more in-depth enrollment with them.

In normal universities, the percentage of former students who are successful in getting into graduate school in their desired school/disciplines is not very high, and the percentage of those who try to choose to go into the workforce after their undergraduate studies will be even higher. This also makes it more difficult for them to reach out to former graduate students who have succeeded in graduate school compared to their counterparts at elite universities.

For students whose families are better off but still attend normal universities, the impact of familial doxa may be greater for these individuals due to the relatively higher educational attainment of their parents and their more competitive proximity to the academic field compared to normal schools. Although familial doxa is by definition considered to be the perceived deservedness constructed from family history, parents are able to mould an individual's deservedness in the form of the production of cultural capital even in the absence of a similar situation in the family's past, similar to the situation described by Atkinson [15]. This is similar to what Atkinson [15] describes, in that parents from the working class, despite not having been to university, are still able to shape their aspirations for higher education by continually emphasising the importance of education to their children, and despite the fact that the university environment in which these parents once worked has changed drastically, and

that they do not have personal experience of postgraduate study, their advice still influences these students' views on what to do in order to enter university. also influenced these students' decisions about graduate school. For example, J, whose parents had both attended a university prior to the expansion of higher education, decided to enroll in an elite university in his hometown based on their advice. In addition, most middle-class families were able to provide more financial encouragement and support to their students.

While working class parents also emphasise educational opportunities, their advice is relatively more abstract, mostly focusing on how reading will enable their children to excel, and with the help of which they can provide individuals with the opportunity to become 'the best human beings'.

However, with the expansion of higher education, the symbolic capital provided by a university diploma, as if it were a title of nobility, which can bring advantages in employment and further studies, is now being monopolised by elite universities [16]. Therefore, although some students are already enrolled in a university and are about to receive their undergraduate degrees, there are still some students in normal universities who try to pursue upward mobility by entering an elite university through the PEE, but it is worth noting that the students who choose to enter a better university to study for a postgraduate degree are not common. However, it is worth noting that it is not uncommon for students to choose to enter a better university for their postgraduate studies, and with the fierce competition for master's degrees, it is not uncommon for students from elite schools to apply to a normal university.

In addition, there are some parents whose tendency is to let their students go straight to work after graduating from undergraduate programmes, and they may even outright oppose their children's pursuit of further studies, such as the parents of H. These parents maintain their demand for education only until they enter university, believing that a university degree is enough to find a better job. However, the situation is changing along with the expansion of higher education. Therefore, this part of the perception can be understood as what Bourdieu [17] calls misperception. a view that uses lagging experience to guide the current stage of life. For H, the parents' own poor level of qualifications did not have much of an impact on her, despite the direction they provided.

When discussing why they went to graduate school, D and H particularly emphasised the impact of the relationship between their future job expectations and this decision. Although their majors had relatively good salaries for employment directly after undergraduate studies, the work was nevertheless very intensive. In order to improve his future job prospects, D indicated that a master's degree would allow him to go to a somewhat easier position, while H chose another, more employable major.

In short, students attending normal universities are further away from master's level life due to the fact that they are located in a school that is more distant from an elite university, and at this point other relevant influences come into play, on the one hand the importance of the familial doxa is raised, and with the emphasis on the importance of academic performance, children are more encouraged to go on to higher education in a middle class environment, although due to the overdevelopment of the Chinese higher education system the academic system has changed considerably from the time they attended. The middle class environment encourages children to go on to higher education, although some parents are still keen to construct familial doxa in this context due to the rapid development of China's higher education system, which has changed considerably since the time of their schooling, while others recognise the changes in the academic system and are more likely to simply give their children the opportunity to go on to higher education, and in this context, other influences emerge. On the other hand, even though working class families are relatively farther away from the academic field and are not aware of the academic system, some parents are still able to support their students' endeavours in the academic field in different ways as described in Patfield, Gore and Fray [18]. This is also true at the postgraduate level, where some parents choose to support their children's choices

without understanding the academic *modus operandi* themselves. In addition, the working prospect was emphasised more often in normal universities than in elite universities, perhaps because these less well-resourced schools are more oriented towards getting a job after graduation in the long term than the academic side, which may also imply that normal universities are more likely to support students in their work after graduation than the academic side. This may also mean that students in normal universities may be more likely to consider jobs upon graduation than students in elite universities.

However, students in normal universities have more uncertainty about the aspiration of their master's degree, perhaps because they don't know much about postgraduate life, or they don't know much about postgraduate studies and their future plans, or perhaps both. This makes them have more negative emotions during the preparation stage, such as "anxiety", "low self-esteem", "what if I fail the exam", and so on.

## 5. Conclusion

Using Bourdieu's lens, this study explored the class stratification of students enrolled in the Postgraduate entrance examination with respect to aspiration at the graduate level. Using semi-structured interviews with 15 respondents, the study found that regardless of the level of study, students with higher socio-economic status were consistently more specific in their aspiration and less likely to consider other factors in their decision-making than students with lower socio-economic status. This difference in aspiration occurs at different levels of university, where students at elite universities have been shaped by institutional *doxa* oriented towards further education through the promotion of exams, career choices of former students, and academically oriented training, but there is still a class divide within the university. There is still a class divide within schools, which is reflected in the degree of clarity about the purpose of postgraduate study. The middle class tends to be able to provide opportunities for their children to study abroad, so students from the middle class tend to start thinking about the purpose of postgraduate study as early as possible and see it as natural to go to postgraduate study, whereas the situation of students from less privileged backgrounds is different. The situation is different for students from less privileged families, who, despite knowing enough about graduate school at elite universities, have more uncertainty about why they are going to graduate school. This influence from the university is lessened in normal universities, even though Chinese universities are regulated by the government, and normal universities also try to build a system of graduate school. Even though universities in China are regulated by the government, normal universities do try to construct institutional *doxa* based on promotion, but because the proportion of former students trying to find a job is higher than that in elite universities, the influence of the school on the students is not as strong as that of the elite universities, and they tend to emphasise the influence of the peer group. They tend to place more emphasis on the influence of the peer group. Nonetheless, class differences in aspiration still exist.

Considering the fact that the entrance examination has already stratified the social background of students before entering university, the proportion of working-class students staying in elite universities is lower, and more working-class students gather in normal universities. Therefore, working class students need to overcome more difficulties if they want to return to the same starting point as their middle-class peers after graduation. In addition, it is worth noting that some parents in the working class also emphasize the importance of education, which will make their children think more about the possibility of further education.

Therefore, this study concludes that the postgraduate entrance examination and the college entrance examination have similar social reproduction mechanisms, and the postgraduate degree may also become a symbolic capital for the middle class to consolidate and maintain their social status in the future.



## References

- [1] Wu, L., Yan, K., & Zhang, Y. (2020). Higher education expansion and inequality in educational opportunities in China. *Higher Education*, 80(3), 549-570.
- [2] Gao, Y. (2022). *Cause Analysis and Strategy Guidance of 'Graduate student Fever' : Based on the Field and Rational Choice Theory*. *Journal of Suzhou Education Institute*, 25(06).
- [3] Zhou, M., Murphy, R., & Tao, R. (2014). Effects of parents' migration on the education of children left behind in rural China. *Population and Development Review*, 40(2), 273-292.
- [4] Zhao, Y., & Li, Y. (2019). Differential acculturation: A study of well-being differences in intergenerational social mobility between rural and urban China. *Sociology*, 53(4), 724-743.
- [5] Xie, A., & Reay, D. (2020). *Successful rural students in China's elite universities: habitus transformation and inevitable hidden injuries?*. *Higher Education*, 80, 21-36.
- [6] Niu, S. X., Zheng, Y., & Yang, F. (2020). *Students' social origins, educational process and post-college outcomes: The case of an elite Chinese university*. *Chinese Journal of Sociology*, 6(1), 35-66.
- [7] Dougherty, K. J. (2018). Higher education choice-making in the United States: freedom, inequality, legitimation.
- [8] Smyth, E., & Banks, J. (2012). 'There was never really any question of anything else': young people's agency, institutional habitus and the transition to higher education. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 33(2), 263-281.
- [9] Bourdieu, P. (2000). *Pascalian meditations*. Stanford University Press.
- [10] Bourdieu, P. (1990). *The logic of practice*. Stanford university press.
- [11] Reay, D. (1998). 'Always knowing' and 'never being sure': familial and institutional habituses and higher education choice. *Journal of education policy*, 13(4), 519-529.
- [12] McDonough, P., & Polzer, J. (2012). Habitus, hysteresis and organizational change in the public sector. *Canadian Journal of Sociology*, 37(4), 357-380.
- [13] Atkinson, W. (2016). From sociological fictions to social fictions: Some Bourdieusian reflections on the concepts of 'institutional habitus' and 'family habitus'. In *Theorizing Social Class and Education* (pp. 119-135). Routledge.
- [14] Davey, G. (2012). Using Bourdieu's concept of doxa to illuminate classed practices in an English fee-paying school. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 33(4), 507-525.
- [15] Atkinson, W. (2010). Phenomenological additions to the Bourdieusian toolbox: Two problems for Bourdieu, two solutions from Schutz. *Sociological theory*, 28(1), 1-19.
- [16] Jin, J., & Ball, S. J. (2021). *Precarious success and the conspiracy of reflexivity: Questioning the 'habitus transformation' of working-class students at elite universities*. *Critical Studies in Education*, 62(5), 608-623.
- [17] Bourdieu, P. (2018). *Distinction a social critique of the judgement of taste*. In *Inequality* (pp. 287-318). Routledge.
- [18] Patfield, S., Gore, J., & Fray, L. (2021). Reframing first-generation entry: How the familial habitus shapes aspirations for higher education among prospective first-generation students. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 40(3), 599-612.