# IS IT POSSIBLE TO TRANSCEND CLASS DOMINAITON?

## A life story study of working-class students at elite universities in China

Thesis submitted for PhD in Education
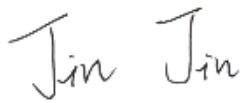
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# Declaration

I, Jin Jin, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

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30 Jan, 2018

# Abstract

This thesis is based on a life story study of 17 working-class students at four elite universities in China – Fudan University, Peking University, Shanghai Jiao Tong University and Tsinghua University. Data collection was conducted between 2015 and 2017 through three rounds of interviews. Data analysis was informed by constructive grounded theory techniques and sensitised by Bourdieu's 'method' - habitus, capital and field. The research question is to understand how and why my participants become working-class 'exceptions' who seem to transcend class domination, at least in part, by achieving academic successes at school and by reaching elite universities against all the odds. While before discussing of the 'exceptionality' of my participants, this thesis first offers an 'adequate theory of habitus' that demonstrates the 'normality' of them being constrained by 'class' in forms of capital deficiency and in the operation of working-class habitus. Then this thesis discusses the ways in which the research participants developed reflexive dispositions through their school experience, drew on those reflexive dispositions to overcome constraints of class and succeeded in achieving to be 'exceptions'. An interacting and synthesising relationship between their habitus and the field of Chinese schooling is highlighted and a new form of symbolic domination of class which is mediated by meritocracy is demonstrated in those discussions. Furthermore, based on analysis of different perspectives the research participants developed to deal with the sense of dislocation they experienced more or less at university, an 'adequate theory of reflexivity' is offered in which a diversity of reflexive responses to class domination, different degrees of being subjects to meritocratic discipline and possibilities to transcend class domination are discussed. Conclusions of this thesis deconstruct 'transcendence', 'exceptionality' and 'success'-categories that define my research participants and point out the contingency of their 'exceptionality' on the possession of more capital.

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# 1. Setting the scene

This is a study about the life stories of working-class students at elite universities in China. It seeks to tell and to understand the experiences, feelings and reflections of these students. Yet, before I do that, at the beginning of this thesis, I also want to tell a story about myself and about why I want to do this project and what I want this project to achieve.

My initial idea for this thesis emerged from an informal discussion with a friend about a series of reports published in 2011 under the title *There can't be a dragon from poor families* in highly influential Chinese news media outlets (i.e. *Southern Weekly* and ifeng.com). These reports exposed a dismal picture of rural students being marginalised at elite universities. For instance, based on an analysis of the historical data of rural students' enrolment at Peking University from 1978 to 2005, Liu and her colleagues (2012) found that the percentage of rural students in this leading university dropped from the mid-1990s onwards, falling from 25% before the mid-1990s to 15% in the 2000s. In comparison, rural residents represented 63.93% of the total population in China according to the national census in 2000 and rural students occupied 50.1% of the total tertiary education enrolment in that year (Liu et al., 2012: 27). The low percentage of rural students was also confirmed by a survey at another top Chinese university, Tsinghua University, which showed that rural students occupied only 17% of its 2010 intake, astonishingly low considering that 62% of all participants in the Gaokao (National College Entrance Exam in China) in 2010 were rural students[1]. These two examples are not isolated occurrences. A study by Yang (2006, in Chinese) demonstrated a steady fall in the intake of rural students from the 1990s onwards in a number of selective universities in China. Elite education in China seems to be increasingly difficult for disadvantaged students to access and more preserved for elites. The possibility of achieving social mobility through education in China is questioned by these reports.

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[1] http://edu.ifeng.com/news/special/qionghaizi/detail_2011_08/11/8333856_0.shtml

Data about the labour market of university graduates pushes this questioning further. According to a report[2] in the *Financial Times* in 2014, the average salary of university graduates (3,366 RMB per month) had only a small advantage compared with that of migrant workers (2,290 RMB per month). Moreover, this advantage was expected to shrink in the following three years. In addition, this report noted a worsening trend in the labour market of university graduates as the demand for university graduates had reached a point of saturation. The demand for university graduates only occupied around 20% of the total demand in the job market, while the supply of university graduates had already reached 35% of the total workforce supply in 2010[2]. On the one hand, there is saturation of the demand for university graduates and on the other hand there is a yearly increase in the number of university graduates. The number of university graduates in 2014 was 7.24 million, 7.49 million in 2015, 7.65 million in 2016[3] and 7.95 million in 2017[4]. In line with the report in the *Financial Times*, findings[5] from a study by the Northeast Normal University in 2015 based on a survey of 200,000 university graduates and fieldwork in 16 cities demonstrated that although the employment rate for university graduates was 89.56% (which includes the rate of 13.11% students who choose to do post-graduate studies; this rate in 211 Project universities[6] is 25.51%), the average monthly salary was 3,698 RMB. The average salary for graduates from 211 Project universities (4,386 RMB) was higher than graduates from non-211 Project universities (3,700 RMB) and vocational institutions (3,108 RMB)[5]. In comparison, according to Chinese government websites, the average salary for all employees in Shanghai in 2015 was 5,939 RMB[7]; the average salary for all employees in Beijing in 2015 was 7,086 RMB[8]. The average salary for university graduates is much lower than the average salary

[2] http://www.ftchinese.com/story/001059582?full=y
[3] http://www.eol.cn/html/c/2015gxbys/
[4] http://xinwen.jgaoxiao.com/jiuyechuangye-jiuyexinxi-51162.html
[5] http://news.xinhuanet.com/local/2015-12/19/c_128546547.htm
[6] 211 Project university are selected by the Chinese government to receive more funding in order to build world-class universities; it covers 116 institutions, including Peking University, Tsinghua University, Fudan University and Shanghai Jiao Tong University in my study; another similar but more selective project is 985 Project, which includes only 39 institutions (the four institutions in my study are also included and receive the largest amount of government funding).
[7] http://shzw.eastday.com/shzw/G/20160403/u1ai9280455.html
[8] http://www.bjstats.gov.cn/zwgk/tzgg/201606/t20160603_352002.html

in the two biggest cities in China, especially for university graduates from less prestigious universities.

Lian (2009) did an ethnographic study of the experience of a group of university graduates in Beijing, which coined a new term 'yi zu' (ant group) to describe a new disadvantaged social group in China – university graduates living in big cities with low incomes (compared with three traditional disadvantaged groups – peasants, migrant workers and laid-off workers). The participants in Lian's study (2009) are higher education graduates but most of them are graduates from non-prestigious universities (89.2% are from non-211 universities) and most of them come from the countryside (54.7%) or small towns (20.7%). They work in low skill occupations with low income (1,956 RMB monthly pay, compared with the average income in Beijing of 3,726 RMB monthly) or they are unemployed or semi-employed. They live in clusters in a suburban village in Beijing, the average room size being 20m$^2$ squeezed with four bunk beds and the average commuting time to the workplace being two hours each way. Very few of them are able to find a job that can support them to move out of this village and most of them are stuck there. In 2010, the population of 'yi zu' was estimated as 100,000 in Beijing and over 1 million in total throughout China. They are higher education graduates but they live at the bottom of the social hierarchy in big cities, like ants in dark holes.

This pessimistic data and stories demonstrate the difficulties of achieving upward social mobility through education in China. They present a 'model' (Bourdieu, 1996: 184) life trajectory for disadvantaged students, coming from a disadvantaged social background, not going to university or going to a non-prestigious university, taking a low-income job and continuing to have a disadvantaged life. It seems to be a vicious cycle, predicted by their economically disadvantaged position. Yet, I am still wondering, are there any exceptions? Exceptions who break the vicious cycle, who can have a 'deviant' (Bourdieu, 1996: 184) life trajectory, who can reach elite universities, thrive at elite universities and who can achieve upward social mobility eventually? What are the stories of such exceptions like? Can we obtain some positive

insights into understanding upward social mobility in China through discussing the stories of exceptions? Dr Tal Ben-Shahar at Harvard University did an open course of Positive Psychology[9] where he compared traditional psychologies and positive psychology in the first session. Traditional psychologies focus on diseases and problems and their main concern is to treat diseases and to solve problems, while cures for diseases or problems bring 'normality' rather than 'happiness'. 'Happiness' requires different theories, different strategies and different ways of thinking from traditional psychologies, which is the theme of positive psychology. This idea inspires me to think of possibilities to undertake 'positive sociology'. I want to shed light on the 'exceptions', on the few disadvantaged students who succeed in gaining entry into elite universities, on the '15%' in Liu's study and the '17%' in the survey at Tsinghua University. I want to elicit and understand the stories of the most high-achieving and most promising disadvantaged students, to give them a voice and to explore possibilities of achieving some different perspectives of upward social mobility in China.

However, albeit with hope to achieve some positive insights by focusing on the most high-achieving students, based on my personal experience I know that the stories of exceptions are not entirely 'positive'. At the beginning of this chapter, I said that this project was to tell the stories of my participants, but this project is also about me. I was a working-class student who attended two elite universities. I was born in a small town in the middle of China. My immediate family, including my parents and my grandparents, as well as part of my extended family, worked in a state-owned factory. I have no memory of financial difficulties in my childhood, as my grandfather and my father worked as managers of the factory. However, the factory was shut down in 1998 (when I was 11), not unusual under the then nationwide economic reform in China. My grandparents retired and my parents lost their permanent jobs, working part-time in irregular jobs. I had been successful in all my schooling throughout this time and I was the first in my class for three years, both in junior school and in senior school (at the best school in the city). I was accepted to a prestigious university to study

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[9] http://open.163.com/special/positivepsychology/

Philosophy and I pursued a Master's course in Higher Education at another prestigious university. I was academically and socially involved at university, for instance being a leader of a large student society, studying a Minor course in Finance and taking part in an exchange programme to the University of Oxford. However, I vividly remember all the struggles I experienced at university and how my social background restricted my choices and influenced my life trajectory. As I was in that position, I understand the experience of working-class students at elite universities is a complex issue that extends beyond simply a superficially successful educational journey. Education at an elite university is accompanied by gains and losses, successes and injuries, striving and acceptance. I want to examine and demonstrate this complexity in my research while occupying the position of an 'insider' with a shared history, which will I hope give me an advantage in understanding and interpreting their narratives and reflections. Yet, paradoxically, the challenge for me as an 'insider' is to understand these stories from a distance, from a wider perspective that goes beyond the personal experience of and the position of being an 'insider'. I must challenge myself and challenge the things I take for granted as an 'insider'. In this sense, this project for me is also a journey of self-exploration and self-challenging.

In fact, the question of disadvantaged students' access to elite universities is not only an important issue in public discussion and in academic studies, it is also a significant concern in Chinese education policies. At the annual session of the National People's Congress held on 5 March 2014, Prime Minister Li Keqiang made explicit in his report the goal of increasing rural students' access to elite universities by 10% for the next year [10]. The government report at the NPC's annual session in 2015 stated that the government aimed 'to widen channels for rural students to achieve upward social mobility and to offer opportunities for everyone to change their life through education' [11]. Increasing the access of rural students to elite universities and improving upward social mobility is not only emphasised in

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[10] http://www.gov.cn/guowuyuan/2014-03/14/content_2638989.htm
[11] http://www.gov.cn/guowuyuan/2015-03/16/content_2835101.htm

political rhetoric; it is implemented in practice and supported by special university recruitment programmes focused on rural students. 'Special University Recruitment Programmes for Rural Students,' which started in 2012[12], now include three levels of programmes – national, provincial and institutional. A special quota is assigned by the central government through national level programmes to some first-tier universities, which aims to recruit rural students who have residence in nationally economically deprived towns and villages; the quota of national level programmes was 50,000 in 2015, 60,000 in 2016 and 63,000 in 2017[13]. Provincial level programmes assign a special quota to some universities managed by provincial governments and aim to recruit rural students from provincially economically deprived areas. 95 institutions including Fudan University, Peking University, Shanghai Jiao Tong University and Tsinghua University in my study are required to set up institutional level special programmes for recruiting rural students.

These special recruitment programmes for rural students demonstrate the Chinese government's determination to address the issue of rural students' access to elite universities and to improve upward social mobility in China. Yet, two main risks exist in the current policies. The first is that these special recruitment programmes are concerned with rural students only and neglect disadvantaged students in urban areas. Rural students are a large disadvantaged group, considering the huge gap between the urban and rural in China economically, socially and culturally. Yet, addressing rural students only in the current policies neglects inequalities in Chinese cities. Urban students are not all economically privileged; however, urban disadvantaged students are paid little attention in the current policies and in current scholarship. While rural students are disadvantaged owing to the huge gap between urban and rural, poor students in urban areas are disadvantaged as a result of increasingly stratified education in Chinese cities. For example, based on an analysis of Shanghai's performance in 2009's PISA, Lu (2013, in Chinese) revealed the presence of social stratification in Shanghai schools.

[12]http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_xwfb/xw_fbh/moe_2069/xwfbh_2015n/xwfb_151204/151204_mtbd/201512/t20151207_223296.html
[13] https://gaokao.chsi.com.cn/gkzt/sdzx2017

There is homogeneity of students' social background within schools and the schools concentrating on privileged students have advantages in the quantity and the quality (represented by education levels) of teachers and also in the variety of extra-curricular activities (Lu, 2013, in Chinese). The social stratification in schools partly indicates and explains the social stratification in universities. Furthermore, privileged students and their families have developed new strategies to maintain their advantages and privileges by investing in high-quality international higher education, which is supported by the rising number of international schools in Chinese cities. This investment in international higher education excludes disadvantaged students owing to the expensive costs. For example, the tuition fees at the Qibao High School, a renowned public school in Shanghai, is 2,400 RMB annually, while the tuition fees at the Shanghai Qibao Dwight High School, the international school jointly run by the Qibao High School and the Dwight School, is 16,400 RMB[14]. The ability to be internationalised is not equal between social classes and only the middle class are able to secure the privileges of internationalisation; internationalisation adds more privileges to privileged groups, which brings more inequalities rather than more equality in domestic class struggles. Disadvantaged urban students are the ones who suffer most from stratification and inequality in cities. Their life stories will offer a more comprehensive insight into inequalities that are now happening and evolving in China, not only in terms of the urban and rural divide but also in the divide within the cities. This is why I include some poor urban students in my sample.

In fact, the discourse in the public debate in China regarding education inequalities seems to be turning as well, changing from a singular 'rural' focus to a rising language of 'class'. Six years after the heated debate under the title *There can't be a dragon from poor families* in media reports that focused only on rural students and their representation at elite universities, now on *Zhihu[15],* one of the most influential social media websites and public

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[14] http://www.qibaodwight.org/tuition-fee

[15] A social media website where people can ask questions and contribute answers; it was founded in 2011 and its registered users reached 50 million in 2016, including 13 million daily active users.

debate platforms in China, under the same title, *There can't be a dragon from poor families*, people are using 'class', 'families' rather than 'rural' in their discussions. Class stories, observations, feelings, reflections and also comparisons with international evidence are shared in these discussions. The discussions on *Zhihu* not only question class structure and economic inequalities in China but also target the intergenerational transmission of cultural and social capital and the classed nature of personality, insights, tastes and lifestyles. These discussions indicate themes in relation to western class theories, for example Bourdieu's theoretical contributions of capital, habitus and field. Chinese society has been marked by dramatic changes in class structure and social inequality and western class theories are becoming useful in addressing and understanding these changes.

Therefore, instead of using the term 'poor students' or 'rural students' in my study, I tend to use the term 'working-class' (a precise definition of 'working-class' will be discussed in the methodology chapter) to have a more comprehensive understanding of 'disadvantage'. I will include both 'working-class' rural students and urban students in my sample. Also by using the term 'working-class', I want to capture and consider their disadvantages not only in economic terms but in a broader sense to include disadvantages in social and cultural terms as well. Furthermore, inspired and aided by western class theories and in line with the trend in the public debate in China, I will extend discussions of class domination to psychosocial levels to see how class penetrates into people's everyday life, influencing their choices, emotions, feelings, perceptions and actions. I am also going to discuss some forms of 'symbolic domination', like self-exclusion, to see how disadvantaged groups themselves contribute to domination unconsciously and voluntarily. These discussions reveal and realise more hidden but more powerful forms of class domination and in turn this may generate deeper reflections and actions for change.

The intention to include discussions of psychosocial influences of class also relates to the second risk of the current policies addressing education inequalities in China. In addition to the issue of a singular focus on rural

students, the current policies over-emphasise the access of disadvantaged students to elite universities and neglect the unequal educational history and trajectories of disadvantaged students before university. Also absent are discussions of the integration and the experience of disadvantaged students **at** university. Focusing on access itself may be a first step or a target that can be directly and quickly addressed by policy interventions, but unequal access is a result of antecedent and structural disadvantages that occur and accumulate before university. It is therefore very necessary to introduce an antecedent perspective in order to track the trajectory of the production and reproduction of inequality. Also it is very necessary to introduce a sociological perspective to demonstrate influences of social factors on personal achievements and trajectories.

Life history approach is an effective method to achieve such an antecedent and sociological perspective. To illustrate the meaning of life history/story approach[16], I choose and use the definition by Atkinson (2001) here as an example:

> A life story is the story a person chooses to tell about the life he or she has lived, told as completely and honestly as possible, what the person remembers of it and what he or she wants others to know of it, usually as a result of a guided interview by another. The resulting life story is the narrative essence of what has happened to the person. It can cover the time from birth to the present or before and beyond. It includes the important events, experiences, and feelings of a lifetime. (Atkinson, 2001: 125)

This definition indicates some key features of the life history/story approach. It is a comprehensive approach, which involves data ranging from 'important events, experiences, feelings' to 'reflections', 'the key to meaning making in life stories' (Atkinson, 2001: 135). It is an historical approach, which tracks the trajectory of the participant(s) 'from birth to the present or before and beyond'. It is a cooperative and participatory approach, which gives voice to the participant(s) who can 'choose to tell about the life he or

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[16] Although some authors distinguish between life story and life history, arguing that life story has an emphasis on narrated story while life history emphasises historical contexts of a story, most authors use them interchangeably (Roberts, 2002).

she has lived' and which also requires cooperation between the interviewer and the participant(s) under the 'guided interview' (Atkinson, 2001: 125). The last but not the least important feature is that the life history/story approach is a sociological approach, in which the main interest is not the individual story of the participant(s) but 'a social reality existing outside the story', 'an individual's place in the social order of things' and 'possible roles and standards that exist within a human community' (Atkinson, 2001: 129). Through such a sensitive, historical and reflective approach, the objective is to 'make the implicit explicit, the hidden seen, the uniformed formed, and the confusing clear' (Atkinson, 2001: 125). Through the life history approach, my objective is to achieve 'a triple concern with biography, structure and history' illustrated and urged by Mills (2000):

> Know that many personal troubles cannot be solved merely as troubles, but must be understood in terms of public issues – and in terms of the problems of history making. Know that the human meaning of public issues must be revealed by relating them to personal troubles and to the problems of individual life. Know that the problems of social science, when adequately formulated, must include both troubles and issues, both biography and history, and the range of their intricate relations. Within that range the life of individual and the making of societies occur; and within that range the sociological imagination has its chance to make a difference in the quality of human life in our time. (Mills, 2000: 226)

By using the approach with 'a triple concern with biography, structure and history' to research working-class students at elite universities, I want to explore the 'human meaning' of some of the most hotly debated public issues in China regarding education inequalities- for example emerging class structure, widening economic inequalities and social stratification in education by relating them to the life stories of people who live and struggle with these public issues. Through their stories, I want to see how public issues and policies influence individual biographies, how they form personal troubles and meanwhile how people understand, negotiate or resist these policies. At the same time, I want to understand these personal troubles and life stories from a wider perspective, to reach a 'sociological imagination' of these troubles, to reflect on the systems, policies and the culture in relation

to these troubles. 'Class' is a useful lens to target 'structure' and some tools from western class theories, like Bourdieu's theoretical tools, which I use in my study, can help to make 'intricate relations' between 'structure' and 'biography' and 'history' visible. Furthermore, by introducing the sociological imagination and by focusing on the group of 'exceptions', I am not only interested in describing and understanding these life stories and public issues but more importantly I want to find a way to make a difference for 'the quality of human life' and also for the quality of society. Life story is the approach; greater equality, justice and flourishing are the objectives.

Before proceeding to the next chapter, I want to first introduce the outline of the thesis. Chapter 2 deals with the theoretical tools I use in my study and the decisions I made in selecting these tools. Chapter 3 discusses themes and contributions from the current academic studies regarding educational inequality and social mobility in China and in some other national contexts as well and this chapter also illustrates original contributions I can make after reviewing the literature. Chapter 4 is concerned with my decisions regarding the methodology and research design and offers an introduction of my participants, followed by an autobiographic account of my experience as the 18th participant. Chapter 5 offers a discussion of how my participants internalise their disadvantages in the external world and how they externalise this internality through their choices, from which it can be seen how their disadvantages are maintained and reproduced by the internalisation of the externality and the externalisation of the internality. From the aspect of *habitus* and from the aspect of *field,* Chapter 6 analyses the trajectory of my participants' arrival at elite universities, against all the odds, and it reveals a new form of symbolic domination of class. Chapter 7 offers an analysis of 'un-usual' successes my participants demonstrate at university, from which three categories of perspectives my participants take to deal with habitus dislocation at university are revealed and possibilities to transcend class domination based on an analysis of a few cases are also discussed. Chapter 8 reviews the research findings, explains the original contributions of my study and sees possibilities for future research and policy implications.

# 2. Theoretical tools: habitus and symbolic domination

We have seen the relevance of the concept of 'class' and class theories to my research in the last chapter. I want to use 'class' to have a more comprehensive understanding of the disadvantages of my participants, including not only disadvantages in economic terms but also in social and economic terms. To achieve 'a triple concern with biography, structure and history' (Mills, 2000: 226), I want to on the one hand see beyond these individual life stories to reflect on the systems, policies and structures in China that could produce and reproduce inequalities and disadvantages. On the other hand, I want to demonstrate what these inequalities and disadvantages mean to people, how they permeate people's everyday lives and impact their being and aspirations. In discussions linking biography, structure and history, especially in the area of researching class, no other theory can compete with Bourdieu's work, particularly his theoretical tool of *habitus*.

*Habitus* is a central category in Bourdieu's theoretical framework, alongside the other two core categories - *capital* and *field*, which is his attempt to bridge the dualisms of 'agency-structure, objective-subjective and the micro-macro' (Reay, 2004: 432). The bridging of dualisms is particularly evident in his work on habitus. As illustrated by Reay (2004: 432), 'it is through the workings of habitus that practice (agency) is linked with capital and field (structure)'. To define it simply here before a detailed discussion continues in this chapter, *habitus* is a system of dispositions which are produced in 'a particular class of conditions of existence' (Bourdieu, 1990a: 53). Habitus is 'generative schemes' that will produce 'thoughts, perceptions, expressions and actions', 'whose limits are set by the historically and social situated conditions of its production' (Bourdieu, 1990a: 55). *Habitus* is developed by Bourdieu in order to understand and to explain how objective inequalities

are deeply embodied and how this embodiment contributes to produce and reinforce objective inequalities.

*Habitus* is a sensitive and powerful theoretical tool for understanding the experience of class and the concurrent production and reproduction of inequalities. However, it still faces many criticisms, which are mainly directed at its determinism and a lack of consideration of reflexivity. Some authors (e.g., Reay, 2004, 2015; Reay, Crozier, & Clayton, 2009; Sayer, 2005) have countered some of these criticisms and developed the understanding of *habitus* by introducing reflexivity.

In this chapter, I will first provide a detailed discussion of the meaning of *habitus* by drawing on Bourdieu's own work and by linking it with *capital* and *field* to indicate how they form a theoretical framework for understanding the production and the reproduction of inequalities, and particularly the mechanisms of symbolic domination. A new perspective to understand *habitus*, centring on 'contingency' and 'freedom', will be introduced in this chapter. Then, based on Reay and Sayer's work and an analysis of some interviews with Bourdieu and his self-reflections of 'reflexivity' as a sociologist, I will include in this chapter a discussion of criticisms of *habitus* and try to offer some insights into how to understand reflexivity in *habitus*.

## Habitus

Bourdieu discussed *habitus* in many places in his body of work and the concept also evolved alongside the development of his empirical work. I select a quotation from *The Logic of Practice* that I think can represent a sophisticated definition of *habitus,* which is also widely used in studies regarding educational inequalities:

> The conditionings associated with a particular class of conditions of existence produce *habitus*, systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organise practices and representations that can be objectively

adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them. Objective 'regulated' and 'regular' without being in any way the product of obedience to rules, they can collectively orchestrated without being the product of the organising action of a conductor. (Bourdieu, 1990a: 53)

As shown by the above quotation, habitus is 'systems of durable, transposable dispositions'. Dispositions include 'thoughts, perceptions, expressions and actions' (Bourdieu, 1990a: 55) and also 'bodily hexis', 'a durable way of standing, speaking, walking, and therefore feeling and thinking' (Bourdieu, 1990a: 70). I extract two major themes from the above quotation – 'structured structures' and 'structuring structures', which I will use to further explain how these dispositions are formed, how they relate to structures and how they function in producing and reproducing inequalities. I argue that these two terms capture two conflicting but correlating aspects of *habitus* - 'structured structures' deal with contingency and constraints while 'structuring structures' address freedom and opportunities. As shown by Figure 2.1, I will also divide discussions on the 'contingency' of habitus into external contingency and internal contingency and similarly I will discuss the freedom of habitus by considering external freedom and internal freedom as well. As we will see later and also as illustrated by Reay, habitus is a 'deep, interior, epicentre containing many matrices' of 'opportunities and constraints' (Reay, 2004: 435).

Figure 2.1: 'Structured structures' and 'structuring structures' in *habitus*
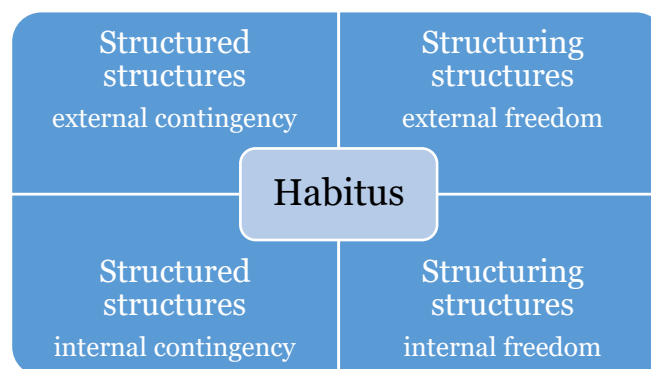
## Structured structures: contingency and constraints

The external contingency of *habitus* deals with 'the conditionings associated with a particular class of conditions of existence' (Bourdieu, 1990a: 53) that produce *habitus*, which as shown in my later analysis in this chapter, indicates the relation of *habitus* with *field* and *capital*. Habitus is an embodied 'structured structures' of the field in which it was produced, as explained by Bourdieu:

> Habitus is a socialised body. A structured body, a body which has incorporated the immanent structures of a world of a particular sector of that world – a field – and which structures the perception of the world as well as action in that world. (Bourdieu, 1998: 81)

> Through the economic and social necessity that they bring to bear on the relatively autonomous world of the domestic economy and family relations, or more precisely, through the specifically familial manifestations of this external necessity (forms of the division of labour between sexes, household objects, modes of consumption, parent-child relations, etc.), the structures characterizing a determinate class of conditions of existence produce structures of the *habitus*, which in their turn are the basis of the perception and appreciation of all subsequent experiences. (Bourdieu, 1990a: 54)

Then the question is how to understand the 'structures' of the field that produce *habitus*. In the second quote in the above, Bourdieu defines 'structures' of the field using three terms, 'economic and social necessity', 'the domestic economy and family relations' and 'familial manifestations of this external necessity', which means that the 'structures' of the field that produces the habitus derive to a great extent from the economic and social conditions of a family. Nevertheless, the economic and social conditions of a family should be understood not only in an absolute sense but also and more importantly seen in a relational sense, to be understood as 'a position within a wider field of social relations', 'relations to both similar and different others'. I introduce an interpretation by Sayer to achieve a further understanding of the 'structures' of the field and at the same time to gain a further understanding of the 'structures' of the habitus.

The dispositions have a structure which reflects that of the corresponding habitat in which they were formed. The habitat is not merely a milieu but a position within a wider *field* of social relations, including relations to both similar and different others, for example to members of both the same and different gender or class. Habituation to this location within structures of social relations and material conditions produces a corresponding structure of dispositions which is attuned to them. When activated, these dispositions produce actions which tend to reproduce the external structures. Most of the dispositions composing the habitus are relational; they are oriented to other people and objects, such as a disposition towards serving others or being served. According to their location in the social field and their socialisation, one person becomes used to being respected, deferred to and listened to, while another, who is more often ignored, whose welfare is secondary to that of others, develops a habitus which is attuned to this treatment. (Sayer, 2005: 24)

The relational perspective is very important for understanding the 'structured structures' of the field and also of the habitus. The sense and degree of a family's economic and social conditions is more evidently felt by comparing with others, by having a sense of its position in a wider field of social relations. For example, we will see in Chapter 5 how Ye Lin developed a sense of her working-class position in comparison with her middle-class relatives and how this sense formed her inferior feelings, as illustrated by Sayer in the above quote, 'the dispositions have a structure which reflects that of the corresponding habitat in which they were formed'. The 'structures' of field produce the 'structures' of habitus, which are systems of durable dispositions and which can 'outlive the economic and social conditions in which they were produced,' as shown by the following quote by Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1990a: 62). The 'ontological complicity' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) between *habitus* and *field* demonstrates the 'external contingency' of habitus 'whose limits are set by the historically and social situated conditions of its production' (Bourdieu, 1990a: 62).

In fact the persistence of the effects of primary conditioning, in the form of the *habitus*, accounts equally well for cases in which dispositions function out of phase and practices are objectively ill-adapted to the present conditions because they are objectively adjusted to conditions that no longer obtain. The tendency of groups to persist in their ways, due *inter alia* to the fact that they are composed of

individuals with durable dispositions that can outlive the economic and social conditions in which they were produced, can be the sources of misadaptation as well as adaptation, revolt as well as resignation. (Bourdieu, 1990a: 62)

The 'external contingency' of habitus is not only reflected in its 'ontological complicity' with *field* but also in its reliance on *capital*. Bourdieu defines capital as 'accumulated labour' (Bourdieu, 1986: 46), which he explains further in the following quote. He identifies differentiations in forms of capital. Social capital refers to social relations; economic capital refers to material wealth; cultural capital refers to the embodied dispositions, objectified cultural goods and institutionalised qualifications (Bourdieu, 1986).

> Capital, which in its objectified or embodied forms, takes time to accumulate and which, as a potential capacity to produce profits and to reproduce itself in identical or expanded form, contains a tendency to persist in its being, is a force inscribed in the objective of things so that everything is not equally possible or impossible. And the structure of the distribution of the different types and subtypes of capital at a given moment in time represents the immanent structure of the social world, i.e., the set of constraints, inscribed in the very reality of that world, which govern its functioning in a durable way, determining the chances of success for practices. (Bourdieu, 1986: 46)

Different forms of capital have different efficacies and they can be converted from one to another but economic capital is at the root, as clearly illustrated by Bourdieu (1986) in the following quote. Nonetheless, the differentiation of forms of capital allows us to have a more subtle understanding of inequalities rather than treating class merely as 'status' or ownership. Class and class differentiations are not only defined by the total amount of capital but also by its composition so that interactions between sources of inequalities can be addressed (Sayer, 2005: 77).

> The real logic of the functioning of capital, the conversions from one type to another, and the law of conversion which governs them cannot be understood unless two opposing but equally partial views are superseded: on the one hand, economism, which, on the grounds that every type of capital is reducible in the last analysis to economic capital, ignores what makes the specific efficacy of the

other types of capital, and on the other hand, semiologism (nowadays represented by structuralism, symbolic interactionism, or ethnomethodology), which reduces social exchanges to phenomena of communication and ignores the brutal fact of universal reducibility to economics. (Bourdieu, 1986: 54)

Bourdieu pointed out the relation of habitus to capital in *The Forms of Capital*, 'the embodied capital, external wealth converted into an integral part of the person, into a habitus' (Bourdieu, 1986: 48). As we see from the quotes in the above, embodiment requires time and capital is an 'accumulation of labour'. Also, the conversion between forms of capital requires time and labour. However, time is not equally available to families who have different amounts of economic and social conditions. For many working-class families, by virtue of their limited economic capital, their lives are organised around necessity, around today, around survival - they are 'getting by', as put by McCrone (1994: 69). It is only in a situation of surplus capital, as is the case for many middle-class families, that it is possible to strategize, plan for the future,  make conversions between different forms of capital and to invest capital for future success or social reproduction - only they are 'getting on' or 'making out' (McCrone, 1994: 69). Time for the poor means deprivation and for the rich means privilege. In this sense, through negotiation with the availability of free time, 'external wealth', or in another word, economic capital, influences the structured structures of 'embodied capital', that is, influences the structured structures of habitus, according to Bourdieu's aforementioned definition.

> It has been seen, for example, that the transformation of economic capital into social capital presupposes a specific labour, i.e., an apparently gratuitous expenditure of time, attention, care, concern, which, as is seen in the endeavour to personalise a gift, has the effect of transfiguring the purely monetary import of the exchange and, by the same token, the very meaning of the exchange…Similarly, if the best measure of cultural capital is undoubtedly the amount of time devoted to acquiring it, this is because the transformation of economic capital into cultural capital presupposes an expenditure of time that is made possible by possession of economic capital. (Bourdieu, 1986: 54)

The influence of capital on habitus is not only restricted to its negotiation with time, but it also constitutes a basis for forming some dispositions. As shown in Bourdieu's interpretation of 'economic competence', the competency to 'seize the potential opportunities' and to make 'appropriate economic behaviour' is the 'product of particular economic condition.' Only the one who possesses the appropriate economic and cultural capital can have the appropriate competence, while the one in an economically deprived condition develops dispositions to 'make their adaptation' to the deprivation. Therefore, Bourdieu concluded in his interpretation of economic competency that 'economic competence, like all competence (linguistic, political, etc.), far from being a simple technical capacity acquired in certain conditions, is power tacitly conferred on those who have power over the economy or (as the very ambiguity of the word 'competence' indicates) an attribute of status' (Bourdieu, 1990a: 64).

> The 'rational' habitus which is the precondition for appropriate economic behaviour is the product of particular economic condition, the one defined by possession of the economic and cultural capital required in order to seize the potential opportunities' theoretically available to all; and also that the same dispositions, by adapting the economically most deprived to the specific condition of which they are the product and thereby helping them to make their adaptation to the generic demands of the economic cosmos (as regards calculation, forecasting, etc.) lead them to accept the negative sanctions resulting from this lack of adaptation, that is, their deprivation. (Bourdieu, 1990a: 64)

> This is, on the one hand, because the propensity to acquire it depends on the chances of using it successfully, and the chances of acquiring it depend on the chances of successfully using it; and also because economic competence, like all competence (linguistic, political, etc.), far from being a simple technical capacity acquired in certain conditions, is power tacitly conferred on those who have power over the economy or (as the very ambiguity of the word 'competence' indicates) an attribute of status. (Bourdieu, 1990a: 64)

From the external contingency of habitus on field and also on capital, we can see how symbolic domination of class is achieved through the interaction between habitus, field and capital. As indicated by the above discussion, people in families in different classes have different 'structured structures' in

their habitus, or classed dispositions, based upon differential amounts and composition of forms of capital that families possess or accumulate and attuned to their different positions in fields. Therefore 'the willingness and the capacity' to play different games will vary between classes according to the first quote below. While considering people are driven to play 'familiar' games through the complicity between habitus and field, class boundaries and inequalities between classes will be maintained and reinforced.

> Investment is the disposition to act that is generated in the relationship between a space defined by a game offering certain prized or stakes (what I call a field) and a system of dispositions attuned to that game (what I call a habitus) - the 'feel' for the game and the stakes, which implies both the inclination and the capacity to play the game, to take an interest in the game, to be taken up, taken in by the game. (Bourdieu, 1993a: 18)

> Social reality exists, so to speak, twice, in things and in minds, in fields and in habitus, outside and inside social agents. And when habitus encounters a social world of which it is the product, it is like 'fish in water': it does not feel the weight of the water and it takes the world about itself for granted. (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 127)

As shown by the second quote in the above, the complicity between habitus and field means that habitus can objectively adjust without any consciousness to those fields that are identical to the conditions of its production. Privileged groups have dispositions that can objectively attune to the elite field, to the privileged position and conditions with possession of forms of capital. When their habitus 'encounters' the elite field, they are like 'fish in water' and their dispositions can adapt to the field objectively, 'without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain' (Bourdieu, 1990a: 53). Meanwhile for deprived groups the elite field is an unfamiliar field, which is very different from the conditions in which their habitus is produced. Accordingly, nothing can be taken for granted, the dispositions they have would be ill-adjusted and their anticipation of the future would be confounded. They have little 'feel for the game' but at the same time they feel the 'weight of the water'. They have more challenges, difficulties, suffering,

sacrifices and they must work much harder in playing the game, or more correctly, in knowing how to play the game. Many discussions in relation to the dislocation of working-class habitus in the field of elite universities will be seen in Chapter 5.

Through the 'ontological complicity' between habitus and field, through the external contingency of habitus on capital, people are confined in familiar conditions and a familiar position. The privileged remain privileged and the deprived remain deprived, a status quo which consolidates and reproduces inequality. Indeed, inequality persists through the domination embodied inside people, through their own choices, feelings, actions and inactions, through their logic of practice, unconsciously and symbolically. The dominated achieve self-regulating domination of themselves, as illustrated by Bourdieu in the following quote on 'strategy':

> If each stage in the sequence of ordered and oriented actions that constitute objective strategies can appear to be determined by anticipation of the future, and in particular, of its own consequences (which is what justifies the use of the concept of strategy), it is because the practices that are generated by the *habitus* and are governed by the past conditions of production of their generative principle are adapted in advance to the objective conditions whenever the conditions in which the *habitus* functions have remained identical, or similar, to the conditions in which it was constituted. Perfectly and immediately successful adjustment to the objective conditions provides the most complete illusion of finality, or- which amounts to the same thing- of self-regulating mechanism. (Bourdieu, 1990a: 62)

Symbolic domination of class is not only achieved by the interplay between habitus, field and capital, by the external contingency of habitus, but also by the internal contingency of habitus through its principle of ensuring continuities and constancy and also through its mechanism of making classifications. Or, in other words, to create 'categories of the possible (for us) and the impossible (for us)' (Bourdieu, 1990a: 64), namely a mechanism of self-exclusion (Ball, Davies, David, & Reay, 2002; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) or the 'art of assessing likelihoods' (Bourdieu, 1990a: 60).

'The principle of the continuity' (Bourdieu, 1990a: 54) in habitus includes a historical perspective, a 'complex interplay between past and present' in which the 'past', the 'early experience,' is emphasised and has 'particular weight'. I coin the principle of habitus to ensure continuities and constancy as 'internal contingency' of habitus, which is contingent on its own history and its early experience. This means that the past can achieve 'active presence' and the practices can be corrected in order to avoid a crisis in habitus. Through constancy in history, the past position and the inequalities are reinforced over time and are 'more reliable than all formal rules and explicit norms'.

> The habitus, a product of history, produces individual and collective practices - more history- in accordance with the schemes generated by history. It ensures the active presence of past experiences, which deposited in each organism in the forms of schemes of perception, thought and action, tend to guarantee the 'correctness' of practices and their constancy over time, more reliable than all formal rules and explicit norms. (Bourdieu, 1990a: 54)

> Early experiences have particular weight because the *habitus* tends to ensure its own constancy and its defence against change through the selection it makes within new information by rejecting information capable of calling into question its accumulated information, if exposed to it accidentally or by forces, and by avoiding exposure to such information...Through the systematic 'choices' it makes among the places, events and people that might be frequented, the *habitus* tends to protect itself from crises and critical challenges by providing itself with a milieu to which it is as pre-adapted as possible, that is, a relatively constant universe of situations tending to reinforce its dispositions by offering the market most favourable to its products. (Bourdieu, 1990a: 60-61)

Another mechanism in relation to the 'internal contingency' of habitus is a mechanism to make a classification, to form a conceptual framework of the possible and the impossible for us, and one that 'adjusts itself to a probable future' (Bourdieu, 1990a: 64). This mechanism also deals with history, linking the past to the future. The possibilities and impossibilities are durable and inculcated in habitus based on the 'opportunities and prohibitions inscribed in the objective conditions', and they form as durable conceptual frameworks to influence choices, exclude the most improbable

and 'refuse what is anyway denied and to will the inevitable'. From this, the probable trajectory is formed and the inequalities in the past are prolonged and realised in the future.

> In reality, the dispositions durably inculcated by the possibilities and impossibilities, freedoms and necessities, opportunities and prohibitions inscribed in the objective conditions (which science apprehends through statistical regularities such as probabilities objectively attached to a group or class) generates dispositions objectively compatible with these conditions and in a sense pre-adapted to their demands. The most improbable practices are therefore excluded, as unthinkable, by a kind of immediate submission to order that inclines agents to make a virtue of necessity, that is, to refuse what is anyway denied and to will the inevitable. (Bourdieu, 1990a: 54)

> In fact, his *habitus* with its temporal structures and dispositions towards the future, constituted in the course of a particular relationship to a particular universe of probabilities, and on the other hand a certain state of the chances objectively offered to him by the social world. The relation to what is possible is a relation to power; and the sense of the probable future is constituted in the prolonged relationship with a world structured according to the categories of the possible (for us) and the impossible (for us), of what is appropriated in advance by and for others and what one can reasonably expect for oneself. The *habitus* is the principle of a selective perception of the indices tending to confirm and reinforce it rather than transform it, a matrix generating responses adapted in advance to all objective conditions identical to or homologous with the (past) conditions of its production; it adjusts itself to a probable future which it anticipates and helps to bring about because it reads it directly in the present of the presumed world, the only one it can ever know. (Bourdieu, 1990a: 64)

And as can be observed in the above quotes and also as illustrated by Reay, 'choice is at the heart of habitus' (2004: 435). As shown in the second quote in the above, choices are made within two frameworks – the external and internal. The external framework can be defined as 'the chances objectively offered to them by the social world' or, as illustrated by Reay, 'the framework of opportunities and constraints' (Reay, 2004: 435) a person finds himself/herself in. The internalised framework 'makes some possibilities inconceivable, others improbable and a limited range acceptable' (Reay, 2004: 435) and is 'the sense of the probable future,' as coined by Bourdieu

in the above quote, and 'social class in the head' (Ball et al., 2002: 52), or 'class frames of reference' (Lauder & Hughes, 1999: 27 quoted in Ball et al., 2002: 56). Through external and internal framing, agents 'become the accomplices of the processes that tend to make the probable a reality' (Bourdieu, 1990a: 65). Also from the discussion on the external and internal framing, we can obtain a better sense of Bourdieu's attempt to bridge structures and agents, as 'social reality exists, so to speak, twice, in things and in minds, in fields and in habitus, outside and inside social agents' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 127).

## Structuring structures: freedom and opportunities

However, the above discussions in relation to the contingency of habitus does not rest on simple determinism that means that the practices, trajectory and the future of every agent can be predicted by his/her past and early experiences. Habitus also relates to freedom, diversity and uncertainty, as clarified by Bourdieu himself: 'the habitus goes hand in hand with vagueness and indeterminacy' (Bourdieu, 1990b: 78). I categorise the freedom of habitus into internal freedom and external freedom. The internal freedom of habitus means its 'infinite capacity for generating products – thoughts, perceptions, expressions and actions' (Bourdieu, 1990a: 55). Habitus keeps 'restructuring' by new experiences, as illustrated by Reay:

> Habituses are permeable and responsive to what is going on around them. Current circumstance are not just there to be acted upon, but are internalised and become yet another layer to add to those from earlier socialisation' (Reay, 2004: 434).

Reay quoted Bourdieu and argued for the influence of school socialisation on the 'restructuring' of habitus, which forms the 'cultured habitus' (Bourdieu, 1967: 344 quoted in Reay, 2004: 434). '[T]he habitus transformed by the action of the school, itself diversified, is in turn at the basis of all subsequent experiences' (Bourdieu, 1972 quoted in Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 134). 'Cultured habitus' is a core concept used in my thesis, from which the

significant role of school socialisation in restructuring the habitus of my participants is demonstrated, as shown in Chapter 6.

The internal freedom of habitus also explains why 'it is impossible for all (or even two) members of the same class to have had the same experiences' (Bourdieu, 1990a: 60). As shown by the following quote, individual habitus is in one way modified by new and unique experiences but in the other way is a 'structural variant of the others', which produces a unique form of integration and reflects a 'diversity within homogeneity'.

> In fact, the singular *habitus* of members of the same class are united in a relationship of homology, that is, of diversity within homogeneity reflecting the diversity within homogeneity characteristic of their social conditions of production. Each individual system of dispositions is a structural variant of the others, expressing the singularity of its position within the class and its trajectory…The *habitus* which, at every moment, structures new experiences in accordance with the structures produced by past experiences, which are modified by the new experiences within the limits defined by their power of selection, brings about a unique integration, dominated by the earlier experiences, of the experiences statistically common to members of the same class.(Bourdieu, 1990a: 60)

However, as may be noted in the above quotes, the internal freedom of habitus should be understood in a 'situational analysis' (Bourdieu, 1990a: 53), as 'conditioned and conditional freedom' (Bourdieu, 1990a: 55). The freedom of habitus should be understood in relation to contingency, as contingency should be understood in relation to freedom as well. Freedom is not the 'free choice of a rootless, unattached, pure subject' (Bourdieu, 1990a: 53) as the reproduction of inequalities is not 'simple mechanical reproduction of the original conditioning'. Freedom and contingency are interrelated in habitus.

> Through the *habitus*, the structure of which it is the product governs practice, not along the paths of a mechanical determinism, but within the constraints and limits initially set on its inventions. This infinite yet strictly limited generative capacity is difficult to understand only so long as remains locked in the usual antinomies- which the concept of the habitus aims to transcend – of determinism

and freedom, conditioning and creativity, consciousness and the unconscious, or the individual and society…the conditioned and conditional freedom it provides is as remote from creation of unpredictable novelty as it is from simple mechanical reproduction of the original conditioning. (Bourdieu, 1990a: 55)

The freedom of habitus is not restricted to its internal freedom, to generate new dispositions and 'creative responses' (Reay, 2004: 435), but also includes its external freedom to reactivate and revive the institutions in which habitus is the product. As illustrated by the following quote, through incorporation into 'the durable, adjusted dispositions', the objectification of an institution is prolonged, strengthened and kept in activity and meanwhile through the internal freedom of habitus, through the revisions and transformation it can make, the objectification of the institution can also be reactivated. The efficacy of incorporation in habitus, as revealed in a quotation from Bourdieu that appears earlier in this chapter, is therefore 'more reliable than all formal rules and explicit norms' (Bourdieu, 1990a: 54).

> This durably installed generative principle of regulated improvisations is a practical sense which reactivated the sense of objectified in institutions. Produced by the work of inculcation and appropriation that is needed in order for objective structures, the product of collective history, to be reproduced in the form of the durable, adjusted dispositions that are the condition of their functioning, the habitus, which is constituted in the course of an individual history, imposing its particular logic on incorporation, and through which agents partake of the history objectified in institutions, is what makes it possible to inhabit institutions, to appropriate them practically, and so to keep them in activity, continuously pulling them from the state of dead letters, reviving the sense deposited in them, but at the same time imposing the revisions and transformations that reactivation entails. Or rather, the *habitus* is what enables the institutions to attain full realization: it is through incorporation, which exploits the body's readiness to take seriously the performative magic of the social, that the king, the banker or the priest are hereditary monarchy, financial capitalism or the Church made flesh. (Bourdieu, 1990a: 57)

Similar to the transcendence of the antinomy between freedom and contingency, the external freedom of habitus suggests transcendence of

another antinomy – between the individual and the institution. Habitus is 'the king, the banker or the priest' that makes 'hereditary monarchy, financial capitalism or the Church flesh', while the institution also offers the individual who embodies its objectification privileges and obligations, marking him/her as 'an eldest son, an heir, a successor, a Christian' as shown in the following quote. Through the inheritance of objectification in habitus, the 'instituted difference' is transformed into 'natural distinction', which achieves symbolic domination and 'produce[s] quite real effects' in a hidden but profound way. From the interaction between the individual and the institution, from the synergy between habitus and field, both the structures in habitus and in field are prolonged, strengthened and reactivated.

> If one is justified in saying, with Marx, that 'the lord of an entailed estate, the first-born son, belongs to the land', that 'it inherits him', or that the 'persons' of capitalists are the 'personification' of capital, this is because the purely social and quasi-magical process of socialisation, which is inaugurated by the act of marking that institutes an individual as an eldest son, an heir, a successor, a Christian, or simply as a man (as opposed to a woman), with all the corresponding privileges and obligations, and which is prolonged, strengthened and confirmed by social treatments that tend to transform instituted difference into natural distinction, produces quite real effects, durably inscribed in the body and in belief. An institution, even an economy, is complete and fully viable only if it is durably objectified not only in things, that is, in the logic, transcending individual agents, of a particular field, but also in bodies, in durable dispositions to recognize and comply with the demands immanent in the field. (Bourdieu, 1990a: 57-58)

As can be seen from the above discussions, the operation of habitus distinguishes itself from determinism and also from 'subjectivism', that sees the subject as a 'rootless, unattached, pure subject' (Bourdieu, 1990a: 53). I use a matrix (see Figure 2.2) to explain differences between the operation of habitus, determinism and subjectivism. Habitus, as commented by Bourdieu, 'aims to transcend – determinism and freedom, conditioning and creativity, consciousness and the unconscious, or the individual and society' (Bourdieu, 1990a: 55). It brings a new understanding of both contingency and freedom, the individual and the society. They are not separated but are

interrelated. Contingency should be understood with relation to freedom, as freedom should be considered in relation to contingency. Habitus of individuals should be seen with relation to the conditions in which it is produced, as the production and reproduction of inequalities in society should also be seen from its relation to the practices of individuals.

Figure 2.2: Habitus, determinism and subjectivism
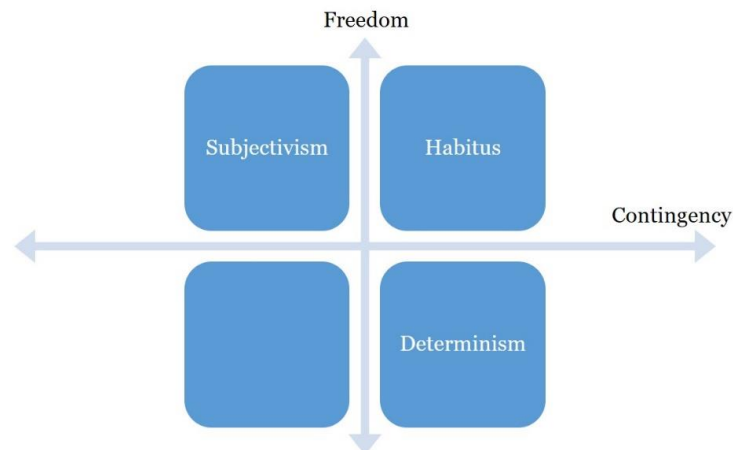


## Reflexivity in habitus

Although the criticisms of habitus with regard to its supposed determinsim are refuted by Bourdieu himself (1990a) and also by some other authors, for example Reay (2004), the problem of his over-emphasis on unconsiousness and a lack of space for reflexivity is a focus of concern for many authors (e.g., Reay, 2004; Sayer, 2005). Unconsiousness is indeed emphasised in Bourdieu's works, for example as shown in his account in an interview with Wacquant (1993):

> LW: Thus, when you speak of 'strategeis of reproduction', this does not imply a utilitarian calculation pertaining to a marginalist model of action or to a theory of rational choice.
> PB: No. To speak of a strategy of reproduction is not to impute to rational calculation the conduct through which the tendency of the dominant to persevere in their being expresses itself. It is only to grasp togeter a number of phenomenally diverse practices (in matters of fertility, prophylaxis, education, economy, sucession) which are practically organised towards this end, without in

any way being explicitly onceived and posed in reference to it. This is possible because these practices have, *as a principle of coherence, a habitus* (Bourdieu, 1977, 1980/1990b) which tends to produce the conditions of its own production by producing, in each of these realms, the objectively coherent and systematic lines of action that characterize a mode of reproduction. (Wacquant, 1993: 31)

Also Bourdieu stated explicitly in many places in his work the pre-reflexive operation of habitus, for example in the following account:

The *habitus* is a spontaneity without consciousness or will, opposed as much to the mechanical necessity of things without history in mechanistic theories as it is to the reflexive freedom of subjects 'without inertia' in rationalist theories. (Bourdieu, 1990a: 56)

Bourdieu has his reasons for emphasising 'unconsciousness' in the operation of habitus. One is to counter rationalist theories that see subjects 'without inertia', as shown in the following account. As we have seen earlier in this chapter regarding his analysis of economic competency, economic competency has 'inertia', is affected by the past and its relation to the exterior, while the history embodied in habitus, the 'intertia' in habitus, will be 'internalised as a second nature and so forgotten as history' (Bourdieu, 1990a: 54). It will 'produce history on the basis of history' (Bourdieu, 1990a: 54) objectively, without calculation, as 'natural bent' (Lucas, 2006: 58). Bourdieu's emphasis on 'un-consciousness' is an outcome of his attempt to link structures and agency, to realise the hidden influences of structures and history on the practices of agents, to 'render the "taken-for-granted" problematic' (Reay, 2004: 437).

Economic theory which acknowledges only the rational 'responses' of an indeterminate, interchangeable agent to 'potential opportunities', or more precisely to average changes (like the 'average rates of profit' offered by the different markets), converts the immanent law of the economy into a universal norm of proper economic behaviour. In doing so, it conceals the fact that the 'rational' *habitus* which is the precondition for appropriate economic behaviour is the product of particular economic condition, the one defined by possession of the economic and cultural capital required in order to seize the 'potential opportunities' theoretically available to all...(Bourdieu, 1990a: 63-64)

One reason for Bourdieu's emphasis on 'unconsciousness' is, as shown in the above, related to his attempt to counter subjects 'without inertia', while the other reason is, to work on 'unconsciousness' is his academic pursuit. Bourdieu is very aware of the reflexivity of people, 'the resistance of the dominated', as clearly shown in the following account. Nevertheless, he 'chose' to work on the 'unconsciousness', to reveal the hidden, unrealised but profound influences of social conditions on the internal world of people, on their practices, emotions and their expectations towards the future. Dominated people have reflexivity and they may have 'resistance', but they may not have the time, abilities or the 'vision' to sit back, think about or think beyond the social conditions in which they are living or in which they are constrained. Bourdieu chooses to use his reflexivity as an intellectual to reflect for them, to reveal the constraints they experience and to demonstrate the 'unlivable' world in which they live. The objective may be to make the world more liveable.

> LW: You have often been criticized for proposing a very mechanical vision of the social world and a closed vision of history, in which forms of power reproduce themselves indefinitely without resistance, with a sort of ineluctable necessity. Yet, at the end of your book, and I may confess that this came to me as something of a surprise, you outline a progressive (or progressivist) historical movement towards the less arbitrary. Is this to say that the school nobility, even if it remains a nobility, is historically less arbitrary than the blood nobility which preceded it?

> PB: This question raises two different issues. There is first the question of 'resistance'. It is nonsense to suggest that I do not recognize the resistance of the dominated. To put it briefly: if I stress the complicity of the dominated in their own domination, it is to 'twist the stick in the other direction', to break once and for all with this populist mythology in currency among those intellectuals who feel a need to believe that the dominated are always on the alert, always ready to mobilize, to rise up, to overturn the oppression they suffer. Projecting their intellectual vision, which is that of a spectator, an external observer, they forget that the dominated are socialized by the very conditions in which they live and that they are therefore often determined – to varying degrees – to accommodate to their situation, lest the world be totally unlivable for them. (Wacquant, 1993: 35)

Over-emphasis on 'unconsciousness' indeed exists in Bourdieu's work; but instead of seeing it as a weakness in his work, I would rather argue that it is Bourdieu's choice, it is his pursuit and his way of making a contribution to a better world. However, despite being aware of his reasons for emphasising 'unconsciousness' and downplaying reflexivity, I still need to understand the space of reflexivity in the operation of habitus. As will be noted in Chapter 6 and especially in Chapter 7, the narratives in my study show much evidence of reflexivity, of 'internal conversations' (Sayer, 2005: 29), of my participants' self-consciousness, strategic planning, critical evaluation of social conditions and deliberate changes to themselves. Therefore I need to understand not only the operation of habitus, how the conditions in which the habitus is produced influence people's life trajectories, practices and inner being, I also need to understand the space of reflexivity in the operation of habitus regarding, for example, how my participants see and respond to domination, how they 'transcend' the operation of habitus and are able to become 'exceptions'.

Although he gives a primary emphasis to unconsciousness, Bourdieu does discuss the space of reflexivity in the operation of habitus. Habitus in most cases operates unconsciously, as discussed in the above, while there is one circumstance in which it works on the level of consciousness – the dislocation of habitus in an unfamiliar field. As illustrated by Reay (2004: 437-438):

> Implicit in the concept is that habitus operates at an unconscious level unless
> individuals confront events that cause self-questioning, whereupon habitus begins
> to operates at the level of consciousness and the person develops new facets of the
> self.

This way of explaining reflexivity is based on the complicity between habitus and field. Reflexivity has not been explained but is only seen as an outcome of an exceptional circumstance – the disjuncture between habitus and field, while in most cases unconsciousness rules the operation of habitus. Reflexivity is downgraded to the position that it is only in unusual

circumstances that unconscious functioning of habitus fails. As commented by Giroux (1983a: 271):

> Unfortunately, where the conceptual possibility for resistance does appear in Bourdieu's work – that is, in the mismatch between one's habitus and the position one occupies – the foundation for such action rests not on a notion of reflexivity or critical self-consciousness, but on the incompatibility between two structures – the historical structure of the disposition and the historical structure embodied in the institution.

Although Bourdieu may want to highlight the powerful influence of symbolic domination by emphasising unconsciousness in the operation of habitus, downplaying reflexivity to the position of only appearing in the disjuncture between habitus and field fails to understand much of the evidence in my study, as will be seen in Chapter 6 and Chapter 7. Some of my participants have a clear self-consciousness of their class position, their ambition and their dreams, even in their childhood. They demonstrate critical evaluation of the social conditions in which their habitus is produced and they are not blindly accepting of 'what comes naturally', rather they strive to be different, to make strategies and to deliberately change their dispositions and work on themselves. Reflexivity, or more exactly coined as 'mundane reflexivity' (Sayer, 2005), which ranges from day dreaming to concentrated reflection, exists and works, as argued by Reay and Sayer, 'during the formation of habitus, and indeed can be constitutive of the habitus' (Reay, 2004: 438). As argued by Archer (2010), reflexivity and unconsciousness should be considered as working in tandem and also as argued by Reay, based on her commentary on a study by Charlesworth (2000) that presents considerable evidence of mundane reflexivity of working-class people in negotiating sufferings, 'as well as habitus coming into view as a mixture of the embodied, the instinctual and the unthought, we also glimpse the "life of the mind", the reflective as well as the pre-reflective' (Reay, 2004: 441).

In fact, in Bourdieu's late work, especially in *The Weight of the World* (1999a), in which Bourdieu and his colleagues interviewed disadvantaged people in positions of social suffering, there is a lot of evidence in relation to

the reflexivity of disadvantaged people in dealing with domination. As pointed out by Sayer, by drawing on the case of Farida in *The Weight of the World* who had struggled under her father's domination but escaped and deliberately worked on herself, 'accounts like this are both a testimony to the power and inertia of habitus and the way in which it can be changed deliberately, at least in part, by repeated practice aimed at the embodiment of new dispositions' (2005: 30). Similarly, Reay commented on these narratives in *The Weight of the World*, 'we begin to get a sense not only of the myriad adaptations, responses, reactions and resistances to "the way the world is", but also of individuals struggling to make the world a different place' (Reay, 2004: 437). However, albeit with plenty of empirical evidence regarding people's mundane reflexivity, Bourdieu still did not explicitly discuss the 'notion of reflexivity' (Giroux, 1983a: 271), the role of reflexivity in the operation of habitus or possibilities to make deliberate changes to habitus in *The Weight of the World*. These are what I want to achieve by doing this project, by focusing on the 'exceptions' who refuse 'what comes naturally to them' and deliberately and constantly change their dispositions in their trajectories they encounter new and unfamiliar fields. By shedding light on the group who seem to have much reflexivity in negotiating with domination and who seem to 'transcend' the operation of habitus, I want to develop the understanding of habitus by discussing the space of reflexivity in the operation of habitus and to see if we can 'transcend' the habitus, the symbolic domination of class and achieve 'self-emancipation' (Giroux, 1983a: 290).

Bourdieu did not discuss in detail 'mundane reflexivity' in his work, but he argue for the need for 'reflexivity' in undertaking sociological research (Bourdieu, 1990b; Bourdieu, 1993a) and argues for 'reflexive sociology' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Bourdieu's idea of 'reflexive sociology' is where he 'turned the instruments of his science upon himself', 'a self-analysis of the sociologist as cultural producer and a reflection on the socio-historical conditions of possibility of a science of society' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 36). Like the objects in Bourdieu's study on class or gender domination, the knowledge, ideas and habitus of sociologists is also formed

from their socialisation in fields so that the knowledge of sociologists will include 'biases' and could 'blur the sociological gaze' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 36). Reflexivity, the conceptions of which 'range from self-reference to self-awareness to the constitutive circularity of accounts or texts' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 37), is 'precisely what enables us to escape such delusions by uncovering the social at the heart of the individual, the impersonal beneath the intimate, the universal buried deep within the most popular' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 44). The idea of reflexive sociology means possibilities for sociologists to achieve transcendence of 'biases'. If sociologists can achieve transcendence of the operation of habitus, why cannot people in other forms of domination? In the subtitle of 'Habitus and Freedom' in the *Scattered Remarks*, Bourdieu explicitly stated:

> Pedagogical action can thus, because of and despite the symbolic violence it entails, open the possibility of an emancipation founded on awareness and knowledge of the conditionings undergone and on the imposition of new conditionings designed durably to counter their effects. (Bourdieu, 1999b: 340)

Also, in *The Weight of the World*, in Sayad's analysis of the interviews, he coined the phrase 'posture of self-analysis' to describe the participants who can gain 'relatively mastery of the situation and turns into the very condition of survival' (Bourdieu, 1999a: 581). As will be seen in Chapter 7, my study also provides plenty of such evidence of 'posture of self-analysis' and some of my participants have clear 'awareness and knowledge of conditionings undergone' and they continuously work on themselves to 'counter the effects' of habitus. I will demonstrate how they work on themselves and transcend the operation of habitus through reflexivity in Chapter 7. However, another finding arising from analysis in Chapter 7 and also in Chapter 6 is that reflexivity is not entirely independent of capital. Reflexivity has some relation to capital. Participants who have relatively more economic, social and cultural capital demonstrate more self-awareness and demonstrate more reflexive dispositions. Furthermore, a third finding is that the existence of reflexivity does not necessarily mean the 'transcendence' or 'transformation' of habitus. As shown in Chapter 7, the reflexive responses

my participants developed in dealing with habitus dislocation in most cases tend to reinforce rather than to change the old habitus.

As stated in the above on my understanding of habitus, my understanding of reflexivity, which will be seen in this thesis, also includes both contingency and freedom. The dispositions to 'know the conditionings undergone' and 'to counter the effects' (Bourdieu, 1999b: 340) are not equally distributed among my participants but they are contingent on the possession of certain forms and volumes of capital. These reflexive dispositions do not always orientate to challenge the habitus, to 'counter the effects.' Rather, they tend to work together with unconsciousness, to reinforce habitus and to join in the production and reproduction of inequalities. This complexity of understanding reflexivity will be especially seen in Chapter 7.

## Conclusion: using habitus as a tool, an instrument and a method rather than as a theory

Habitus is a very useful tool to be employed in my study. First, it offers a triple focus on biography, structure and history, that makes it possible to think about the ways in which the disadvantages of social conditions related to the working-class position are embodied in my participants' dispositions and influence their choices, actions, feelings and expectations towards the future, that is to see how they 'contribute to their own domination' (Bourdieu, 1996: 4). Second, through demonstrating and revealing the role of unconscious operations, habitus can help me to shed light on forms of symbolic domination. As illustrated by Reay, 'habitus is a way of looking at data which renders the "taken-for-granted" problematic' (Reay, 2004: 437). With the aid of habitus, the successes of these 'exceptions' are questioned in this thesis and a hidden and deeper form of symbolic domination is demonstrated, which can be seen in Chapter 6 and in Chapter 7. Third, habitus improves my understanding of the experience of class. From the data analysis chapters, especially Chapter 5, we will see how class influences my participants' choices and actions as well as their deselection and inactions. We will also see the influences of class on my participants'

emotions and how these emotions contribute to their submission to domination.

By focusing on the group of 'exceptions' who in some degree can be seen as 'counter-evidence' of the operation of working-class habitus and who have achieved some transcendence of 'what comes naturally to them' and who demonstrate some obvious evidence of mundane reflexivity, I am not satisfied with only using habitus in my study but also I hope to develop the understanding of habitus through researching this 'counter-evidence'. This is, in fact, the attitude of Bourdieu towards his own theoretical work, taking it as methods rather theory. As he explains, 'the core of my work lies in the method and a way of thinking' (Bourdieu, 1985 quoted in Reay, 2004: 439). In addition, as commented by Harker, Bourdieu 'works in a spiral between theory, empirical work and back to reformulating theory again but at a different level' (1990: 3). Therefore I want to use habitus in my study as a method, a tool and a way of asking questions, but also I wish to develop the method by immersing myself 'in the specificity of an empirical reality' (Bourdieu, 1993b: 271). As Wacquant illustrated by quoting Foucault (1980: 53-54), 'to use it, to deform it, to make it groan and protest' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: xiv).

# 3. Literature review: under-researched questions in a fully-researched theme

Class inequality is a long-standing topic that has been extensively discussed in sociological studies of education. Indeed, in many ways it defines the discipline. The myth of the 'school as liberating force' (Bourdieu, 1996: 5) has been deconstructed by the studies of this kind that have demonstrated the social role of education in legitimating, reproducing and amending the class order (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Bourdieu is among the most influential writers in this field, and he has developed a powerful set of theoretical tools, consisting of *capital*, *habitus* and *field,* to understand symbolic domination (in comparison with material domination) and using these he conducted a thorough empirical examination of the social reproduction mechanisms in France's elite education system (Bourdieu, 1996). I will discuss this classic study by Bourdieu at the beginning of this chapter, followed by a discussion of similar findings found in some other national contexts, China included. Elite universities (for example, Grandes Écoles in France and the Ivy League in United States) play a crucial part in maintaining and reproducing the privileges of the dominant groups. As commented by Wacquant in the *Foreword* of *The State Nobility*, 'by providing separate pathways of transmission of privilege and by recognizing competing, even antagonistic, claims to pre-eminence within its own order, the field of elite schools insulates and placates the various categories of inheritors of power and ensures, better than any other device, the *pax dominorum* indispensable to the sharing of the spoils of hegemony' (Bourdieu, 1996: xiv).

After discussing the 'macro domination' regarding the distribution of classes in the hierarchy of higher education and the related social reproduction systems and mechanisms, I will then turn to look at studies on the 'micro

domination' that investigate how class domination is achieved in everyday life, by the choices, actions, conceptions of both the dominant and the dominated, that is, achieved not 'out there' but 'in here' (Bourdieu, 1996: xiv).

As illustrated by Bourdieu in the interview with Wacquant, although 'the mechanism of reproduction formed by grande écoles constitutes an extraordinarily powerful system' (Wacquant, 1993: 28), 'the statistical logic of its functioning means that it produces established structures with enough exceptions to create the illusion of independence and democratization' (p.30). Although Bourdieu regarded the stories of these 'exceptions in both directions – failures and success stories' (Wacquant, 1993: 30) as an illusion, as I argued in Chapter 1, focusing on the 'exceptions' might generate new perspectives on class domination, to understand possibilities for breaking the class domination. Bourdieu coined the 'exceptions' as 'deviants' in *The State Nobility* (Bourdieu, 1996: 183-187), individuals who lead to 'the pole opposite to the position to which they were promised and which was promised to them' (p.184). Some authors have focused on the experience, the trajectories of such 'deviant cases', as do I, with a focus on working-class students attending elite universities. Various studies now have offered stories intertwining the experience of educational successes with hidden injuries of class and also they have already provided some theoretical insights into understanding the stories of these 'deviants'. I will discuss those studies in the second section of this chapter.

I quoted Bourdieu in the last chapter, 'the core of my work lies in the method and a way of thinking' and 'to be more precise, my method is a manner of asking questions rather than just ideas' (Bourdieu, 1985, quoted in Reay, 2004). The same approach applies here and explains my purposes in this literature review. Instead of using existing research as practically proven frameworks or models, the concepts, themes, findings and research designs that I present later in this chapter, together with Bourdieu's theoretical tools that were discussed in the last chapter, will be used as sensitising tools to

think about my data, to ask questions, to make comparisons and to generate new ideas, which can be seen in the later chapters of my thesis.

## Classifications of HEI attending based on social origins: 'like father, like son'

As Bourdieu commented in *The Weight of the World* (1999a), the massification of higher education shifts the focus of class competition from access to higher education to the access to elite education. Before this comment, early in *The State Nobility*, Bourdieu (1996) had already demonstrated the social classification in French higher education and examined the role of elite universities in reproducing the privileges of the dominant classes.

At the beginning of the *Foreword* he wrote for Bourdieu's book, *The State Nobility*, Wacquant said, '*not one but two species of capital* now give access to positions of power, define the structure of social space, and govern the life chances and trajectories of groups and individuals: economic capital and cultural capital" (Bourdieu, 1996: x, original emphasis). Using statistical analysis, interviews and narratives, historical comparisons and theoretical insights, Bourdieu demonstrated in *The State Nobility* how social origins (a combination of economic capital and cultural capital) determined access to higher education, in terms of chances going to university and types of institutions attended. Elite universities (Grandes Écoles) are dominated by the middle and the upper classes and this distribution then links to their over-representation in the top tier of occupations. Graduates from these universities occupy the uppermost tier of 'bourgeoisie and top corporations' (Bourdieu, 1996: xii), and have 'the monopoly on dominant positions' (p.5). A similar class distribution in high education and the underrepresentation of disadvantaged classes are also found in many other countries. Jerrim (Jerrim, Chmielewski, & Parker, 2015; Jerrim, 2013) demonstrated and compared the access of low-income students to elite universities ('high-status universities' in Jerrim's terms) in some economically developed societies with a special focus on the UK, USA and Australia, in that there are

'well-defined elite university sectors' (Jerrim et al., 2015: 20). Only one in eight undergraduate students in Oxbridge and other elite universities in London, such as LSE and Imperial College, come from low-occupational backgrounds  and one in five undergraduate students in Ivy League universities received the Pell Grant (a commonly used marker of low-income students) (Jerrim, 2013: 9-10).

## The dualist organisation of schools and accumulated disadvantages

The distribution of social origins in higher education and in occupations are maintained by systems in education and also by the 'work' done (or not done) by the agents of the dominant and the dominated classes. The system of 'dualist organisation' (Bourdieu, 1996: 96) of pedagogy is highlighted by Bourdieu, which he commented on as being, 'the most well-hidden effect of the existence of noble channels is without doubt related to the very duality of pedagogic organisation – public schools and grammar schools in Great Britain, grande écoles and universities in France' (Bourdieu, 1996: 96). Bourdieu explained further on the role of the dualistic organisation, 'it is *the relationship of systematic opposition* between the two categories of institution that gives rise to the originality of each, and to the (positive and negative) *distinction* and the symbolic value that each bestows its products' (Bourdieu, 1996: 96-97, original emphasis).  He demonstrated how the everyday practice at elite schools (preparatory classes for grande écoles) bestowed 'distinction and the symbolic values' on their students, including a discussion of the intake of students and teachers to elite schools, pedagogy, assessments and peer influences. The dualistic organisation of schools achieves an early selection and divergence of different social classes into different kinds of schools, which ensures and enhances their divergence at higher education. Disadvantages and advantages are accumulated over time and are difficult to change in the dualist organisation, as commented by Bourdieu in *The Weight of the World*:

In a sense, the most decisive "choices" are made sooner and sooner, as early as the troisième [tenth grade], and not, as in the past, after the baccalaureat. Academic fate is sealed sooner and sooner (which helps to explain the presence of very young lyceé students in the recent mass protests). But, in another sense, the consequences of these choices appear later and later, as if everything conspired to encourage and support high school or university students and give them a "reprieve" which allows them to put off the final reckoning, the moment of truth when they will see the time spent at school as lost time, time wasted. (Bourdieu, 1999a: 423)

The cumulative effects of the dualistic organisation are also examined and confirmed in many studies based in other national contexts. For example, Archer and her colleagues (Archer, Hutchings, & Ross, 2003) demonstrated the different curricula in English schools, which directed working-class students to vocational higher education and middle-class students on academic paths. Ball's (Ball, Davies, David, & Reay, 2002; Ball, Macrae, & Maguire, 2000) and Reay's studies (Reay, David, & Ball, 2005) on university choices also confirmed the role of schools in shaping students' aspirations and preparations for university application. Oxbridge for students at private schools is the obvious choice, an option they are expected to choose, 'the starting point that has be reasoned against'. (Ball et al., 2002: 58). But in state schools (except in England for a small number of elite state schools – mainly grammar schools) it is the choice that the student needs to work really hard for. It is a challenging choice, a lonely choice that is atypical to the majority of others at school (see the case of Rachel who was struggling to apply for Cambridge from a state school in Ball et al., 2000). The dualistic organisation of schools based on class distinctions remains, enhances and reinforces the social order, through maintaining the distinctions between classes from school to university and then to career. Statistics show that students from private schools occupy more than 40% of undergraduates at Oxbridge, but fewer than one in ten English children attend private schools (Zimdars, 2016).

The dualistic organisation is a well-functioning and durable system that maintains and reproduces the social order, but its functioning is not only

achieved from 'out there', but also from 'in here' (Bourdieu, 1996: xiv), through 'power comes from below', that is, 'the practical operation of habitus' (p.4). Through socialisation in the dualistic organisation, people tend to accept the divisions they confront and the trajectories indicated by the divisions. They embody these divisions into their habitus, develop a sense of their place, and by seeking like-minded persons and cultures, they maintain and reinforce their place in education and in society. Through recognising and choosing the 'like-minded person', 'a neighbour so socially similar that he is able to love himself in him' and through being reinforced by 'continuous and prolonged contact with classmates endowed with similar or related dispositions' (Bourdieu, 1996: 182), the distinctions between classes under the dual organisation of schools and their positions in the field of power, are maintained, reproduced and strengthened, both unconsciously and deliberately, which is 'better than any other device' (Bourdieu, 1996: xiv). The dominated class more often than not accedes to this class domination by embodying the divisions of the dualistic organisation, convinced that they are un-deserving, as Bourdieu illustrates in *The Weight of the World*:

> Until the end of fifties, the secondary school system was characterized by great stability based on the early and brutal elimination (at the beginning of junior high school) of students from culturally disadvantaged families. This social based selection was widely accepted by the children who were its victims and by their families, since it seemed to be entirely based on the talents and merits of the individuals selected and because the children not wanted by the school system were convinced (notably by the system itself) that they did not want anything to do with school…the resulting state of affairs contributed more than a little to convince those who felt unsuited for school that they were unsuited for the positions that an education opens up (and closes off) – that is, white collar jobs and, especially, managerial positions within these occupations. (Bourdieu, 1999a: 421)

The dualistic organisation of schools based on class divisions constitutes a major contextual aspect for many societies, which maintains and reinforces the social order and class inequalities. The dualistic organisation of schools

in China and the influences of this organisation on the habitus of my participants will be discussed in detail in Chapter 6.

**Access to elite high education: exclusions and self-exclusions**

The system of dualistic organisation of pedagogy based on class divisions accumulates advantages and disadvantages and offers different qualifications and forms of preparation for students from different social origins. But this general distribution does not mean success for every single advantaged student and failure for every single working-class student, as Bourdieu made it clear that 'the homology between positions and the dispositions of their occupants is never perfect' (Bourdieu, 1996: 183). Some working-class students do achieve the qualifications required by elite universities, while even for them, this does not mean that they do enter elite universities. Jerrim and his colleagues (2015) found that in the USA, 58% of high-achieving school students from advantaged backgrounds entered a high-status university, but the figure for high-achieving disadvantaged students was only 27% and the percentage attending an elite private university (compared with an elite public university) was as low as only 9% (p.29). The UK has a similar percentage with 53% for advantaged groups and 25% for disadvantaged groups (Jerrim et al., 2015: 29-30). Jerrim pointed out that this 'suggests that there are significant numbers of working class children who, even though they have the academic ability to attend, choose to enter a non-selective institution instead' (2013: 8).

Jerrim does not discuss the reasons for the 'wasted talents' of these high-achieving working class students, but other studies can offer some insights. Financial issues may be a realistic barrier. Hill and other authors (Hill, Winston, & Boyd, 2005) demonstrated that the sticker prices (balanced off by adding into financial aids) at the American selective universities still expected a large sum for low income students ($8169 for the lowest income group to pay at the Ivy League), which would have a negative impact on their enrolment. And Hutchings (2003) had a similar conclusion that the university costs for low-income participants were a disincentive considering

the large debts they would take on (£13,805 for studying in London and £11,200 for outside London, according to 2002/2003 rates). The amount of debt may be expected to dramatically increase now, considering the tuition fees at all universities are rising or have risen to £9,250 per year. Jerrim's study (2013: 13) of four elite universities in UK and USA also demonstrated that studying in Oxford involves a sticker price of £3,550 for the lowest household income group (below £10,000), £11,750 for LSE and £3,185 for Ann Arbor, Michigan, as against £865 for studying in Harvard, which had generous subsidies.

Furthermore, working class students may be discriminated against in the process of enrolment to elite universities. Karabel (2005) demonstrated that how 'meritocracy', the philosophy claimed by American elite universities, could be constructed for the purpose of serving institutional interests. Using historical documents including admission reports, internal memoranda, statistics, committee minutes and biographies, Karabel (2005) traced the history of admission policy changes at Harvard, Yale and Princeton (abbreviated as the 'Big Three') from 1900 to 2005 and demonstrated how presidents and admissions directors, together with faculties and alumni, constructed and altered the meaning of 'merit' according to social changes in America. This served their occupational interests in the competition within the Ivy League and with international competitors. The first change at the Big Three happened in the 1920s when they altered the meaning of 'merit' from almost entirely based on academic criteria to the evaluation of 'character' that could serve to legitimately exclude the 'wrong' students, like those of Jewish origin. In line with this change, the Big Three 'began asking for photographs, personal interviews, letters of recommendations, etc. to weed out the undesirable' (Swartz, 2008). The first change forms a regime called the 'iron law of admissions', which is as explained by Karabel, 'a university will retain a particular admissions policy only as long as it produces outcomes that correspond to perceived institutional interests' (Karabel, 2005: 2).

Karabel examined other changes to the definition of 'merit' in the Big Three's admissions and concluded that 'these definitions all privilege the "attributes most abundantly possessed by dominant social groups"'(Karabel, 2005: 549). But maintaining symbolic domination does not mean there was no progress towards greater diversity and equality at the Big Three. Karabel discussed the progress in gender, race and ethnic diversity at the Big Three by introducing inclusion policies in the 1960s, although he considered these as strategic responses to race riots and coeducation trends, not based on moral grounds. Yet Karabel pointed out that increasing gender and race equality did not bring progress in class equality and the latter remained almost the same as it was in the 1950s. Moreover, Zimdars (2010; 2016) had a similar finding from her interviews with admission officers and on-site observations at the Big Three and at Oxbridge in that their enrolment was looking for 'likeability' (Zimdars, 2010: 318). An influence of social capital such as family legacy, faculty legacy and development legacy on admissions was also mentioned in Zimdars' study (2016: 82-87). Also, in the book, *Degrees of Choice*, Reay mentioned '40% of students at Cambridge had a family member who went to Oxbridge' (Reay et al., 2005: 66). As a hidden but effective mechanism, enrolment at elite universities discriminates against the 'wrong' students, in particular working-class students who have little of the 'right' cultural and social capital, even among those who achieve academically against all the odds.

Alongside the discriminatory effects of admission policies, some high-achieving working-class students may self-exclude from elite universities. As Bourdieu said, 'if it is fitting to recall that the dominated always contributed to their own domination, it is at once necessary to recall that the dispositions that incline them toward this complicity are themselves the effect, embodied, of domination' (1996: 4). The living out of 'social class in the head' by making 'classifications and judgements' is carefully examined in some authors' studies on students' higher education choices (Ball et al., 2002; Reay et al., 2005; Reay, Davies, David, & Ball, 2001). Based on their analysis of 502 questionnaires and 120 interviews at six educational institutions (two comprehensive schools, two private schools, one further education college

and one tertiary college), Reay and her colleagues (Reay et al., 2001, 2005) found that most working-class students tended to choose new post-1992 universities, including some high-achieving working-class students. It was an effect of many factors including material constraints, for example, low academic performance influenced by demanding part-time jobs, domestic obligations and financial considerations and also cognitive factors, for example a commitment to maintain an 'authentic' working-class identity and considerations of social and cultural 'fit' (Reay et al., 2001; 2005). Higher education choices, as argued by Ball (2002), are a 'practical logic' in a nexus of institutional habitus, family habitus and individual aspirations, identities, dispositions and capital, which are infused with rational, practical and emotional decisions. The decision to choose new post-1992 universities are not all desperate, constrained and filled with compromises, as Archer and Hutchings (2000: 570) said in their study of working-class non-participants, 'placing themselves as potentially able to take advantage of the benefits it can offer, but not as "owners" of it', some working-class students, even high-achieving students, 'chose' going to new universities determinedly and voluntarily. For example, Mick, a working-class student at the FE college in Reay's study, rejected King's College and chose Roehampton with a determined statement that his priority was to find a place in which he could be comfortable, somewhere he could feel at home (Reay et al., 2005: 91). Elite universities are seen as a place for 'them', for 'elites' and for 'others'. Such students accept their place in society and live out this place through their own choices, preferences and actions, by which they contribute to class domination and to its reproduction. Reay and her colleagues (Reay et al., 2001; 2005) also discussed some exceptions who attended elite universities rather than new universities. Instead of pursuing a trajectory of comfort, safety and similarities, these working-class students are seeking 'a world of fluidity and change where they can create a new self unconnected with their former selves in school and in the family' (Reay et al., 2005: 98). They did not want to maintain the authentic identity as a working-class student, but engaged in a process of dis-identification, as someone who 'doesn't want to be a member of any club that will have me'. Reay includes a further discussion of the dis-identification in her study of the experiences of these

exceptions at elite universities (Reay, Crozier, & Clayton, 2009), which I will address in the next section.

**A new context: possibilities to have new findings**

Plenty of studies have demonstrated objective and symbolic social reproduction mechanisms in the 'developed' and stratified societies (for example the UK, USA and France), the studies listed and discussed earlier being only a few instances. However, as Giroux (1983a: 290) argued, 'power is exercised on and by people within different contexts that structure interacting relations of dominance and autonomy' in varied forms and also as Marginson (2016) proposes, the UK and USA could benefit from learning from other societies with more egalitarian education systems to increase social mobility. Shavit and Blossfeld (1993) examined class inequality in education opportunities in 13 countries and except in Sweden and the Netherlands, where the social welfare policies acted to reduce inequalities, class inequality had remained stable since the early twentieth century, including some former socialist societies where privileged bureaucratic elites were over-represented in HE. Drawing on the data from OECD, Liu, Green and Pensiero (2016) conducted a comparative study of 24 countries to see how 'stratified and differentiated systems affect higher education opportunities by different social groups' (p.243). Three factors are argued for constituting contextual factors that influence the relation between high education participation rate and equality of education opportunities between social groups: private contribution to higher education (tuition fees), the degree of hierarchy in higher education and public support (Liu et al., 2016). They conclude that 'the liberal and East Asian countries, which have the highest average higher education qualification rates, generally have relatively higher inequality of opportunity' while 'the social democratic countries, with lower rates of participation, have relatively low inequality of opportunity.' (Liu et al., 2016: 260). China, if defined by the contextual factors in this study, has greater government investment and support in education, which distinguishes it from the two East Asian countries in their study (Japan and South Korea), and China also has an education system that

is largely managed by the government rather than driven by the market, which makes it different from the 'liberal market countries (the UK, the US, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand)' (Liu et al., 2016: 244). Also, Confucian culture has a significant role in motivating private investment into education for both poor families and rich families (Marginson, 2011). As can be noted in the above, China is a context with many distinctive features but has not been much researched in relation to the theme of class inequality. Indeed, the evolving marketised reforms in China, in education and also in society add to its distinctiveness as a context. As pointed out by Bian (2002) after a systematic review of post-1980 research (the majority of the research he studied is written in English with very few studies in Chinese) on class stratification and social mobility in China, as a socialist state but with evolving marketised reforms, 'China presents an unusual research field of sociological experiments for many questions about class stratification, socioeconomic inequalities, and social mobility' (p.108).

Moreover, as mentioned earlier in this section, there is a dualistic organisation of schools in China, as there exists in many other contexts, which constitutes a main mechanism to maintain and reinforce class inequality. However, the dualistic organisation of schools in China tends to demonstrate relatively more meritocratic features. The access to different levels and types of elite schools in China and even to different subjects at university is almost entirely based on exam performance. There seems to be less apparent involvement of family capital in access to elite schools and to elite universities than some other contexts, as in the UK, with the apparent divergence of students from different social classes into private schools and state schools and different sorts of state schools. This very strong meritocratic feature makes the Chinese system difficult to be understood simply by drawing on experience from studies based in other national contexts. Based on an analysis of the data collected from questionnaires completed by 960 first year undergraduates at Anhui and Zhejiang (two eastern provinces; the former is economically under-developed and the latter is developed), Liu (2013) found that socio-economic backgrounds had **no** significant relation to students' performance in Gaokao (National

University Entrance Examination) and to their rates of admission to elite universities. However, geographic origins and types of secondary schooling were shown to have stronger associations to patterns of access in as much as the students from cities rather than rural areas and students from key schools (high-performing schools; I will discuss key schools in detail in Chapter 6) had more chances to reach elite universities. Liu offered a possible explanation for the limited impact of socio-economic status on students' performance in Gaokao: 'the selection to senior secondary schooling has already filtered out many students from poor areas or from lower working class backgrounds, but less so where the parents are highly educated' (2013: 880). The effect of pre-selection and filtering out is also confirmed in Hannum and her colleagues' study (Hannum, An, & Cherng, 2011) and the role of key schools in determining chances to be admitted into elite universities are also highlighted in some other studies (Liang, Zhang, & Li, 2013; Liu, Wang, & Yang, 2012). But I will argue in the later chapters of my thesis that there are other factors and explanations than simply the effect of filtering out in secondary schools related to the impact of socio-economic status on student performance and admission into elite universities. Arguments citing meritocracy are used by governments in many societies as an effective way of promoting class equality and social mobility, for example the agenda to build more grammar schools promoted by UK Prime Minister Theresa May in order to 'make Britain a great meritocracy' (2016). However, meritocracy only makes class inequality and domination more hidden, complicated and more difficult to challenge. I will demonstrate how the production and reproduction of class inequality is achieved in the meritocratic environment in this thesis by focusing on the ideal meritocratic case of Chinese schooling.

In fact, although China may have some different kinds of mechanisms to maintain class inequality in education, some studies have demonstrated a similar class stratification picture in Chinese higher education as in other societies. Through a survey of 9,656 urban residents in 20 cities in China, Zhou and his colleagues (1998) tracked the history of social inequality in higher education in China from 1949 to 1994 and concluded that 'education

inequality based on family social origin persisted throughout the entire period under study' (p.208). This was the case even in the period from 1960 to 1965 when the government implemented political interventions aimed at de-stratification and reducing social inequalities. Other authors (Ding & Liang, 2014; Yu & Jin, 2014) demonstrated a social class distribution picture in contemporary Chinese higher education which is similar to Bourdieu's study (1996), with the low socio-economic classes clustered in lower tier universities and the middle and upper class over-represented in the top tier universities. This social class distribution becomes more worrying when it is linked with the increasing unemployment of university graduates in China and the widening income gap between graduates from different types of higher education institution graduates, as shown in Chapter 1. Rural poor students, who cluster in lower tier universities or vocational colleges, confront higher unemployment rates, lower salaries and have less of the 'right' social capital and cultural capital to deploy in the process of job searching (Mok & Wu, 2016). Meanwhile their disadvantaged position in the job market will become worse, considering rich families' shifting strategies to invest in high-quality overseas education for their children (Xiang & Wei, 2009).

Current studies on social stratification in Chinese education sketch out a general picture of continuing class inequality, but very little attention has been paid to the micro-processes of class domination, to the experience of people living out these processes and to choices, actions and cognitive thinking of agents enmeshed within them, which according to Bourdieu is the 'practical operation of habitus' (Bourdieu, 1996; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). In other words, we know little about of how people embody domination and contribute to domination by their own actions and inactions. This omission might be attributed to the predominance of quantitative approaches in the current studies of educational inequalities in China. Only a very few authors have undertaken qualitative studies in this area. Xie and Postiglione (2016) conducted an ethnographic study from 2009 to 2010 in a village in Anhui Province and they demonstrated how families from different social backgrounds in this village employed different

strategies to use *guanxi* (social capital), which had a differentiated influence on their children's schooling. Their study described the many ways 'in which social class privileges are reproduced in the partnerships between families and schools and are transformed into children's advantages in school success' (Xie & Postiglione, 2016: 1030). Using mixed methods, Xie (2016, in Chinese) also conducted a longitude study of rural students at four elite universities in China and discussed their 'habitus transformation' at university. He demonstrated an experience of being competent at academic studies but being incompetent at social activities for rural students at elite universities. Xie explained their incompetence at social activities as 'a result of structural and accumulated influences on students' habitus due to the urban-rural divide' (2016, in Chinese: 80). Drawing on the data from interviews with ten rural students at an elite university in Beijing, Li (2013) also demonstrated similar findings in relation to the dislocations of rural students' habitus at the field of elite universities. She also discussed their various responses to those dislocations but their responses presented in her study seem to be all driven to forms of exclusions, self-exclusions and disadvantages in 'position takings' (Li, 2013: 829) at university. In the later chapters of my thesis, especially in Chapter 6 and Chapter 7, I will demonstrate a more complex experience for working-class students at elite universities with some examples of my participants who thrive at university in terms of their academic performance and also in terms of their accomplishments in social activities. I will also discuss the various ways they deal with dislocations they experience at university, but not all their strategies lead to exclusion, self-exclusion and disadvantage. Some of my participants show evidence of 'transcendence' of class domination and manage to gain 'advantage' rather than experience 'disadvantage' in 'position takings' at university.

Also as may be noted, like the majority studies that address social inequalities in education in China, both Li (2013) and Xie (2016, in Chinese) define disadvantaged students based on the urban-rural divide. Although this is a significant division that clearly underpins many inequalities in China, rather, as I argued in Chapter 1, an over-emphasis on the urban-rural

divide could lead to perpetuating ignorance of the experience of disadvantaged groups in the cities. A review of literature and being aware of an absence of voices given to disadvantaged urban students is another reason other than those I have discussed in Chapter 1 why I want to use 'working class' in my study to include both rural and urban working-class students.

As shown in the aforementioned discussions, focusing on the unusual context – China, which is not fully researched and has many distinctive features in terms of studying class inequalities in education, and using qualitative approaches that are rarely used in current studies in relation to examining education inequalities in China and that can address the power from 'in here' (Bourdieu, 1996: xiv), 'the practical operation of habitus' (Bourdieu, 1996: 4), this thesis in many ways has the potential to generate original findings. However, as I stated at the beginning of this chapter, the themes, tools and findings from the review of literature will be used in the analysis of my data as references for making comparisons, constructing categories and generating ideas.

## Understanding the experience of 'exceptions': working-class students at elite universities

Although many studies focus on inexorable class domination, a few authors have turned to studying working-class students who 'succeed against the odds', those who have broken systems of exclusion and discrimination and who achieved places at prestigious institutions. In this section I will discuss these studies of such 'exceptions', those working-class students who gain access to elite universities.

### Habitus dislocation: a central theme

As indicated by Bourdieu's work, working-class students may face what might be called 'habitus dislocation' upon their arrival to the field of elite universities that are culturally so different from the conditionings within

which their habitus was formed. The frustrations and difficulties experienced in the initial stages of university life are reported in almost every article regarding working-class students at elite universities. For example, as reported by Granfield (1991) and Aries and Seider (2005), the inferiority, inadequacy and intimidation felt by working-class students concerned not only financial issues, but also their 'inappropriate' speech, attire, presentation, manners, experiences and opportunities. These working-class students are like cultural strangers who have little idea of the codes of this new world. Habitus dislocation is also a central theme in the study by Li (2013) on ten rural students at an elite university in Beijing. Using Bourdieu's thinking tools of *habitus*, *field* and *capital* and drawing on studies of 'institutional habitus' (Crozier, Reay & Clayton et al., 2008; Reay, Crozier, & Clayton, 2010), Li demonstrated the 'disquiet, ambivalence, insecurity and uncertainty' rural students in her study experienced in 'a metropolitan milieu' (2013: 833). The contrast between these rural student's habitus and the institutional habitus of the elite university in a metropolitan city created 'an acute sense of self-consciousness' (Crossley, 2001: 158 quoted in Li, 2013: 833) of their rural identity. Financial hardships, a lack of appropriate forms of cultural capital and especially the sense of incompetency in social societies were also demonstrated in Li's study (2013).

Compared with Li (2013), Xie (2016, in Chinese) described the habitus dislocation in social life as well, whereas his participants reported little experience of habitus dislocation in academic studies. School experience, as argued by Xie (2016, in Chinese), constitutes the basis to form academic competency for his participants at university. 'The "right" attitudes and methods to achieve the academic successes they acquired from school experiences make them like "fish in water" at university in terms of academic studies' (Xie, 2016, in Chinese: 78). A similar experience of 'fitting in' in academic studies and being 'out of place' in social life was also evident in Reay's study (2009) of nine working-class students at an English elite university. Working-students may experience a painful habitus dislocation in the field of elite universities, but this dislocation does not necessarily happen in academic areas but more often in social life.

As pointed out by Xie (2016, in Chinese), the predicted habitus dislocation of working-class students at elite universities is based on two presuppositions: 'a. there is a radical mismatch between the institutional habitus of the elite university and the individual habitus of these students, that is, working-class students encounter a totally different social field; b. the habitus of students are relatively static in that their attitudes, preferences and other dispositions stay unchanged before university' (p.75). However, both Xie (2016, in Chinese) and Reay (2009) argue that the habitus of working-class high-achievers has been changed at school and the changed habitus - 'cultured habitus' (2004: 434), in Reay's terms, has some complicity with the field of elite universities, which explains why working-class high-achievers in their studies reported a partial 'fitting in' experience at elite universities. In this sense, Reay described them as 'familiar strangers' (Reay, 2009: 1115). I will also demonstrate in my thesis how the habitus of my participants is changed and developed at school and how the changed and changing habitus influences their experience at university.

**A typology of coping strategies**

To deal with the habitus dislocation, working-class students develop strategies in various forms. Some authors (e.g., Hurst, 2010; Lehmann, 2012a) identify a typology of working-class students' coping strategies to deal with the habitus dislocation.

These strategies could be seen as different points on a continuum of responses with dropping-out standing at one extreme end and 'habitus transformation' at the other end. Using qualitative interviews, Lehmann (2007) examined 25 first-generation students who had dropped out from a large, research-intensive Canadian university which is dominated by middle-class students. The majority of the students in this study left the university even though they had a solid academic performance. With very few reporting economic issues as the reason for their leaving, rather 'not fitting in, not feeling university and not being able to relate to these people' (Lehmann,

2007: 105) were the key reasons reported for their withdrawal. In the face of the contrast between their working-class origins and the university's middle-class culture, they chose to reject the value of being at this university and to reaffirm their working-class identity by dropping out. Lehmann concluded that the narratives constructed by these students 'lend support to the notion of habitus as an open system of dispositions, but also one that tends to ultimately reinforce itself.' (Lehmann, 2007: 105). Lehmann's findings align with Quinn's study (2004) of 80 working-class students in the UK, albeit ones who were at four non-metropolitan, working-class-dominated universities. He found that drop-out had little to do with academic ability but rather was mainly related to cultural factors. 'Young working-class people must be seen in serious search of meaningful lives, with drop-out sometimes a valid part of that search.' (Quinn, 2004: 71) University education was perceived by the students in this study as less meaningful, while the drop-out decision, rather than being a decision they felt they were forced to make, was a voluntary way to escape the personal failure of being a university student and to achieve 'meaningful lives' which had much consistency with working-class values. It also confirms findings from Archer and her colleagues (Archer et al., 2003) that working-class students in UK saw higher education as 'otherness'. But university dropout seems not a concern in China nor in my study. None of my participants chose or thought of dropping out as a choice although one participant mentioned one of his classmates dropped out due to extremely poor academic performance. According to an influential newspaper in China, the university dropout rate in China in 2011 was only 3% and even this figure was considered 'untruly high' by the Ministry of Education, who said it was merely 0.75%[17]. Despite that, the mechanisms of self-exclusion to create 'categories of the possible (for us) and the impossible (for us)' (Bourdieu, 1990a: 64), which has been demonstrated by these studies, has relevance to my study. Evidence of such self-exclusions in order to achieve 'self-protection' (Keane, 2011) and a corresponding consequence of reinforcement of their disadvantages by such self-excluding actions will be seen in Chapter 5.

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[17] http://www.eeo.com.cn/2013/0412/242461.shtml

Other than the choice of withdrawing, the other responses to habitus dislocation can be summarised into three types, using Hurst's categories, that is 'loyalists', 'double agents' and 'renegades' (2010). Based on data from interviews with 21 working-class college students at 'one large moderately selective public university' and according to these students' perceptions of their class identity in relation to others (their college students, their family and the working class and the middle class in general), Hurst (2010) categorised the university experiences of her participants into three types: 'loyalists' who 'strenuously reject reclassification and make extra efforts to maintain connections with working-class family friends, and community'; 'renegades' who on the contrary 'long for reclassification'; and 'double agents' who 'have been able to accept and retain cultural aspects of both the working class and the middle class' (p.6). Drawing on Bourdieu's concept of habitus and Bernstein's typology of student roles, Lehmann (2012a) developed a similar typology regarding the positions and responses working-class students developed at university. Lehmann (2012a) interviewed 36 working-class students at a large, research-intensive Canadian university respectively in their first, second and final years of their study, from which the changing of students' habitus over time and also their ultimate attitude towards university can be seen. Similar to Hurst, Lehmann (2012a) identified two extreme types, which were respectively the *committed* students and the *alienated* students. *Committed* students had a realistic understanding of university and had strong motivations to open themselves to transformation upon their arrival; over time they fully integrated into university academically and socially. *Alienated* students questioned or refused the expressive order of university from the outset and they reported the strongest feelings of habitus dislocation, while their poor academic and social integration reinforced their sense of 'not fitting in'. The other two types identified by Lehmann both started from a position of deferment, what Bernstein termed as 'wait-and-see' or 'watching the state of play' (Bernstein, 1975), but later developed in two different directions, one to alienation, one to commitment. The factors that influenced their development were individually specific, with even chance encounters playing an important role. Li's (2013) ten cases of rural students in a Chinese elite university also

confirmed the diversity of students' strategies deployed to deal with dislocations. Some students conceded to the marginalisation, gave up their identity of being a successful learner and used computer games as a way to escape reality; some students committed to studies and relied solely on the advantage of academic performance to achieve high ambitions; some students adopted a laid-back attitude towards studies and engaged in activities related to rural issues as a way of being loyal to their rural origins. But the strategies demonstrated in Li's (2013) study indicated more of the 'contingency' of habitus, which I have discussed in the last chapter on the role of habitus to achieve the production and reproduction of inequalities. Emphasis in Li's study is given to 'exclusion in various forms and the entailed self-exclusion' (2013: 844). Participants in Xie's study (2016, in Chinese) seemed to have a similar tendency to choose working hard on academic activities as their response to the habitus dislocation, the area in which they had strengths and could have the 'right' feel for the game and they avoided or admitted their incompetency in social activities. As one participant in his study said, 'I have no other choice but to work hard on exams' (Xie, 2016, in Chinese: 79). A real complexity in terms of my participants' responses to habitus dislocation will be seen in Chapter 7. Most participants' responses will lead to a reinforcement of their disadvantages but some other participants' responses in fact show evidence of 'transcendence' in that they keep a reflexive distance to being subjects of class domination and they deliberately work on their habitus. Discussions on factors in relation to why they take different responses will also be seen in Chapter 7.

## 'Change or die' culture and hidden injuries

Students' reactions to dislocation are varied, reflecting 'diversity within homogeneity' (Bourdieu, 1990a: 60), the unique individual integration of encountering and changing within the limits of the 'structured structure' of habitus. Paradoxically, no matter which strategies they adopt to cope with habitus dislocation within the elite field, working-class students may continue to feel and endure the weight of their habitus under the force of

'change or die' as vividly pictured in Hurst's *The Burden of Academic Success* (2010):

> Academic success is a burden for working-class college students, not because they dislike education or because they are less intelligent, and not even because the academy embraces White culture or a particular feminized measure of success, but because the type of work college prepares one for is middle-class work. By succeeding in college, working-class college students are not only embracing this type of work, but they are endorsing the hegemonic view that manual labour is less worthy. But why they should think labour work is worthy if objectively manual work cannot bring them more material returns. (Hurst, 2010: 5)

> What this means, practically speaking, is that academic achievement marks these students as different from their parents, their friends, their home communities. Potentially, it also marks them as *more deserving*. To accept academic success, working-class students must grapple with these multiple meanings. They must come to terms with an achievement that potentially separates them from all they have known before. If they embrace the notion that they are special and uniquely deserving of advancement, they are also the notion that their parents are not special ("common" even), and are perhaps to blame for their failure to "get ahead" in this society. If they embrace the notion that they are "intelligent", they must then confront society's evaluation of the working class as "stupid" and "ignorant". Every working-class person who is encouraged to achieve individually leaves a community behind. (Hurst, 2010: 6-7)

Education is not neutral, rather it is a process of socialisation or indeed re-socialisation, which carries with it, overtly or implicitly, a system of values, evaluations and disciplines. As working-class students strive for academic success, they have to accept the values embedded in the system of rewards they seek; that is, as illustrated by Hurst in the above quotes, being academically successful means not only being 'intelligent' or 'smart', but also being 'superior'. Middle-class work is superior to manual or routine labour, middle-class lifestyles and dispositions are superior to working-class lifestyles and dispositions and being middle-class is a form of success and staying in the working class is failure. In the way they are marching to become middle-class and in the way they are embodying the values in the education system, they are distancing themselves from 'their parents, their

friends, their home communities'. As commented by Hurst in the above quote, 'every working-class person who is encouraged to achieve individually leaves a community behind'.

The sense of superiority these working-class high-achievers is embodied not only in relation to material returns they can expect to have from their education at elite universities. While even people from their home communities earn more than these high-achieving students, they still think being educated has more value, as Lehmann (2013) says of the high-achieving working-class students in a prestigious Canadian university:

> For instance, the success of those "left behind" (having early work experience in blue-collar careers; having children, own homes, etc.) are seen as deficient or of lesser value than the success associated with becoming educated, certified, and more cultured, although in purely utilitarian terms, those left behind might have higher incomes, more consumer goods, and lower levels of debt. (Lehmann, 2013: 12)

Reay discussed the 'cultured habitus' of working-class high-achievers with an emphasis on how they developed reflexive dispositions from their experience at schools, of which I will offer a detailed discussion of later in this section, while the influence of their school socialisation on their changing habitus includes not only the development of reflexive dispositions but also the embodiment of the culture and the values in the education system, which in Hurst's study is a superiority of middle-class values while in the case of my study it is the embodiment of meritocratic values and dispositions. The consequences rather are similar - they are driven increasingly further away from lifestyle and values of their parents and the working-class localities by their successes and progression in the education journey. Chapter 6 will address how my participants embody meritocratic values and dispositions through their academic successes at school and how this discipline at school distances them from the working-class localities.

Motivations that force them to make changes include not only the culture of 'change or die' embedded in the education system, but also the external

forces that may compel students towards certain forms of adaptation. For example, as indicated in Granfield's (1991) study of 23 working-class students in an elite law school in the United States, job recruiters such as the Wall Street law firms, the Supreme Court or United States government, favoured people 'like them' in order to better cater to the needs of their high-status clients. The homogeneity being sought forced working-class students to make changes 'in themselves', otherwise 'the lucrative opportunities would be denied them' (Granfield, 1991: 241). Considering the high expectations of realistic returns from education for working-class students as indicated by Lehmann (2012b), it is not difficult to imagine the significance of the expectations of job recruiters in shaping working-class students' decision in the choice of 'change or die'.

Of course, not all students feel compelled to choose 'change', as is the case of the drop-out students discussed above, who may be examples of choosing to 'die'. Most students however who choose to stay while adapting or transforming or 'working on' themselves may still find themselves suffering what is called the 'hidden injuries of class' (Sennett & Cobb, 1972). Lehmann (2013) demonstrated these 'hidden injuries' endured by some working-class students who are academically and socially integrated at a prestigious Canadian university. The students in this study embraced the middle-class culture of the institution and transformed themselves in various ways from their physical presence to their worldviews. In adapting to the new world and forming their new self, they left the old world and the old self behind – a process of 'dis-identification'. Lehmann described the situation of a typical interviewee as one 'who has mastered the rules of this new game, encounters problems in familiar fields that are governed by rules she no longer wishes to follow.' (2013: 10). Transformation does not come without costs; indeed, some students spoke about the emotional burdens of guilt, betrayal and struggle (Granfield, 1991; Lehmann, 2013). The links with the home community these students had lost might not have seemed of immediate value to them, but could be resources that give them 'ontological security' (Giddens, 1991). On the one hand, they left the old world and the old self behind by the transformative university experience; on the other hand, they

are more likely to find themselves in the position of 'cultural outsiders' (Lehmann, 2013: 12) in the new world - the middle-class professions they aspire to. Based on an analysis of the career plans of his participants, most of whom revised their plans from ambition to take traditional middle-class professions, such as law or medicine, to taking postgraduate studies in related subjects, Lehmann pointed out 'they are thus at risk of being caught between the "old" and the "new", no longer feeling they belong to one, but not (yet) accepted in the other.' (2013: 12). Similar feelings of being cultural outsiders have been reported by academics from working-class backgrounds, who have been termed as 'strangers in paradise' (Ryan & Sackrey, 1984) or in 'Limbo' (Lubrano, 2004).

The difficulties facing working-class students seeking to enter high-status professions, even for those with a credential from elite universities, are also indicated in some other studies. Considering concerns around credential inflation raised by Collins (1979) and the increasing importance given to non-credential activities in the employment of skilled positions (Brown, 2003), Lehmann (2012b) focused on and identified different possibilities of access to extra-curricular activities at university between social strata. Lehmann (2012b) reported that a deficit of the 'right' forms of capital meant they had difficulties in accessing valuable activities where 'soft skills' and social capital are acquired, such as studying abroad or career-related internships. The lack of access to such experiences that are given increasingly more importance by professional schools and high-status professions means that although working-class students were aiming to enter high-status professions, many find it difficult to achieve this. Thus, although working-class students can find ways of adapting to and integrating into college, they might still find themselves in a disadvantaged position in the fight for valuable resources, which once could be defined as opportunities to gain admission to higher education and then to elite universities but now have turned into valuable extra-credential activities at university. Stratification does not disappear, but takes different forms. According to the report by *The Panel on Fair Access to the Professions* (2009), access to high-status professions in UK strongly relates to having

been educated in independent schools and to being born in a family of above-average income. The reality of it being difficult to be an 'insider' in middle-class professions reinforces the hidden injuries that could be experienced by these working-class achievers.

In terms of hidden injuries of class, Xie (2016, in Chinese) demonstrated some different findings from the above. He reported that although the participants in his study were aware of the differences between their new life and the life of their parents and the working-class community, they could maintain bonds with their parents and old friends. On this point, I have some different observations based on my data in terms of the reasons why my respondents work hard on academic performance, which involve motivations to leave behind the working-class community and negative evaluations of the working-class community. Indeed, their university experience brought many transformations and most of them reported a similar feeling of being distanced from the working-class localities and being superior to their parents and to old friends, as shown in the studies by Lehmann (2013) and Hurst (2010). There is considerable evidence of hidden injuries of class in my study that paradoxically have been brought about by academic successes and the transformative experience at university (see Chapter 5 to Chapter 7).

## Possibilities to change the field

The above discussions are almost exclusively focused on aspects of class domination, regarding forms of constraint, exclusion, self-exclusion and the hidden injuries working-class students may experience in their education journey. Only a small group of studies discussed possibilities of transcending class domination.

Based on the study of nine working-class students at an English elite university, Reay (2009) demonstrates possibilities to keep a reflexive distance from the 'change or die' culture at elite universities. Her respondents form a set of reflexive dispositions from their school experience

and they draw on these reflexive dispositions to thrive at the elite university in academic studies and meanwhile 'have a critically reflexive, questioning stance' (Reay, 2009: 1114) in relation to the social culture of the elite university. Reay used disjuncture between habitus and field to explain the development of reflexive dispositions for her participants. These working-class high-achievers were 'dislocated' in the environment of working-class schooling (only one student in nine attending a grammar school, others attending comprehensive schools with average or slightly above average GCSE results), from which they developed a set of reflexive dispositions, such as 'an ability to cope with adversity' as 'fish out of water', resilience and 'a self-reliant independence' (Reay, 2009: 1107). Most of the participants in Reay's study also experienced habitus dislocation in the field of elite universities, coined as 'the shock of the elite' by Reay (2009: 1113). While drawing on the set of reflexive dispositions they developed at school, they have coped with the habitus dislocation at university and 'fitted in' in the ideal academic environment of this elite university. As one participant in her study said, 'Southern has liberated me' (Reay, 2009: 1115). At the same time, the participants in Reay's study kept a distance from the elite university 'as a social place', which is vividly described in the account:

> You feel like you're in a bubble here, it's not reality. I love going home, just because it's like normal people, and normal life, you know. You walk down the street, and you hear people talking about normal things, rather than like, you know, nuclear physics or something. It's completely weird. (Reay, 2009: 1115)

Reay argued that 'the students may be engaged in a constant fashioning and refashioning of the self' but 'their habitus still appear to retain key valued aspects of working-class self' (Reay, 2009: 1111). Drawing on Friedmann (2005) she comments: 'while their habituses were clearly being continually modified by their encounter with the field of elite higher education, there was not "the wholescale escaping of the habitus"' and 'these students seemed determined to hold on to former aspects of self even as they gained new ones' (Reay, 2009: 1111). Reay's study suggests possibilities for working-class high-achievers to preserve a reflexive distance from the 'change or die' culture, even within the experience of personal transformation at elite

universities. This may partly explain Xie's findings on rural students' remaining bonds with parents and old friends.

Furthermore, the possibilities for working-class high-achievers to maintain a reflexive distance to the 'change or die' culture brings a complexity to the understanding of the hidden injuries they experience. Being caught between the old self and the new self can have two sides: the negative side might mean suffering from hidden injuries of class, while the positive side means possibilities to make a special contribution to change the field of elite university and maybe ambitiously to change the society from this unique position. Grandfield (1991) and Reay (2009) offer some evidence to support this argument. Grandfield reported that many of working-class students in the elite law school in his study consciously worked hard as role models to challenge the domination of social elites. As a black working-class student said, 'we need black people with money and power' (Grandfield, 1991: 345). Many of them defined working at large law firms as the best way to benefit the less fortunate, 'if I want to contribute to social change I had to become an important person' (Grandfield, 1991: 345). Four of the nine students in Reay's study engaged in 'outreach work with non-selective state schools, trying to encourage other traditional students to apply' (2009: 1114). Some of her participants had career plans to make contributions to their working-class community, such as working as a trade union lawyer, pursuing a further degree in Human Rights and being a teacher through the Teach First scheme. The thriving of working-class high-achievers would probably not only benefit the working-class community, but would also renew and revitalise the elite university. As Reay comments, quoting Archer and Leatherwood (2003: 176), the assumption is always that working-class students must 'adapt and change, in order to fit into, and participate in, the (unchanged) higher education institutional culture' (2009: 1116). But the question is, why should the institutional culture stay unchanged? I agree and support the argument Reay made in her conclusion, that 'elite universities need non-traditional students just as much as the students need them' (2009: 1116):

> Both need the other in order to flourish, the students academically and the universities socially. Within the current status quo, an enormous number of working-class students are excluded from realizing their academic potential. Yet, equally worrying and even less recognised is the failure of the elite universities to realise their potential for combining academic excellence with a rich social diversity. (Reay, 2009: 1116)

However, understanding the contributions that working-class high-achievers could make are complicated. First, as shown in the above discussions, working-class high-achievers find it difficult to gain entry into high-status professions, which means that they find it difficult to grow up to be 'people with money and power' so that the possibilities for them to make social changes are constrained. Secondly, as may be noted, findings from Lehmann (2012a) and Hurst (2010) on the 'change or die' culture of elite universities and findings from Reay (2009) and Granfield (1991) on possibilities of keeping a reflexive stance towards the 'change or die' culture demonstrate two conflicting forces: one is in relation to domination and the other is in relation to people's agency under domination. The possibility of maintaining a critical stance towards the 'change or die' culture demonstrated in Reay's study (2009) comes from the possibility for her participants to develop a set of reflexive dispositions from school experiences, that is, to keep a reflexive distance to the culture in schools. It may be relatively easier for participants in Reay's study (2009) than my participants to achieve independence and a reflexive distance to the school culture, as in Reay's study there is a radical contrast between the school culture and the evolving learner identity of her participants. However, as will be seen in Chapter 6, my respondents find it difficult to develop a reflexive distance to the culture of schools as the institutional culture of the schools they attend fits with their pre-adjustment to hard work and performance maximisation. They find it easier to subject themselves to change, to be transformed and to the discipline at school, rather than to keep a reflexive distance from that discipline. By saying that, I do not mean that there is no possibility of developing a reflexive distance under the 'change or die' culture. I will discuss in Chapter 7 examples of some students who achieve some independence from the disciplines of schooling and achieve and maintain a reflexive distance from the culture at

elite universities. However, such examples in my study are rare and I coin them as 'exceptions within exceptions' in Chapter 7. 'Chances', being in better economic and social conditions and being supported by better education at home, are all involved in making them capable of developing a reflexive distance to the school culture. More such comparisons between studies, findings and contexts will be explored later in this thesis.

## Conclusion: possibilities to generate new findings from a fully researched topic

Class inequality in education has been addressed by a huge number of wide-reaching studies and has been researched in many national contexts. Similar patterns of class stratification in higher education, the role of elite schools in producing and reproducing advantages and disadvantages and mechanisms in relation to exclusions to and self-exclusions of the dominated have been demonstrated by these studies. However, compared with some societies that have been more fully researched in terms of class inequality in education, such as the UK, USA and France, China has many distinctive contextual features, for example strong government involvement in education and large private investment in education motivated by Confucian culture. Also the issue of class inequality in education in China has been less well researched, especially with a lack of qualitative research. Thus, this thesis with a focus on the less researched context of China and using the life story approach in many ways has the potential to generate original findings.

Also, even in the more fully researched societies, there is only a small strand of studies focusing on the 'deviants' who lead to 'the pole opposite to the position to which they were promised and which was promised to them' and who according to Bourdieu are 'undoubtedly one of the most important factors in the transformation of the field of power' (Bourdieu, 1996: 184). In this chapter, I also discussed studies in relation to a kind of 'deviants'- working-class students at elite universities. Habitus dislocation, a typology of strategies to deal with this dislocation, the 'change or die' culture of elite universities and also possibilities to transcend the culture have been

addressed. There are many conflicting findings between the current studies of the experience of working-class high-achievers and the findings from my study. Some discussions of comparisons between findings from the review of literature and findings from my study and some explanations of such differences, bearing in mind the specificity of the Chinese context, have been offered in this chapter. More detailed discussions can be seen later in this thesis. While the comparisons not only aim to gain more empirical evidence in a new field or to achieve a better understanding of class inequality in a wider range, they also, and more importantly, attempt to achieve a further understanding of the relation between structures and agency, the core theme in Bourdieu's theoretical work, as has been discussed in Chapter 2. As I quoted Giroux (1983a: 290) earlier in this chapter, 'power is exercised on and by people within different contexts that structure interacting relations of dominance and autonomy' in varied forms. This thesis, with the focus on the unusual context, aims to achieve some new understanding of the relation of 'dominance and autonomy' and also, as indicated in Chapter 1, has ambitions to find possibilities to transcend the dominance.

# 4. Trajectory of finding the method

In Chapter 1, I addressed the suitability of the life story approach to my research. By using this 'comprehensive', 'historical', 'cooperative', 'participatory' and 'sociological' approach (Chapter 1: p.15), my aim is to achieve 'a triple concern with biography, structure and history' (Mills, 2000: 226) in understanding the life stories of working-class students at elite universities. As mentioned in Chapter 1, my research aims can be summarised as the following: 1. by taking a biographic approach, through looking at the life stories of people in China who live in and struggle with class inequality in education and in society, I want to demonstrate the human meanings of this public issue, to see how it influences individual biographies, how it constructs and relates to personal troubles and meanwhile how people respond to class inequality and class domination; 2. by taking a sociological perspective, I also want to see beyond these personal troubles and individual biographies, to reflect on the systems, the policies and the culture that provide the context for the individual biographies, that is, to bring the 'sociological imagination' (Mills, 2000) to bear upon these life stories; 3. as I discussed in Chapter 2 and in Chapter 3, by using Bourdieu's work in a new context to study class inequality in education and by focusing on a group of working-class 'exceptions', I am not only interested in describing and understanding the situation in this new context but also, and more importantly, it is my ambition to develop Bourdieu's work and make contributions to the theoretical understanding of class inequality in education as well as social production and reproduction mechanisms.

In this chapter I will discuss how I use the life story approach in my study, including the methodological decisions I made, a description of the research procedures, an introduction to my participants and autobiographical reflections in the end. The review of my research aims as shown in the above was used as the basis for every decision I made in the research process, which can be seen later in this chapter.

## Combining the life story approach with constructive ground theory techniques

As shown in the above, my research interest is not in describing the life stories of my participants, nor gaining empirical evidence of the new context in which these stories are situated. Rather, I want to achieve a theoretical understanding of the lived experiences of my participants, to compare them with Bourdieu's work and other related literature. Therefore I used the life story approach to collect my data and grounded theory techniques to conduct data analysis and to inform the research design, drawing mainly on Charmaz (2005, 2006, 2008, 2011, 2014), Thornburg (2012) and Keane's (2015) work on constructive grounded theory. I have discussed a definition of the life story approach in Chapter 1 and here I choose Keane's definition of grounded theory to illustrate its meaning. 'Grounded theory aims to develop an integrated "mid-range" theory which is grounded in and "fits" the data, and which generates relevant, applicable and useful analytic explanations' (Keane, 2015: 417). The details of the research procedures in my study will be discussed in the next section. In this section, I will focus on why the life story approach and grounded theory techniques can be worked together, why I need to work them together and how I use them together in my research practice.

The life story approach I drew on (Plummer, 2001, 2013) to collect data and the constructive grounded theory techniques I used to analyse data are based on the same epistemology – symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969) that emphasises action, process, contexts and the interactive relationship between participants and the researcher(s) in constructing the findings, or more exactly, the 'meaning making' of the researched world (Keane, 2015: 423). Rather than regarding subjects as a simplified 'universal, autonomous and progressing self', both of the approaches see the participants and the researcher(s) as an 'always embedded, dialogic, contingent and embodied self' (Plummer, 2001: 262), a perspective coined as 'critical humanism' by Plummer (2001). As may be noted here, the epistemology of constructive

grounded theory and the life story approach - symbolic interactionism - also has some synergy with Bourdieu's theoretical standpoint, which as I have discussed in Chapter 2 emphasises the 'inertia' of subjects instead of taking them as 'rootless, unattached, pure' subjects (Chapter 2: 32).

The second reason why I can work the life story approach together with constructive grounded theory is that the context and the interactive relationship between participants and the researcher(s) are emphasised in both of these approaches. Charmaz (2014) differentiates what she calls objective grounded theory and constructive grounded theory. Objective grounded theory, represented by Glaser and his colleagues (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998), holds strong positivist leanings, viewing the grounded theory as a process for revealing an objective truth by a neutral researcher with rigorous procedures (2014). Constructive grounded theorists (for example, Charmaz, 2006; Clarke, 2003; Thornberg, 2012) see the grounded theory as 'constructed portrayal of the studied world' (Charmaz, 2006: 10) through dialogues between the researcher and participants and other resources, as shown by Charmaz's account below:

> I assume that neither data nor theories are discovered. Rather we are part of the world we study and the data we collect. We *construct* our grounded theories through our past and present involvements and interactions with people, perspectives, and research practices. (Charmaz, 2006: 10, original emphasis)

Compared with the objective grounded theory's search for context-free generalization, constructive grounded theory emphasizes the role of the context, the situation, the reflexivity of the researcher and dialogue and interaction with participants in the formation and construction of the 'portrait of the studied world'. The emphasis on the context, on the interpretation based on the 'intimate familiarity' (Charmaz, 2005: 521) with the setting and the data is very important to my research considering the main findings I can generate, theoretically and empirically, are based on 'intimate familiarity' with the unusual context – China.

Furthermore, Charmaz (2011: 361-362) has a very compelling illustration of strengths in terms of using constructive grounded theory in conducting social justice research, which also relates to what I want to achieve in this research: a. constructive grounded theory can 'help social justice researchers attend to the construction of inequalities and how people act toward them'; b. constructive grounded theory can 'aid researchers in explicating participants' implicit meanings and actions'; c. mid-range theory constructed from constructive grounded theory can 'increase the abstract level of conceptualisation of their analyses' and thus can build complexity into their analyses that challenges conventional explanations of the studied phenomenon'; d. constructive grounded theory could 'attend to context, positions, discourses, and meanings and actions'; e. the 'extremely significant' strength that constructive grounded theory can provide for social justice research is that it can 'reveal links between concrete experiences of suffering and social structure, culture and social practices or policies', which relates directly to Mills' 'sociological imagination' and articulates closely with my research aims. Constructive grounded theory techniques are used in this study to explore the inner and outer life of life stories, which are 'the stories they tell us' and the 'narrative reality that works its way through the wider society and history' (Plummer, 2013: 210).

However, the question is why did I not use constructive grounded theory as the methodology of my research rather than combining it with the life story approach? The first reason is that although my research aim is to achieve a theoretical rather than empirical understanding of my data, which can be realised by grounded theory, compared with the findings of mid-range theory constructed from data, I have more interest in using Bourdieu's theoretical tools and comparing the findings arising from my study with his work and other related literature. To put it simply, I am more interested in using Bourdieu's tools and developing them rather than constructing a new mid-range theory, which makes using grounded theory techniques more suitable for my research than conducting a grounded theory study. While the legitimacy of using grounded theory techniques with pre-existing concepts is

in fact confirmed and argued by some constructive grounded theorists, such as 'Informed Grounded Theory' argued by Robert Thornburg (2012).

Whether pre-existing concepts can be worked with grounded theory is always a controversial issue among different schools of grounded theory. For the classical school of grounded theory, represented by Glaser (1978, 1998, 2001, 2005), engaging with literature should be carried out once data analysis is complete in order to stay open to new possibilities and to avoid being contaminated by pre-existing concepts. Thornburg (2012: 245) points out the problems for Glaser's argument for delaying engagement with literature, which in Thornburg's opinion will bring a risk of 'a loss of knowledge' and is 'underestimat[ing] researchers' ability to reflect upon the links between extant theories and their gathering and analysis of data'. The problems for Glaser's claims can be best summarised by Dey's words, 'an open mind is not an empty mind' (1993: 237) and 'the issue is not whether to use existing knowledge, but how' (p. 65). On this point, in contrast to Glaser, Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1998) argue that literature can be used actively as long as it does not block creativity. The constructive school of grounded theory, led by Kathy Charmaz, goes further on this point, arguing that engaging with literature is necessary for achieving intimate familiarity with the setting and participants (2005). They further argue that this process does not only mean engaging with literature but also should include an autobiographical reflection of the researchers' engagement with literature so that the researcher(s)' theoretical position and background can be made explicit and the influences of this position on the construction of theory can be seen (Keane, 2015). Thornburg (2012) argues for an 'Informed Grounded Theory', which he defines as 'a product of a research process as well as to the research process itself, in which both the process and the product have been thoroughly grounded in data by GT methods while being informed by existing research literature and theoretical frameworks' (Thornberg, 2012: 249). He argued that grounded theory could never be pure induction but rather abductive reasoning that requires constant dialogues between data, analysis and literature review, as he described in the following quote:

> If researchers reject a naïve empiricism as well as theoretical forcing, then they do not dismiss extant theoretical and research literature nor apply it mechanically to empirical cases. Instead these researchers use the literature as a possible source of inspiration, ideas, "aha!" experiences, creative associations, critical reflections, and multiple lenses, very much in line with the logic of abduction (Thornberg, 2012: 249).

Thornburg also offers seven 'data sensitizing principles' (Thornberg, 2012: 249-255) to conduct informed grounded theory in practice in order to avoid the risk of forcing theories into data: a. 'theoretical agnosticism', which means 'to treat all extant theories and concepts that one already knows or might encounter during the pre-study or on-going review as provisional, disputable and modifiable conceptual proposals' (p. 250); b. 'theoretical pluralism' (p.250), which means to think of different theoretical perspectives; c. 'theoretical sampling of literature', which means 'ongoing literature review' and the researcher search[ing] and read[ing] literature guided by the codes, concepts, questions and ideas that he or she develops during data collection and analysis' (p.252); d. 'staying grounded' (p.252), which means that the main focus of analysis is always on data; e. 'theoretical playfulness' (p.253), which means the research aim is to extend or revise pre-existing theories; f. 'memoing extant knowledge associations' (p.254), which means that pre-existing concepts can be used as 'flexible, modifiable and sensitive ideas, creative associations, and heuristic tools' (p.254); g. 'constant reflexivity' (p.254), which means to recognise the researchers' assumptions, to make them explicit and to 'use GT techniques to work beyond them' (Schreiber, 2001: 60).

The seven principles illustrated by Thornburg capture very nicely the way I worked with grounded theory techniques in my research. Bourdieu's theoretical tools and established themes from the review of literature are used in the data analysis process with the following three purposes: a. pre-existing concepts work as sensitising tools, which aid me in problematizing what has been taken for granted; c. pre-existing concepts function as analytical references, which help me to establish imaginary connections between categories so as to form a more coherent and enhanced theory, like

'standing on the shoulder of the giant'; c. categories constructed from my data analysis are used to compare with the pre-existing concepts, which aims to achieve a further understanding of these concepts. My way of using pre-existing concepts can be summarised as 'working on' them by 'working with' them in a new context. Pre-existing conceptions play an important role in my data analysis process, but the principle is always data comes first. I had no intention to force theories or concepts into my data and they were only used to form codes when they fit in. The relations between categories were only built when the data indeed indicated so. This way of using pre-existing concepts keeps the analysis open to new possibilities while being open-minded on the shoulder of the giant.

The second reason that I chose not to conduct a grounded theory study but to employ grounded theory techniques in the life story study is that achieving a theoretical grasp of my data by constant comparison between cases is not the only aim. I also need to examine a case as a whole, to employ 'case-centred' narrative approaches in order to understand the history, the continuities and the discontinuities in a life story. According to Riessman (2008: 11), 'narrative analysis refers to a family of methods for interpreting texts that have in common a storied form'. She listed three main approaches to conduct narrative analysis in the *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences* (Riessman, 2008): thematic analysis with an elusive focus on what is told; structural analysis, which is interested in how narratives are organised and why they are organised in that way; dialogic/performance analysis, which focuses on how narratives are constructed by interactions between people involved and social circumstances. However, regardless of which approach, the narrative analysis is a 'case-centred' analytical approach, which distinguishes it from other 'category-centred' approaches such as grounded theory. As Riessman (2008: 12) elaborates:

> The difference is perhaps the most fundamental distinction: in many category-centred methods of analysis, long accounts are distilled into coding units by taking bits and pieces – snippets of an account often edited out of context. While useful for making general statements across many subjects, category-centred approaches eliminate the sequential and structural features that are hallmarks of

narrative. Honouring individual agency and intentions is difficult when cases are pooled to make general statements.

This argument for the distinctive feature of narrative analysis being its 'case-centred' focus is also supported by Josselson (2011: 226), who states that 'what is perhaps unique to narrative research is that it endeavours to explore the whole account rather than fragmenting it into discursive units or thematic categories'. Another feature of narrative analysis, as argued by Josselson, is that it primarily focuses on how narratives are told and why narratives are told in that way. Plummer has a similar argument, 'while stories direct us to what is told, narratives tell us how stories are told' (Plummer, 2013: 210).

I agree with Riessman's and other narrative researchers' comments on the gains and losses of grounded theory and narrative analysis. To focus on a theoretical and general understanding of the narratives, by distilling long accounts into coding units 'by taking bits and pieces', means that less attention is paid to how narratives are told and to understanding the stories as a whole. As clearly shown in Chapter 1 and in Chapter 2, 'history' is a significant category in my research. Therefore it is impossible for me to give up the historical and sequential analysis that can be best achieved by the case-centred approach of narrative analysis. The use of narrative analysis approaches in my study can be particularly seen in Chapter 7, in which continuities of the development of habitus are demonstrated by narrative analysis of some cases of life stories. The factors that may influence my participants' differences in terms of perspectives they take to deal with habitus dislocation at elite universities are also discussed based on 'case-centred' understanding. Therefore my study can be seen as a study which combines case and category focuses.

In fact, conducting a life story study with grounded theory techniques employed can make some use of the advantages of both narrative analysis and grounded theory approaches. On the one hand, a theoretical understanding that has intimate familiarity with data can be achieved by

using the rigorous procedures offered by grounded theory; on the other hand, the historical perspective to understand continuities and discontinuities for individual life stories and 'thick descriptions of participants' lived experiences' (Keane, 2015: 426) can also be achieved through narrative analysis. Therefore with careful design, the advantages of narrative analysis and grounded theory can be synthesised rather than being in competition.

The above discussions address the questions about why I combine the life history approach with constructive grounded theory techniques in my study and why they can be used together. In terms of how to use them together in practice, I mainly refer to Keane (2015), who offers useful advice based on her experience in her doctoral project. 'A participatory approach' (Keane, 2015: 423-425) is particularly borrowed and used in my study. Keane used the participatory approach in many ways, for example feeding her pre-understanding of participants from her work experiences into the research design, seeking participants' views about her study and interview questions before the commencement of the research, returning the full transcripts to participants and maintaining frequent contact with her participants throughout the whole research process. The most creative way to introduce a participatory approach used by Keane (2015) is through involving participants in the process of theoretical sampling so that participants can be actively involved in the co-construction of the emerging findings. After initial analysis of first-round interview data with 22 traditional students and 23 non-traditional students at an Irish university, Keane (2015) built tentative categories and wrote up a summary of her provisional interpretations. She then returned to her participants for the second-round interviews to require clarification and elucidation in order to improve her provisional theoretical framework. Instead of only seeking further answers and participant validation, the central objective for her second-round interviews was to fill out the theoretical gaps in her analysis by discussing with participants and including their views in the construction of the emerging theory. Through the participatory approach, co-construction of findings is in fact achieved.

Many of Keane's experiences are borrowed in forming the research design of my study, as shown in the following figure:

Figure 4.1: Research procedures of my study
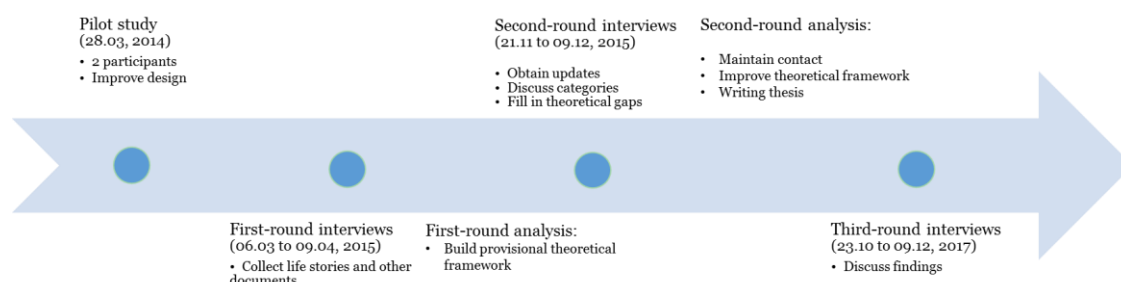


## Research procedures

I conducted a pilot study with two participants and three-rounds of interviews as the main study with 17 participants (after excluding seven participants who were identified as 'un-suitable' after the first interviews and one participant who chose to withdraw after the first interview). I will explain every procedure in detail in this section.

## Participant recruitment

The criteria I used in defining 'working-class' before I went to the field included: a. economic factors - participants would be selected from the students who received a Chinese National Student Loan (which is a needs-based loan and requires evidence of family economic conditions in applications); b. social and cultural factors - the occupations of students' parents should sit in the two lower levels of occupations according to Lu's (2002, in Chinese) analysis of social classes in Chinese society (commonly used as the reference to define class positions in sociological studies in China), which included specifically the unemployed, peasants, factory workers, service workers and small business owners; c. educational factors - participants should be the first-generation university students in their

extended family; d. historical factors - participants should be the 4ᵗʰ year undergraduates so that their life stories could demonstrate a full picture of their changes, struggles and coping strategies at university.

However, when I entered the field, I found it was unrealistic to hold on to all the factors in relation to my search for potential participants. I reduced the requirements in the process of recruiting participants into only two criteria: Year Four undergraduates and having received a Chinese National Student Loan. While in the interviews, I asked about their family economic background, parents' occupations and educational levels, and their self-identification of class position. Also I compared their accounts with national statistics and Lu's analysis (2002, in Chinese) so as to verify their working class status. In this regard, I still considered economic, social, cultural and historical factors in terms of the selection of participants.

In order to demonstrate the most intense contrasts between two opposing worlds, working class and middle class, rural and urban, western China (economically deprived) and eastern China (economically developed), which as a technique according to Plummer (2001) has the most potential to generate original findings, I chose to situate my research in biggest cities in China. Also, in order to avoid too much complexity regarding the influences of varied economic and social conditions of a city on student experiences (such as varied employment opportunities or access to valuable extra-curriculum opportunities, like taking volunteer activities at the Olympics or World Expo), which is a main finding from my pilot study, I chose to focus my study on the two biggest cities in China - Beijing and Shanghai, which are the most developed cities in China, economically and educationally. The elite universities are defined as universities in the C9 league, which is a group of nine top universities in China that are selected to receive the largest amount of government funding in order to build an elite group of world-class universities. C9 universities in these two cities specifically are: Fudan University, Peking University, Shanghai Jiao Tong University and Tsinghua University (in alphabetical order).

I used my personal contacts in these four universities to find potential participants. My teachers or friends at these four universities helped me to contact the student support offices at university or class directors in specific departments I needed, who had files on students' family economic background and from whom I obtained a list of potential participants. Then I contacted these potential participants individually before interviews by phone and by email to introduce my research and to confirm their consent for participation. A copy of the Information Sheet and Consent Form (see the appendices) were sent through email after receiving their consent. As a result, I had my first interviews with 25 students. Excluding 3 students who I identified in the first interviews as middle class students, 3 students who were in their first year, 1 student who withdrew her participation after the first interview and 1 student who I excluded after initial analysis (I will explain this decision in the next section), I had 17 participants in total. They include male and female students and show diversity in subjects, parents' occupations, rural and urban origins and regional distributions. I wrote letters of thanks to the students who were excluded, in which I explained the reasons and expressed gratitude for their participation. A detailed introduction to my participants can be seen in the next section.

**Pilot study (28 March, 2014)**

I conducted a pilot study of interviews with two students at the Shanghai Jiao Tong University on 28 March, 2014, in which I tried out some life story interview techniques, for example writing life as book chapters (I will discuss this technique in the next section), strategies to find participants and data analysis approaches to combine narrative analysis and informed grounded theory techniques. I made some revisions on my research design according to the pilot study experience, for example choosing to focus on the C9 universities in Beijing and Shanghai rather than C9 universities in other cities, as mentioned earlier in this section. I included Zhen Liang in my main study. The other participant obtained her bachelor's degree from a C9 university in Northeast China and was only pursuing a master's degree in Shanghai Jiao Tong University. It was her report of the large regional

disparity in terms of extra-curricular opportunities between C9 League universities that led me to make the decision to situate my research only in Beijing and Shanghai. She was excluded from the main study because she was not a Year 4 undergraduate at one of the four elite universities in my study, but I wrote about her life story in another publication (Jin, 2014). Other reflections of the pilot study that contribute to the improvement of my research design include: a. using Chinese to transcribe and to analyse data in order to capture some sensitive meanings in my participants' accounts and also Chinese transcripts are easier to return to my participants and to communicate with them; b. I only focus on Year 4 undergraduates at these four elite universities rather than including master's students in order to avoid the complexity of the influences of different institutions they might have access to at different levels of higher education; c. I worked on the analysis of these two interviews with a combination of narrative analysis and informed grounded theory with Bourdieu's theoretical tools particularly being employed, which demonstrated the usefulness of working with pre-existing concepts and the possibility to develop these concepts by working on the data collected in a new field.

**First-round interviews (6 March to 9 April, 2015) and analysis**

In order to obtain preliminary knowledge of my participants and also to help them reflect and organise their accounts before interviews, I used a life story interview technique introduced by Ken Plummer (2001) – inviting participants to write their life as book chapters. In the email inviting participation, I offered brief guidance on how to write their life as book chapters and I explained the purposes of this procedure. They all handwrote or word processed their life story book chapters and they all returned the writings to me before the interviews. This life story technique was reported to be a useful tool to recall and to reflect on their experience. Obvious differences can be seen in the organisation, language, content and layout of their writing, as shown in a few examples of their writings in Figure 4.2. Some demographic information, important persons and critical moments in their life can be identified before interviews and were used to form specific

prompt questions at the first interviews. An analysis of their life story book chapters also reveals some patterns, categories and classifications, which also feed into my later data analysis.

Figure 4.2: Examples of writing life as book chapters by my participants
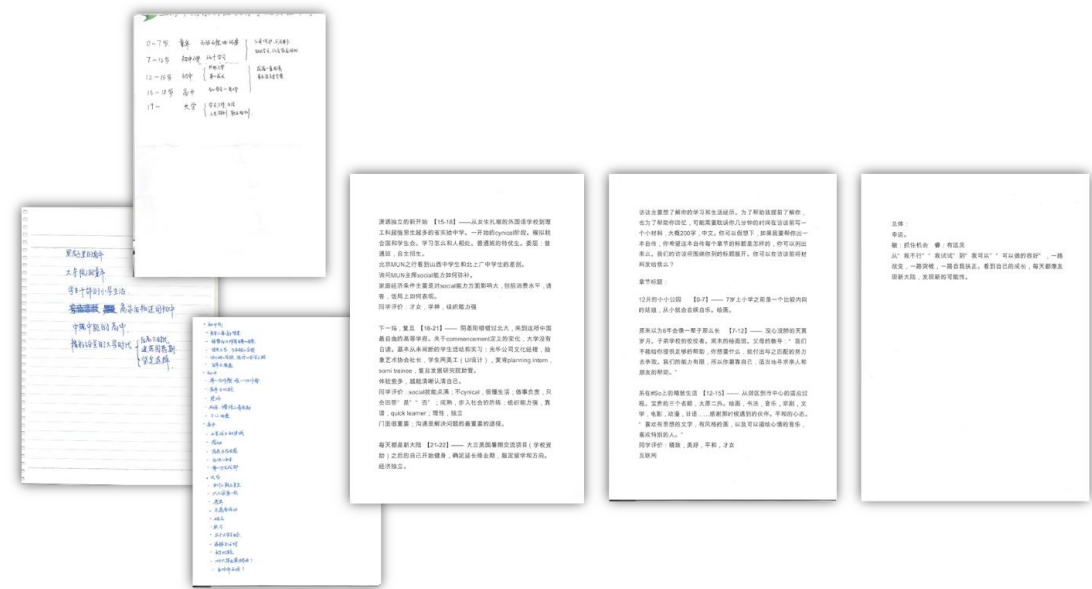


Based on their writing about their lives in the form of book chapters, I prepared some prompt questions specific to their life stories and also some general questions, such as 'could you tell me about the persons you think have a significant influence on you in your life' and 'could you tell me about the critical moments in your life until now'. The interviews were mainly based on their writings and their own organisation of their life stories, prompt questions only being used in occasions to encourage talk and to make clarifications. All interviews were conducted in coffee houses or university counselling rooms with a careful consideration of privacy and all places for interviews were confirmed with participants beforehand. Interviews lasted normally one hour while four interviews took two hours. After each interview, field notes were immediately written detailing my impressions of the participant, reflections on the interview and follow-up questions or actions (e.g., requesting additional documents).

Some additional documents were requested following their being mentioned at interviews. For instance, Zhen Liang sent me a summary of his university life that he posted on Renren (a popular social media website among university students), Yue Gu sent me her write-up of her life story that she had been invited to write by an entrepreneur in a plan to publish a collection of successful stories of working-class students and a copy of her essay for the course Autobiography Writing and Ye Lin sent me her application to the university for approving registration for one more year in order to better prepare her applications to overseas postgraduate programs. Four participants offered to add me to their Wechat contacts (the most popular social media app used in China that one can send messages, make video calls and post updates).

I used Nvivo to organise my data, conduct initial coding, write memos and draw maps. First I made initial codes in Nvivo, then I manually built focused codes based on the initial codes, compared the code structure between transcripts, built categories, wrote memos, drew maps on paper with attempts to find relations between categories and then finalised the maps in Nvivo. Snapshots of the initial coding in Nvivo, examples of code structure I organised for the transcripts and examples of memos, hand-drawn maps and finalised maps can be seen in Figure 4.3 and in Figure 4.4. As shown in the figures, instead of using Glaser's coding families (1978, 2005) or Corbin and Strass's (2008) axial coding framework, I referred to Charmaz (2014) again in terms of building a theory, which I gradually constructed through constant comparison between cases, writing memos, theoretical sampling, drawing maps and diagrams and also as informed grounded theory, established dialogues with pre-existing literature. A provincial theoretical framework was constructed based on the first-round analysis. I wrote a data analysis report in English (19,408 words) and then discussed with my supervisor to confirm the arrangements for the second-round interviews.

Figure 4.3: Examples of initial coding, comparisons of code structure of transcripts and memos
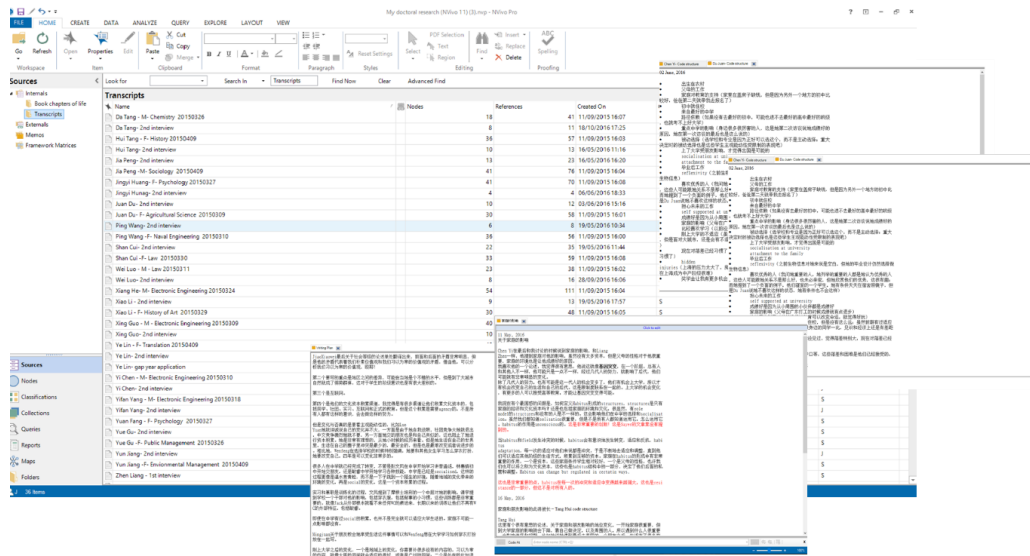
Figure 4.4: Examples of manually drawn maps and finalised maps in Nvivo
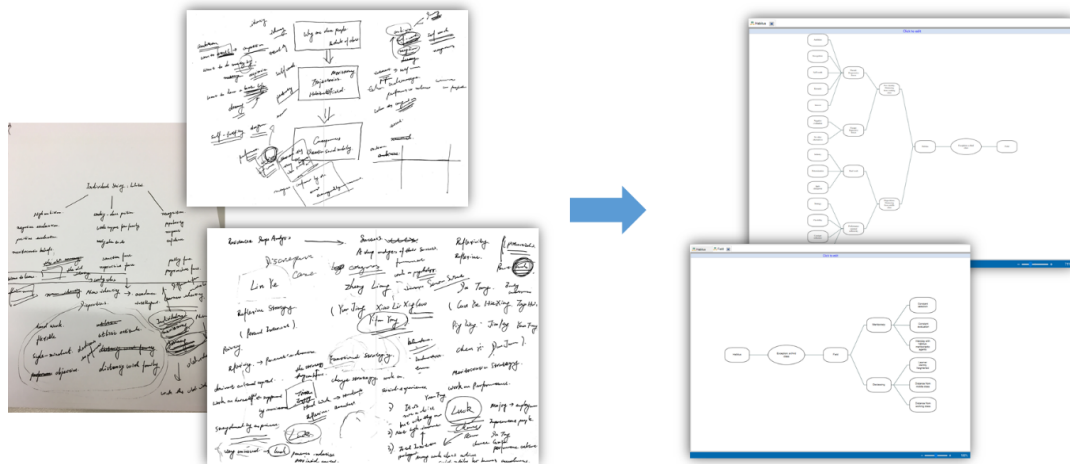


**Second-round interviews (21 November to 9 December, 2015) and analysis**

The purposes of second-round interviews include: a. as my participants had moved from university to workplace or to postgraduate studies at a home or overseas university, it is necessary to obtain updates on their life stories and it is possible to make comparisons between these two rounds of interviews; b. some points that had been shown as of much importance in the first-round analysis need to be elaborated; c. some confusing points that I found in the first-round analysis need to be discussed with participants so as to make them clear; b. the relationship between me and my participants may

be enhanced through one more face-to-face meeting; e. as suggested by 'the participatory approach' (Keane, 2015), the provisional theory framework built from the first-round analysis can be improved by discussion with the participants and also their voices and views can be included in the co-construction of emergent findings through this approach.

With these five purposes, I returned to the participants around six months after the first-round interviews. I interviewed 13 participants through face-to-face meetings and the other 4 participants through Wechat calls as they could not make time for a face-to-face meeting. The first-round interview transcripts were sent to the participants when I made contact for the second-round interviews in order to refresh their memory of the first interviews. Based on the first-round analysis, I prepared questions I needed to ask specifically to every participant. It turned out that the purposes of the second-round interviews were achieved. To name a few, I obtained updates about their life stories, which indicated many changes or significant progress, especially for those who chose to work after their undergraduate studies; I was able to elaborate on why they worked very hard at studies at school and found a relationship between education at home with their motivations to become high-achieving students, a detailed discussion of which can be seen in Chapter 6 and in Chapter 7; I made clarifications of a comparison I set up in the first-round analysis between Yun Jiang and Xiao Li that demonstrated different expectations of female working-class students towards elite universities; and greater rapport was built between me and the participants, for instance Xiao Li inviting me to her home for the interview, Ye Lin asking for my advice about her applications to overseas universities, Zhen Liang revealing some important events in his university life that had not been shared in the first interview and Yi Chen taking two hours after the interview to ask questions about my research and discuss the 'hidden injuries' which had come up as a main theme in his life story.

I employed the same process and techniques I used in the first-round analysis to analyse the data but this time, analysis was more focused and concentrated on specific questions I brought to the second-round interviews

and on filling in theoretical gaps I found in the provisional framework I built through the first-round analysis. Memos became more theoretical and conceptual than descriptive and summative as analysis evolved and developed, as can be seen in the memo I wrote on how to understand their new and old identity in Figure 4.5. As noted in this graph, I used English rather than Chinese to write memos at this stage as the theoretical and conceptual dialogues with literature in English became more important than being sensitive to the words used by my participants. I referred to the enhanced memos, categories, maps and framework to write up my thesis.

Figure 4.5: An example of advanced memos in the second-round analysis
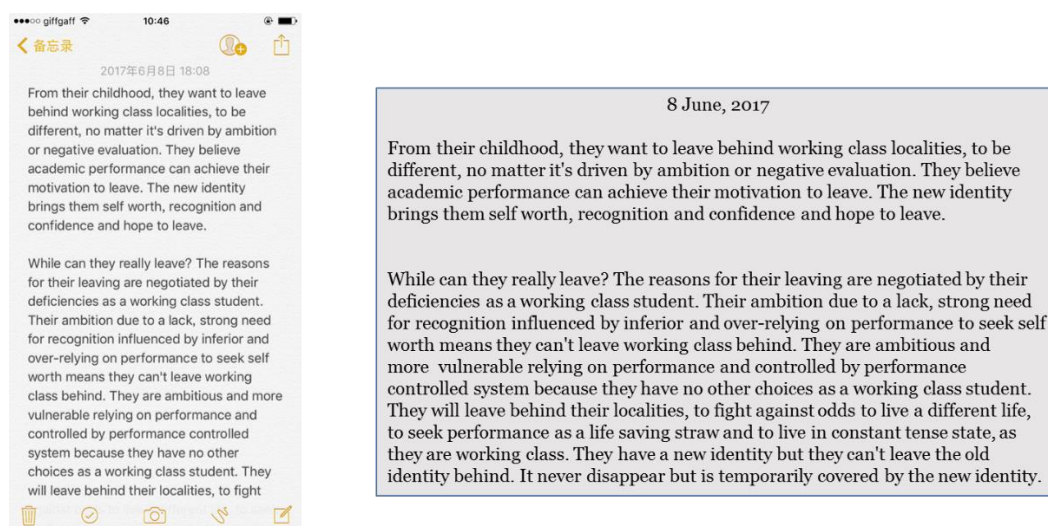


**Third-round interviews (23 October to 9 December, 2017)**

Third-round interviews were conducted between 23 Oct and 9 Dec, 2017. Seven interviews took place in face-to-face meetings, nine interviews were conducted through *Wechat* calls and one participant made no response to my contact. The participants chose how they wanted to be interviewed for his/her convenience. The purpose for the third-round interviews was to discuss research findings with my participants and make adjustments if necessary according to their feedback.

I wrote a report of research findings in Chinese (5,784 words in total) and sent it to my participants through Wechat before each interview. The

interviews started with my introduction to the research findings and were followed by discussions with my participants. They agreed with and confirmed almost all the findings and showed particular interest at some points, such as forms of self-exclusion and different perspectives to deal with habitus dislocation. Some participants suggested ideas for my future research and for policy implications. For example, Xing Guo recommended I introduce teacher recruitment and teacher training into the policy implication section and Wei Luo suggested I conduct a follow-up study of my participants in their workplaces. Information in relation to the employment of my participants was updated, as for the participants who continued to study in a postgraduate programme at the time of the second-round interviews, it was time for them to look for jobs at the point of the third-round interviews. I have updated the information on their employment in this thesis. Also, some points in the research findings were elaborated on, for example Wei Luo offered a very revealing account of his feelings towards social inequality according to his experiences working in Shanghai and in Zhengzhou (the provincial capital of his hometown; he moved back from Shanghai a year after graduation). The updated information for their life stories, their views on the research findings and some of their recommendations have been written into the thesis. Also, I made a promise to them that once the thesis or chapters were published, I would send them a copy.

## Ethical issues

Ethical issues have been carefully considered in the whole research process. Consideration of ethical risks and coping strategies have been made with reference to *the Statement of Ethical Practice* by the British Sociological Association and a statement of those issues had been approved by UCL Institute of Education before I went to field. Participants had been made aware of those issues through the *Information Sheet*. I demonstrate a summary of this statement here.

Sampling: I will contact potential participants individually; the involvement of participants in the whole research process will be kept confidential between the researcher and the respondents in order to avoid any negative impact on their life.

Informed consent: participants will be given a copy of the Information Sheet and Consent Form before the research (including the pilot study), which will explain details of the research design, the researcher, the planned dissemination of research outcomes and their rights and obligations as participants; participants will be informed of their right to withdraw at any time and for any reason they wish; all participants in this study are senior students at university, so they are able to make independent decisions in giving their consent.

Confidentiality/anonymity: all personal information will be anonymised in transcripts, field notes, publications and the thesis so that no one can be identified from information in any document; I will take the role of their friend during my involvement in their lives in order to protect their privacy.

Data sharing: research data including life stories and other document materials relating to participants will only be shared between the researcher and her supervisor and will not be disseminated to any third party during the research process.

Data analysis/reporting: a participatory approach will be used in the research and I will try to involve participants and their views in the data analysis process.

Dissemination: participants will be consulted prior to any publication of research data; and participants will receive a summary report of findings when the research is completed.

**A brief introduction to the 17 participants**

As shown in Table 4.1, the sample of my study comprises eight male participants and nine female participants, whose subjects at university vary in sciences, engineering, humanities and social sciences.

As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, I referred to Lu (2002, in Chinese) to define working class. The occupations of my participants' parents should be in the two lower levels according to Lu's analysis, which include the unemployed, peasants, factory workers, service workers and small business owners. As indicated by Table 4.1, this definition applies to 15 participants but two participants, Xiang He and Yifan Yang, are exceptions. Xiang He's father worked in a mining group and his mother was a local government officer and he is the only participant in my sample with both his parents having received higher education. Yifan Yang's mother ran a small print room and his father was a bank clerk, which are ambiguous as to whether they should be defined as working class.

Despite the ambivalence of defining the two cases as working class based on their parents' occupations, I did not exclude them. A main reason was their self-identification. Xiang He defined himself as 'definitely working class'; when I asked him 'where he was from', he said that he was from 'a national impoverished town' and he identified himself as 'a country boy' in his life story book chapter. Yifan Yang had a similar account, identifying himself as 'a poor student' and describing his hometown as 'an impoverished town'. A second reason was that they were all from economically under-developed regions so that the salaries of their parents were way below the national middle-class level, which was confirmed at interviews. A third reason was based on an analysis of their life stories. Both of their stories revealed evidence of the constraints of a lack of forms of capital. Considering these reasons, I still included them in my study but I defined them as 'upper working class'. By the inclusion of the two cases, I aim to demonstrate the diversity of experiences among fractions in the working-class. Working class includes different fractions, who vary, among other things, in the volumes and forms of capital they hold. Making a distinction in terms of class fractions is important in understanding variations in class experiences, as

demonstrated in Jackson and Marsdens' study (1962) of 88 working-class students in a British industrial town. The possible influences of class fractions can be particularly seen in Chapter 5 on university choices and in Chapter 7 on reflexive dispositions.

In the right column of Table 4.1, I selected my participants' own descriptions of their hometown. As mentioned earlier, Xiang He and Yifan Yang emphasised the economic position of their hometown, 'national impoverished' being stressed; four other participants used 'small' in their descriptions. 14 participants in my sample are from rural areas or small towns and only three participants are from cities, which are Shanghai, Taiyuan (a provincial capital in north China) and a small city in southwest China. For working class students who live in cities, their living places may also be different from what modern city life was supposed to be. Hui Tang can be used as an example here. She was born in Shanghai but she lived with her family in a Long Tang (a community of houses centred on a lane) in Shanghai. The following pictures of a Long Tang I took when I conducted fieldwork in Shanghai show what the properties and living conditions of disadvantaged people in Shanghai are like.

Figure 4.6: Pictures of a Long Tang



(Photos: 28 November, 2015 by Jin Jin)

## Table 4.1: A list of the 17 participants

| No. | Name | Gender | Subject | Parents' Occupations | Hometown |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Da Tang | M | Chemistry | father and mother: peasants | 'village' in north China |
| 2 | Hui Tang | F | History | father: laid-off worker, paraplegic, unemployed; mother: laid-off worker, bus attendant | 'Shanghai' |
| 3 | Jia Peng | M | Sociology | father: used to be taxi driver, now bus dispatcher; mother: migrant worker | 'small city' in southwest China |
| 4 | Juan Du | F | Agricultural Science | father: used to be carpenter, now migrant worker; mother: housewife | 'village' in middle China |
| 5 | Ping Wang | F | Naval Engineering | father: used to be peasant, now runs a self-owned, motorcycle maintenance store; mother: housewife | 'village' in north China |
| 6 | Shan Cui | F | Law | father and mother: peasants | 'small village' in middle China |
| 7 | Wei Luo | M | Law | father and mother: peasants | 'village' in north China |
| 8 | Xiang He | M | Electronic Engineering | father: works in a mining group; mother: officer in local forestry bureau | 'national impoverished town' in north China |
| 9 | Xiao Li | F | History of Art | father: decorator; mother: mill worker | 'village' in east China |
| 10 | Xing Guo | M | Electronic Engineering | father: foreman of workers in a factory; mother: nurse supervisor | 'rural-urban fringe town' in north China |
| 11 | Ye Lin | F | Translation | father and mother: workers | 'Taiyuan' (a provincial capital) in north China |
| 12 | Yi Chen | M | Electronic Engineering | father and mother: peasants | 'village' in north China |
| 13 | Yifan Yang | M | Electronic Engineering | father: bank clerk; mother: self-owned print room | 'impoverished town' in southwest China |
| 14 | Yuan Fang | F | Psychology | father and mother: mineworkers | 'mining town' in southwest China |
| 15 | Yue Gu | F | Public Management | father: laid-off worker, now work as an electrician; mother: factory worker | 'a remote mountainous town in Chongqing' (a provincial capital) in southwest China |
| 16 | Yun Jiang | F | Environmental Management | father and mother: peasants | 'village' in southwest China |
| 17 | Zhen Liang | M | Material Science | father: used to be a mineworker, now taxi driver; mother: cashier | 'small town' in north China |

For most of my participants who are from rural areas or small towns, the 'underdevelopment' of their hometown does not only mean in economic terms but also in education conditions. In relation to this, Yun Jiang and Da Tang offered a vivid description in the following, which expresses sentiments that are shared in many of my participants' accounts:

We had a very difficult living situation at that time. Peasants were known as having a poor life and that's even without saying that my family had debt to pay back. We would wait a long time to have one meal with meat. Sometimes we had to borrow rice from others...when we started Year 2, Year 1 was closed. The student number was very small with only around ten for one class. I felt so blessed that at least we had got someone to teach us. Teachers were from local villages who received more education than others. My mum used to be a teacher...We spoke local dialect at school, generally with no use of Mandarin. When it came to Year 5, the school was closed (so I had to go to another place). The closest school was in town. Nowadays they have cement roads but at that time the roads were all muddy and bumpy. (It was terrible) especially in Sichuan where rain was frequent. We got up and started walking to school at 5:30 as we should arrive to school at around 7:30. (It was dark, so) we brought a flashlight. Sometimes the flashlight could be out of battery. How would you know whether it had battery or not? We could tell from whether the flashlight was reflected in the  water holes on the roads. This was my life in Year 6 and at junior school. (Yun Jiang)

We didn't call it 'pre-school' (one-year preparatory class before primary school), we called it 'Year Half'. It was run by someone in the village. We needed to bring chairs to class. They had only tables, no chairs. My plan had been to continue primary school in my village but the quality of teaching was so bad (that I had to move to another place). Teachers themselves didn't even understand what they were talking about in my previous school. They received no training. They couldn't finish junior school themselves. They became teachers only because they had more education than others in the village. You could teach only if you were literate. After Year 2, I went to another place for primary school. Education there was better, but only in a relative term compared to my previous school. Teachers there practised corporal punishment and they spoke very rudely to students. (Da Tang)

Schools they attended, as will be seen in Chapter 6 and Chapter 7, are a significant theme in their life stories. Table 4.2 shows my participants'

trajectories of schooling. Key senior secondary schools are argued by many studies (e.g., Liang, Zhang, & Li, 2013; Liu, 2013; Liu, Wang, & Yang, 2012) as an important place to form upward social mobility opportunities for working-class students in China and have a significant role in forming their 'cultured habitus'. As may be noted in Table 4.2, many of my participants moved away from home when they progressed in their education journey. This not only meant geographic separation from family and working-class localities but also social separation. This separation reinforces the role of schools in forming their habitus and it is possible that it brings them 'hidden injuries'. I will discuss in detail the influences of key senior secondary schools on the habitus changing of my participants in Chapter 6.

Table 4.2: Trajectories of schooling of the 17 participants

| No. | Name | Before senior school | Senior school |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Da Tang | primary school and junior school in village | 'key school in town' |
| 2 | Hui Tang | a normal primary school and a normal junior school close to her home place | 'key school in city' |
| 3 | Jia Peng | a normal primary and a normal junior school | 'key school in city' |
| 4 | Juan Du | primary school in the village; a key junior school in town | 'best school in city' |
| 5 | Ping Wang | primary school in village and moved to town since Year 3; stayed in Year 3 for one more year; a normal junior school | 'second best key school in town' |
| 6 | Shan Cui | primary school in village until Year 4; Year 5 and Year 6 in another village; a key junior school in town | 'key school in city' |
| 7 | Wei Luo | primary school in village and a normal junior school in town | 'best school in town' |
| 8 | Xiang He | primary school and junior school in town | 'best school in town' |
| 9 | Xiao Li | primary school in village; junior school in town | 'best school in town' |
| 10 | Xing Guo | primary school and junior school in town | 'key school in city' |
| 11 | Ye Lin | primary school for factory staff's children in the suburb; a key junior school in city | 'key school in city' |
| 12 | Yi Chen | primary school in village; junior school in town, '20 or 30 miles away from home' | 'key school in city' |
| 13 | Yifan Yang | a normal primary school in neighbourhood; a key junior school in city | 'key school in city' |
| 14 | Yuan Fang | primary school in town and junior school in another town | 'second best school in city' |
| 15 | Yue Gu | primary school and junior school in the school for factory staff's children | 'key school in city' |
| 16 | Yun Jiang | primary school in village until Year 5; Year 6 and junior school in town | 'key school in city' |
| 17 | Zhen Liang | primary school in town; junior school at a city '55 km away from home' | 'best key school in city' |

Another point I want to mention here is that I excluded one participant, Jingyi Huang, based on the analysis at this stage. She had been included in

the first-round interviews and analysis as she was a Year 4 undergraduate at Peking University, received a national student loan and her parents were seed-sellers, 'small business owners' in the two lower levels of occupations according to Lu's analysis (2002, in Chinese), all of which fitted the definition of working class in my study. However, the first interview revealed that she went to a private school for primary education and junior school education, her brother was funded by her family to study at a secondary school in Australia, she identified herself as 'middle class' rather than 'working class' and also I compared the salaries of her parents with the statistics on the national average salary, which indicated that her parents' salaries were much higher. She received a national student loan because her father was ill and became un-employed when she was in Year 2 at university. Considering all these factors, I excluded her from my study. I wrote an email to her and explained the reasons why I did not include her in subsequent interviews.

I mentioned earlier in this chapter that my participants moved into postgraduate studies or into the workplace at the time of second-round interviews. Figure 4.7 shows their distribution in career destinations at the time of the second-round interviews, when they had finished their undergraduate studies.

Figure 4.7: Distribution of my participants' career destinations



- Postgraduate studies at home universities
- Postgraduate studies abroad
- Being employed
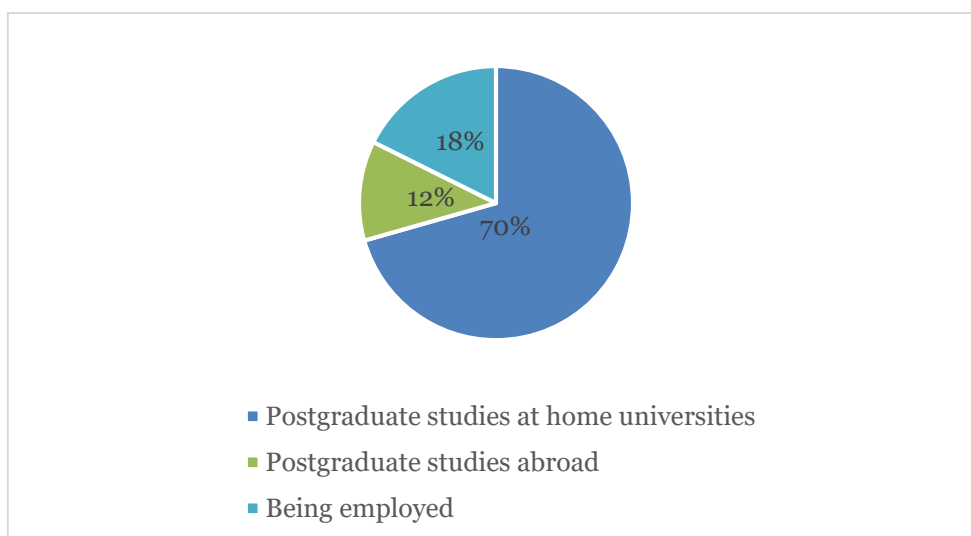
In the second-round interviews, 12 participants were studying for a postgraduate degree at universities in China, all of whom were recommended to the programme and were waived from taking exams owing to their excellent academic performance at university. Among them, two participants were in programmes that were military services related, who would be assigned positions by the military after postgraduate studies; one participant was in a programme leading to a PhD and planned to pursue an academic job afterwards; the other participants preferred to work after postgraduate studies. Two participants were studying for a postgraduate degree in overseas universities, Juan Du on the Master's programme in Agricultural Management at the Paris Institute of Technology and Ye Lin on the Master's programme in Visual Interaction Design at the Carnegie Mellon University. Three other students moved into the workplace: Shan Cui worked as an office assistant in a department at her home university; Wei Luo worked as a salesman in a patent application service company; Yun Jiang worked in an executive recruitment company.

In the third-round interviews, five of the twelve participants who studied in a postgraduate programme at a home university continue to pursue a doctoral degree at the same university (Gu Yue, Jia Peng, Tang Hui, Xiang He, Yuan Fang) and the other participants found jobs, Yifan Yang and Zhen Liang in the finance industry, Yi Chen in the electronic engineering industry, Ping Huang in the mechanic engineering industry, Xiao Li in the education consultancy industry, and Xing Guo, one of the two participants who were in the military services related programmes (the other one is Da Tang, who had no response to my contact) being assigned a position in Xinjiang province. Two participants who studied in an overseas postgraduate programme – Juan Du and Ye Lin, found jobs that were related to their subject studies respectively in Paris and in Los Angeles. The other three participants who chose to work after undergraduate studies all changed jobs: Shan Cui resigned his job as an office assistant in a department at her home university to work in a new media company in Beijing; Wei Luo left Shanghai and moved back to the provincial capital of his hometown but also worked in a patent application service company; Yun Jiang left Shanghai too and worked

in an executive recruitment company in the provincial capital of her hometown- Chengdu.

## The 18th participant: autobiographic reflections

As done by my participants, I drafted a set of book chapters of my life, having myself been a working-class student at elite universities in China, as shown in the following figure. In this section, I will 'lay my cards on the table' (Keane, 2015: 420) by first offering a descriptive account of my life story as the 18th participant and then providing a reflective account as a researcher.

Figure 4.8: Book chapters of my life



Chapter 1:  A Girl in a Small Town
            I thought I had the whole world

Chapter 2: I was the No.1 across the Town
            Moved to another town: two #100
            'My parents are teachers'
            I was the No.1 in every term final exam

Chapter 3: Senior Schools with Only Exam Papers
            'Returning after struggles'
            I remained No.1
            Couldn't meet you at Peking University

Chapter 4: By Chance
            I stood up and I couldn't speak a word in a debating competition
            Student societies: for the resume
            Unfinished Global 500 dream

Chapter 5: Accidentally Met My Career Destination
            Unexpected attention and care
            I could go abroad
            I want to be an academic like him/her

Chapter 6: Tomorrow would be better- to be continued

**Book chapters of my life**

Chapter 1: A Girl in a Small Town
I thought I had the whole world

I was born in a small town in Anhui (a province in the middle of China, economically underdeveloped). My whole family (my grandparents, parents and some of my extended family) worked in a state-owned factory, which

recruited a large amount of the workforce from this town. My grandfather was one of the managers of this factory and my father was a 'technical star' who often received awards. One of my aunts and her husband were local government officers and two of my uncles received higher education and worked at universities in Shanghai and in a city in Anhui respectively. I was taught by my family since my childhood to take the two uncles as role models, to work hard at studies and to become an academic.

The town was very small so almost everyone who lived there knew each other. My family was respected for having lived in this town for more than 40 years, especially my grandfather, who was considered as an experienced and inspirational leader of the factory. My father often bought me snacks, toys (e.g., mini car models, video games) and very generously gifted me books. My parents and I went for trips to Hefei (the capital city of Anhui province) sometimes to meet my father's friends there. In my childhood, I thought I had the whole world.

Chapter 2: I was No. 1 across the town
Moved to another town: two #100
'My parents are teachers'
I was No.1 in every term final exam

My family and I moved to another town at the second term of my first year at primary school owing to the relocation plans of the factory in which they worked. It was a much bigger town. When I went to the new school, I was nervous about being introduced because I thought I was a student from a 'small' place. However, I shocked them in the first exam because I got full marks in two main subjects - Mathematics and Chinese. But one little thing I still remember clearly now was, when someone came to me and asked about what my parents did, I answered, 'they are teachers'.

After primary school, I went to the only junior school in this town. Very quickly I became the No. 1 in my class, but only around the top 50 in the grade. My class director encouraged us (the top 10 students in the class) to

work hard at exam performance with a promise that she would give us 50 yuan (5 pounds) if we could make it into the top ten in the grade. However, it was only I who succeeded in entering the top ten in the grade in the next end of term exam. I retained that position throughout the rest of my schooling. Finally, in the entrance examination to senior school, I was ranked No. 2 across the town in the total performance and No. 1 in the subjects of Chinese and English. My school even made a banner to hang on the wall beside the door with my name and performance on it. But at the same time, the factory where my family worked was shut down. My grandparents retired and my parents lost their jobs. My father started a small business and my mother opened a convenience shop near to our house.

Chapter 3: Senior Schools with Only Exam Papers
'Returning after struggles'
I remained No. 1
Couldn't meet you at Peking University

I went to the best key senior school in the city owing to my excellent performance in the entrance examination. I had to live away from home and board at school because the school was two hours' drive away from my house. I was very homesick in the first term, so much so that every time I made a call to my family, I would cry. Students in my class were all high-achieving students and most of them were from the city. The feeling of being a girl coming from a 'small' place returned and this time even stronger. I struggled in every subject, even in Chinese and in English in which I had been the No.1 in town. I failed in Physics (under #60, which was the only time I failed an exam) in the final exam of the first term. I went back home that winter vacation and I thought about quitting the senior school and changing to a school in the town. But I decided to have another try. I worked very hard doing exercises from textbooks during that winter vacation, thinking carefully of every item and every question, and then in the next exam I suddenly arrived to the top ten in my class and then at the end of the first year I got to be the No. 1.

We had to choose between humanities and sciences at the end of the first year. I chose the humanities track without any hesitation because I liked writing and reading and I had more confidence to obtain a place in a good university in the humanities instead of in the sciences. The decision was made on my own. After selecting to follow the humanities track, I kept the No.1 position in my class in every exam and sometimes I could achieve the No.1 position in my grade. My objective was to go to Peking University, the dream school for students studying on the humanities track. I enjoyed reading a book at that time, *Meet you at Peking University*, which was a collection of success stories of those who achieved getting into Peking. But I did not make it because I was nervous in the Gaokao so I did not perform as well as usual.

Chapter 4: By chance
I stood up and couldn't speak a single word in a debating competition
Student societies: for the resume
Unfinished Global 500 dream

I went to Nanjing University (an elite university in the C9 league) to study Philosophy. The subject was not my choice, but was decided by the university according to my Gaokao performance. I chose not to transfer to another subject when I had a chance at the end of my first year. An important reason for that decision was what one of my classmates (who was from Beijing) said to me, 'students in other countries often choose to learn philosophy for their bachelor's degree instead of studying in management science or finance as they could work in any industry in future when they have four-years of training in critical thinking by learning philosophy'.

I enjoyed philosophy and I did well in exams (ranked the 6th in the first term and 2nd in the second term). English was my strength (I went to a garden in the university every morning to read English textbooks) but I could feel the gap between myself and some other students in the presentation skills and in the forms of 'cultural capital' they brought to bear on their studies (e.g., they

had read many philosophers at junior school or senior school, they had been to many places and they watched movies that I could not understand). One thing that shocked me and made me feel inferior was an experience I had at the debating society. I applied to join the debating society with an intention to improve my skills in public speaking. However in a debating competition, when I was supposed to challenge the rival team, I stood up but I could not speak, even though I had made many preparations (e.g., reading books in the library, discussions with the team). I quit the debating society after this embarrassing experience.

Since I performed well in exams, I devoted my time to my studies and I maintained a good academic performance at university so that I could be recommended to the postgraduate programme at the end of my university life. After quitting the debating society, I joined in two other societies and gained experiences in organising activities by learning from older members. I enjoyed learning things such as how to find funding and negotiate with companies, how to manage a team and how to develop a good marketing campaign. Also by working in these two societies, I came to make many friends from different subjects, from whom I learnt that working in a Global 500 company was a good career choice since they gave out very generous salaries. Also from these older students, I learnt about the preparations for working at a Global 500 company. I studied in the minor subject of finance every weekend in my third year, prepared for the Cambridge Business English Test, practiced English speaking every day with two learning partners I found on the university online forum, read widely in business (e.g., marketing, human resources management, organisation behaviours) and participated in more activities in student societies, which were all said to be useful at interviews.

However, my plan to work in a Global 500 company did not progress well. I sent out more than 100 applications for summer internships, but I got almost no replies. I had to postpone the plan and accepted the offer to be recommended into a postgraduate program in Shanghai, which was suggested by my uncle.

Chapter 5: Accidentally Met My Career Destination
Unexpected attention and care
I could go abroad
I want to be an academic like him/her

I went to Shanghai Jiao Tong University for a master's program in higher education but my plan was to find more internships in Shanghai in order to achieve my Global 500 dream. However, I found I was interested in this subject - higher education. I participated in a couple of research projects organised by teachers in this school, from which I established the confidence and the interest to do research and accordingly I changed my future plans - I wanted to be an academic, an academic who could make real changes to society. Also, owing to my excellent performance in these projects, I gained extra attention, encouragement and care from these teachers, which I did not expect but which made me more determined to follow the new career plan.

From a teacher at the university, I learned of the CSC (Chinese Scholarship Council) programme that could support high-achieving students for overseas studies with a full sponsorship of tuition fees and living expenses. I began to think of the possibility of going abroad only after knowing this information. There happened to be an opportunity that my school could send one student to the University of Oxford for one-term of studies. I obtained the place and visited Oxford.

Unfortunately, I did not get the CSC scholarship when I finished my master's course and with the recommendation of my supervisor, I worked as an office assistant in a prestigious business school in Shanghai. Most of the staff at this school had held tenure at elite universities overseas but they gave up the tenure and came back to China and undertook the projects that could contribute to the development of the financial market in China. The idea of 'I want to be an academic like him/her' came to my mind many times when I

worked at the school. I applied for the scholarship again and this time I obtained it.

Chapter 6: Tomorrow would be better - to be continued

**A reflective account as a researcher**

As can be seen from my account as the 18th participant, there have been two conflicting 'selves' in my habitus (the way of thinking, behaving, feeling and making choices) - a working-class self and a high-achieving student self. My sense of the division between two 'selves' in my habitus becomes clearer after the data analysis of the 17 life stories of my participants. There are obviously two forces in our habitus: on the one hand, we feel inferiority, disadvantage and incompetence as a working-class student; on the other hand, we have pride, hope, ambition and superiority as a high-achieving student. The feeling of superiority is strongest at school but is weakened at university, while the inferiority is strongest at university but less visible at school. The meritocratic environment of Chinese schools eases the hidden injuries of class we experience and offers us many opportunities to achieve progression into the best schools. 'Divided habitus', the concept borrowed by Reay from Bourdieu and emphasised in her study (Reay, 2015), offers a very good description of our experience. A detailed discussion of this can be seen in Chapter 6.

My experience as an 'insider', having been a working-class student at elite universities in China, privileges me in understanding the life stories of my participants and in expressing their feelings. Also being sensitised by the concepts in Bourdieu's work and in the related literature, makes me to develop a theoretical understanding of their and my experience. The discussion on 'divided habitus' is an example as the way in which my role as an 'insider' contributes to the outcomes of data analysis in this thesis.

However, as I mentioned in Chapter 1, being an 'insider' does not only bring advantages for me. It also brings many challenges. Having a similar

experience to my participants makes it difficult for me to see beyond the experience, to transcend the 'biases' as an 'insider' and to achieve 'reflexivity' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) as a researcher. As I illustrated in Chapter 2 on Bourdieu's idea of 'reflexive sociology', the knowledge, ideas and habitus of sociologists is also formed from their socialisation in fields so that the knowledge of sociologists will include 'biases' and could 'blur the sociological gaze' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 36). In order to transcend the 'biases', the researcher should 'turn the instruments of his science upon himself' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 36), conduct a self-analysis so as to make the sociohistorical conditions that form the habitus of the researcher part of the analysis as well. The instruments I used in conducting such a self-analysis are also Bourdieu's theoretical tools, especially habitus, as I did in the analysis of my participants' life stories. The reason why I use habitus is the same as I discussed in Chapter 2 – habitus can make visible how socialisation in social fields operates unconsciously in influencing our thinking, that is, in forming our 'biases'. Using habitus in conducing self-analysis can challenge what I have taken for granted as an 'insider'.

One example of such a challenge is that I was made to realise how having been a 'successful' person in the meritocratic environment of Chinese schooling influences my interpretation of data. In the first draft of my thesis, I argued for the legitimacy of the performance-based access system to different levels of education and to types of schools in maintaining upward social mobility in China. I demonstrated in that draft some of the many ways in which the performance-based system increased the role of individual striving and reduced the role of the intervention of family capital in competing for places at elite schools and at elite universities. The conclusion was that the meritocratic arrangement did contribute to upward social mobility. That argument developed from rigorous data analysis procedures, built little by little from initial coding to focused coding, writing memos and making comparisons. The argument became more obvious and stronger when I compared the performance-centred system in China with the apparent divergence of students from different classes into different types of schools in some countries - for example in UK the concentration of rich

students at private schools and the concentration of working-class students at state schools. I was arguing in the first draft that the performance-centred system in Chinese schooling offered more opportunities for working-class students in China than in other countries to achieve upward social mobility through its role to constrain the intervention of family capital. Thus, I was arguing for retaining this system in terms of its role to 'promote' upward social mobility. Also I discussed the 'worrying' trends of reforms in China to revise this system, although I was aware of many problems of this system, such as the 'hell' experience of students in 'exam factories' that often appeared in news reports.

I held this argument until I was encouraged by my supervisor to read around the issue of meritocracy and I was challenged by a friend who was working on Foucault. The questions he asked me woke me up and forced me to distance myself from this 'insider' perspective. He asked: 'why can only intelligent people be selected to go to the best schools and have opportunities to gain successes?'; 'what happens to those people who cannot be selected?'; 'do these 'exceptions' in your study have real choices?'; 'are they in a situation that they can only choose either to follow the rules defined by the system or to stay among the poor?'

I was made to realise the 'biases' I held unconsciously as having been a 'successful' person in the meritocratic system and how these 'biases' significantly influenced my findings. As can be seen from the descriptive account in the above, I was always the No.1 student in the class, I had a banner made for me, hanging on the wall and making a statement of my 'achievement' in this system and I always could access the best school, the best university and the best opportunity owing to my excellent performance in exams. I am exactly 'an eldest son, an heir, a successor, a Christian' (Chapter 2: 31) of this meritocratic system of Chinese schooling. I was making an argument for the system I had embodied and drawing on the objectification of this system in my habitus. I became a loyal meritocratic agent through all the successes I had gained in this system. I was one of the kings, the bankers, the priests who would make the monarchy, the financial

capitalism and the Church of meritocracy 'flesh' (Bourdieu, 1990a: 57). The argument I made for the legitimacy of the performance-centred system was a 'natural bent' of my habitus, was an unconscious choice to fulfil my duty, was reinforcing and reactivating this system and its related domination.

As a 'successful' person in this system, as a 'lucky survivor', my 'sociological gaze' is blurred. I was 'successful' and I was around similar 'successful' people at university so that the many 'unsuccessful' people could not be seen. Also the losses, injuries, struggles, failures and sometimes despairs I had experienced in this system are easily forgotten, such as I pretended my parents were 'teachers', I cried every time I called back home, I did not make it to become a story in *Meeting You in Peking University* and I could not speak a single word in the debating competition. The successes of a small number of working-class students in this system are accompanied by the failure of a large majority of other working-class students. Also, even the successes of the small number of working-class students have their costs, too. As an 'insider' it is easy for me to neglect these failures and costs and see them as just 'the other side of the coin', 'the costs we anyway should pay'. However, we can be different. We can have fewer sacrifices, injuries and costs and a better system. Those are the objectives I want to achieve by 'turning the instruments' of sociology to my participants and to myself as well.

This is one of the many examples of my self-analysis in the process of finishing this thesis. I do not have the space here to illustrate every experience of awakening I had in the process, but from this example, it can be seen how the self-analysis of my positon as an 'insider', the sociology of the conditions of production of my own 'views', enabled me to recognise and reconsider my 'biases', and to see my data differently and reflexively. Bourdieu's theoretical tools, as clearly seen in the above example, play an important role to help me achieve reflexivity as a researcher. This may be seen as another reason in addition to those I have discussed earlier in this chapter as to why I should use informed grounded theory in my thesis -

being grounded in data and meanwhile being challenged and helped by the dialogue with pre-existing concepts.

## Conclusion: using methods reflexively

As can be seen from the above discussion, I take the same attitude towards making methodological decisions as I take in using Bourdieu's theoretical tools - being orientated towards the research aims and also using these methods and tools reflexively. I worked the life story approach and constructive grounded theory approaches together in my study as the combination of these two methods can best achieve my research aims, to have a theoretical understanding of these life stories and also to have a thick description of lived experience at the same time. As explained, the first principle of conducting my data analysis is staying grounded in data, however pre-existing concepts are used as tools to develop my thinking, challenge my biases and have dialogues with literature. As can be seen in the above, there are few 'either/or' choices in my decisions, but I will think carefully of the choice in 'either' and 'or' and use them creatively in order to achieve the strengths in both sides.

Learning from other studies is another important factor informing my research decisions. 'The participatory approach' emphasised by Keane (2015) is an example. I used this approach in many ways in my study by learning from Keane's experiences, for example involving participants' views in theoretical sampling so as to achieve the co-construction of findings in practice.

At the end of this chapter, I offered an account of auto-biographic reflections. I used Bourdieu's tools to analyse myself as the 18th participant and as a researcher who had an 'insider' perspective. As I said at the beginning of this thesis in Chapter 1, this is a project about life stories of my participants and this is also a project about me. My analysis of the life stories of my participants developed when I went deeper in my own self-analysis and at the same time as my self-analysis developed, my analysis of their life

stories improved as well. In this sense, I used myself as a tool as well, to challenge myself and develop my thinking as the self-analysis and the analysis of my participants evolves. I use the developed thinking to achieve a better understanding of class inequality in China and to find possibilities to make a difference.

# 5. Class matters: the 'normality' in the 'exceptionality'

In the previous chapters, I have argued that my participants can be seen as 'exceptions' who have different life trajectories from most working-class students in terms of their academic successes and their reaching elite universities against all the odds. However, their exceptionality that allows them to achieve these academic successes does not mean that they are 'exempt' from class constraints. Rather, on the contrary, these exceptions experienced similar constraints of class in the forms of capital deficiency and the operation of working-class habitus, as other working-class students. In this sense, they are not 'exceptions' but 'normal' working-class students. Class matters to them as it matters to other working-class students. The choices, thinking, feeling, self-identification and aspirations of my participants are impacted on by their working-class positioning, as described by the famous quote, 'class is something beneath their clothes, under their skin, in their reflexes, in their psyche, at the very core of their being' (Kuhn, 1995: 98). I will focus on the 'normality' of my participants as working-class students in this chapter and discuss their 'exceptionality' in the next two chapters.

Based on the analysis of my data, I organise the discussion in this chapter into 'five senses' – a sense of deficit, a sense of inferiority, a sense of incompetence, a sense of us and a sense of otherness, as shown in Figure 5.1. My use of 'sense' here indicates and includes feelings, evaluations, rationality and emotions. Through the discussion of these five senses, I want to demonstrate in this chapter 'an adequate theory of habitus' (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990: 205) to see how my participants internalise their external disadvantages and also how they produce and reproduce their disadvantages through this internalisation.

Bourdieu explains the 'internalization of externality' and the 'externalization of internality' as an operation of unconsciousness, 'internalised as a second nature and so forgotten as history' (Bourdieu, 1990a: 54). I will argue in this chapter, following Sayer (2005) and Reay (2004), that both the 'internalization of externality' and the 'externalization of internality' are not only the operation of unconsciousness but also involve thinking, evaluation, awareness, feelings and emotions - 'mundane reflexivity' as Sayer calls it. This is why I use 'senses'. As Sayer argued, 'people are not merely shaped, but flourish or suffer' and 'they value the world' (2005: 34). People not only make classifications of what is possible and impossible for us and bring about a 'probable future' through the 'class frame of choice' (Lauder & Hughes, 1999: 27). Rather, they can also 'actively discriminate between the good and the bad, the safe and the threatening' (Sayer, 2005: 34) and they have a 'desire for recognition and self-respect' (p.35) so that a 'probable future' can be refused and what is refused can be longed for. However, the sad thing I will argue in this chapter is that the disadvantaged people can make evaluations, they long for flourishment and they have desire for recognition and self-respect, but they are still likely to internalise disadvantage, accept disadvantage, make adaptation to disadvantage and live out disadvantage. Compared with unconsciously following the rules of habitus, this is a greater misery, walking to the 'probable future' with consciousness by choice or with consciousness of no choice.

Figure 5.1: Five senses of working-class identity
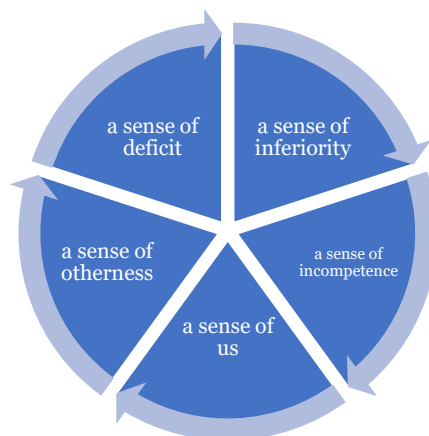
## A sense of deficit: making second best choices

The sense of deficit in forms of capital, particularly in economic capital, is easily developed in a working-class position and the effect of being constrained is directly felt, as reported by Yun Jiang below, who I quoted in the last chapter as well. The concrete sense of deficit in economic capital is reported by almost every participant in my study.

> We had a very difficult living situation at that time. Peasants were known as having a poor life and that's even without saying that my family had debt to pay back. We would wait a long time to have one meal with meat. Sometimes we had to borrow rice from others.

Experiencing the sense of deficit, my participants learnt self-control from a very young age, behaving maturely, living up to parents' expectations and forming motivations to pay back to their parents, as reported by Zhen Liang:

> A: I was mature. Many kids would lie on the ground if their parents didn't agree to buy what they wanted. My mom said when I wanted to buy something at that age, I always asked first whether she had enough money. If she didn't have enough, I would give up.
> Q: Why do you think you were so mature at that age (primary school)?
> A: I knew my parents weren't at ease. It was not easy for them to make a living.
> …
> A: We didn't have a lot, but they never let me feel any difficulties, no matter in food or clothes. But I knew they were struggling to make a living. One time at my senior school, my parents visited me and when we had dinner, my dad talked very excitedly about what he did today and he was very happy to have earned 20 yuan (2 pounds) from this job. I was crying when I heard it. He could be so excited at having earned only 20 yuan. It was so difficult to make money, but he gave me so much. I knew I couldn't waste (their efforts and expectations) by any means.

These dispositions developed from the sense of deficit form their reflexivity and motivation to work hard on school work and contribute to their academic successes, which I will discuss in the next chapter. But these dispositions also form emotional burdens, as vividly described by Yi Chen in the account below, 'everyone wanted to be outgoing and sociable in aged 15

and in 16', which is natural for a kid, for a teenager. But they cannot be sociable as they sense the deficit in their family and they develop the sense of responsibility to pay their parents back. So they felt 'different' and 'isolated'. The sense of deficit also helps to explain why some participants cannot enjoy leisure time and they cannot find an interest in anything that is not 'functional', which will be discussed in Chapter 6. As reported by Zhen Liang, they knew that their parents were not at ease, so they knew that they could not waste the effort their parents made for them. Furthermore, they felt they should spend every minute of their time on serious things like school work, on things that can make money and that can help them to pay their parents back. Anything that is not 'functional' is a waste of time and a waste of the effort their parents made for them. The sense of responsibility and related pressures felt by my participants can be well described by a Chinese proverb, 'poor kids become masters of family earlier'.

> I can summarise (my school days) into some key words. The first is 'quiet'. I didn't speak too much at school. The second is 'working hard'. The third is 'nice'. I had never been angry and I was very polite at everything. My classmates liked me. 'Three Good Student' (an award to approve students' excellence in studies, in character and in sports) and 'Civilised Student' (a similar award to 'Three Good') were all given to me. But these were all superficial. I was stressed inside. Everyone wanted to be outgoing and sociable in aged 15 and 16…I didn't want to be like that (being quiet and mature), and I felt I was isolated. I was not truly isolated. Every time I had lunch, I had company. But it felt like I was isolated. They made jokes with each other, but they didn't make jokes to me. We got along well, but I felt I was different. I was really pressured inside.

In relation to their management of desires, the sense of deficit also forces them to make second best choices, even although they may achieve the standard of the best choice, as shown by the accounts below:

> Graduates from this primary school in town usually went to a junior school in the city. But you needed to attend an entrance examination (in the city) and also the tuition fees there were expensive (to me). So I never considered going to the junior school in the city. (Yun Jiang)

> Did I tell you about my friends at senior school who were years before me who encouraged me to go abroad (for undergraduate education)? It's an example of compromises I am talking about. I was thinking of the possibility to go abroad. I knew there was a bigger world and I wanted to see the bigger world. You saw some students attending international summer camps, but what you were thinking was, 'wow, it's too expensive, I can't go'. (Ye Lin)

As shown by the examples of Yun Jiang and Ye Lin, my participants knew the potential benefit and opportunities of the best choice but they still made the second best choice as a result of both a lack of economic capital in their family and the sense of responsibility not to burden their parents with debt. They had to give up on the best choice. The consequences of making second best choices are easy to imagine – their potential is wasted and an imagined future is betrayed. Another risk is that being used to making second choices could lead them to make self-excluding choices in the future. As will be seen in the section on 'a sense of otherness', 'going abroad' is excluded by many of my participants as an option before they know of this option, as they assume this option is expensive and unaffordable for them. When making second choices becomes habitual, self-exclusion becomes habitual.

The sense of deficit my participants developed at an early age is not only concerned with economic capital but also with appropriate social capital. Da Tang's account below shows how his second best choice was made by the sense of deficit both in economic capital and in appropriate social capital:

> I wanted to go to junior school in the town, but it was impossible for me. You needed an urban *Hukou* (household registration) to access the public school. You'd better have some personal contacts at the school and also you would have a better chance if you could treat the headmaster. But even if you arranged everything, it still couldn't guarantee that you could get a place. Private schools were way beyond my affordability. That was why I ended up staying in the village for junior school.

The sense of a deficiency in appropriate forms of social capital was very evident when the students made their university choices. With the absence of guidance and professional advice from 'significant others', they felt lonely

and vulnerable in making significant decisions. Their parents were unable to give them advice on making university choices as they have no knowledge or experience of higher education. Even for the three participants in my study whose parent(s) had been to university (Jia Peng, Ping Wang and Xiang He), they did not mention the importance or influence of advice from their parent(s) on their university choices. University choices are reported by my participants as being decided 'all on my own' and the main source they relied on to make this significant choice is the internet. The sense of deficit in appropriate social capital in making significant choices was evidently felt by my participants, as reported by Hui Tang:

> I checked the websites of different colleges (at Fudan), which was the only resource I could use. I wanted to have more resources. I wanted to know someone at Fudan. But I didn't have any contacts. The only way was to trust myself.

Some participants asked former students at school for advice and some participants' university decisions were largely influenced by school teachers but they were aware of the involvement of teachers' self-interest in the advice offered, as vividly described by Xiao Li and Yun Jiang in the below:

> They (teachers) didn't know much about the programme either, but senior schools often had a performance requirement on the number of students who could go to Peking or Tsinghua. That's why they encouraged me to apply for this programme...I was called to the headmaster's office and they wanted me to apply. I thought about it for quite a while as I would like to apply for a programme that I really liked and I wanted to go far away from home. I remembered clearly that the headmaster then invited my father to his office and he closed the curtain, turned on the air conditioning because it was summer, made tea and said to my father, 'you see, Tsinghua is a very good choice, and we can leave all the other things aside, only thinking of the possibility that your daughter could have a Tsinghua boyfriend'. My father was convinced. I was not so determined to study Psychology at that time, which was only a personal interest and also I didn't have much knowledge about it. I was hesitating, especially hearing Psychology would be difficult to get a job. But when my parents and teacher were so encouraging I said, OK, I'll do it. (Xiao Li)

I was so confused about how to make choices after my Gaokao performance, in the face of so many schools and so many programmes. Teachers all said, 'how about you try Peking University? The school (senior school) would give you ￥50,000 (£5,000) if you made an application'. 'But what if I don't succeed in going?' I asked. They said, 'then apply for their Medical School and we will also give you ￥50,000'. My performance was lower than Peking, so I went to consult the admission officers of their Medical School in Chengdu, which was my first visit to Chengdu. They told me they couldn't give me (popular) subjects such as Clinical Medicine or Oral Medicine considering my performance and their only offer would be English. And then I asked the brother of one of my classmates who was at Peking University about whether I could transfer to other subjects if I was enrolled in the Medical School. He said 'no' because Medical School had a different system. That was why I didn't apply for the Medical School for ￥50,000. (Yun Jiang)

With the absence of advice from parents or relatives who had been to university, school teachers became the only professional source my participants could rely on for advice. However, as shown by the two examples in the above, they were clearly aware of the involvement of teachers' self-interest (performance requirements by schools) in giving them advice. Therefore in making university choices, no matter the information they obtained from the internet, from former students or from teachers, none of it was 'hot knowledge' (Ball & Vincent, 1998) that can be decisive, trustworthy, personal, evaluative and unequivocal. In the end, most of my participants chose the university or the subject by chance. Meanwhile their own lack of knowledge of university and subjects, as shown by Jia Peng and Yi Chen's accounts, adds to the riskiness of their university choices, which are made by chance or 'all on my own'.

Xiamen University was my only objective in the first two years at senior school because I adored Zhongtian Yi (a professor in Xiamen University who became very popular by talking about *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* in a TV programme). I didn't know Fudan at that time. I hadn't heard of it. When my deskmate said to me he wanted to apply for Fudan, I was curious about what Fudan was. (Jia Peng)

> My first preference subject was Mechanical Engineering, but they gave me Electronic Engineering in the end. It was the typical thinking of a student from Henan Province (the province he was from) who valued Mechanical Engineering and Naval Engineering over Electronic Engineering. Unlike the students from the rich east China, we knew very little about computer science. I didn't know at that time what computer science was. It seemed very difficult to learn. I'd rather choose Mechanical Engineering, which was industry-orientated, known by everyone and could assure a job after university. But the funny thing was, when I came to university, I got to know that, as a traditional industry, Mechanical Engineering could not compete with emerging industries such as Electronic Engineering in employment no matter in job opportunities or in salaries. (Yi Chen)

A lack of appropriate social capital and their own lack of knowledge of university constitutes their blurred and uncertain 'imagined future' (Ball, Macrae, & Maguire, 1999) – they have no clear idea about the plans for their university experience and the choices are only made according to immediate circumstances. The risk of making university choices on their own or by chance is in relation to their university experience. Many of the struggles my participants experienced at university, which I will discuss later in this chapter and in the next chapters as well, can be tracked back to their university choices. For example, two of the three kinds of 'chance' I will discuss in Chapter 7 that contribute to their academic and social successes at university relate to their subject choices. A lack of appropriate social capital in making important decisions has a significant influence on their life trajectories, which can be further understood by a comparison with the case of Xiang He, who is the only participant in my study who had the support of appropriate social capital in making university choices.

Five participants (Xiang He, Yifan Yang, Yuan Fang, Yue Gu, Zhen Liang) in my study reported that they did not perform as well in Gaokao as they usually did at school. Yet, in the case of Xiang He, we can see how the social capital he could draw upon shaped his trajectory to reach an elite university, even in a situation in which he could not achieve as well as expected in Gaokao. Xiang He, one of the two upper working class participants as I indicated in the last chapter, failed to reach the performance threshold of

Tsinghua in his first time sitting the Gaokao. The headmaster of the senior school he attended, who was a teacher of Xiang He's uncle, was invited to Xiang He's home to discuss with his family about Xiang He's plans for his university applications. As encouraged by the headmaster, Xiang He decided not to take the offer from the Harbin Institute of Technology (a C9 university in Harbin, a city in north China) but to spend one more year in the same senior school to prepare for the next year's Gaokao. He eventually went to Tsinghua the following year. Of his choice to sit the Gaokao again, Xiang He said:

> That year is a valuable experience for me. I do not have any regrets of having chosen to do that. Comparing these two possibilities, if I chose going to HIT, (I would definitely regret that). I'm not saying HIT is not good, but my experience in Tsinghua tells me, it will definitely be the most valuable four years in my life.

For Xiang He, the social capital he was able to draw on had a significant role in helping him make his decision, leading him to have 'the most valuable four years' in his life. However, for the other 16 participants in my study, they had no such social capital at the time when they made university choices. Appropriate social capital can give these working-class high-achievers reliable information, broader visions and help them to form decision-making strategies, as shown in Xiang He's case. The role of appropriate social capital is something some of my participants are aware of, as seen in Hui Tang's account, but they knew their deficit in such appropriate social capital so that 'the only way is to trust yourself'. The same as the sense of deficit in economic capital, the sense of deficit in social capital brings them independence and the ability to make use of resources, that form their reflexive dispositions. The relation of the sense of deficit in appropriate social capital and the development of reflexive dispositions can be particularly seen in Ye Lin's case in Chapter 7. At the same time, the sense of deficit in appropriate social capital brings loneliness, a sense of vulnerability, fear and acceptance of deprivation, which can be seen in the section of 'a sense of us'.

## A sense of inferiority: being attuned to the inferior position

The previous section addressed how some of the dispositions of my participants acquired from their sense of deficit in economic capital and in appropriate social capital, while this section will discuss how they embody dispositions in relation to their sense of place in the field of social relations in comparison with 'different others' (Sayer, 2005: 24).

As I have discussed in Chapter 2, the external contingency of habitus does not only mean its reliance on the absolute amount of capitals a family acquires but also means the relational sense of capitals a family can draw upon in comparison with 'similar and different others', which is 'a position of the family within a wider field of social relations' (Sayer, 2005: 24). My participants developed a sense of inferiority in comparison with middle-class relatives and classmates at school, as shown by Ye Lin and Yue Gu's accounts below:

> I did my primary school at the factory-owned school for staff's children. We had only 80 students in one year. My parents worked in that factory until it shut down in my junior school…The brother of my father worked in a state-owned company and his sister, my aunt, worked in the local government bureau of education. You could see economic conditions for both their families were continuously rising, but my family remained very normal. My sister's family had moved to the city and we still lived in the suburb. You could *feel* the gap and it was widening. (Ye Lin, emphasis added by the author)

> Salaries in the small place (her hometown) were very low. My parents earned only 1,000 yuan (100 pounds) a month when I was in primary school. There were many rich people in Chongqing, but working in state-owned factories earned very little, not even to say my father often only got 80% of his salary and my mom's monthly pay didn't even come to 1,000 yuan…There were many rich students in my class. Some went abroad after senior school for undergraduate education. You could tell the economic gap (between me and them) from our lunch at that time. We had simple noodles if we were tired of the food at the school canteen, but they had a set lunch. You could *feel* the obvious gap between classes. (Yue Gu, emphasis added by the author)

The economic gap between my participants and their middle-class relatives and classmates was *felt* by my participants, from which they developed their 'sense of place' and a sense of inferiority. I have discussed in Chapter 2 an 'ontological complicity' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) between habitus and field in that dispositions embodied in one's habitus reflects and is attuned to one's place in the field. For my participants, the 'introverted personality' is an example of this attuning. Many of my participants (Da Tang, Xing Guo, Ye Lin, Yi Chen, Yue Gu, Yun Jiang, Zhen Liang) described their 'introverted' personality as a child and this 'introverted personality' reported by Ye Lin and Yun Jiang has some relation to their sense of inferiority:

> They (her junior school classmates) thought I was calm. Why did I look so calm at that time? Because I thought I had nothing special. I felt inferior. So I didn't dare to make jokes with them. I didn't dare to say, 'I will be annoyed if you keep making that joke with me'. I didn't dare to say that. Then everyone had an impression on me - they thought I had a very good personality. (Ye Lin)

> I went to town for my Year Six (because the primary school in the village was shut down). I felt inferior…I did not like talking. I almost didn't talk with others. They learnt English from Year Three. I had not learnt English before. I was detached in English classes…I didn't dare to talk in front of many people. I was very shy. (Yun Jiang)

The complicity between their personality and their sense of place is obvious in the accounts above. Their introverted personality and dispositions are embodied in their habitus, which is attuned to their inferior position in the field of social relations. Furthermore, Ye Lin, Yue Gu and Yun Jiang's accounts above also show the role of 'mundane reflexivity' in the formation of habitus, as argued by Sayer (2005) and Reay (2004). As seen in the accounts above, the awareness of the economic gap, the comparisons with relatives and classmates, observations, thinking and feelings are all involved in forming the sense of inferiority and constituting the introverted personality and their habitus.

The 'introverted personality' is not a problem if they are comfortable with that personality, although as Yi Chen reported in the above, it brings

'pressures inside'. Some of my participants in fact worked hard to change themselves by learning from their middle-class classmates, as I will discuss in the cases of Ye Lin and Xing Guo in Chapter 7, but personality here is a form of social and emotional experience that forms and mediates choices, strategies and aspirations, as shown by Hui Tang and Jia Peng's accounts in the below on making career choices according to their 'personality':

> I didn't like Media Studies, though many said it was a featured subject at Fudan...I enjoy doing History now. Classes are very interesting and doing research with teachers and communicating with them is fun. And it's a subject that you can do alone, which fits my personality, reading and writing alone. I like it this way but the only problem is it's not a subject that makes it easy to find a good job. (Hui Tang)

> I don't want to stay at university any more. I would like to go to companies or government offices. I don't like teaching. I don't like to speak in front of many people. I got very nervous when I had to do presentations. I would be nervous and I'd do a lot of preparations. Even now I would be nervous at the thought of doing presentations. I would be nervous even in front of a small group...I don't like to speak alone, in front of many students. I'm not a quick reacting person. I can't respond to a question from students very quickly. But I will think it through after class. (But if you can't respond quickly), the students may think you are not capable. But I am quick and good in writing, though. (Jia Peng)

Through making choices towards the embodied dispositions that are attuned to the inferior place they used to occupy, they live this inferior 'place' out and the inferior place is correspondingly maintained and reinforced. Mundane reflexivity may be involved in the formation of habitus, while once the habitus is formed, it tends to operate at the unconscious level, as shown by Hui Tang and Jia Peng's examples. Some participants may be aware of some consequences of the unconscious operation of habitus, as shown in Ye Lin's awareness of the reason for her introverted personality and taking steps to work on her personality, but it is impossible for them to be aware of every unconscious effect of the operation of habitus. As will be seen later in this chapter, even Ye Lin, who demonstrates considerable reflexivity in negotiating with the operation of habitus, is unable to escape from the dispositions that construct her engagement with the social field in which she

struggles. Awareness and reflexivity happens occasionally and requires effort, attention and work, while unconsciousness operates habitually and all the time.

From the account given by Wei Luo below, we can see another example of the complicity between habitus and field and the durability of this complicity. Although habitus can be changed, as described by Reay, 'habitus are permeable and responsive to what is going on around them' (2004: 434), the 'early experience has particular weight' (Bourdieu, 1990a: 60) and embodied dispositions have considerable durability and can 'outlive the economic and social conditions in which they were produced' (Bourdieu, 1990a: 62).

> Q: Why did you choose to do sales?
> A: I think it would help me improve my social skills. The ability to do business is a 'must-have' ability. As a person from a rural area, I have never earned money by negotiating with others. That's why I am not comfortable to earn money from others. I feel guilty. It makes no sense (to feel guilty) as I am not stealing or robbing. Why do I have that feeling? Because I am not used to it. Doesn't it need to be learned? What's the future if you always have a fixed salary? You don't need to negotiate, to socialise, to decrease costs, to make benefits if you are satisfied to earn a fixed salary. But those are the things we should learn.
> Q: Why did you have the guilty feeling?
> A: I have never had that experience (sales) before. I could sell this (coffee, as we were at a coffee house for the interview) to you at 30 yuan (3 pounds) as it's only worth 30 yuan. But I should sell it to you at 50 yuan (in order to make money). Am I adding your costs? I feel guilty by doing that.
> Q: You said in the first interview you valued manufacturing industries more than the law industry because manufacturing could produce real things from nothing and lawyers can't produce anything. Do you still have that thought?
> A: I might have a different idea if you asked me three or four years later, but now I still have the same thought. I think industries that can produce things have more value. Even software, it is sensible. But I'm not sensitive to (the value of) services. I don't like the industry of law. Lawyers are supposed to be social lubricants, but they actually are adding social costs. For example, I could only need to make an apology if I slapped you; but in western society, we would take two years to make lawsuits, arguing in the court and I could have to pay you 1 million yuan (100

thousand pounds). It's not the job I dream of. I don't like lawyers; I don't hate service industries, but I like manufacturing industries.

Wei Luo's account is in some ways a surprising account of how one's position in that habitus is attuned to influences the modalities of feeling, thinking and evaluating and how durable the complicity between habitus and the position is. For a person who comes from a city or even a small town, it is difficult to understand why manufacturing industries have more value than the law industry and why doing business renders guilty feelings. While as a son of peasants, being used to working on the farm, seeing products grown from nothing and getting payment for the value of products, negotiating, making benefits and offering 'insensible' services would be strange, not 'real' and have no value, as Wei Luo reported. Also the beliefs, the world view, the dispositions embodied in habitus based on his early experience have such a strong and long-lasting influence on him that they still persist, even when he has graduated from university. Wei Luo also reported that he had difficulties in improving his sales performance. He observed his colleagues and he read books, but he still could not improve his sales skills. He does not have the 'sense' of how to do business as he 'never had that experience before'. The complicity between habitus and field demonstrated in Wei Luo's account is way beyond my imagination, even though I have read Bourdieu and I am aware of the long-lasting effect of this complicity. As a son of peasants, Wei Luo in many ways is doomed to remain the son of peasants. Habitus is 'permeable to what is going on around us' but a more profound effect is that 'what is going on around us' is experienced through established ways of seeing, ways of understanding, ways of feeling and ways of evaluating embodied and constructed in our habitus based on our early experience. Habitus can be changed but it is extremely difficult to do so.

## A sense of incompetence: a tendency for self-blaming

As may be noted, the two senses – the sense of deficit and the sense of inferiority -both concern a disadvantaged position in relation to the more concrete forms of capital - economic capital and appropriate social capital.

The deficits of and the disadvantaged position in terms of appropriate cultural capital and the consequences of this are less often addressed by my participants, which partly reflects the more hidden effects of cultural capital and the necessity to use Bourdieu's tools in conducing data analysis. This section will employ the tool of cultural capital to demonstrate more hidden effects of the external contingency of habitus and the corresponding maintaining of disadvantages. A typical influence of cultural capital on the experience and choices of my participants is its influence on their performance in some school subjects, as Da Tang and Hui Tang reported:

> My humanities (History, Geography and Politics) were bad. I had no interest in these subjects. I couldn't understand them. It could be the problem of my expression. I couldn't give direct answers (in exams). Now I have some sense of what to do. We need to take Politics courses at university as well but now I have some sense of what to do. You should first summarise the points of the reading and then link them with the practice...the most difficulty for me (to acquire a good performance at school) was from the subjects of Chinese Literature and English (Chinese Literature, English and Mathematics are compulsory subjects for both humanities and sciences tracks), so I bought a lot of textbooks and I did questions in the textbooks every day. I knew I shouldn't rely on textbooks, but (it was the only thing I could do). You see, at Gaokao, I just missed one question in all choice questions in the exam in Chinese Literature, but I had no idea how to do writing. In terms of English, my English is deaf English. Even now, I can't understand others and they can't understand me, too. I'm fine to do tests, but listening and speaking is really hard for me. Even now I don't know how to improve my English. (Da Tang)

> I didn't have too much knowledge about subjects at university. I was not good at sciences. Subjects in humanities and social sciences seemed all alike to me...I couldn't do well in Chinese Literature (at school). I was always struggling to understand what authors were indicating. I didn't like Media Studies, though many people said it was a featured subject at Fudan. (Hui Tang)

Compared with sciences, in which my participants often achieve excellent exam performance by working extremely hard, taking up an enormous amount of time and doing a lot of exercises in textbooks, humanities subjects bring 'the most difficulty,' as commented by Da Tang, for my participants to achieve in exams by using the same learning methods. Writing,

understanding and the good expression needed to do well in humanities subjects require extensive reading, broad knowledge, skilled use of elegant language, all things related in part to middle-class cultural capital. With little or no such capital, my participants found it extremely difficult to improve their performance in humanities subjects. The influence of cultural capital on their performance can be further understood by a comparison with the case of Jia Peng, who did very well in humanities subjects at school and chose to study sociology at university. Jia Peng is one of only three participants in my study whose father had been to university; he read his father's books since childhood, such as *A Critique of Political Economy* by Karl Marx, which he mentioned as an example at interview; and the only hobby he had at senior school was reading philosophy in bookstores. The appropriate cultural capital Jia Peng gained at home and by reading philosophy in bookstores is almost certainly related to his performance in humanities subjects. In fact, the hidden influence of cultural capital on academic performance is emphasised by Bourdieu:

> The notion of cultural capital initially presented itself to me, in the course of research, as a theoretical hypothesis which made it possible to explain the unequal scholastic achievement of children originating from the different social classes by relating academic successes, i.e. the specific profits which children from the different classes and class fractions can obtain in the academic market, to the distribution of cultural capital between the classes and class fractions. The starting point implies a break with the presuppositions inherent both in the common sense view, which sees academic success or failure as an effect of natural aptitudes, and in human capital theories. (Bourdieu, 1986: 47)

As Bourdieu comments in the above, being unaware of the relation between the middle-class cultural capital and the performance in humanities subjects, my participants were frustrated and attributed their difficulty of achieving in humanities subjects as down to their own limitations. 'Maybe I am not suitable for doing such subjects' is a typical conclusion of such frustrations. One of the problems with such a conclusion is that their subject and course choices are consequently further narrowed down. We have seen the effect of limitation on their available choices by making second best

choices and by making choices by chance in the discussion of their sense of deficit in economic capital and appropriate social capital, while here we can see a further narrowing down of their available choices by the influence of cultural capital on their performance. What makes the situation worse is that the subjects they exclude may have more material returns for their future than the subjects they chose. The exclusion of Finance in comparison with the choice of Chemistry in Da Tang's case and the exclusion of Media Studies in comparison with the choice of History in Hui Tang's case are indicative of this.

For some participants, the influence of cultural capital on academic performance also penetrates into their university experience. Xiao Li, as seen earlier in this chapter, was persuaded by her school teachers to choose the programme of History of Art at Tsinghua, while when she went to university, she found that she could not understand the lectures:

> The first two years we were learning the course of history of arts and crafts. Teachers were talking about those vases and jars, about their dates, characteristics and aesthetics. I couldn't get the point...I was hearing every word they were talking about, but I couldn't understand what they meant...I couldn't understand and also I had no interest to figure it out.

Here we can see obvious ways in which cultural capital impacts on students' learning in subjects in the heartland of middle-class culture, such as the fine arts and classical music, especially compared with the account of another participant I interviewed who is a middle-class student in the same department as Xiao Li and who did not report any difficulties in understanding the courses. The influence of cultural capital on academic performance in these examples is not something these participants are aware of and thus their difficulties are explained as an effect of 'natural aptitudes' or 'personality'.

The sense of incompetence for my participants is not only reflected in their struggles in learning some subjects, but also in their 'incompetence' in

'fitting in' at the elite university. This sense of 'incompetence' to fit in at the elite university is well described by Da Tang's accounts below:

> I cried many times in my first year. You see, it had been so hard for me to fit in when I moved from a village to a town for senior school, (and then you can imagine how hard it was when I jumped into such a big city). I had never been out of the province before university. I had always been in the town in which I was born. I went to only two towns and to Zhengzhou (capital of the province he lived) only once, for health checks. Everything was different when I just came here. I couldn't find places for classes. Classes took place in the same room (when at school), but they changed rooms for each class at university. I felt the campus was so huge. I couldn't find the places for classes, even by bike. And I didn't know where I could get help.
>
> …
>
> Exam papers in the past years could be found online, but I didn't know that at that time. Although the internet had become popular, such as the wide use of Weiming BBS (an online community for Peking students), I didn't know it. I didn't know how to type at that time. We should learn computer programming. I was so frustrated. I knew nothing. But it was compulsory. I stayed every day until late at night to do it. No one could help you because you couldn't copy their codes. One week, two weeks, I almost broke down. And at the same time I had to do experiments and to take mathematics classes. I was extremely busy. Some other students were in societies. I didn't know how they could make it…teachers in computer classes didn't say anything about basics, about what codes were. They started from a high level, asking you to do complicated programming that could calculate what day it was when you input a date. It would be much better if they could teach us step by step. It was very easy for students who had learnt it. They finished programming in only half an hour. But for me it was very difficult.

There is a complexity of factors involved here in forming the sense of incompetence reported by Da Tang. The influence of a lack of cultural capital, such as computer literacy and travelling experience, the influence of a lack of appropriate social capital, which could help him in making plans for university life and the dislocation of his working-class habitus in the field of elite university that assumes students' 'competence' based on the experience of middle-class students, such as knowing how to do computer programming. The competences needed to fit in at the elite university will continue to be discussed in the next section; it constitutes a factor in forming

their adaptations to their deprivation. Here I want to focus on my participants' explanation and understanding of their incompetence. Da Tang tended to blame himself: why am I struggling to fit in at university while other students can manage it well and attend student societies at the same time? A similar and more obvious account of self-blame is reported by Shan Cui:

Q: Do you have any trouble fitting in at university?

A: I was led by the teacher at school. I only needed to follow. When I came to university, I could only rely on myself. I had so little accumulation (of knowledge and of skills). I had no distractions at school. Only studies. When I came here, I needed to do so many things at the same time. When I knew my performance in the first exam, I was so shocked and frustrated. It was really bad. I often fell in sleep in classes. I couldn't help falling in sleep.

...

Q: How exactly was your performance at university?

A: I don't want to talk about it. It was always bad. I couldn't fit in with the way of assessment at university. At schools, you had similar documents to other students. But at university you needed to find resources yourself. Where could I find resources? I came to learn many things. But I was much later than others.

Q: Did you get someone to help you?

A: Actually there was someone who could help me (if I asked). But my personality is not to bother others. This personality was really a problem. I digested everything alone.

...

Q: Do you think the four years in Peking have had many influences on you?

A: Sometimes I was thinking if I didn't choose here, would it be better? I needed someone to guide before me. In Peking, it feels like I was like going here and going there, but I wasn't gaining anything from anywhere. There are indeed many resources in Peking. If you have a clear objective, you can have a very good development here. But for some people like me, having not enough knowledge about myself, being OK about everything and not ambitious, (it's not a good place). I appeared to be ambitious at school as life was so concentrated. You gained in certain areas little by little and then it appeared I was ambitious. But when I came to university, it was dispersed. A little here, a little there.

Shan Cui's account describes the problem of her blurred, unclear, uncertain and unstable 'imagined future', which in a large degree is influenced by her working-class position with no appropriate social capital and cultural

capital. Bringing that unclear 'imagined future' to university, my participants are easily distracted by immediate demands, as reported by Shan Cui, 'spending a little time here, and a little time there'. In the end, she cannot make use of the 'many resources' in Peking, as she titled the book chapter of her university life - 'inability to make a plan'. Similar to Da Tang, she explained her struggles at university as the problem of her 'personality' –'not to bother others', 'digest everything alone', 'having not enough knowledge about myself, being OK with everything and not ambitious'. Shan Cui blames herself for what seems as personal incompetence and explains it as 'pathological' (p.301), as the white working-class girls in Reay's study (2006) explained their low achievement.

As explained by Bourdieu in relation to 'economic competency', 'the "rational" habitus, which is the precondition for appropriate economic behaviour, is the product of particular economic conditions, the one defined by possession of the economic and cultural capital required in order to seize the potential opportunities 'theoretically available to all' (Bourdieu, 1990a: 64). The possibility of forming a concrete, realistic and clear 'imagined future' (Ball, Macrae, & Maguire, 2000) and the competence to achieve in some subjects and to fit in at university are also outcomes of the possession of specific economic, social and cultural capitals and of the socialisation experiences that are conditioned by such possession. With middle-class parents or even middle-class relatives who have been to university, with cultural experiences of visiting a university or with economic capital that makes possible the hiring a private tutor, the competence and the experiences of my participants could have been different. My participants are the victims of disadvantages in the possession of capital, but the influences of disadvantages are often forgotten, unrealised or neglected so the victims are blamed, or blame themselves or are defined and self-defined as 'pathological'. Their disadvantages are internalised, accepted and legitimised.

## A sense of us: making further adaption to the deprivation

We have seen in the above discussion how three senses, the sense of deficit, the sense of inferiority and the sense of incompetence, relate to the internalisation of disadvantages and externalisation of this internalisation, which maintain and reinforce the disadvantages of my participants. In this section, we will see that all the three senses are intensified and maximised when my participants come to university and the correspondingly amplified sense of deficit, sense of inferiority and sense of incompetence heighten the awareness of working-class identity and thus reinforce 'a sense of us' and lead them to make further adaptation to their deprivation.

The sense of deficit and the sense of inferiority are intensified at university by sharp comparisons with middle-class students in some concrete symbols of class identity - food, clothes, mobile phones and accents, as shown by the accounts below:

> I bought clothes from Taobao (an online shopping website with a lot of bargains), while some other students in my class, for example one of my roommates, only went to shopping malls and always came back with bags and bags. Her relatives sent her Louis Vuitton bags, she bought a brand new laptop immediately after her old one got water in it and her stuff was piled up in our whole room. I feel OK (with the gap) now. I have been getting used to it. There is always a gap between you and rich people...You could also feel differences in the cell phones we used. Some students in my senior school were rich but not rich enough to use iPhone. I didn't know of iPhone before university. When I came to university, I was so confused why people were all using the same mobile phone... You talked about the feeling of a gap (between me and other students). I had that feeling in my English. My reading and listening was OK but speaking had a huge gap compared with students from the southeast (an economically developed area in China). I couldn't believe I was laughed at by my roommates when I spoke English. When I was in Chongqing (her hometown), I was much better than my friends. (Yue Gu)

> The main change (for me) came from changes in social environments, from an under-developed place to a large city. Changes in environments had a big impact on me. We were so behind economically. Taking cell phones we used, for example, my family bought a Nokia for me with a cost of only certain hundreds yuan; but you saw everyone from Shanghai had an iPhone in hand. That was iPhone 4 at that time. It was my first time to see a phone worth four or five thousand yuan.

Then you knew they were in a much higher levels than you economically. (Wei Luo)

It was very hard when I just came to Shanghai. You knew no one in Shanghai. The first obvious difference (between me and other students) was in Mandarin. I was speechless. Mandarin could be a problem (she said earlier in the interview that they used dialect at school and she started using Mandarin at university). The second (biggest difference) was what we talked about. For example, I had no idea about the brands of clothes and shoes they bought and I didn't know how to use computers. Another point I want to mention is, I really think I was very country at that point, in dressing and in other areas. I looked very different. The process to fit in was very difficult. (Yun Jiang)

I took one semester or half a semester to fit in (one semester is a half year in China). One thing (I need to change) was the language. I spoke Mandarin before but the Mandarin we spoke in Guangxi was different from here (Shanghai). We had the accent. It was weird when you spoke Mandarin in that accent. I had to adjust my accent. I wanted to stay here. I had plans to stay not long after I came here, in my first year. That was why I thought I should speak Mandarin in a more standard way. Now I can switch without any problems between both ways (of speaking Mandarin). When I'm here, I speak a standard Mandarin; while when I'm back at home, I speak Guangxi Mandarin or use dialect. (Yifan Yang)

The huge gap in economic capital between them and 'different others,' their middle-class classmates, becomes concrete in these comparisons of symbols. The economic gap in regions, between classes, between rural and urban, are all 'seen' and 'felt' through these sharp comparisons. Working-class identity is amplified by these concrete comparisons. As Yue Gu and Fang Yuan reported, 'I never thought I was poor until I came to university'. These symbols become the 'stigma' (Goffman, 1963) of their inferior position that they need to work on, to learn the right forms of 'dress', the right 'brands', to 'adjust my accent' and need to take part-time jobs in order to afford an iPhone. All the work is 'double effort' to my participants. Their middle-class classmates may still take time and effort to fit in but they do not need to work on these stigmas.

The 'double effort' working-class high-achievers need to make includes not only the effort to overcome these stigmas, but also to rectify their

'incompetence' in cultural activities, as reported by Xiang He in the below, or to make up 'what they had not experienced at school,' as reported by Zhen Liang. Zhen Liang's account also helps us to understand why Shan Cui was easily distracted at university. A lack of relevant cultural experiences at school was made aware to these working-class high-achievers but they had no choice but to dedicate themselves to performance at that time, as will be seen in the next chapter. Since they had come to university, they wanted to seize every opportunity to 'experience'. Almost every participant in my study reported the plans they brought to university to 'check out more cultural experiences'.

> All the first year I was struggling to fit in. What I say most often now and can best describe my feelings is the environment (that you are born in) determines who you are and the height you can get to. When I first came to university, came to Beijing, I saw many things for the first time in my life. My first year was to learn what others had learnt (many years ago). Taking some small examples, I didn't know what was KFC, I hadn't had fast food before, I didn't know I needed to wear suits on formal occasions, I didn't know the manners when in a conference and so on. I learnt many things for the first time in my life. I had to learn a lot from zero. It was like, for a country boy going to town (for the first time), everything was new, everything was intriguing...if you were a city kid, not to say you were from Beijing, even if you were from Taiyuan (capital of the province he was from), you should have been used to many things. Their life in Beijing should be little different from their life at home. (Xiang He)

> Learning at university shouldn't be only around academic studies, especially for us students from the middle or the western part of China. You already have less experience than others. If you only blindly focus on academic studies, your life would be disastrous...Then apart from working on my courses, I attended a couple of student societies, getting to know people, going to different kinds of lectures, in order to make up for my disadvantages as a student who came from the western part of China. (Zhen Liang)

For participants in humanities subjects, they also make a 'double effort' to accumulate cultural capital as they are aware of the direct influence of cultural capital on their performance and they are aware of the huge gap in

cultural capital between them and their middle-class classmates, as reported by Jia Peng and Yue Gu:

> At senior school, I was the first in my grade. I was very relaxed. But now (when he came to university), everyone was a top student at senior school. You were competing with each other. I was struggling to fit in in the culture. You could see students from Shanghai (were much better). For example, they had read more classic books, such as *Republic* by Plato. They might have read it at junior school but I read it in my first year at university. It was very tiring always being on the way to catch up with them. I had never heard of what they said in class. It was like I was left behind. I really wanted to catch up. But I couldn't find ways. It was so frustrating. I become confused at what I was going to do in future (he said his dream since junior school was to be a scholar)…I enjoyed reading in the library, but when you had a discussion with classmates, you still felt left-behind. You opinions were not as high-end as they had and not as insightful as they had. I worked towards that direction. Later when I read books, I knew their opinions were actually from some books. But at that time, I didn't know. (Jia Peng)

> Exam performance became less important at university. You should have your own thoughts. We had group discussions in one course, *An Introduction to Politics*, the course we did with Yuanpei College (an elite liberal arts college in Peking). Many of them (students at Yuanpei College) were Zhuangyuan (students who are ranked the first in Gaokao in every province). We couldn't do anything but listen to them. I didn't know what they were talking about, Aristotle, Plato, etc., who I had never read before. You might be at the same level with students from the west, but you had a huge gap with students from Beijing. I looked down on students from Beijing, as they could go to Peking with much lower performance. But it was totally wrong. The best student in my class was from Beijing. He did very well in exams and he was very knowledgeable, smart and skilled in debating. He got very good results. A few days ago I heard he got offers from MIT and Chicago. Today someone said he got another offer from the Kennedy School (at Harvard). (Yue Gu)

In the next chapter, we will see what being a high-achieving student means to my participants and how it defines their 'purpose to live in the world'. Based on the understanding of the significance of a high-achieving student identity to my participants, it will be easy to understand here how they struggle and how frustrated they felt when they knew they were 'left-behind' in academic performance and how strongly the feeling of being 'left-behind'

would motivate them to put in 'double effort' to make up the gap in cultural capital between them and middle-class students. Furthermore, as we have seen earlier in the discussion, Jia Peng in fact was already the participant who read the most widely and intensively in my sample. It therefore can be imagined just how wide the gap between working-class high-achievers and their middle-class classmates is and how much frustration they experienced at seeing this gap.

These 'double efforts' of working-class students are not without costs and consequences. As I discussed in Chapter 2, 'time for the poor means deprivation and for the rich means privilege' (p.23). As reported in the last section by Da Tang, when he was struggling to find rooms for classes and to follow the computer classes, other students were attending student societies and, as reported by Xiang He in this section, when he was learning the basics of city life, other students were preparing to go abroad. It is a game in which they are always left behind. Yesterday's winners will be tomorrow's, too. Being aware of the situation, the game they never have the possibility to win, most of my participants chose to accept the situation, as reported by Xiang He and Yun Jiang in the below: 'do not always think of winning'.

Q: When we discussed about your difficult time at university, you mentioned a talk you had with one of your friends. You mentioned he said, 'education at Tsinghua is for elites. It makes some people and it destroys some other people at the same time'. What do you mean by quoting his words?
A: This is a place where you can meet many excellent people, everywhere. You can feel the pressures every minute. You should have a very strong heart. Whenever you think you have done a very good job, there would be someone coming up and reminding you, how much better he is than you. You have pressures all the time. When my friend said that, he should be struggling as well. However, it won't matter if you accept the fact. You do well, it's your business, nothing to do with me. If I have tried my best for my choice, I can be happy about myself. You can survive in this university without trying to jump from a building if you can comfort yourself with that thought. Only if I can be better than yesterday, I would be happy. Only compare me with myself. It does not necessarily mean I can catch up with you, but it is good enough for me if I can keep moving forward. After I figured it out, I feel my inner strength has been improved by a couple of levels. (Xiang He)

Q: Did you find you are different from others?

A: Yes. I felt inferior again (she reported the same feeling when she moved to town for junior school). We were both in Fudan, so in academic performance they could not be worse than you or most likely they could be much better than you. And socially they already had outstanding social experiences at senior school. No matter in experiences or in family background, (you felt you were far behind them). I began to feel bad about myself again.

Q: How is it getting better?

A: It is not getting better. I made adaptations. I accepted it. There was a saying, 'do not always think of winning'. No matter at junior school or senior school, I won over others in exam performance; but at university, I couldn't win over others in every single way. I had been very aggressive so the contrast at university really brought me down. But I accepted it then. I accepted the fact they were better than me. I tried not to put myself in comparisons with others. And (focused on) who I wanted to be and worked hard to achieve that. (Yun Jiang)

'Only compare me with myself' is setting double standards – as we are working class, we can expect less and we can achieve at a lower standard, which is actually to accept, confirm and internalise inequalities. This is a response of making an adaptation to deprivation in accordance with Bourdieu, which I have discussed in Chapter 2 (p.24) and also I quote here again:

> ...also that the same dispositions, by adapting the economically most deprived to the specific condition of which they are the product and thereby helping them to make their adaptation to the generic demands of the economic cosmos (as regards calculation, forecasting, etc.) lead them to accept the negative sanctions resulting from this lack of adaptation, that is, their deprivation. (Bourdieu, 1990a: 64)

Accounts by Xiang He and Yun Jiang here show how painful this 'making adaptation to the deprivation' is. This 'making adaptation' is not completely unconsciously driven by habitus, a choice 'that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them' (Bourdieu, 1990a: 53). Rather, these adaptations involve an awareness of the relativity, the comparisons between them and middle-class students, the

'double effort' they should pay and the history of capital accumulation. This response is based on an at least partial awareness of the situation, this 'fact' of the impossibility of winning this game and also based on the amplified senses of deficit, inferiority and incompetence. With a degree of awareness of this situation, they still deny 'relativeness', to 'only compare me with myself' as this is the only way to protect themselves from not 'jumping from a building'. Only in this way can they feel comfortable and survive these frustrations, and their sense of inferiority and sometimes of despair. They realise the long-term risks, but at these moments they are hugely frustrated by the differences between their situation and those of their middle-class classmates at university, the immediate thing was to survive first. The future is too far to think about. Furthermore, the injuries they experienced at this point were in fact more serious than shown by the accounts here, when the hopes, ambition, dreams and confidence they brought to university based on their academic successes at school are considered. I will discuss the gap between their 'imagined future' and the reality they confronted upon arrival at university in Chapter 7. Nevertheless, making adaptations to deprivation is never completely unconscious, especially in a condition of an 'acute sense of self-consciousness' (Crossley, 2001: 158) arising from the sharp comparisons with middle-class students at university. To a large extent, my participants' making adaptations to deprivation is a mindful 'choice' with the consciousness of no other possibilities, which is a greater misery compared with making choices unconsciously in according to their habitus.

## A sense of otherness- forms of self-exclusions

The previous discussion in this chapter seems to suggest a space of self-consciousness and 'mundane reflexivity' in the operation of habitus, while the discussion in this section gives greater emphasis to unconsciousness. As commented by Reay, choices are bound by the external framework of available choices, 'the framework of opportunities and constraints the person finds himself/herself in, her external circumstances', and also at the same time choices are 'circumscribed by an internalized framework that makes some possibilities inconceivable, others improbable and a limited

range acceptable' (2004: 435). This section will focus on the internalised framework within which my participants make choices, and explore how their working-class habitus 'makes some possibilities inconceivable'.

As I discussed in Chapter 2, 'the principle of the continuity' (Bourdieu, 1990a: 54) in habitus means the choices made tend to guarantee constancy and avoid crisis, to confirm and reinforce habitus rather than transform it and to refuse 'what is anyway denied and to will the inevitable' (Bourdieu, 1990a: 54). One of the mechanisms habitus operates to achieve 'the principle of the continuity' is referred to as 'self-exclusion' (Ball et al., 2002) or 'self-elimination' (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) whereby people make a classification of the possible and the impossible for 'us' and choose what is 'reasonably' (Bourdieu, 1990a: 64) for us.

Self-exclusion works in two directions: one direction is to ensure constancy, to seek similarities and the other direction is to avoid crisis, to refuse what is not effective for us. An example of the first direction of self-exclusion in my study is some participants' preference for making friends with people from a similar family background or a similar 'personality', as reported by Shan Cui and Ping Wang:

> The friends I got along with mostly came from my college and the same year. They had similar experience to me, a similar family background and personality. My roommates had many differences from me. We had different circles and different schedules. We were not close in the first year. (Shan Cui)

> I attended the university's students' union (in the first year). After half a year, I found it was not suitable for me. People there were all rich people…I also took a part-time position in the university's student support centre and I was more comfortable with colleagues there. We were almost all from low-income families. I was happy there. I have the feeling now, whether or not you can get along with someone has a large relation to your previous experience. They (her colleagues at the student support centre) are from Shandong, Henan and North eastern China, mainly from small towns. We have many common topics. I feel very lucky to be there. Finally I found the sense of belonging, a place like home. (Ping Wang)

'Personality' appears again as a reference point for making a choice. I have already unpacked 'personality' in the previous sections in terms of its relation to the sense of inferior place and the influence of cultural capital on exam performance. Personality here is referred to in order to make classification, to distinguish 'us' from 'them'. This classification is more unconscious whereas 'whether or not we can get along', 'whether or not I can be comfortable' is the conscious standard. However, as Bourdieu comments in *State Nobility*, 'indeed, the deep and lasting affective ties of fraternity that inevitably develop among adolescents so thoroughly in tune with one another that everything predisposed them to "get long" give a seemingly natural foundation to the solidarity of the corps' (Bourdieu, 1996: 182). Here, 'getting along' has a significant relation with habitus. As realised by Ping Wang, 'whether or not you can get along with someone has a large relation to your previous experience'. Through seeking similarities, the constancy of habitus is guaranteed and the dispositions embodied in habitus are reinforced. As Bourdieu vividly described, 'continuous and prolonged contact with classmates endowed with similar or related dispositions can only reinforce in each student the dispositions and values shared by all, and hence each student's confidence in his own value' (Bourdieu, 1996: 182). Through the first direction of self-exclusion by seeking similarities and ensuring constancy, the boundaries and the segregation between different groups are maintained and enhanced. The 'sense of us' is further reinforced and then the further reinforced 'sense of us' leads to a firmer, clearer rejection of others.

In the two examples of Shan Cui and Ping Wang, seeking similar friends is to seek a similar family background, which is influenced by the working-class self in their habitus, while for most of my participants, seeking similarities is more influenced by the high-achieving student self in their habitus, seeking 'excellence' in other words, which will be explored in Chapter 7. We will also see in Chapter 7 some other participants neither seek a similar personality, family background or 'excellence' in making friends, but see friends as an opportunity for learning and for the growth of their 'self'.

In addition to seeking similarities, self-exclusion also goes in another direction - that of avoiding crisis and refusing what is not effective for us. Choices are marked as 'impossible for us' and excluded before they become choices, which is evident in many of my participants' exclusion of the choice of overseas studies. The choice of overseas studies is marked as 'high-end', for rich people and 'impossible' before they learn of the possibility for them to make this choice, as shown by Xiang He's account:

> I didn't choose to apply for an overseas university place. When some of my classmates just came to Beijing, after Gaokao, they might have plans already that they would study at Tsinghua for a bachelor's degree and then go to North America for a master's or a PhD. But I had no such concept. When I came to Beijing, I should first find ways to adapt to the life in Beijing and make up the gap between me and my classmates in the first two years and then when I started thinking of the possibility to go abroad, I had already been left behind. That's why I keep saying 'the environment where you are born determines where and how far you can go'. If your parents offer you many chances to see a big world, you would have more chances to enter a big world when you grow up. But at places like where I was born, going abroad is seen to be way beyond our life, very high-end. None of the people around me have been abroad. It seems very expensive and the degree is very easy to get. That was my impression (of going abroad). My feeling was that was other people's life, nothing to do with me.

In Xiang He's account, we can see many factors that I have discussed in the previous sections involving in his exclusion of the possibility of overseas studies – this comes about from a lack of appropriate social capital and cultural capital, the double effort he had to pay in the situation of habitus dislocation and the response of making adaptations to 'what I can expect according to where I was born'. The opportunities and possibilities, the 'external framework' of available choices for working-class students are seriously constrained by their lack of forms of appropriate capital. At the same time, the 'internalised framework' of making a choice, the internalisation of disadvantage and inequality further narrows down their choices by 'making some possibilities inconceivable'. As shown in the example of Xiang He, going abroad is a part of 'other people's life'. Inequality is accepted, confirmed and internalised by him and then is

externalised, maintained and reinforced by his self-regulation. Realistic constraints are one factor while 'social class in head' (Ball et al., 2002) is another factor and they work together in producing and reproducing disadvantages of working-class students. Sometimes, even if realistic constraints do not exist, 'social class in head' still forces the exclusion, as shown by Yue Gu's reflections:

> From the very beginning, going abroad had not been in my consideration. Talking about that, it reminds me of a post I read this afternoon. The author tells the same story as mine. She was at a very good university, not as good as Peking but still a good university, her academic performance was excellent, being the first in her grade and having received a National Scholarship (for the top 5% students), and she had many extra-curricular experiences. Not trying to be modest, I think she is writing exactly like me as well. She said she was upset when she saw those who were lower than her in GPA (Grade Point Average, the average outcome of the total exam performance added by individual performance in each subject) received offers from top international universities (Yue Gu expressed a similar strong feeling of upset when she saw her roommates received offers). I saw someone replied under the post: 'actually it's yourself who makes restrictions. You don't open your mind. If you open your mind, you will know many places offer scholarships'. I think he got the point. He listed a range of examples, including Japan, Germany and France where many scholarships were available and open to Chinese students and where the tuition fees were not that expensive. He said: 'You choose to stay home because you are lazy to learn a new language and to work on these troubles. You leave yourself staying in the same place'. I think he is right.

Overseas study may not be 'very high-end', may be 'not that expensive', may be not 'impossible' but before trying to learn about it, my participants mark the experience out as 'impossible for me' and exclude themselves from it. Such self-exclusion happens almost in every life story in my study, even in the life story of Ye Lin, who demonstrates tremendous reflexive awareness and dispositions in negotiating with the working-class habitus and the discipline at school, which will be seen in Chapter 7. Ye Lin's avoidance of Renmin University given its student intake 'with many government officials' children,' as shown in the following account, is a typical self-exclusion choice:

Peking was my dream school. I was choosing between Peking and Renmin University. One reason that I preferred Peking rather than Renmin was Renmin's campus was too old and decaying, and the other reason was I heard Renmin was very political with many senior government officials' children. It was such a huge gap (between me and them) that I couldn't make up. And I didn't want to be part of them either. I was watching *Go Lala Go!* (a popular Chinese movie about how a normal girl survived and grew up to be a senior manager in a highly competitive company). It was filmed in Shanghai, so it gave me a very good impression of Shanghai. And Lala was such an inspiring role model for me. Then I made my mind up and chose Fudan.

'Institutional habitus' (Reay, David, & Ball, 2001), which is in relation to the identifiable culture of a university, its student intake and institutional history, is an important factor reported by studies of students' university choices in the UK (e.g., Ball et al., 2002; Reay, David, & Ball, 2005; Reay et al., 2001). Some high-achieving working-class students exclude Oxbridge as they consider Oxbridge as 'posh and white', 'all typical private school, posh people' and so 'not a place for people like us' (Ball et al., 2002: 68). However 'institutional habitus' in my study is rarely reported as a factor to be considered in making university choices. Only Ye Lin mentioned some aspects in relation to 'institutional habitus' in avoiding Renmin University as 'Renmin was very political with many senior government officials' children'. The few mentions of 'institutional habitus' in my study to some degree reflects the homogeneity of the culture at Chinese elite universities that almost all universities have a strong meritocratic culture which emphasises exam performance. The culture of Chinese elite universities will be discussed in detail in Chapter 7. However, Ye Lin's account in the above shows obvious evidence of self-exclusion, which is very common and evident among other participants as well. Renmin University is, in her eyes, a place that does not suit her, a working class student. There is 'a huge gap' between her and them so 'I couldn't make it up' and also 'I didn't want to be part of them either'. The classification between 'us' and 'them' is evident in these accounts. The reason that she liked Shanghai is in relation to the consideration of culture, too. Shanghai is a place that is more suitable for girls from a 'normal family' like her and Lala. A similar account appears again when she made a choice for her postgraduate studies. She preferred institutions in the USA rather

than in the UK, as 'the USA is more suitable for people like me who have worked their way up from scratch'. Seeking similarities and avoiding crisis work together in constituting these self-exclusion choices and such self-exclusion choices shown in Ye Lin's accounts operate unconsciously, although they are regarded by my participants as 'realistic', 'rational' and 'reflexive'. From Ye Lin's example, we can see the effectiveness of self-exclusion in the externalisation of disadvantage and inequality, even for the people with tremendous reflexive dispositions.

As seen in the above, self-exclusion often works unconsciously, while appropriate social capital and 'different others' can help bring self-exclusion to consciousness, as shown by Yuan Fang's account:

> Q: Does the 'Determined Choice' in your book chapter mean you want to work in finance (she transferred from Psychology to the subject of Finance for her master's degree)?
> A: No. Actually I want to work in the media industry.
> Q: Why?
> A: Because I'm interested in the media.
> Q: When did you have the idea that you wanted to work in media?
> A: I have always had the idea, but I don't take it as a realistic option. It feels like I can't be the person who can work in that industry. I have always been a celebrity fan, but it seems like an impossible option for me to work in that industry. I think I need a chance, for example someone around you to find a job in media (one of her roommates works in the media industry). If there wasn't anyone around you who did that, it would be like an option that is far away from you. And the feedback my roommate gave to me, her talking about the people she met every day, made me feel like it was not that far.

Yuan Fang's account shows the problems for an uncertain 'imagined future,' as I have discussed in the example of Shan Cui, in that their choices are very easily diverted by immediate demands, occasional meetings and spontaneous ideas. Yuan Fang's account also demonstrates the significance of 'different others' in bringing self-exclusion into consciousness. Working in the media industry seems likes an impossible choice for Yuan Fang as it is not an option for the people like us, until she knows of the industry from her

roommate. The unconscious self-exclusion is brought to consciousness, as also shown by Yue Gu's reflections earlier in this section, 'you leave yourself staying in the same place', which is awakened by the writer of the online article. Also, the only two participants in my study who decided to apply for an overseas postgraduate program also reported that this choice had not been considered as an option until they learnt the possibility from their university friends. Encountering 'different others' has two sides: one side is to bring an amplified sense of deficit, inferiority, incompetence and entails hidden injuries of all sorts, while the other side is that it could bring a reflexive awareness of self-exclusion, as well as possibilities for ending self-exclusion and to bring about change. However, as will be seen in Chapter 7, the possibility of encountering 'different others' is not equally distributed among my participants, which means the possibility of having some reflexive awareness and reflexive dispositions is not equally available to all and capital still matters in forming their chances to be different. Also, as we have seen earlier in this section, the tendency to seek others like themselves, as shown in the examples of Shan Cui and Ping Wang, prevents the possibilities for some participants from building relationships with 'different others' and this in turn constrains the possibilities for them to achieve reflexive awareness and change their habitus. The significance of 'different others' in relation to changes of habitus can also be further understood by Wei Luo's example. We have seen the extremely persistent constancy of habitus in the example of Wei Luo and one of the reasons for that is related to the absence of 'different others' in his life story. I asked him in the first interview whether there was someone in his life who had a significant influence on him and he answered, 'no, the formation of my world view was not influenced by anyone around me, mainly on my own'. Also I confirmed this point at the second interview with him. I asked, 'did you learn something important to you at university, are there any important persons at university to you?' He answered with a firm 'no'. Self-exclusion is effective and unconscious, even to the people who have reflexive dispositions, while the absence of 'different others' in some participants' life stories further reinforces the effectiveness of self-exclusion and further enhances the constancy of habitus and the entailed constancy of disadvantage and inequality.

## Conclusion: unconsciousness is normality and consciousness is exceptionality

In agreement with other authors (e.g., Archer, 2010; Reay, 2004; Sayer, 2005), there is plenty of evidence shown in this chapter that demonstrates and supports the existence and role of 'mundane reflexivity' in the formation and operation of habitus. People are indeed not only externalising the internalised framework of choice and action that is embodied in habitus in a certain class of conditions and that is constantly attuned to those conditions, which effectively achieves the maintenance and reinforcement of inequality. People do think, evaluate, experience, feel, respond to and sometimes challenge the world. The operation of habitus, the 'internalisation of externality' and the 'externalisation of internality' is indeed the case, as described by Reay: '[a]s well as habitus coming into view as a mixture of the embodied, the instinctual and the unthought, we also glimpse the "life of the mind", the reflective as well as the pre-reflective' (2004: 441).

However, as we will see in the next chapters, the existence of mundane reflexivity, of consciousness, of evaluation, of longing to flourish, never means a direct relation to the possibilities that people can achieve breaks in the operation of habitus, of unconsciousness, of the maintenance and reinforcement of disadvantage and inequality. As we have seen in many places in this chapter, consciousness and unconsciousness, the reflexive and the pre-reflexive, are interacting and intertwining, and they work together to produce and reproduce disadvantage and inequality. My participants' adaptations to the deprivation, their internalisation of the external disadvantage and the externalisation of this internality involve both conscious and unconscious aspects. While unconsciousness is more 'natural', constant and powerful, reflexive awareness arises from time to time and it requires effort, attention, the support of some appropriate social capital and chances, as well as training through years of practice and deliberate working, as we will see in Chapter 7. Unconsciousness is the normal state while the

consciousness is the exception, which makes habitus extremely difficult to change and inequality extremely difficult to challenge.

Furthermore, the use of Bourdieu's theoretical tools in this chapter and the findings they helped to generate, for example the persistent constancy of habitus demonstrated by Wei Luo's account, the hidden effect of cultural capital on academic performance and the forms of effective self-exclusion support, and in some degree argue for, the benefit of using pre-existing concepts in grounded theory and using 'class' to understand inequality in China. Class matters to working-class students in China as it matters to working-class students in other countries. Here I want to quote Kuhn (1995: 98) again to conclude this chapter: 'class is something beneath their clothes, under their skin, in their reflexes, in their psyche, at the very core of their being'.

# 6. Transcending class domination? Exceptions and a new form of symbolic domination

The objective and symbolic constraints of class experienced by my participants were discussed in the previous chapter. Class matters to them as significantly as to other working-class students. This begs the question of their position as 'exceptions', inasmuch that they achieve high levels of academic success and gain entry to elite universities? How did they overcome the objective and symbolic constraints of their class? Is it possible to find some breaks, discontinuities and moments of mutation in class domination through the life stories of these 'exceptions'? Is it possible to obtain some findings in relation to a 'positive sociology'? Those are the questions I want to explore in this chapter.

Before proceeding to discuss the trajectories of these 'exceptions', I will first give a sense of how difficult it is to reach elite universities in China. I take the university enrolment of students in Henan Province as an example, as the province has the largest number of participants (4/17) in my sample by provincial distribution. Universities in China recruit students by province and by students' performance in the Gaokao (national university entrance exam). The university assigns recruitment quota by province and the provincial government selects from the students who choose to apply for this university based on who can achieve the position negotiated by the quota and the student's provincially ranked Gaokao performance. In 2010, when my participants attended their Gaokao exam, Henan province had a total population of 952,400[18] sitting the Gaokao, which was the largest population by province across China. Correspondingly, the numbers of students who could be admitted into these four elite universities in my study in Henan

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[18] According to http://gaokao.eol.cn/henan_5798/20130606/t20130606_955394.shtml
and http://edu.sina.com.cn/gaokao/2010-06-04/1018249525.shtml.

province[19] in 2010 are shown in Table 6.1. Even for Peking University, which was shown to have the largest recruiting number in Henan Province among the four institutions, only around one in ten thousand students could get a place. The four universities recruit only the top ranked applicants. Access to elite universities is a competition between different classes within a province. In this sense, my participants who succeed in obtaining a place at these four elite institutions seem to have transcended class domination. This takes me back to the questions I asked at the beginning of this chapter. Why were they successful in the competition for places in spite of the fact they face the same objective and symbolic constraints of class as other working-class students? Does their success in the competition really mean a transcendence of class domination? I will discuss these questions in this chapter.

Table 6.1: Recruiting numbers of students by four elite universities in Henan Province (2010)[20]

|  | Humanities Track | Sciences Track | In total |
|---|---|---|---|
| Fudan | 15 | 30 | 45 |
| Peking | 32 | 46 | 100 |
| Shanghai Jiao Tong[21] | / | / | 92 |
| Tsinghua | 3 | 69 | 72 |

As noted in the above, Gaokao performance constitutes the basis for their 'transcendence'. Based on data analysis, I will discuss their trajectories toward excellent Gaokao performance and elite universities from two aspects: *habitus* and *field*. From the aspect of *habitus*, I will discuss why and how my participants become 'exceptions' who achieve outstanding exam performances at school and reach elite universities, albeit with the same class constraints as other working-class students. I will also discuss a set of

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[19] There might be differences between the numbers one university intends recruit and of the number it actually recruits; the number of students who apply for one university could be less than the quota the university assigns to one province; the numbers used here are the numbers these four universities were going to recruit in 2010.
[20] Data obtained from http://edu.sina.com.cn/gaokao/2010-06-28/0810255366.shtml. I cross-checked the numbers by comparing them with reports published on each university's website.
[21] Shanghai Jiao Tong University did not report the divided numbers by track.

dispositions they demonstrate as 'exceptions'. From the aspect of *field*, I will discuss how their attendance at key schools [22] reinforces their *habitus*. Through the interplay of *habitus* and *field*, they achieve the status of 'exceptions', which distances them both from their working class peers and from the middle class at the same time. Contrary to the appearance of transcendence, I will argue in this chapter that 'exceptionality' of my participants means the operation of a more hidden form of class domination. In the following section, I will discuss this from the perspective of *habitus*.

## Habitus: new identity and distancing

Graph 7.1 shows the categories I construct in relation to the *habitus* of 'exceptions'. They work on exam performance driven by two kinds of forces: progressive forces of pursuit and regressive forces of escape. A new identity, that of 'the high-achieving student', evolves alongside and to some extent against an existing and 'natural' working-class identity. As they develop and maintain the new identity, they also acquire a set of dispositions: industry, strategy, determination and self-discipline among others, as shown in Figure 6.1. These dispositions can be grouped according to two themes: individualism and performance-orientation.

Figure 6.1: *Habitus*: new identity and distancing

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[22] Schools are divided into key schools and normal schools in China; key schools (including primary schools, junior secondary schools and senior secondary schools) receive more government funding and policy support, have the best teachers and recruit the best performing students in every level of entrance exams.
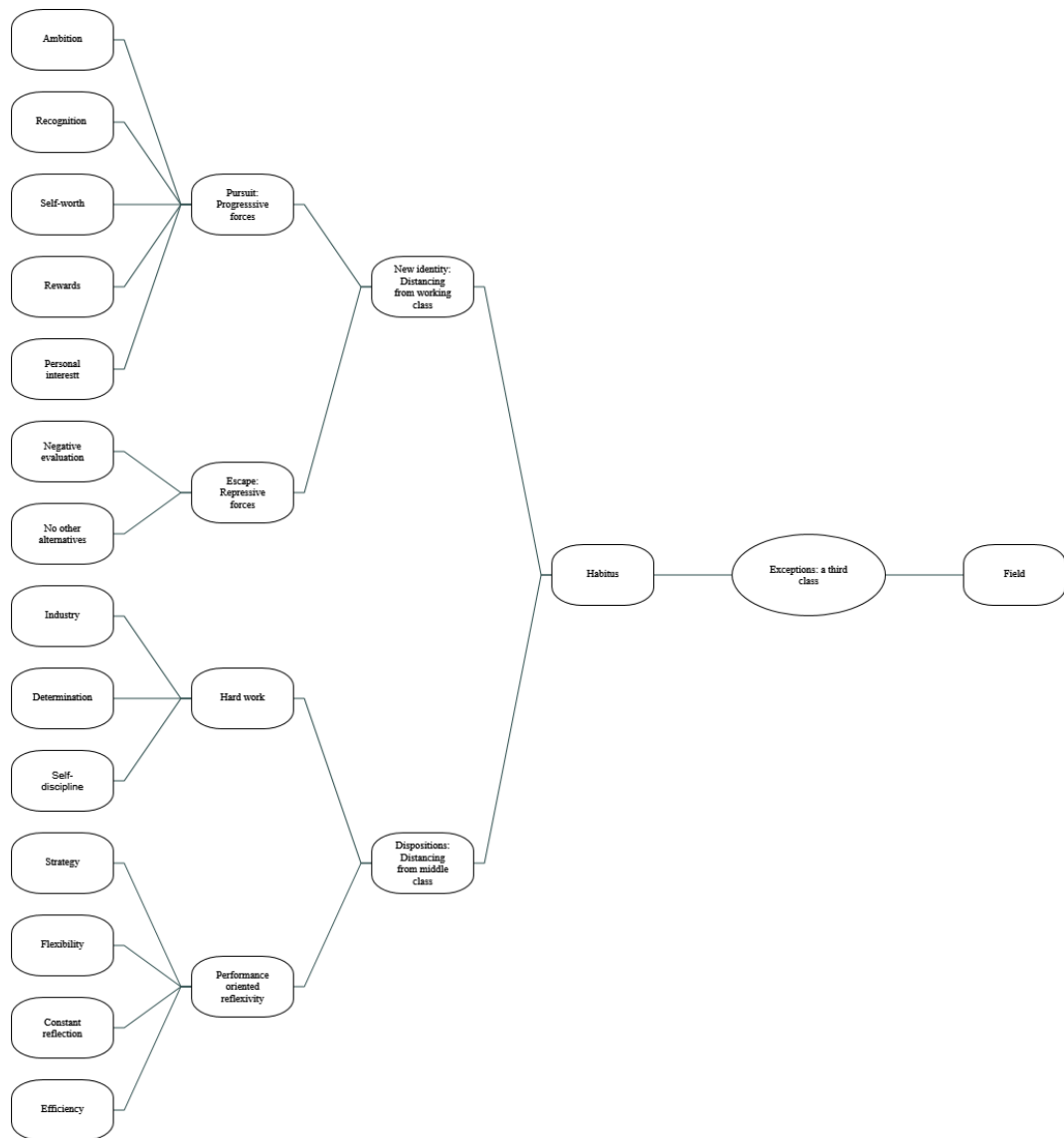
## New identity: distancing from working-class localities

Driven by two kinds of forces - 'progressive' and 'regressive' respectively, my participants construct a new identity, that of 'the high-achieving student', at an early stage of their life, which overtime distinguishes them from other working-class students in their community.

Progressive forces constitute a complex of ambition, self-worth, recognition, rewards and personal interest. The complex can be clearly seen in Da Tang's account:

I was different (from other kids nearby). My parents kept a strict eye on me. We saw whether a kid was clever or not from whether he/she could talk nicely, whether he/she could respond quickly. I was surrounded by clever kids, (but I was not clever). When I was doing one thing, I would forget other things, I was very single-minded. For example, when I was watching TV, I couldn't hear anything others said to me. It seemed I was very dumb and stupid. I couldn't do (things they could), swimming, climbing trees. All I could do was to study…if the things you are good at are so few, would spend most of your time on schoolwork. I was not good at Chinese Literature. I couldn't understand it. What I could do was to read by rote. But I liked mathematics very much. It was not difficult at that time. I liked solving questions in textbooks. I was often so dedicated to it until I realised it was very late…Many kids in the countryside had very little schooling. They often dropped out after primary school. Only two or three students went to junior school and only one was as good as me at school. I didn't pay much attention to those who were bad at studies. I had the motivation. When you achieved a good performance, other kids would admire you, make friends with you; when you did badly, teachers would treat you badly…I could only find confidence from my studies. Someone might be good at playing computer games. I couldn't. Someone would be good at talking. I couldn't do it either…I was emulative. My teachers actually commented that I was 'emulative'. I didn't know what 'emulative' meant at that time, but I knew I should be better than others. If I met someone who was good, I would try to find ways to be better. I was like that since I started school, from kindergarten, what we called Year Half. We could get a certificate of honour if we got full points. I got certificates very often. My parents would praise me, saying I was clever. It was important to get praise in your childhood.

Da Tang had ambition to excel, to 'be better than others', but the only thing he could excel at was academic performance at school. He could not be defined as 'clever' by the evaluation system in folk norms in the village as he did not 'talk nicely' or 'respond quickly', while academic performance at school could distinguish him as 'clever'. A similar childhood story of having an 'introverted personality' and being distinguished by schoolwork is seen in some other participants' accounts (Yi Chen, Ye Lin, Xing Guo, Yue Gu and Yun Jiang). Like Da Tang, academic performance at school defines their 'worth' and builds their confidence, while the recognition and rewards they acquire on the basis of academic achievement at school, praise from parents, popularity among classmates, encouragement and extra care from teachers

enhances their self-identification with the high-achieving student identity and motivates them to invest more to maintain this identity.

The account by Da Tang covers a full complex of ambition, self-worth, recognition, rewards and personal interest that I categorise under the theme of 'progressive forces', but I am not suggesting every participant is driven by all of these factors. In fact, only a few of participants demonstrated high ambition in their childhood. Da Tang is one such example and this would also include Zhen Liang, Yifan Yang and Yun Jiang. As Liang Zhen reported, 'I knew from childhood I wanted to do something big, something more than just getting married and having kids...life can't be like that...people should have some pursuits'. They were unwilling to accept 'what comes naturally' in their class culture and wanted to make changes, they wanted to achieve something, something out of the ordinary, they wanted to be different, to be 'extra-ordinary'. The motivation to be different is evident in the account of Zhen Liang regarding his dream of a future life following his negative evaluation of working class localities:

> It remind me of the imagination I had at that time (childhood) of what was a beautiful life. I had a very exact imagination, mainly about the house. I imagined the house was huge with a garden and a swimming pool. Anyway, it was really good! I had a study room and a bedroom. I had a very big bed, very soft. All was good. A detail I would never forget in my life. Every day when I woke up, feeling relaxed, I would then slowly open the large French door. There was a curtain, it was like this (he pointed at the sunblind in the interviewing room) and then I pulled up the curtain. It was all green outside, all lively. Oh, it was exactly my dream life.

A further analysis of their ambition reveals a link to meritocratic beliefs, they believe their ambition can be realised by making efforts towards and constantly striving for excellent performance at school. Often following their account of ambition, they emphasised the importance of schoolwork to achieve their ambition, as Zhen Liang reported:

> My family can't give me strong support in the future. I can only rely on myself. I don't want to hang around even if I can only rely on myself. I want to have a

career. I want to go out and to achieve something. What I could do then was to work hard on my studies...people have different pursuits. Many people may think it's enough to make an effort and have some experience of studying. They don't think they need to work to their utmost. But I don't think so. I take studies as a must-do step towards my future career. I must make a good move. We have a different attitude toward studies.

The meritocratic beliefs on which they draw are taught at home, at school and by the media, as reported by Xiao Li, 'good performance can bring a good life, which I learnt from books, from TV'. Yi Chen reported, 'You can have a future if you work hard on your studies; it is not only taught at home, at school but also in the whole social environment'. Working hard on schoolwork for some students is a means to achieve their ambitions. Yet, for most of my participants, working hard on schoolwork has little to do with ambition, which relates more to self-worth and recognition. Schoolwork is the only area in which they can be outstanding, have confidence and earn recognition. The recognition they gain from academic performance at school is important to them, especially considering the inferiority they feel as working class students. Recognition as a high-achieving student comforts them and builds their 'self-worth', as reported by Yue Gu and Yun Jiang:

> Everyone has a purpose to live in the world. If you can gain recognition from others, you feel very pleased, you feel good about yourself...I was very unconfident and that's why I had a strong need to gain recognition from others...I was quiet when I was young. I had few friends. Popular girls were all high-achieving students. And that's why I wanted to be high-achieving. (Yue Gu)

> I really need a sense of relevance. I need to get attention. But meanwhile I was very afraid of being looked at. It could be a sense of strong inferiority. It may be influenced by my family background. I felt inferior in speaking, eating, my behaviours, and dressing. People spoke Mandarin (but I spoke the dialect). And, you know, in the English class, I felt really inferior. I was around the twentieth and thirtieth in the grade. No one cared about me. I was very upset. When the mathematics teacher paid attention to me, I felt I was paid attention...I can't remember much about junior school and why I became a high-achieving student, but that teacher occupied a very important position. You felt you were cared for. You felt that sense of relevance. (Yun Jiang)

In contrast with a sense of inferiority as a working-class student and a sense of superiority brought about by excellent performance at school, being high-achieving becomes 'the purpose to live in the world' for my participants. It becomes an 'imprint', a 'label' for them and 'an aim to live in the world', as described by Yue Gu:

> Working hard on studies is a path of dependence. I was not very good before junior school, but I became a top student after working hard with motivation by a promise from my dad, saying he would buy a computer for me if I could get to the top. It was an opportunity. Then I had a thought, I had gotten this place by working so hard, why not to keep it? It was a path of dependence. If you were a good student in people's eyes and they liked you because you were a good student, you would then have the pressure of avoiding going down. You wanted to get recognition from others. Being a good student became a label, a mark, an imprint. I had a class talking about the imprint of an organisation and the idea actually came from an analogy in humans. If you have an imprint, you will work hard for it. Everyone has an aim to live in the world (being high-achieving is my aim). I felt very happy and pleased with myself when I could get recognition from others.

The high-achieving student identity becomes a path of dependence and defines who they are. Working hard on schoolwork becomes a natural instinct, the authentic way of living without needing to think and the high-achieving student identity evolves as their 'primary' identity, distinguishing them from other working class students. As Tang Da said: 'many kids in the countryside had very little schooling. They often dropped out after primary school. Only two or three students went to junior school and only one was as good as me at school. I didn't pay much attention on those who were bad at studies'. This involves a dis-identification from the ordinary and expected.

As may be noted in the account from Da Tang, he mentioned his interest in mathematics, but this is unusual. Personal interest is almost absent in their stories. Apart from Da Tang, only one other participant, Du Juan, explained her path of dependence as a high-achieving student as based on personal interest: 'I didn't think studies can change anything. I just enjoyed studying. Then I worked hard'. Rather, the forming of path dependence as a high-

achieving student for most of my participants is a strategy to build self-worth and gain recognition, which is functional.

The rewards they gain as a result of excellent performance at school reinforce their dependence on schoolwork, especially scholarships that can directly relieve their economic concerns, as reported by Zhen Liang:

> I felt I couldn't do anything for my parents except by working hard on my studies. Getting to be high-achieving was one way to relieve some of their burdens…you could be waived tuition fees if you were high-achieving. It was 1,300 RMB (130 GBP) annually, which was expensive. I worked really hard on my studies. One time at the term final exam, when I finished all the questions, I came to remember it was time to be evaluated for scholarships and so I was counting how much I could earn by answering one question right.

The discussion of progressive forces seems to suggest that the evolution of their new identity arises from their 'un-usual' personality and 'extra-ordinary' pursuits, as put by Zhen Liang. Nevertheless, a working class identity and its influences never disappear in the development of their high-achieving student identity, which has already been touched in the aforementioned discussions on why the new identity is paramount to my participants and why extra-rewards are such attractive to them. The influence of their working class identity on their evolving new identity can be further understood from some participants' explanation of their ambitions. Their ambitions come not only from an 'emulative' personality or pursuits to be 'extra-ordinary', but also are influenced by an awareness of a lack of appropriate resources in a working-class position. As they have little, they want more. As Zhen Liang explained of his ambition: 'I was poor. The awareness of a lack generated my motivation to make changes. If I had been born in a good environment, I would like to sleep all day, play around and travel to different places'. Progressive forces are not only realised in individual striving, driven by 'un-usual' personality and motivations to be 'extra-ordinary'; rather, they are also influenced by an awareness of a lack of appropriate resources, by the dis-identification with the ordinary and

expected by the working class identity. The influence of this awareness of a lack is more evident in the following discussion of regressive forces.

The efforts and commitment to becoming a high-achieving student are propelled by both progressive and regressive forces. Regressive forces involve a negative evaluation of working-class life and experience. The participants reported a sense of frustration, discomfort and even hatred towards their working-class origins, as shown in the accounts from Zhen Liang and Yun Jiang. Their sense of discomfort together with ambition and dreams combine to construct their desire to leave behind and escape from the working class community, to make changes to what they are and to have a different life, to be someone different. The desire to leave behind their class origins and limitations is a pursuit and also an escape. The basis of achieving both is by working hard toward academic performance.

> Childhood experiences had a huge impact on me. People in the village felt envious and uncomfortable at everything good you did for yourself. My parents were building our house. Some people then came and fought with my parents. It was disgusting. I didn't want to live like that. First they were poor economically and this was the biggest factor (for them to feel uncomfortable with others' benefits); then they were poor intellectually. I felt sick to live in the community of these people. I was eager to leave them. How could I leave? Through studies. That's why I worked so hard (he said he was the most hard-working student in the whole senior school). (Zhen Liang)

> We had a very difficult living situation at that time. Peasants' lives are very hard, not to mention my family had debts. We would wait for a very long time to have meat, and sometimes we had to borrow rice from others. (Yun Jiang)

Dedication to schoolwork is not merely an active strategy to achieve the wish to escape the working-class; it is also the only choice, the single possibility, to leave behind the constraints that come from a lack of material possessions and cultural activities. As they see it, they have no alternative, as reported by Yun Jiang:

I read an article online, which was an interview with a poor student about how he was able to go to Peking University. The student said that was because 'I have nothing to distract me'. It was also my situation, 'I have nothing to distract me'. I had no computer, no smartphone. The only thing I could do was to study. I also worked on a farm and picked in the paddies. People in the village often said I was so capable, being able to manage both studies and farm work. (But I really want to say), I had to (manage both), OK? My mom often told me, I had no one to count on but myself if I wanted to change my life.

The above analysis suggests a complex set of relationships between ambition, self-worth and recognition, and discomfort, frustration and inferiority in forming identity and path of dependence to the identity of the high-achieving student. These young people are focused on an 'imagined future' towards which academic achievement is the one route available to them. Building a new identity is a strategy which involves rational evaluations, imaginaries and also emotions. The habitus of the participants in my study is more like 'divided habitus' coined by Bourdieu, 'a habitus divided against itself, in constant negotiation with itself and its ambivalences' (1999a: 511). Reay identifies examples of such a 'divided habitus' in her study of white middle-class parents who choose to send their children to comprehensive schools. These parents are dealing with constant tensions between 'an acquisitive self-interested self and a more altruistic, public-spirited self' (2015: 16). My participants are divided and torn between self-fulfilling aspirations, which pull them to be 'extra-ordinary', and a working class identity, which constantly reminds them their 'ordinariness'. My participants are exceptions from very early on in their lives and they develop the competencies needed to make leaving a possibility, through their excellent performance at school. But can they really leave their working class background behind given that this has been critical in forming their choices, evaluations, emotions, history and social trajectory? The 'working class self' intertwines with their new evolving self. The awareness of a lack associated being working class motivates their ambition, drives their need for recognition and constrains their sense of self-worth at the same time. Being working class they have no alternative but to rely on academic performance for the pursuit of self-worth, recognition or for the wish to leave. Their

working class background defines the way they can leave, the exit they can take and the possibility of being different. Being working class is part of their new identity - it does not disappear despite their attempts to leave it behind.

## Dispositions: distancing from middle class

On the one hand, building a new identity involves dispensing with, giving up on aspects of who they are, while on the other hand the strategy my participants use to achieve their new identity also distances them from middle-class students. Hard work is at the centre of their strategy. Single-minded and determined industry in performance is one of the main characteristics of their hard work, as shown by the following accounts:

> Everyone was out on Saturday evenings except me, still sitting in a big classroom, reciting History and Politics. I got very good results in the final exam of that year. You knew there was a lot to gain if you put in enough effort. It was the most unforgettable time for me. We had extra classes in summer until 31 July and then we had a break from 1st to 24th August. But I got the key to the classroom from our teacher and then I went to the classroom and studied by myself on a tight schedule from 7:00 to 22:00 every day in those three weeks. And then we had the first monthly exam and I came first in my grade, exceeding the second-place student by forty or fifty points. I kept the position and the large gap (to second place) in every exam afterwards. Many students might say Year 3 (in senior school) was difficult but I felt it was very smooth. (Jia Peng)

> I was around the two hundredth place in the grade in the first exam, but after that, I was lower than three hundredth. I was once eight hundredth. I didn't think about Tsinghua or Peking. I didn't dare to. The ideal situation for me would be a key university. I didn't dare to think more…After I went to the science class (students were divided into sciences classes and humanities classes after Year 1 at his senior school), I entered the top 50 in the grade! I was astonished, how come I could make such a huge progress? At that time, I could begin to see a future…I suddenly became the first in my class and then I kept aiming to be the first…then gradually I got into the top ten (in my grade). I worked really hard (to achieve that). I climbed into the classroom every day at 5:20am from the window I left open the day before because the school gate only opened at 5:50 am. My only thought at that time was Gaokao. (Da Tang)

It was not that I liked it (studies). You had nothing to do but to study…I was different from those who liked studies. I didn't like it. At least, I didn't like exam-orientated studies, but I worked hard…I wanted to leave home. I didn't know what ways could make me leave home other than by working hard on my studies…I worked really hard. I attended Olympiad exam classes in mathematics or physics, I can't remember which one. I could spend the whole afternoon solving one question. I spent a lot of time doing things like that or reading. I had a thought at that time, if I were not reading or studying, I was wasting my life. If I stayed too long when I visited relatives' places at Spring Festival (Chinese New Year), I would feel I was wasting my time. (Xiao Li)

A similar description of the strategies of working-class high-achievers and their industry, self-discipline, dedication and single-minded application is also offered by Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) and by Reay (2009). Compared with middle-class students whose academic success often largely depends upon family support both in a practical sense such as private tuition and more generally in the transfer of cultural capital (Ball, 2003), the education success of working-class high-achievers almost entirely comes from their individual striving. Furthermore, their striving is performance-obsessed with little access to dominant cultural capital. It means there are risks for their future, as noted by Reay (2009: 1109), because 'they have had to focus so intently on achieving academic success in their chosen field that they have foregone wider cultural accomplishments and they are open about their efforts'. They have little sense of finding and developing personal interests and potential, building other forms of competency and acquiring more intangible forms of dominant cultural capital in the process of their single-minded focus on exam success. The risk is that when they enter an environment where performance is no longer the single objective, they will lose the 'aim to live in the world', and lacking the clear direction provided by their orientation to performance, they lose their sense of purpose and the ability to succeed. For example, Shan Cui felt the consequences of being single-minded and the despair accompanying the loss of performance-orientation.

Sometimes I was thinking if I didn't choose here, would it be better? I needed someone to guide before me. In Peking, it feels like I was like going here and going

there, but I wasn't gaining anything from anywhere. There are indeed many resources in Peking. If you have a clear objective, you can have a very good development here. But for some people like me, having not enough knowledge about myself, being OK about everything and not ambitious, (it's not a good place). I appeared to be ambitious at school as life was so concentrated. You gained in certain areas little by little and then it appeared I was ambitious. But when I came to university, it was dispersed. A little here, a little there.

Single-mindedly working on exam performance and a strong determination to academic success ensures that these students are heavily invested in this area and correspondingly they see many benefits from their hard work. However an overreliance on performance means that they become dependent on continuing high levels performance to maintain their self-worth and identity and thus they become vulnerable as they make the transition to a different field where the 'rules of the game' and the skills of the players are different from what they are used to.

Yet hard work in my study does not only mean industry, determination and self-discipline, but also includes abilities such as critical evaluation, constant reflection and efficiency. These flexible and reflective dispositions are emphasised by Ye Lin and Yifan Yang:

> I don't think it (high achievement) is all a result of IQ. IQ should be a little factor. (But a more important reason for me) is I was good at making connections. And also I was careful (at details)...I was hard-working at senior school but I would say, more accurately, I was flexible. I didn't buy many textbooks. I had only one textbook for the whole of Year 3. But I was very good at summarising key points (from doing exercises). It made it easy for me to excel in Chinese school education. (Ye Lin)

> I think I was flexible. When I used a strategy, I would wait and see its result, whether it could work, and then I would think about reasons and make adjustments accordingly. I went for high-efficiency. (If a strategy didn't work), I would think about the reasons and try to figure out how I could make it better. I would keep thinking of it until I could have a better strategy. (Yifan Yang)

Although the importance of 'flexibility' is only reported explicitly by a few participants (Ye Lin, Yifan Yang and Zhen Liang), it is implicit in almost every account, including that of Da Tang who is from a remote village and describes himself as 'dumb', 'single-minded' and 'stupid'. For example, at senior school, Da Tang refused the invitation to join the top class and chose to stay in the second best class as he saw 'they (students in the top class) all looked very stressed' and 'I didn't want to be so stressed'. And 'the teachers in the second best class could also give you extra exercises and training and if you achieved in the second best class, you could also be in the top ten in the whole school'. He also demonstrated strong 'flexibility' in managing his time before the Gaokao. 'I submitted blank exam papers in the third or fourth mock exams before the Gaokao (often the fourth mock exam is held a week before the Gaokao). I preferred to have more time reading. Teachers would not mark our papers. They didn't have time to look at our papers at that time.' In both respects Da Tang also demonstrates a sophisticated sense of strategy and tactics in relation to his academic work. He becomes adept at ensuring high levels of support and avoiding too much stress. He picks his way through the school system with great care.

Similar reflexive dispositions are also noted by Reay (2009) in her study of nine working-class students at an elite university in the UK who retained a critical stance of the social environment of the elite university but embraced the supportive academic environment. These reflexive dispositions, according to Reay (2009), are embedded in the *habitus* of the working-class high-achievers by their early school experiences. Working-class students who in her study experienced dislocations in working-class schooling, developed a set of dispositions, 'resilience', 'an ability to cope with adversity' and a 'self-reliant independence' to deal with the difficulties they encountered in elite universities. In the sense of the reflexive dispositions they have and re-employ at university, Reay coined them as 'familiar strangers'. By quoting Sweetman (2003: 537), Reay commented 'for some, reflexivity and flexibility may actually characterize the habitus, and that, for those who display a flexible or reflexive habitus, process of refashioning - whether emancipatory or otherwise - may be second nature rather than

difficult to achieve' (Reay et al., 2009: 1116). In a way similar to the participants in Reay's study, the set of reflexive dispositions of my participants were developed early in their life and enabled them to cultivate personal resources on which they could draw to deal with adversity later at university. However, contrary to Reay's discussion, reflexive dispositions for most of the participants in my study do not enable working-class students to retain 'key valued aspects of working-class self' (Reay et al., 2009: 1111) and develop a critical stance of social environment at university. Reflexive dispositions, as shown by the accounts from Ye Lin and Yifan Yang, relate to and are narrowly focused on maintaining academic performance. For most of my participants, the reflexive dispositions they demonstrate are an element of their academic competence and are derivative dispositions of hard work that have a strong relation with and orientation towards exam performance, as explained by Zhen Liang.

Q: I think what's interesting is, no matter where you were, you were observing and learning. It is the reflexivity that we discussed before. How do you think reflexivity is formed?

A: I had a thought since childhood, I should have more.

Q: Why did you have that thought?

A: Because I was poor. If I was born in a good environment, I would like to sleep all day, play around and travel to different places. But I had no resources and I wanted to have resources, so I had to work and work. What I could do was to work hard. But you should work in a smart way. You should know what is right for you, what your strengths are, what you like and what you can do to get the things you want in the most efficient way. You should keep working hard. You might have doubts about yourself in the process, but you should stop the doubting. The doubting is pointless. You should believe you can. You should believe that.

Q: Were you flexible at school?

A: (Yes). My life from primary school to senior school in my memory was occupied by studies. But I was thinking all the time how to have the largest amount of knowledge in the shortest time. I was thinking of that. I don't think I have a high IQ. The average IQ of students in Jiao Tong should be higher than me.

Q: So you think you can excel in studies because you have strong reflexivity?

A: Yes. They are over-reliant on their inborn advantages. Comparing us with computers, I have a 4G RAM (Random Access Memory), but they have 8G or even 16G. Some people waste their 16G RAM to watch movies, to think of useless things. They might only use 5G on studies. But for me, I use the full 4G (on studies

in order to excel). And I wanted to do something else, so I had to think of how to be more efficient. They could have a Windows operating system, which was very slow, but I had an iOS operating system. So I could be faster.

For most of my participants, the reflexive dispositions they demonstrate do not help them see beyond single-mindedly working on exam performance. Indeed, their reflexive dispositions serve the purpose of single-mindedly working on performance. Exam performance is still their single objective and orientation, while determination or flexibility underpins the strategy to better achieve their objective. Overreliance on performance is not a choice. In order to excel in a position with only limited relevant resources, they concentrate almost exclusively on performance, and invest most of their time and energy in that, using their time as efficient as possible. Therefore, as Reay comments on working-class students' strategies to achieve academic success, quoting Bourdieu (1990b), 'their strive for distinction is the opposite of distinction because it involves both recognition of lack and the avowal of self-seeking aspiration' (Reay et al., 2009: 1109). Working-class students can achieve academic success, but the strategy they use to achieve it distances and distinguishes them from middle-class students.

An analysis from the perspective of the *habitus* of 'exceptions' indicates the importance of distancing – both from the working class and from the middle class. Their establishment of a high-achieving student identity is based on a strong desire to leave behind the working class and forms their competence to achieve this, while the strategy they use to achieve and to maintain their new identity distances them from middle class students. The *field* of key schools, which will be discussed in the following section, reinforces this distancing from both sides.

## Schools: reinforcing distancing

'Key secondary schools' were first introduced by the Chinese government in 1953 in order to concentrate resources to establish good secondary schools under the condition of limited human resources and financing in education

(Liang, Zhang, & Li, 2013: 218). The government meeting on education in 1953 published a list of 'key secondary schools' in every province with a total number of 194, which amounted to 4.4% of all secondary schools in China. In 1980, the Ministry of Education reemphasised the policy and published the document *The Decision to Build Key Secondary Schools by Stage*, which made priority arrangements for key schools in terms of teacher recruitment, teachers' salaries and government funding (Liang et al., 2013: 223). Every province began to select and build key secondary schools according to the policy. It was intended that through the key school policy, certain good schools would first be built and subsequent to this, the quality of normal schools would be improved through cooperation and dissemination. However the policy created a sharp and unequal divide between key schools and normal schools. The key school policy has now been abandoned by the Chinese government, as officially announced in the new *Compulsory Education Law* published in 2006, but the structure of 'tiered schooling' has been formed and retained after years of preferential building.

Under the framework of 'tiered schooling' in China, key schools control access to elite universities. Based on a study of students' registered information in Peking University from 1949 to 2002, Liang, Zhang and their colleagues showed that the overwhelming majority of Peking University students were from key secondary schools (2013: 199). Although unequal social class access to key secondary schools is pointed out by some authors (e.g., Yang, 2005, in Chinese), Liang and his colleagues (2013) argued in their study that key secondary schools increased significantly the chances of working-class students gaining entry into elite universities, especially in those provinces where key secondary schools are distributed more evenly between regions (between towns, cities and the provincial capital). The role of key secondary schools in contributing to rural students' access to elite universities is also confirmed by Liu and her colleagues (2012). The building of key secondary schools is controlled by provincial governments and key secondary schools have different forms of distribution according to different provincial policies. Key schools in some provinces are highly concentrated in the capital city, while some other provinces have a more even distribution of

key secondary schools between the capital city, non-capital cities and towns. Based on a study of archived data of students' demographic information in Peking University from 1978 to 2005, Liu (2012) examined the relation of regional distribution of key secondary schools within a province and the number of rural students enrolled into Peking University. As would be expected, she found that provinces with a more even regional distribution of key secondary schools had a larger percentage of rural students enrolled in Peking University. Variations in inequality between provinces in terms of rural students' access to key secondary schools and then to elite universities are demonstrated by Liu (2012), but the role of key secondary schools is also confirmed in constituting rural students' opportunities to gain admission to elite universities. Liu (2012: 51) commented that key schools are the only ones 'in which concentration of brain power, material power and manpower - or top educational resources - are made available to members of the base levels of society'.

Table 4.2 records the senior secondary schools my participants attended and it shows that 12 participants came from key secondary schools in a city (only 3 participants in my study were born in a city) and the other five participants all went to the best schools in their localities. Senior secondary schools are very important in constituting their opportunities to gain admission to elite universities. Reay also argued the role of schooling in forming a 'cultured habitus' (2009: 1105). How do senior secondary schools influence the trajectories of some students toward 'exceptionality'? How does the *field* of key schools interact with the *habitus* of 'exceptions' and influence the 'structuring structures' of their *habitus*? These are the questions I will address in this section.

Table 4.2: Trajectories of schooling of the 17 participants

| No. | Name | Before senior school | Senior school |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Da Tang | primary school and junior school in village | 'key school in town' |
| 2 | Hui Tang | a normal primary school and a normal junior school close to her place | 'key school in city' |
| 3 | Jia Peng | a normal primary and a normal junior school | 'key school in city' |
| 4 | Juan Du | primary school in the village; a key junior school in town | 'best school in city' |

| 5 | Ping Wang | primary school in village and moved to town since Year 3; stayed in Year 3 for one more year; a normal junior school | 'second best key school in town' |
|---|---|---|---|
| 6 | Shan Cui | primary school in village until Year 4; Year 5 and Year 6 in another village; a key junior school in town | 'key school in city' |
| 7 | Wei Luo | primary school in village and a normal junior school in town | 'best school in town' |
| 8 | Xiang He | primary school and junior school in town | 'best school in town' |
| 9 | Xiao Li | primary school in village; junior school in town | 'best school in town' |
| 10 | Xing Guo | primary school and junior school in town | 'key school in city' |
| 11 | Ye Lin | primary school for factory staff's children in the suburb; a key junior school in city | 'key school in city' |
| 12 | Yi Chen | primary school in village; junior school in town, '20 or 30 miles away from home' | 'key school in city' |
| 13 | Yifan Yang | a normal primary school in neighbourhood; a key junior school in city | 'key school in city' |
| 14 | Yuan Fang | primary school in town and junior school in another town | 'second best school in city' |
| 15 | Yue Gu | primary school and junior school in the school for factory staff's children | 'key school in city' |
| 16 | Yun Jiang | primary school in village until Year 5; Year 6 and junior school in town | 'key school in city' |
| 17 | Zhen Liang | primary school in town; junior school at a city '55 km away from home' | 'best key school in city' |

Figure 6.2: *Field*: reinforcing distancing
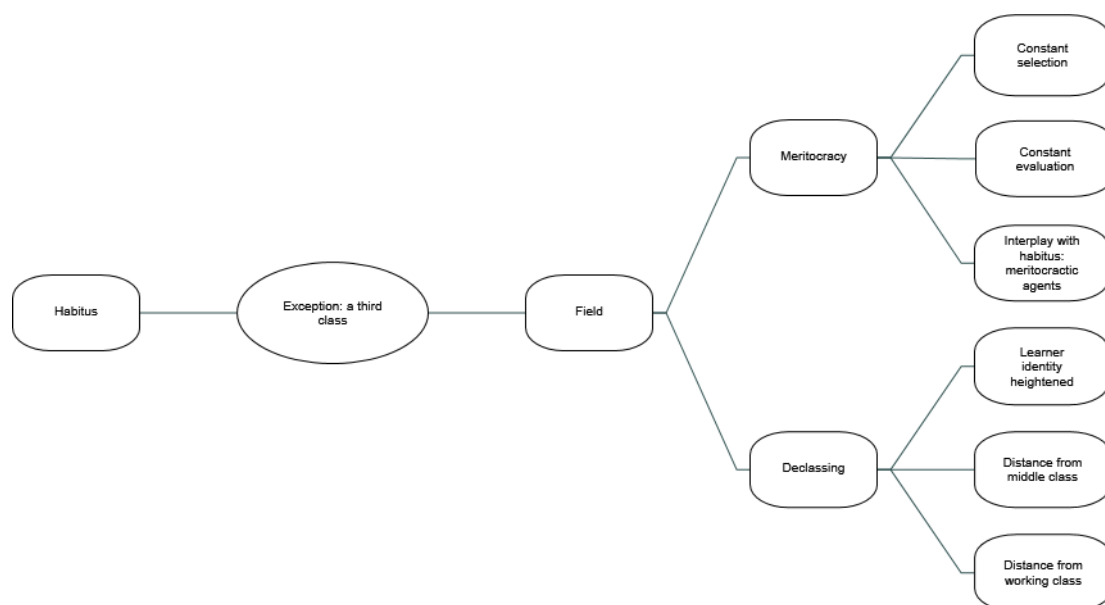


Data analysis of the *field* of key senior secondary schools indicates two main categories- meritocracy and declassing, as shown by Figure 6.2.

**Meritocracy at schools: 'exam factory'**

The origin of the term meritocracy is obscure (p.11), but *The Rise of the Meritocracy* (Young, 1958) popularised the use of this term in support of an

agenda that social benefits in society should be taken by merit (IQ and effort) rather than by inheritance or by wealth. However, this book is a satire and critique of meritocracy rather than an argument for meritocracy; nonetheless, this term is now extensively used to legitimise a particular version of equality, that is, relating opportunity to formal measures of talent. Some authors (e.g., Brown, 2013; Brown, Power, Tholen & Allouch, 2016; Dench, 2006; Radnor, Koshy & Taylor, 2007) have shattered the illusion of social equality that can be built on the basis of meritocracy. Brantlinger (2003) shows how meritocracy is used as an effective ideology by American middle-class professionals to maintain and legitimise privileges of their children in education. From the discussion below, we can see that Chinese key and tiered schools are based on this meritocratic version of equality or we could say inequality.

'Tiered schooling' involves separating schools into key schools and normal schools with key schools enjoying privileges in policy support, money, staff recruitment and student enrolment. The distinction between key schools and normal schools occurs at primary school level, junior school level and in senior school level. The meritocratic structure in Chinese schooling is formed by the effects of two major examinations - senior school entrance examination and Gaokao. Access to primary schools and junior schools in China normally depends on geographic proximity, while access to senior schools depends on students' performance in the senior school entrance examination. This examination is organised by the provincial government or the city government; students attend tests in Chinese, English, Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry, History, Politics and other subjects required, which varies according to province. Their performance in every subject is added together as their total performance; students attend senior schools based on their total performance and the highest-achieving students go to key schools; students with lower performance than the requirement of key schools can pay extra fees to attend key schools as well. In the system of 'tiered schooling', success in the first examination is a premise for achieving success in the second examination, as only key schools under the framework of 'tiered schooling' can offer adequate preparation for Gaokao, as shown by

Liang and his colleagues' study (2013) that has been discussed earlier in this section.

Access to university in China almost entirely depends on a student's exam performance in the Gaokao, although some institutions can recruit students before the Gaokao through their self-designed examinations and interviews, which only accounts for around 5% of total university enrolment (Liang et al., 2013). Even in institutional independent evaluation tests and interviews, key senior schools still predominate as students need the recommendation of their school to attend these tests and interviews and only key schools have the ability to recommend students. In most cases, recommendations are based on students' exam performance, too, in monthly examinations at senior school. Hui Tang in my study entered Fudan University by way of this type of interview; Yifan Yang acquired an award of 10 points waiver in the Gaokao by attending interviews at Tsinghua University and Yuan Fang obtained 30 points waiver by attending interviews at Peking University; Yue Gu was recommended to attend interviews at Peking University. Yet, at some schools, the recommendation is given to wealthy students, as shown in the case of Ye Lin.

Through the effects of these two major entrance examinations, what is envisaged as a meritocratic structure has been established in Chinese schooling, and it drives not only the practice at senior secondary schools but also the practice in primary schools and in junior secondary schools as it is a performance-based cycle. Only if you achieve highly in primary school can you proceed to a good junior school and then to a key senior school, as is well-illustrated by Juan Du:

> I had a good performance in primary school, so the teachers in the primary school were going to recommend me to a junior school in the town (she lived in the village), which was the best junior school in the locality...mainly based on exam performance. I also attended a competition and got a certificate...that junior school was really good and then I went to the best senor school in the city. It was because of my performance in the entrance examination. There were different classes in the senior school – high-achieving classes and normal classes. Many in

the high-achieving classes were my junior school classmates. It was related to junior school education. If I didn't go to that junior school, it would be very difficult for me to enter that senior school...I found the environment was a significant factor. The most significant step was I went to that junior school, which was a good start. If I had gone to a different junior school, I would not attend this senior school and then I would not enter this university either. If I didn't go to this university, I would not think of going abroad for further studies.

In this way, Chinese schooling is a step by step selection (and exclusion) process that it is consistently orientated towards exam performance. This in part explains my participants' ambition and motivation to work hard at school, as has been discussed in the last section. High levels of school performance is what distinguishes them from other working-class students, while more generally in the performance-centred system of Chinese schooling this distinctiveness can offer to them the hope of some kind of social mobility. Therefore they have reasons to have high expectations for themselves and for their futures. These expectations reinforce their motivation to work on their performance. Their desire to leave behind their working class origins and their confidence in achieving this are encouraged and facilitated in the meritocratic environment of Chinese education. Meanwhile also strengthened are their beliefs in single-minded strategy and their individualised dispositions. They can progress and succeed, which reinforces their belief in this strategy, strengthens their dispositions and solidifies 'who they are'. As said by Da Tang below, hard work will bring returns; if not, it means you are not working hard enough. The lack of access to wider cultural activities and awareness of personal interests are further neglected by their successful progress on the education journey, while the ambition, confidence, and expectations that they can achieve social mobility based on merit are reinforced.

> Making an effort should have returns. Short-term returns are the improvement of performance. It is the best type of returns. If you cannot see improvement in performance, it means your effort is not good enough.

Within the meritocratic environment, not only are the ambition, self-worth, expectations of upward mobility by merit of these students formed and

reinforced, and strategy and dispositions amplified, but so are their beliefs in individual striving and individualised perceptions. Every participant in my study explains their successes from factors related to individual effort, hard work, flexibility and innate intelligence. They see their successes as their individual successes – hard earned. The problem and the risk of this individualistic perception is, when it comes to failures and frustrations, they tend to see themselves as individual failures. This form of explanation is constantly reiterated, 'hard work can bring returns; if not, it means you are not working hard enough'.

These meritocratic beliefs and the individualised perceptions are enhanced by another powerful technique at key senior schools, namely monthly examinations and corresponding rankings. Through monthly rankings, the worth and the competitiveness of a student is made clear by his/her position in rankings and through rankings students adjust their ambition, reflect on their performance, develop strategies and regulate themselves. The self-discipline through rankings is evident in every participant's narrative, as shown in the account of Da Tang I used in the last section.

Constant monitoring contributes to the development of their reflexive dispositions, flexibility, reflective thinking, independence and self-discipline, and they draw on these dispositions to survive and to achieve in this environment. The rankings enhance individualised perceptions too and reinforce the idea that successes are a matter of individual capability and individualised effort. Through rankings, meritocracy achieves its full form in Chinese schooling. Young (1958) described the condition for the full form of meritocracy, 'it is that a meritocracy could only exist in any full form if there were such a narrowing down of values that people could be put in rank order of worth' (Young, 1958: xvii). The values in Chinese schooling are narrowed to one thing - exam performance and people are put in rank order of worth through these monthly examinations and rankings.

Based on the discussions in the two sections in the above, a synthesis between the *habitus* of working-class survivors and the *field* of Chinese

schooling can be found. Performance is the single thing they pursue; meritocracy is the philosophy they believe in; and individualised hard work is the strategy they use and promote. In some respects the synthesis of their *habitus* is stronger than middle-class high-achievers as middle-class high-achievers are less driven by the necessities of performance and their success also draws more on involvement from the family rather than solely individual effort. Owing to the synthesis between *habitus* and *field*, working-class survivors thus can feel like 'fish in water' in Chinese schooling and also the 'structuring structures' of their habitus in the *field* of Chinese schooling reinforces their dispositions rather than challenging and changing them. Meritocracy and individualism are strengthened through socialisation at school and also through their successes in this field. Meanwhile they reiterate and achieve the 'structuring structures' of the field. Working-class survivors become 'the king, the banker or the priest' that makes 'hereditary monarchy, financial capitalism or the Church flesh' (Bourdieu, 1990a: 57). The 'monarchy', 'capitalism' and 'Church' mean meritocracy and individualism in Chinese schooling. Working-class survivors become meritocratic agents who 'partake of the history objectified in institutions' and who will 'reactivate the sense of objectified in institutions', 'continuously pulling them from the state of dead letters, reviving the sense deposited in them', as vividly described by Bourdieu in the following quote:

> This durably installed generative principle of regulated improvisations is a practical sense which reactivated the sense of objectified in institutions. Produced by the work of inculcation and appropriation that is needed in order for objective structures, the product of collective history, to be reproduced in the form of the durable, adjusted dispositions that are the condition of their functioning, the habitus, which is constituted in the course of an individual history, imposing its particular logic on incorporation, and through which agents partake of the history objectified in institutions, is what makes it possible to inhabit institutions, to appropriate them practically, and so to keep them in activity, continuously pulling them from the state of dead letters, reviving the sense deposited in them, but at the same time imposing the revisions and transformations that reactivation entails. (Bourdieu, 1990a: 57)

Through embodying the objectification of the institution in *habitus*, meritocracy and individualism in the field of Chinese schooling, are sustained, prolonged, reactivated and reproduced, 'more reliable than all formal rules and explicit norms' (Bourdieu, 1990a: 54).

## Declassing: reinforcing distancing

Socialisation and experience at school not only reinforces meritocratic and individualistic dispositions at the level of *habitus*; it also involves a process of declassing. Class identity and awareness is weakened by the construction of a learner identity within the meritocratic environment, as seen in Ye Lin's account:

> I asked the president of our students' union (about how to improve my social ability). It was my main concern. I was worried about my social skills. I didn't know how to talk and how to get in touch with others. He said: 'You don't need to worry about that. Are you worrying about your studies?' 'No, not at all. I am the second in my grade. I have no reason to worry about my studies.' Then he said: 'You are young. You shouldn't worry about your social ability at all. All you need to do is to concentrate on you studies. It will be fine'. I thought he was cold. He didn't give me any advice. However, after Gaokao, I found people would come to me when I got a good result, even the junior school classmates got back in touch with me. It felt really like 'The person who can manage the state by means of his virtue is like Polaris, which stays in its place and all stars turn around it' (a sentence from the Confucian Analects). When you are good enough (in studies), people will come to you automatically, because you are a person who is worth being around.

My participants are the 'Polaris'. They stay in place and people will come to them automatically as they are 'worth' being around. Meritocracy creates the illusion that class does not matter and can be transcended by performance. Once you are high-achieving, you have 'worth' and you are judged by your performance rather than by class. The illusion that class does not matter and only performance counts is obvious in the account by Gu Yue below:

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You might be on the same level as students from the west, but there's a huge gap to students from Beijing. I looked down on students from Beijing, as they could go to Peking with much lower performance. But I was totally wrong. The best student in my class was from Beijing. He did very well in the exams and he was very knowledgeable, smart and skilled in debating. He got very good results. A few days ago I heard he got offers from MIT and Chicago. Today someone said he got another offer from the Kennedy School (at Harvard).

The declassing process is strengthened by the boarding experience of some of my participants. Eight participants boarded at schools from junior school and 12 participants boarded at senior school. Boarding at school means geographic separation from parents but also social separation from parents and the working-class community. Through years of separation, their relations with parents, and with working-class localities, become 'blurred' and distant, as described by Yun Jiang:

I drifted apart from my parents since senior school. (I lived at school). In the first two years, I went back home once a week and in the last year I only went back once a month. I felt since then a gulf began to develop with my parents. They had not been in my life for eight years if you include this year. It was difficult to imagine how I could talk to them about my job. I tried to, but there were so many gaps between us. It was very difficult (to have a conversation). Some people would think their parents were their most important support but for me, since senior school, bonds with family became blurred...I had a very good friend at university. She was from Shanghai. When I was upset, I would ask her out to have dinner together, have a coffee and talk about any problems we had recently.

As commented by Liu (2012: 52), in the refashioning of working-class students' *habitus*, 'parents are absent' and 'the role of secondary schools is greater than that of households':

These schools (key secondary schools) are an important site for the formation of students' values, cultivation of their habits and establishment of their normative systems. For rural students, this is especially so: their household's scarce social and cultural capital has little effect on their development; their studies are a process of individual struggle. Successful rural children are secondary schools' poster children, the system's pets. (Liu et al., 2012: 52)

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Liu coined them as 'institutional children' (2012: 52) where school socialisation has a greater influence on the refashioning of their habitus than family. This socialisation my participants experience at key schools has strong features of the 'total institution' coined by Goffman (1961) where people sleep, play and work in the same place, with a same group of similar people, under a same tight schedule and a 'single overall rational plan purportedly designed to fulfil the official aims of the institution' (p.6). The 'official aim' in the 'total institution' of Chinese key schools is simple and direct- 'exam performance'. In such a 'total institution', the refashioning of habitus for my participants does not prepare them to enter the middle class while it distances them from the working class. The problem remains of a lack of access to 'a broad array of dominant cultural capital' as in the aforementioned discussion of their personal trajectories to becoming exceptions, which Reay describes as 'their strive for distinction is the opposite of distinction' (2009: 1109). The performance-centred culture in Chinese schools strengthens 'the opposite'. Music classes and art classes are commonly reported by my participants as having been replaced by maths or English classes. My participants' accounts on schooling are mostly about exam performance and rankings with very little mention of cultural activities and even personal hobbies. As Zhen Liang commented, 'my life from primary school to senior school in my memory was occupied by studies'. Only three participants in my study had access to a broad range of cultural activities at school, which I will discuss in the next chapter. Refashioned in a performance-centred environment, these working-class students' lack of dominant cultural capital is indeed reinforced and they will later experience 'culture discontinuities' (2012: 52) when they enter HE with its greater cultural diversity. Their differences from middle-class students and the problem of their socialisation at school are highlighted when they go to university, as reported by Ping Huang and Yi Chen:

> I would like to develop my interest in many areas at university. Conditions in my senior school (for developing interest) were deficient. We had no student societies. Physical education classes were very poorly designed as well. When I came to university, I found my roommates had a very colourful school life compared with me. For example, one girl learnt guitar and taekwondo at senior

school. Another girl was from Hengshui, that famous school. Although they had military management (at Hengshui), their teachers organised them to listen to news reports every day and they had singing competitions. Now I realised my school could not compare with them. In my school, we had only studies. We were taught to only focus on studies. (Ping Wang)

I know very clearly it brings good things to me, while at the same time it has bad sides, too. For example, my EQ is low, my social skills are bad and I don't have my own opinions on many things. It could be the result of too much dedication to studies. You spent lots and lots of time and energy on studies so that you could do well. You sacrificed many other things. This is the bad side. You are in this social class. You will be constrained by this class position. You put all your resources into one area so that you could do well in this area. (Yi Chen)

Class never disappears. Class influences the process of declassing, as Yi Chen said in the above. Working-class high-achievers do not have many resources so they have to concentrate all their resources on one area, to invest all their time and energy in order to gain advantage in this area; such investment brings them advantage but it also has risks. Yet, the distancing effects and the results of distancing will only be realised later, when their belief in the meritocratic environment is shattered. However, by the time they realise the problem, the problem is hard to resolve and the gap between them and middle-class students becomes harder to make up, which has been seen in the stories of my participants in the last chapter. The problem can also be seen from Ping Wang's account above. Owing to an absence of experiences or education at school that could lead to the cultivation of personal interests, working-class survivors had no sense of such personal interests when they made university applications. They did not have social and cultural skills other than their competencies in exam performance and when they went to university, many spent a long time trying to find and develop interests not connected to exam preparation. But some found little interest in anything that was not 'functional', as reported by Zhen Liang below. They are used to a life in pursuit of serious things and of 'excellence' while time for breaks, entertainment and leisure are regarded as 'bad habits' (Ping Wang), 'luxuries' (Xiao Li) and 'a waste of time' (Zhen Liang). Working hard, as has been seen earlier, is regarded as the only authentic way of living and access

to a wider range of cultural activities is ignored, which will enlarge and reinforce their distinction both in relation to middle-class students and the middle-class destinations they work towards.

> I tried to cultivate interest or hobbies, like I watched matches with roommates, tried to learn guitar and piano, played basketball. Anything I could think of, I tried, but I couldn't like any of them genuinely. I think maybe I didn't like 'play'. Anything I could try, I have tried. I tried my utmost. But I couldn't find a passion for anything like others might have.

The performance-centred system and culture in Chinese schools distance working-class survivors from their parents and working-class communities, while at the same time the system is distancing them from middle-class students and from the middle-class destinations they dream of. They will experience 'cultural discontinuities' in both class directions. As predicted by Liu (2012: 52), 'they are more like to be the "victims" of the system' – lost between worlds. They are more likely to be the victims who are woven into illusions of meritocracy, take meritocracy as their religion and act as meritocratic agents, but at the same time will be more disciplined, damaged and deceived by these illusions. In some ways these class injuries are 'self-inflicted'. When they enter a different field with more cultural diversity, their illusions will be broken, class will return and the domination of class will become more difficult to resist.

Distancing under the guise of meritocracy, which arises as a central category from the analysis of the *habitus* of 'exceptions' and also from the analysis of the field of Chinese schooling indicates issues not only in relation to hidden injuries, but also in relation to the question of whether wider participation of working class students at elite universities can bring social changes if they have already been transformed into non-working class, into a 'third class' whose core values and principles reside in meritocracy rather than 'key valued aspects of working-class self' as described by Reay (2009: 1111).

## Mutation: better within the bad

The above discussion seems to have delivered a message that my participants have personal 'exceptionality' that distinguishes them from other working class students and their academic successes at school and their trajectories to elite universities are dependent solely on this personal 'exceptionality' and their individual striving. The meritocratic field of Chinese schooling confirms this individual 'exceptionality' and contributes to their 'individual striving'. This interpretation from an individualistic perspective is shared by my participants, as shown earlier in this chapter, who tend to explain their academic successes in terms of their individual dispositions, such as hard work, flexibility and resilience. However, an analysis of their families indicates that their 'exceptionality' is not only reflected at the individual level but also at the family level.

One aspect of 'exceptionality' for the family of my participants is that their families have relatively more secure and better economic and social conditions than their working-class neighbours. It is not a question of class fractions - they are not upper working class (in fact, as I have made clear in the Chapter 4, only two participants - Yifan Yang and Xiang He - can be defined in this way). Rather it means that their family can meet their basic need for necessities and offer a relatively better social environment to work on exam performance. As commented by Bourdieu, 'the common root of all these "liberties" is no doubt the sense that at least there will not be self-imposed controls, constraints and restrictions- especially not in eating, a primary need and a compensation- and especially not in the heart of domestic life, the one realm of freedom, when everywhere else, and at all other times, necessity prevails' (Bourdieu, 1984: 195).

The families of my participants have a relatively better economic situation than their working-class peers. For example, Zhen Liang mentioned that his family were building a new house and it was envied by neighbours; Xiao Li reported directly, 'my family was relatively rich in the village; we had a colour TV, so my friends always came to my place'. Even Shan Cui and Wei Luo, who may demonstrate the worst economic situation among my participants, nonetheless did not report any difficulties in meeting basic

needs and they both had older sisters who gave them private tuition. Economic capital still matters here in constituting 'exceptionality' of these families compared with their working class peers. The personal 'exceptionality' of my participants is maintained and developed on the basis and with the support of their family's 'exceptionality'. In comparison, many poorer working-class students may drop out of junior school or senior school owing to economic difficulties, as described by Da Tang when discussing his neighbours. The early drop-out of poor rural students for economic reasons, especially by poor female students, is also addressed in Postiglione's edited book (2006). Liu (2016) confirmed social selection before the Gaokao as well and she argued that working-class students who survived in the system until the Gaokao had relatively better economic and social conditions than other working class students.

Apart from a better economic situation of their families, my participants live in a more supportive social environment for them to focus on schoolwork. For example, Yi Chen described the importance of the social environment of his family in contributing to his academic successes:

> I have been thinking of a question you asked me, why I was different from other kids the same age as my in the village who dropped out at junior or senior school. I have been thinking, why was I able to maintain a good performance? I have thought about this a lot and I think a possible explanation, or the most important one, is the influence of my family. My parents were different from theirs. I knew some families, for example, fathers were alcoholics, speaking rudely after being drunk or the parents were often in fights. In these families, it was easy for kids to pick up bad habits like smoking, fighting or joining gangs. My family was different. My father never drank or smoked and my parents had a good relationship. In terms of why they were different, I have no idea.

The support their families provide is not only a social environment at home, but also active involvement in my participants' choices of schools, which was reported by every participant in my study. For example, Yuan Fang mentioned that her parents took her to visit and then sent her to a junior school in another town that had a better quality of education than the one in the town in which they lived. The parents of Da Tang, who are peasants and

received education only until primary school, sent him to a 'better' junior school than the school in their village. Based on an ethnographic study in a village in China, Xie (2016) discussed the involvement of middle-class parents in their children's schooling and their contribution to their children's school success. My study demonstrates the involvement of some working-class parents in children's schooling as well. It aligns with Marginson's findings (2011) that under the influence of Confucian culture, no matter rich or poor, families know the importance of education in achieving social mobility and they are willing to provide support and investment for their children's education as much as they possibly can.

A better economic and social environment constitutes one aspect of 'exceptionality' for the families of my participants and another aspect is the positive influence of their parents' character. I have discussed my participants' ambition and reflexive dispositions in the previous sections, both of which are explained by individual reasons. For example Da Tang explained his ambition as part of his tendency to emulate others. Zhen Liang explained the development of his reflexive dispositions from his awareness of a lack of resources in the working-class position. However, ambition and reflexive dispositions cannot be explained entirely at the individual level, they are influenced by family as well. Zhen Liang, Ye Lin, Yi Chen, Yun Jiang and Ping Wang reported the significant influence of their parents on their ambition and reflexive dispositions, as shown by Zhen Liang's account below:

> A: Why do I have strong reflexivity? Because I have belief - not religious, but I have the belief that I can. This was taught to me by my mother. She always said to me, you are the best, you can do it...She was like that. No matter whether she can make it, she would try. You should try with the strongest confidence. Even if you can't make it right now, you may make it later; even if you can't make it in one way, you can make it in another way.
>
> Q: So your mother had a significant influence on you?
>
> A: Yes. She had a big impact on me. I was brought up by my mother. My father was normal, very average. But my mother worked very hard. You can see my mother in me. My mother had many difficulties (when she was young). She couldn't go to school because her family was poor. So she always supports my

education. She wants to let me have fewer difficulties and she tries her best to give me more resources. She always teaches me to work hard on my studies.

Q: So you think you mother is an excellent person, but because she couldn't have many resources and opportunities, she has a difficult life?

A: Yes. Absolutely. She is definitely excellent. If she had even had a few chances, if she could have gone to senior school, if she could have had a chance to sit the Gaokao, she would have a very different life from now. But the family (couldn't give her the support). I think I should thank many people, especially my mother that I was able to get here. She gives me a lot, not only resources but also positive personal influences. They are all important to me. If my mother hadn't taught me how to walk, I wouldn't know how to run now; if I don't have shoes, I can't run fast. So I know I can't waste what my parents gave to me. I can't just play, eat and sleep with all these resources. I would feel sorry (if I did that).

This account demonstrates a different way of seeing the working class. Working class does not simply mean inadequacy and incapacity. Within the working class there are people who are hard-working, ambitious, intelligent, flexible and sensible with resources. The fact that they are in a working class position does not mean that they are not 'excellent', 'smart' or 'intelligent', according to Zhen Liang's perception of his mother, which could be a result of structural disadvantages. As Zhen Liang commented about his mother: 'She is definitely excellent. If she had even had a few chances, if she could have gone to senior school, if she could have had the chance to sit the Gaokao, she would have a very different life from now.' Zhen Liang's account indicates how strong structural disadvantages limit agency, but it also means individuals cannot be understood simply and entirely from their class position. Here we can challenge those prejudices toward the working class, articulated through stereotypes, like 'laziness', 'stubbornness' and 'a lack of insight'. As you cannot have gender expectations for a girl, you cannot have pre-expectations for a working class. I am not making distinctions within the working class and making an argument that some are more deserving than others. Rather, I am suggesting that the working class is in fact made an enormously diverse and heterogeneous category.

This way of understanding the working class can change the way we see social mobility as well if we not only see the disadvantages transmitted inter-

generationally but also see the 'excellent' qualities transmitted inter-generationally. These parents pass on their ambition and reflexive dispositions to their children, who have access to more opportunities, more necessities and more support to achieve their ambitions. Hopes of and chances to achieve social mobility are passed on inter-generationally. As Yi Chen commented, their social mobility journey is based on their parents' journey; it is inter-generational progress:

> But because of the differences, (I was different from other kids). The most important factor is the family. It's like gene mutation. In one class, there are always those who will be different from others. He/she may change a little bit, but through the little influence on his/her children, slowly and slowly, through generations, they (the family) could change
> …
> If someone is always tense about changing his/her class position, he/she will lose many pleasures. He/she could go to the extreme and have bad consequences. But on the other side, for some people who are from a lower class position, they might have a thought - I have a hard life but I can create a better environment for my children. It always requires someone to pay the price. Taking me as an example, if I could settle down in Shanghai after five years, ten years or twenty years, I could provide a very good environment for my kids. From the beginning of their life, they would not experience what I have experienced in the fast track of social mobility. So it's a good thing from a view of a general trend, from the long-term perspective. But there always should be someone to pay the price.

The account given by Yi Chen can also bring a new perspective to perceptions of the life stories of my participants. No matter whether or not they experience some kind of social mobility after university, they are attending the best universities, accessing the best education and having a better life than their parents and they succeed in enlarging the hope, chance and possibility of achieving social mobility for their children. In this sense, they are all stories of success, of resistance, of mutation.

## Conclusion: do they transcend class domination?

I arrive to the concluding section of this chapter with mixed feelings. On the one hand, I now have offered a new perspective of the life stories in my study and new perceptions of class and social mobility. Individuals cannot be reduced to merely class bearers. Being born working class does not mean being inadequate intellectually and reflexively.

Parents' ambition and reflexive dispositions constitute a significant condition for children to become exceptions and to break class reproduction. Intergenerational transmission of ambition and reflexive dispositions should be included in thinking about social mobility as the 'other side' of the transmission of disadvantage. From this perspective, life stories in my study are all stories of success and stories of mutation; and life stories in my study constitute strong evidence to argue for a wider participation agenda in key senior schools and in elite universities.

On the other hand, although the success of these exceptions in reaching elite universities means that there can be breaks in the cycle of class reproduction, their education journey rather drives these exceptions into another form of symbolic domination - they are selected and transformed into a 'third class' who are distanced both from their working-class localities and also from the middle-class destinations they aspire to. Distancing means not only hidden injuries of being caught in the middle between working class and middle class, but also raises questions of the assumed link between wider participation of working-class students and the possibility of social change. If these 'exceptions' have been transformed into a 'third class', how can they bring about social changes that will be of benefit to the working-class?

This distancing is not only a consequence of meritocratic discipline in Chinese schooling. It is also an effect of the powerful and hidden influence of social class. In a working class position, they have no other choices but to follow the rules of meritocracy. They can either choose to be a product of the exam factory or to be a 'loser'. It is a 'change or die' pressure, but the meaning of 'change or die' does not mean choosing between becoming

middle class or not, as illustrated by Hurst (2010), but choosing between accepting meritocracy or not. Class matters but matters in a hidden way behind the glory of meritocracy. In this sense, 'exceptions' in my study do not transcend class domination; they experience another form of class domination, a form covered by meritocratic successes.

# 7. Exceptions within exceptions: how to understand 'un-usual' accomplishments

I have discussed in the previous two chapters how my participants are constrained objectively and symbolically as 'ordinary' working-class students and how they deal with such constraints, and develop new identities and become 'exceptions', as working-class students who succeed in gaining entry into elite universities against all the odds. Their success seems to transcend class domination, but further analysis demonstrates a tendency for them to become subject to a new form of symbolic domination of class, a form mediated by meritocracy. As shown in the last chapter, their path to elite universities is heavily dependent on exam performance, which carries with it the risk of a concomitant lack of access to 'a broad array of dominant cultural capital' (Reay et al., 2009: 1109). Accordingly, they are likely to experience 'cultural discontinuities' (Liu et al., 2012) at elite universities where the 'rules of the game' require more social and cultural skills than the competencies required to achieve high scores in exams. They experience dislocations, disadvantages and discontinuities as 'fish out of water', which are key themes in many studies of working-class students at elite universities (e.g., Aries & Seider, 2005; Li, 2013). However, some authors have demonstrated the complexity of the relation between the *habitus* of working-class high achievers and the *field* of elite universities, in which their habitus and the elite field demonstrate a partial complicity. For example, academically 'fitting in' and socially 'fitting out' presented by Reay and her colleagues (2009) and also by Xie (2016, in Chinese). In some other studies, which showed a typology of working-class students' experiences at elite universities, there is one type of working-class students, coined as 'renegades' by Hurst (2010) and 'committed students' by Lehmann (2012), who instead of reporting the 'fish out of water' experience, embrace

socialisation at elite universities and achieve academically and thrive socially at university.

Like these studies, the experiences of my participants at elite universities demonstrate a considerable complexity. They experienced dislocation, discomfort and disadvantage, as shown in Chapter 5, but most of my participants succeeded in overcoming those dislocations and they achieved academically, and for some of them were also successful socially. I shall try to describe and provide a thorough analysis of such complexity in this chapter.

## Exceptions within exceptions: thriving at elite universities

Dislocation, disadvantage and failure, as one side of this complexity, have been discussed in Chapter 5. This chapter will address the other side of this complexity, the accomplishments, of different sorts, of my participants. Before discussing how most of my participants overcame dislocation and achieved success at university, I will describe their accomplishments first, from which a sense of some of the 'un-usualness' of their accomplishments compared with other studies and some of the discussions in the previous chapter will be provided.

First, in terms of their academic achievements, a majority of my participants had excellent performances at the end of their university studies, which can be seen from the number (12/17) of my participants who were recommended for entry into postgraduate studies without the need to take entrance exams. Only around the top 20% students in each department are offered this opportunity. Among them, Xing Guo secured first place in his department (Electronic Engineering), Yue Gu (Public Management) held second place and Da Tang gained the award of *Excellent Graduate*[23]. The other two participants who went abroad for postgraduate studies were also high-achieving students in their departments. These high achievements align with Reay's finding (2009), two of the four three-year students in her sample

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[23] This is equivalent to a bachelor's degree with distinction in the UK

gained first class degrees and the other two got 2:1s. Xie (2016, in Chinese) also confirmed the academic competency of working-class high-achievers at elite universities. In this regard, the high achievements of my participants in academic performance are not that 'un-usual', whereas their accomplishments in social activities show more 'un-usualness' compared with other studies.

Unlike findings from Li (2013) and Xie (2016, in Chinese), which both show an absence of working-class students in leadership positions in student societies owing to their lack of skills such as 'organisation, communication and expression' (Li, 2013: 835), as well as their self-excluding tendency to define themselves as 'unfit' (Li, 2013: 839) for leadership positions, eight participants in my study took leadership in student societies. Also, the student societies in which they worked as leaders are not all organisations 'purposely established for the most disadvantaged students' (Li, 2013: 840) but were various. Ye Lin worked as the president of a student society for abstract art and Yifan Yang worked as the captain of his university basketball team, although both of their cases are un-usual in my study, which I will explain later in this chapter; Yue Gu, Xiang He and Xing Guo worked as leaders in student unions in their respective departments. Even for the other three participants who worked as leaders in a student society that aimed to help disadvantaged students apply for studentships, they described the 'excellence' of the society and the 'competitiveness' to gain entry to it. For this, Zhen Liang explained this: 'they recruit very few people; they interview around 200 people, but only 20 of them can enter the stage of probation; and then only 10 out of the 20 in probation can finally stay. It is really competitive. But it is a very good place where many excellent people want to go. I attended many activities after I worked in this society and then I found many people who I thought were excellent had at least been interviewed by this society.' These participants in my study are not deficient in social skills and nor are they self-excluding, although most of them had almost no previous experience in student societies at school. Their accomplishments in student societies are hard to explain in the light of their habitus developed at

school, which is highly skewed towards academic dispositions to achieve in exams.

'Un-usual' social accomplishments of my participants are not only reflected in their experience at student societies, but also in their experience in internships and overseas studies. Lehmann (2012a) reported the difficulties that working-class students have in gaining 'valuable' experience in career-relevant internships and in securing study positions overseas. In contrast five participants in my study had internships and three of them had internship experience in well-known companies. Ye Lin first interned at McCann Erickson (a global leading advertising agency), then interned at Somi (a fashion design start-up) and in her final year she worked with a famous independent curator on two projects - Forest Fringe, a series of contemporary art performances introduced to Shanghai that were organised by the British Council and Reloading, an exhibition that demonstrated changes in architecture in Shanghai. Zhen Liang first interned at General Motors, then gained internships at Mercer and at A.T. Kearney afterwards (both are global leading companies in business consultancy) and later interned at CITIC Securities and Guotai Jun'an Securities (both are leading companies in finance in China). Yun Jiang had internship experience at Morgan Stanley.

Six participants in my study had experience in overseas studies or visits. Shan Cui and Yun Jiang visited the University of Hong Kong through a university-funded programme purposely for working-class students. Ye Lin, Zhen Liang, Hui Tang and Jia Peng had experience of studying in summer schools at international universities funded by the university exchange programme (not purposely for working-class students only, but a competitive program across campus based on academic performance and English proficiency), Ye Lin at the University of Washington in St. Louis (USA), Zhen Liang at the National Tsinghua University (Taiwan), Hui Tang at Yale University (USA) and Jia Peng at the Monterrey Institute of Technology (Mexico).

The risk associated with their socialisation at school, which was pointed out in Chapter 6, and a lack of intangible forms of dominant cultural capital, seem to not have much impact on the university experience of my participants in most cases. Although they invest intensively in exam performance at school and the habitus they developed is strongly performance-orientated, they are successful at university not only academically but also socially. This pattern is not only contrary to what is suggested by the analysis in Chapter 6 and as may be noted in the above, but is also contrary to findings of many of other studies. Some of my participants seem to not be as bothered by the risk of a lack of dominant cultural capital and they seem to form and develop social competencies at university from scratch. How can we understand their 'un-usual' accomplishments at university, especially their accomplishments in social activities? Do these 'un-usual' accomplishments mean that these working-class high-achievers experience a transformation of habitus and in some way or other they make up for their lack of dominant cultural capital? Does it mean that they can avoid the effects of the distancing from working class and middle class that is a result of socialisation at school as I discussed in Chapter 6 and become, in effect, middle-class? If they can transform their habitus and overcome this distancing, does it mean that it is possible to transcend class domination and to avoid being caught in the middle? I will explore these questions in this chapter. From the following analysis, I will demonstrate that what is going on here is not a transformation of their habitus but in fact is a continuation of the development of their 'old' habitus formed at school. They draw on the dispositions they developed at school to secure successes at university. However, an analysis of their 'un-usual' accomplishments at university introduces another level of complexity to an understanding of their socialisation at school. They all experience school as a form of 'total institution', borrowing Goffman's term (1961), with an over-bearing and singular meritocratic culture and they all come to embody meritocratic dispositions in order to maintain their 'extra-ordinary' identity as high-achieving students, but they demonstrate different degrees of reflexivity in relation to the meritocratic discipline of school and therefore leave different degrees of space to transcend being subjects of this discipline. As argued by

Giroux (1983a: 289-290), 'the oppressed are not seen as being simply passive in the face of domination', rather they 'mediate and respond to the connection between their own experiences and structures of domination and constraint' in a complex way. While Chapter 6 addresses how my participants become subject to the symbolic domination of class through their attachment to the high-achieving student identity and by their embodiment of meritocratic dispositions, this chapter will deal with the complex way they 'mediate and respond to' this symbolic domination. From this we can see a complex relation between human agency and structures.

Based on an analysis of the 'perspectives'[24] my participants developed to overcome the sense of dislocation they experience more or less at university, I divide them into three categories: a meritocratic group, an adaptive group and a transcending group. Figure 7.1 shows the distribution of my participants (except Shan Cui and Wei Luo, who did not report any achievements at university) in these three categories.

Figure 7.1: Forms of perspectives to achieve at elite universities

Meritocratic perspective

•Da Tang, Hui Tang, Jia Peng, Juan Du, Ping Wang, Xiang He, Yi Chen, Yuan Fang, Yue Gu

Adaptive perspective

•Xiao Li, Yun Jiang, Zhen Liang

Transcending perspective

•Xing Guo, Ye Lin, Yifan Yang

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[24] Using the theory of George Herbert Mead, Becker explains 'perspective' as 'a co-ordinated set of ideas and actions a person uses in dealing with some problematic situation' and it 'refers to a person's ordinary way of thinking and feeling about and acting in such a situation' (Becker, 1961: 34)

## Meritocratic perspective: reinforcing symbolic domination of class

As shown by Figure 7.1, most of my participants (9/15) fall into the category of 'meritocratic perspective' which involves a primary commitment to and investment in academic performance as they did at school, although their experience at university involves different degrees of participation in social activities. Yue Gu aptly describes this strategy:

> I was so bored that I went to study by myself in a classroom, doing advanced mathematics textbooks (Advanced Mathematics is a core course at university). I went to tutorials every day, only me and the other few students, so we built a very good relationship with the two teaching assistants...I was ranked the eighth in my grade. I was pleased with this performance as a student who came to Peking by luck. It was not easy for me. Then in the second term I was thinking, since I had made it to eighth place in the first term, it would be a shame if I couldn't persist and keep going. Then I came fifth in the second term and after that GPA became my goal. I came second or third next and then I continued to be second.

A similar account of defining self-worth by academic performance and their position in rankings, as seen in the last chapter, reappears here. Also similar are the dispositions they draw on to achieve - industry, self-discipline and single-minded application. The way they work toward high levels of performance is to devote as much of their time as possible and to work as hard as possible on their subject studies – reading in the library, writing assignments and participating in tutorials. For example, Jia Peng said, 'I stayed in the library almost every day of my first year at university. I went there at around 7 am or 8 am and went back at around 11pm. It was like life at senior school'. Xiang He said of his university life:

> Teachers and parents there (in my hometown) often said that if you worked hard at school, then you could play as you liked at university. But (when I came here), I found that this place was not like that. Everyone was still working hard on their studies. I found that this place was not the place where you could do whatever you wanted. The most important thing was studying...After I became familiar with the life (at this university and in Beijing), I worked at my utmost on my studies afterwards...in the last two years, I was thinking I should do my very best to catch

up on academic performance. The most important thing was to get the opportunity to be recommended for postgraduate studies...In my whole university, I had not been out of the gate of the university more than eight times every year, except when I needed to go home. This also includes the times I went to get-togethers with my classmates. I would not go out of the campus if I didn't have special things to do. I went to classes, did volunteer work and worked on my course work at weekends. And sometimes I did part-time jobs in school.

Nonetheless, as evident in Xiang He's account, the participants who displayed a meritocratic perspective also attended social activities at university and some of them even took leadership positions in student societies, like Xiang He and Yue Gu who worked as leaders in their respective department's student unions. However, for these students their university life is mainly concerned with and focused on academic performance.

Why do they take such a perspective, especially considering that they have come to appreciate that at elite universities exam performance is not the only important factor in terms of future career – necessary but not sufficient? Chapter 5 has demonstrated their awareness of the different culture of elite universities. As Yue Gu said explicitly, 'exam performance became less important at university'. I try to understand their choice to take a meritocratic perspective from two aspects - their habitus and the field of elite universities.

Their adoption of a meritocratic perspective is their reflexive response to dealing with the habitus dislocations they experienced at university. But their reflexive response is influenced by their old habitus developed at school and will lead to an enhancement and reinforcement of their old habitus. Reay (2004; 2009) offered an interpretation of a place of reflexivity in understanding habitus and she argued that reflexivity, such as 'self-awareness and a propensity for self-improvement' (Reay, 2009: 1105) is generated at the disjunctures between habitus and field and the disjunctures 'can generate change and transformation' (2004: 436). She demonstrated how working-class high-achievers embodied reflexive dispositions in their

habitus as a result of their experience of dislocations between habitus and field in their schooling and then draw on these reflexive dispositions as a source of creative adaptation once at elite universities (Reay et al., 2009). An analysis of my participants who adopt a meritocratic perspective supports Reay's argument on the generation of reflexive awareness, 'an acute sense of self-consciousness' (Crossley, 2001: 158), at points of disjuncture between habitus and field. However, such disjunctures, I argue, do not bring a 'change and transformation' of their habitus but rather the reinforcement of their habitus.

I term the habitus dislocation they experience at elite university as 'self in crisis'. In the last chapter I discussed the 'divided habitus' of my participants who are constantly torn between a high-achieving student self, which brings them exceptionality, hope, ambition and superiority, and a working-class self, which reminds them of their normality, frustration and inferiority. When they enter the elite university and meet middle-class high-achievers who are as smart, intelligent and hard-working as them but who are also capable in other areas, their exceptionality, built on the high-achieving student self, is endangered while their sense of normality and inferiority, of a working-class self, is intensified. They feel the gap between themselves and middle-class high-achievers, experience a sense of failure, realise their on-going disadvantage and most importantly, experience a sense of fear, the fear of losing their 'high-achieving student identity', the only thing which can bring them hope, confidence and comfort. The only thing that makes sense of who they are, who they have become – and who they might be in the future. To save their high-achieving student identity from crisis and maintain the old balance in their habitus which they struggled to manage at school, they devote themselves to producing work that attracts high grades. This is what they believe they can do to protect their 'self' and also deal with the 'self in crisis'. This is a form of self-protection (Keane, 2011) driven by the way habitus works. Habitus tends to 'ensure its own constancy' (Bourdieu, 1990a: 60), it favours similarities and avoids change, as Bourdieu illustrated:

> Early experiences have particular weight because the *habitus* tends to ensure its own constancy and its defence against change through the selection it makes within new information by rejecting information capable of calling into question its accumulated information, if exposed to it accidentally or by forces, and by avoiding exposure to such information. (Bourdieu, 1990a: 60-61)

In the disjunctures between habitus and field, there will be an 'acute sense of self-consciousness', a sense of 'problems' (Becker, 1961: 67) arising and evaluations of the situation in the new field. But it would be too strong to argue that reflexive responses adopted based on conscious evaluations can necessarily be transformative or bring about new ways of thinking, acting and new perspectives. People still tend to rely on what they have acquired and what they are familiar with to shape their reflexive responses. Choosing the familiar way of living, relying on what they know, is more secure, realistic and 'natural', both emotionally and rationally. This is not unconscious functioning of habitus. This is a reflexive response based on self-consciousness, the evaluation of options and deliberate planning. But the reflexive response tends to reinforce habitus rather than challenge it. This demonstrates the power of habitus. Even functioning at a conscious level, habitus still tends to reinforce consistency to avoid challenges, rather than to bring about change and transformation.

Also the tendency to work on academic performance is not only their rational response in order to protect the high-achieving self, but is also their emotional response to accommodate the hidden injuries they experience at this dislocation of 'self in crisis'. Emotions are, as argued by Reay (2005) and Sayer (2005), highly influential on how people act and classed emotions contribute to the reproduction of inequalities. Dislocations experienced at elite universities had various emotional consequences for my participants, as shown in the account by Da Tang that we have seen in Chapter 5 and again I quote here below. Similar kinds of frustration, despair, loneliness and inferiority are mentioned by most of my participants. These emotions suggest they are deeply hurt, especially considering the enhanced ambition, confidence and hope they have at school and bring to university. There is a big gap between their imagined future and the reality of university life. They

have no one to help them out, to give them support and they have much less of the emotional capital middle-class students can acquire from their educated and confident parents. They have to make sense of and deal with these emotions on their own. What do they already possess that they can use if they find that they do have to overcome these emotions on their own? They have only the dispositions developed at school. They have only those competencies that enable them to achieve in exams. Those are the only straws they can grasp in the face of frustration. Compared with their accounts of school, these accounts of working hard at university display little ambition, passion and expectation but rather are full of fears, compromises and despair. Some of them were very ambitious before university, as Da Tang explained, he had ambition to excel, 'to be better than others'. However these ambitions were undermined by the dislocations experienced at university, as put by Yun Jiang, 'do not always think of winning' and 'I couldn't win over others in every single way'. They have to accept their disadvantages and they have to admit that working on performance is the only choice and the only pathway that is open to them. Choosing the meritocratic perspective is not only for the purpose of saving the high-achieving student self in crisis but is also driven by the working class self, by the hidden injuries of class.

> Exam papers in the past years could be found online, but I didn't know that at that time. Although the internet had become popular, such as the wide use of Weiming BBS (an online community for Peking students), I didn't know it. I didn't know how to type at that time. We should learn computer programming. I was so frustrated. I knew nothing. But it was compulsory. I stayed every day until late at night to do it. No one could help you because you couldn't copy their codes. One week, two weeks, I almost broke down.

On the one hand, their tendency to choose a meritocratic perspective is a reflexive response driven by the habitus; on the other hand, their meritocratic dispositions still have some function at university, in that it can help them to achieve in exams and also they can still enjoy enormous benefits from their excellent academic performance in exams. Their habitus has some complicity with the field of Chinese elite universities, which still

have a strong meritocratic culture, if not as much as Chinese schools. They are not entering a completely different field and their habitus is not completely 'dislocated' at Chinese elite universities. The strong meritocratic culture at Chinese elite universities can be seen from the enormous benefits my participants can mobilise by way of excellent exam performances.

As Yue Gu illustrated in the account below, working on academic performance is a rational calculation based on the benefits she can 'enjoy' as a result. A very realistic return is generous scholarships, which can cover both tuition fees and living expenses. Considering some other financial subsidies reported by my participants that they can obtain at university, like financial aids and on-campus part-time jobs, it is easy to understand why none of the participants in my study report economic difficulties at university. Since economic anxiety is the most direct and serious concern for these working-class high achievers, as we have seen in Chapter 5, it is also easy to understand why scholarships are such a tempting incentive reinforcing the meritocratic perspective, as commented by Yue Gu: 'working hard on GPA was mainly for earning scholarships'. But Yu Gu's account also provides evidence for how strongly class influences them and drives them to the meritocratic pathway.

> I enjoyed the benefits of being high-achieving. I could have scholarships, pay tuition fees and live on my own and relieve my parents with less burdens to support me…scholarships could cover all my costs at university, including tuition fees and living expenses and you could have some left over that you could use to enjoy with friends (she took two or three trips every year with friends as shown by her Wechat posts)…Yes. Working hard on GPA was mainly for earning scholarships.

Apart from economic returns, some participants obtain non-economic returns, like a second chance at subject choices and switching to more popular subjects. This is very important for my participants, particularly considering the random choices they made at the time of applying to university, as discussed in Chapter 5. Students at Chinese universities are allowed to switch to another subject after the first year, but the opportunity

is normally only restricted to the most high-achieving students in each department. Among my participants, Zhen Liang changed his subject from environmental engineering to material science, which can lead to better employment; Yuan Fang enrolled to study in a second bachelor's degree program in finance from her second year based on her excellent academic performance in her subject, psychology.

For Zhen Liang and Yuan Fang, excellent academic performance adds to their chances of gaining better employment, while for some other participants excellent academic performance can directly lead to better employment. For example, Xiang He and Yi Chen, both in the subject of electronic engineering, report a direct link between academic performance and their employment. According to them, employment in this industry requires a postgraduate degree and both of them are recommended to the postgraduate programme, which waived paying tuition fees based on their excellent academic performance. They both plan to work in this industry after their postgraduate studies. The average annual salary for postgraduates in this subject, as reported by the two participants, is around 180,000 RMB, which is more than twice the average salary in Shanghai (71,268 RMB in 2015 [25] ). For the participants who are in subjects that link academic performance with employment, a meritocratic perspective is a very reasonable choice.

A very un-usual non-economic return reported by my participants that they can obtain at university based on their excellent performance is valuable extra-credential experience, such as overseas experience. As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, participating international exchange programmes is in most cases based on exam performance. Ye Lin gained experience of studying at the University of Washington and Hui Tang was able to exchange to Yale as they were the most high-achieving students in their department. It also explains the cases of Zhen Liang and Jia Peng, who both have overseas experience. Also worth mentioning is that all these exchange programmes in

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[25] According to http://shzw.eastday.com/shzw/G/20160403/u1ai9280455.html (An official website of Shanghai Government)

which my participants participated are fully funded (including tuition fees and living expenses) by the university. In this sense, some 'un-usual' social achievements my participants demonstrate, which are different from those recorded in other studies, can be understood in the un-usual context of Chinese elite universities that still has a major emphasis of meritocracy in its culture. Some of my participants' social achievements can actually be understood as derivative of their academic achievements.

Hui Tang's account of her experience at Yale can add a further understanding to the social achievements my participants have at university. She made no mention of socialising with her classmates or any other aspects of social life at Yale but only described the library and courses she took. Even at the overseas university, academic performance was still her main concern and her life was still about working on her studies. New experiences do not necessarily bring changes and transformations of the habitus but can be negotiated by habitus on its 'principle of continuity'– 'to refuse what is anyway denied and to will the inevitable' (Chapter 2, p.27). As Bourdieu commented and I quoted in Chapter 2 and earlier in this chapter, 'the habitus tends to ensure its own constancy and its defence against change through the selection it makes within new information by rejecting information capable of calling into question its accumulated information, if exposed to it accidentally or by forces, and by avoiding exposure to such information' (1990a: 61-62). Hui Tang kept a familiar way of living and the 'constancy' of her habitus even when she was in a vastly different environment. Access to new experience does not necessarily mean changes of habitus and engaging in social behaviours that are often regarded as restricted to middle-class students does not mean that they have gained middle-class social or cultural capital. Hui Tang's account raises questions of the role of new experience on the changing and refashioning of habitus.

The strong meritocratic environment of Chinese elite universities has double-edged effects on working-class high-achievers' social mobility. On the one hand, the environment provides them with many opportunities and possibilities to draw on dispositions they have developed at school, to

maintain a high-achieving student self, to access forms of new experience and to deal with hidden injuries arising from a heightened working-class self. On the other hand, as I discussed in the last chapter, their meritocratic perspective, to single-minded focus on academic performance, has consequences and risks, such as 'cultural discontinuities' pointed out by Liu (2012). These issues will remain buried under the meritocratic environment of elite universities and will not be realised until they enter an un-meritocratic field - workplaces, for example. The later these consequences are realised, the harder they are become to deal with, which is evident in Yuan Fang's case. She obtained third place in the first end of term exam at university and then she maintained her high-achieving academic performance; as a result, she had the opportunity to study a second bachelor's degree in finance from the second year. The high-achieving student identity at university was reported as giving her much confidence and bolstering her 'psychological defences'. However, she met the 'biggest setback in her life' at the end of her university life when she cried all the time - she was refused by all the business schools she applied for as she had no internship experience. She knew the importance of internship experience but she could not make time away from the busy course schedule. Regarding the setback, her reflection was, 'why couldn't I work harder?' As I discussed in the previous chapter, as success is explained through individual striving, failure is explained as personal failure and not working hard enough.

From the above discussions, we can see that for most of my participants, the symbolic domination of class through meritocracy is enhanced at university rather than weakened. Driven by emotions, psycho-social injuries, habitual dispositions and also rational calculations based on the enormous benefits they can gain through exam performance, they choose the meritocratic perspective, to focus on working on their performance at university, which reinforces their habitus rather than changing it. Their socialisation at university further pushes them in the direction determined by their class position, to be high-achieving students, hard-working, determined and self-responsible and to rely on meritocracy. They are further subject to the symbolic domination of class.

The risks attached to the meritocratic perspective not only mean 'cultural discontinuities' they may experience in the future but are also reflected in their uncertain grasp on academic success, even in a meritocratic environment. Further analysis of their accomplishments highlights an important category, 'chance,' in forming the success of their meritocratic perspective. It means that even in a strong meritocratic environment where they are supposed to have advantages, ease and competency as 'meritocratic agents', their success still cannot be assumed and guaranteed but depends on 'chance'. The first kind of 'chance' according to my analysis indicates that a working class student is by chance in a subject where the meritocratic perspective, working hard and investing much time can bring excellent academic performance, which usually only happens in STEM subjects. For example, Ping Wang who is studying naval engineering, and Xiang He, who is in the subject of electronic engineering, find it easier to achieve good academic performances by taking the meritocratic perspective than Shan Cui and Wei Luo, who are both in the subject of law, which requires more accumulation of middle-class cultural capital to achieve higher academic performance. The second kind of 'chance' means meeting important persons and having 'critical moments' during time at university. The 'critical moment' was coined by Yue Gu when she talked about her path of dependence on academic performance at university:

> I was bored at the start of university life. I was thinking of going to find a job after university. Then I was thinking I didn't have to work hard on studies. So I played all day. But I was so bored that I went to the tutorial class of mathematics. Then I got a good result on the final exam that term. That was a 'critical moment' for me. When you have that moment, you will think since I already got eighth place, it would be a shame if you don't work hard (to keep it). So I think it's a path of dependence.

The 'chance' for Yue Gu is that she luckily went to the tutorial course and had the 'critical moment' to start on a path of dependence. Similarly, the 'chance' is extremely important in Da Tang's story. The 'chance' for Da Tang is that he luckily met a teacher at a course who was kind enough to give him

extra tuition and to involve him in a research project where he met postgraduates, gained research experience, had publications and then earned the opportunity to be recommended to a postgraduate programme. Da Tang's university experience was altered from the point that he met the teacher. Before the 'critical moment' he was miserable and stuck in many kinds of dislocations, for example having difficulties to find classrooms and struggling to follow computer classes, while after the 'critical moment' he slowly found the way to use his dispositions developed at school and to make academic progress. It is worth noting that the 'teacher' he met is not the result of his strategy and effort to gain social capital, which according to Bourdieu (1986) needs time, energy and plans to accumulate and to invest in; rather, the 'critical moment' for Da Tang is more like a 'chance', which is not dependent on his effort or strategy but on a lucky meeting with a kind teacher. Therefore in a large sense, 'chance' saves Da Tang from being damaged by dislocations and 'chance' determines his survival.

The third kind of 'chance' is, as mentioned earlier in this section, evident in the examples of Xiang He and Yi Chen, a working-class student can be lucky in studying a subject that can expect good employment and high salaries. I refer to this as 'chance' as neither of the participants 'chose' this subject when they made university applications, rather they 'happen' to end up in this subject. As shown in Chapter 5, Yi Chen had no idea of what 'electronic engineering' was when he made university applications and his first choice was mechanical engineering as 'it was industry-orientated, known by everyone and can assure a job after university'. Only when he entered university, did he begin to understand the advantage of electronic engineering over mechanical engineering for his employment prospects. A similar 'chance' of being in this popular subject occurred in the other three participants in my study.

Working class high-achievers re-invested in a meritocratic perspective at university as their reflexive response to habitus dislocations. However the meritocratic perspective is a risky strategy, even in a strongly meritocratic environment. Think of the possibilities if Yue Gu missed the chance to attend

the tutorial class, Da Tang did not meet the kind teacher and Xiang He and Yi Chen were not studying electronic engineering. There is no guarantee of success for working-class high-achievers; all they can do is work hard and hold a last hope for 'chance'.

## Adaptive perspective: a diversity of reflexive responses to domination

Although most of my participants' achievements at university, as shown in the previous section, are derived from their commitment to a meritocratic perspective, some other participants show a different perspective, in that they do not focus on academic performance at university but they work on extra-curricular activities like student societies and internships. I divide the participants who work on social activities into two categories: one group of participants took an 'adaptive perspective,' who started working on social activities at university whereas at school they were dedicated to exam performance; the other group of participants have gained experience in social activities at school and their involvement in social activities at university are based on their prior accumulation of skills, competencies and experiences. I label the latter group under the category of 'transcending perspective'. In this section, I will focus on the group of participants who took an 'adaptive perspective' first: Xiao Li, Yun Jiang and Zhen Liang.

The adaptive group's changing perspective at university comes with a sense of dislocation, which is similar to what we have seen in the previous section. As shown by Zhen Liang's accounts below, his old beliefs were all turned over and he clearly realised his disadvantages in the field of elite universities:

> It (the university) was a totally strange world for me. My old beliefs, thoughts were all turned over. My thought before (university) was to work hard, get a good performance and then go to college. But what after college? I had no clues. One shocking finding (I got at the beginning of college life) was, hard work can't guarantee your success in doing research; success in doing research can't guarantee you a successful life; even if you work hard in doing research, make a

lot of achievements and then you can do further studies abroad, it also doesn't mean you can have a successful life. The belief I had at school that I could get everything by working hard, by having a good performance, was totally destroyed at university. It was an extremely shocking finding for me. I didn't want to take the old route any more. People are different, have different choices. I don't want to live a life like that.

If you want to have an outstanding academic performance, you should keep a very high level investment in it. You can't do more on something else. It is a very costly opportunity. You need to give up many things in order to dedicate yourself to academic performance. Learning at university shouldn't be only around academic studies, especially for us, students from the middle or the west part of China. You already have less experience than others. If you only blindly focus on academic studies, your life would be disastrous. Academic performance is important, but it isn't the only important thing any more…then apart from working on my courses, I attended a couple of student societies, getting to know people, going to different kinds of lectures, in order to make up my disadvantages as a student who came from the west part of China.

But the question is, why did these three participants, unlike most of my participants, change their perspective when they realised the different culture at elite universities? I try to explain this based on an analysis of their accounts. One factor may be that they are not 'lucky' enough to be in a subject that leads directly to good employment opportunities. Working on their academic performance cannot in itself deliver upward social mobility. As Zhen Liang described in the above, even if you have achievements in doing research, you are also not guaranteed a 'successful' life. The pessimistic employment future is also felt by Yun Jiang, as shown by her reflections of her teachers' pep talks:

Our teachers often gave us pep talks. They kept saying things like 'environmental engineering is an emerging but promising industry', 'although it is unpopular now, it will be popular someday'. But you see the jobs taken by students years before me. Almost nobody did something in relation to this subject, especially for undergraduates. They often went to banks or accounting firms. I made my mind in the first year I would go to work.

The same 'bad luck' emerges in Xiao Li's story, who was persuaded by her school teachers to choose the subject of history of art and when she went to university she found she could not understand the lectures, as we have seen in Chapter 5. In the face of the difficulties to understand the courses and an awareness of her personal interest in psychology, Xiao Li found a part-time job in the university's counselling office and attended a psychology-related student society. From the accounts of the adaptive group, we can see that compared with using the word, 'choosing', they are more likely to be 'forced' to change perspective by not having a 'chance' to be in a subject in which a meritocratic perspective can bring excellent academic performance and good employment. For Zhen Liang and Yun Jiang, they also did not mention important persons who changed their university experience. Xiao Li did mention a 'critical moment' in her life story – the time she met an important person, her boyfriend, who involved her in his entrepreneurial project. She then worked with her boyfriend to run an online education company. We have seen how encounters with important persons changed Yue Gu and Da Tang's university experience and here again we see how importantly it changes Xiao Li's university experience and even her life experience (She had married her boyfriend by the time of my third interview with her). From this point, we can also see how vulnerable these working-class high achievers are in that their life is not much in their own hands but in a very large degree dependent on these 'chances'. Missing those 'chances' would have a life-changing impact on their trajectories.

On the one hand, these students are forced to make changes by not having 'chances', while on the other hand they demonstrate more detachment from the high-achieving student identity than the meritocratic group. Compared with the meritocratic group, who take being high-achieving students as 'the purpose to live in the world', the adaptive group demonstrate a more functional attitude towards maintaining excellent academic performance. As I quoted in the last chapter, Zhen Liang takes working hard at school as 'a must-do step towards my future career', 'a good move'. His 'purpose to live in the world' is not to be a high-achieving student but 'to achieve something big'; maintaining excellent academic performance is a step towards the

future, towards a 'successful life'. The same strong functional attitude is also seen in Yun Jiang's account that working hard on performance is 'the only thing I could do' if 'I wanted to change my life'. We have seen a very similar account by Xiao Li in the previous chapter, but from the following account by Xiao Li, we can see a more obvious functional attitude towards maintaining a high-achieving student identity and her detachment to the performance-centred culture at school:

> I was cynical (at school). The stuff in the Politics textbooks is pretentious, is impractical. Why should I spend so much time trying to recite it? I would be taken off scores if I made mistakes in one sentence. It's annoying. But I needed performance, I needed the position in the rankings, I needed Gaokao. So I forced myself to work hard on studies. I was not studying all the time. I went to the library to read what I liked. I was avoiding work. But also it was a way to keep a distance from others, trying to make myself different. I was reading Nietzsche and Guoping Zhou (a famous writer in China and a researcher on Nietzsche). It was like a way of resisting.

Although Xiao Li found the performance-centred culture irritating and she disliked working hard towards high grades, she forced herself to work hard as she 'needed' to succeed. Academic performance for the adaptive group is only a means, a tool, a step to achieve their aims, which are related to their ambitions, as Zhen Liang illustrated, 'to achieve something big' or striving to have a better life, as shown by Xiao Li and Yun Jiang's accounts. Therefore it is easier for them to shift perspectives and change tools when they confront elite university culture, compared with the meritocratic group, who need to change to gain a 'purpose to live in the world'. The strong functional attitude towards a high-achieving student identity is also shared by the transcending group, who I will discuss in the next chapter. For example Yifan Yang in the transcending group said: 'At least academic performance can equip you. It is a tool that can send you to a higher platform. I don't hate schoolwork, but how many people love it?'

The functional attitude demonstrated by these participants provokes a question about the discussion in the previous chapter. They tailor their

behaviours according to the performance-centred rules at school, to be hard-working, single-minded, self-disciplined and performance-orientated, but does this mean that they all accept and they are all 'immersed' in the school culture? Their accounts show a very detached and disapproving attitude towards the performance-centred culture. Giroux (1983a) discussed the weakness of resistance theories in that they focus primarily on overt oppositional acts and ignore less obvious behaviours. As commented by Giroux, 'what resistance theorists have failed to acknowledge is that some students are able to see through the lies and promises of the dominant school ideology but decide not to translate this insight into extreme forms of rebelliousness' (Giroux, 1983a: 288). In some cases, the rationality which informs such a response may be understood in that it 'gives them the power to reject the system on a level that will not make them powerless to protest it in the future' (Giroux, 1983a: 288). Moreover, 'they have not renounced access to knowledge and skills that may allow them to move beyond the class specific positions of dead-end, alienating labour that most of the showy rebels will eventually occupy' (Giroux, 1983a: 288). Xiao Li's account in the above demonstrates some aspects of this rationality. She was reluctant to fully partake in the performance-centred culture and adopted a certain form of resistance, but in a manner that would not threaten her school career and her chance to have a good life through progressing in the education system. Therefore, although she did not approve of the culture at school, she seemed to conform to that culture and regulations and worked very hard on her exam performance. In many respects she appeared to be a 'meritocratic agent'. My participants show a diversity of attitudes towards the high-achieving student identity and the performance-centred culture and they keep differing degrees of distance in embodying the 'legitimate' beliefs and dispositions rendered by this culture, such as taking academic performance as a basis to define self-worth and as a 'purpose to live in the world'. This diversity may not be obvious in their behaviours and experience at school, but it becomes evident in their responses to and decisions at university, which in some degree can explain the different perspectives they adopt.

This diversity of attitude highlighted by the above analysis brings another level of complexity to thinking about the impact of school socialisation on my participants. As argued in the previous chapter, they demonstrate a tendency to succumb to the symbolic dominations of class that is rehearsed and reinforced by the meritocratic disciplines of school. However, the diversity of their attitudes towards these disciplines and the different degrees of their reliance on the high-achieving student identity mean that they might subject to such symbolic domination to different extents and there might be some space for them to resist, keep a distance and to negotiate a degree of insulation in relation to such domination. They are not the bearers of domination, blindly accepting it and embodying the legitimate beliefs and dispositions through which it works; rather they think about, negotiate with and develop different strategies to work with and against domination. The consequences of negotiation are not always as a result of the reinforcement of domination by adapting to deprivation, as shown by the discussion of the meritocratic group in the last section, this can be an apparent and temporary submission and acceptance while keeping at the same time a detachment and having a reflexive distance, as shown by Xiao Li's case. The consequences of their negotiation can even include some possibilities of transcending symbolic domination, as we will see in the next section. From their overt behaviours and characteristics, my participants all seem to be the same, loyal meritocratic agents, but they have different degrees of submission to the meritocratic discipline of the school. The participants who keep more distance from this discipline, and from attachment to the high-achieving student identity, find it easier to adapt to the new university environment and to accept new experiences and beliefs, thus change their habitus. In this sense, they are less subject to the symbolic domination of meritocracy and they have more freedom to achieve 'the possibility of an emancipation founded on awareness and knowledge of the conditionings undergone and on the imposition of new conditionings designed durably to counter their effect' (Bourdieu, 1999b: 340).

However, for most of my participants, the distance they keep towards discipline at school is a distance towards the high-achieving student identity,

a functional attitude towards academic performance, rather than a reflexive distance towards meritocracy itself. Most of them do deeply believe in meritocracy. As can be seen in Zhen Liang's accounts earlier in this section, the destruction of his beliefs at university is not a disillusionment with meritocracy but disillusionment regarding the role of academic performance in fulfilling meritocracy. He still holds a strong belief in meritocracy itself - intelligence and effort can bring rewards, which can be seen from the way he used to accumulate experience in social activities. He still drew on meritocratic dispositions he developed at school to gain experience in social activities, industriousness, self-discipline and individual striving, as shown in Zhen Liang's account below:

> From the first year on, I didn't meet my roommates very often. I saw them when we woke up and then when I got back at night, they'd already gone to sleep. Except for studies, I did many other things. I attended many lectures in the first term. I went to any lecture that was open to students, about career development, about self-planning, about life…I thought people should work hard, work really hard for an aim. That was an attitude about living. But now I think I was petty at that time. Now I realise everyone has his/her own personality, his/her own environment and thoughts. They have their own reasons of not working so hard. For example, I thought my roommate was not hard-working. He often slept until 11:00 or 12:00. One time I found he was sleeping when I came back in the afternoon at around 15:00 or 16:00. I asked why he was sleeping at that time. He said he got up too early this morning. I asked when he got up. He said, 8:30. I said, 8:30? I already finished my work in the lab at 8:30. I didn't understand (why people are so lazy). I looked down on them. But now I understand. He is not good physically. He couldn't work extra hours like me. He has his future plans, arranged by his family, working regular hours and enjoying time with family after work. It's good if he feels it's good for him. We have different attitudes about living, so we will have different behaviours and actions under these attitudes. That's it.

He reflected on his looking down on his roommate and he concluded that everyone could choose a way of living that he/she liked. However, implicit in his account is still a superiority of meritocratic dispositions over others. If his roommate has no health issues and no support from family, he should work hard for an aim, too. This sense of superiority is more evident in his

other accounts. He demonstrated a tendency to use meritocratic standards to make evaluations of people and things. Zhen Liang and many other participants reported explicitly that they liked to make friends with 'excellent' people. They define 'excellence' often in terms of IQ, hard work and a university degree, things positively evaluated by meritocratic standards, while being lazy, hanging around and enjoying time are defined as not 'excellent', as shown somewhat in Zhen Liang's account of his roommate in the above and more obviously seen in his account in the following:

> I thought employees in consultancy firms should all be graduates from top universities. That company was different. The staff members at that company were not so excellent. I didn't see that the firm cared about the reputation of institutions from which they graduated. Not many of the staff graduated from top universities. There is a hierarchy in any field with excellent players at the top. Excellent industries would have the best resources, which would attract a large number of talented people with whom to compete. I couldn't feel that kind of excellence in that firm.

The quality of the degree and the reputation of the university from which a graduate obtains are used as major criterion to judge whether he/she is 'excellent'. However, a degree is a symbol that only proves one's ability in intelligence and effort, proving his/her 'excellence' and 'success' under a meritocratic system, rather than proving one's excellence in every area and in every quality, as shown by Yun Jiang's reflections about a colleague at her workplace in the extract below. But Yun Jiang's reflections are unique in my participants' accounts. For most of them, they still hold very strong meritocratic beliefs, even when they go to a workplace.

> A: The company has a requirement for a degree, but they only require a bachelor's degree. So you can see a bachelor's degree from different levels of institutions in the company. I have a colleague who has a bachelor's degree from Nankai University and a master's degree from Fudan University. I think he cares too much about his degree. It has become a burden to him. He may think why have I come to this firm since I have such a good educational background, is it because the people I work with are not good enough so that I can't have a good performance? Why can't I go to a better place? I think he is burdened by the glory

of his degree. A degree for me, in the workplace, can only deliver a good impression to your customers that you may be good quality. That's all.

Q: Do you have the same kind of thoughts as your colleague?

A: To be honest, I have, but not as strong as him, especially when you are in a situation where a colleague with a bachelor's degree from a normal university has a much better performance than you. How can you make comparisons? I have a better educational background than him, but I can't do better than him. Many soft things, invisible things, you can't compare. Like that colleague, he has a better educational background than others, but he may not be good as others in other personal qualities. They can do well, why can't he? He makes only superficial comparisons.

The problems that arise for most of my participants when they strongly hold meritocratic beliefs are multifaceted. It reinforces their distancing from both the working-class localities they come from and the middle class they aspire to. They are more likely to become distanced from their working-class parents, relatives and local community, who are unlikely to be defined as 'excellent' and 'successful' in the meritocratic evaluation system. We have seen in the last chapter Zhen Liang's comments about his mother when he defined his mother as 'excellent' but we can also see his negative evaluation of his working-class neighbourhood and he commented on his father as being 'very normal'. Most of my participants said 'I can't go back', 'I can't imagine I would go back after university'. At the same time they are used to pursuing 'excellence' and being hard working, they would be likely to ignore exploring their personal interests and they found it difficult to enjoy leisure time, which are hidden injuries of sorts as mentioned in the last chapter. As Zhen Liang reported, 'striving for excellence' is his life motto. Maintaining an excellent performance is not his 'purpose to live in the world', but striving to be an 'excellent' person is. Sadly the 'excellence' they are pursuing is often defined by meritocracy and by different forms of meritocracy in different fields, which is in turn defined as academic performance at school, extra-curricular activities at university or high-ranked, high-earning positions at work. There is no 'self' in their striving for excellence. In this sense, they are not transcending the discipline of meritocracy or the symbolic domination of class; they are adapting to the different forms of symbolic domination in

different contexts and they are subjects of a deeper and hidden symbolic domination.

However, the above analysis only serves to point out the risks of the adaptive perspective. I am not suggesting that there is no space for reflexive awareness and possibilities of transcendence in their making adaptations to different forms of domination in different contexts. We have seen Xiao Li's awareness of her personal interest in psychology and her accumulation of experience in this area. She was recommended to study for a master's degree in psychology at Beijing Normal University and she was also thinking of providing psychological services through the online education company she runs with her boyfriend. Also we see Yun Jiang's and to some extent Zhen Liang's reflections on their meritocratic beliefs and evaluation system. The analysis of the adaptive group demonstrates a very complex and diverse range of reflexive responses to domination, which is, as observed by Giroux, 'power is exercised on and by people within different contexts that structure interacting relations of dominance and autonomy' (1983a: 290). In addition, the analysis demonstrates the necessity of undertaking a careful analysis of reflexive responses and achievements made by my participants at university. Some responses, such as those of Xiao Li, take the form of submission and acceptance but embed some radical logic of resistance and independence, while other responses seem to be emancipative and transcending, as shown by Zhen Liang's extraordinary achievements in social activities. However analysis indicates a fundamental acceptance of meritocracy. In the next section, we will see more independence, reflexivity and autonomy in my participants' negotiation with domination.

## Transcending perspective: opportunities for self-emancipation

The transcending group is also a very small group, namely Xing Guo, Ye Lin and Yifan Yang. They show some different experiences in school socialisation from the other participants. Although the high-achieving student identity is also important to the transcending group, it is not the only thing that defines their self-worth or brings them recognition and it is

never important to them to the level that constitutes their 'purpose to live in the world'. Apart from working hard on studies, working in student societies for Xing Guo and Ye Lin was also a large part of their school socialisation; and for Ye Lin and Yifan Yang, they had a clear sense of their personal interests at school and they developed skills based on these personal interests. On the one hand, they keep a greater distance from the high-achieving student self and therefore the 'cultured habitus' (Reay et al., 2009: 1105) they developed at school is less performance driven than other participants; on the other hand, they have a greater awareness of their working-class dispositions and they strategically made the effort to work on themselves, 'distinguish' themselves, while still at school. Their habitus cannot be understood completely by the description of a 'divided habitus' (Bourdieu, 1999a), divided between a high-achieving student self and a working-class self. Their habitus is more complex, which includes not only the high-achieving student self and the working-class self but also some transcendence of both. Given the differences of their 'cultured habitus' from other participants, I coin their habitus as a 'toned habitus', which has been toned and revised at school and which includes less meritocratic and working-class dispositions. In this section, I shall first discuss how they keep a distance from both the high-achieving student self and the working-class self in school socialisation and then I shall address how the 'toned habitus' brings them different experiences at university from the other participants and how they work further on their 'toned habitus'.

**Distance from the high-achieving student self**

We have seen in Chapter 6 how the high-achieving student identity defines the self-worth of my participants and confirms their exceptionality. However, not all the participants have a same degree of identification with the high-achieving student identity. Compared with other participants, the transcending group has less identification with the high-achieving student identity and they are not completely dedicated to work on their performance at school. For example, Ye Lin tends to define her 'un-usualness' by drawing on her personal interests and skills developed in painting rather than by

referring to the high-achieving student identity. She liked painting since kindergarten, stating, 'I was very introverted. I didn't speak to other kids and I didn't like to take a nap at noon as required by school. So when they were sleeping, I sat there and painted'. Regarding the reasons why she liked painting, she explained:

> My parents said it came naturally, like a gift. My father and my uncle could paint. My parents would observe what I liked. My father encouraged me to learn *Zheng* (a traditional Chinese musical instrument) and dancing and my mother encouraged me to learn stage performing and calligraphy. But I didn't like them. I only liked painting.

We can also see some differences in her family compared with most of the other families in my study. Her parents encouraged her to learn other things rather than teaching her to focus on exam performance alone. Her parents even paid her to learn painting at weekend classes, which lasted until she was in Year 5 at primary school, when her family could no longer continue financially supporting her to attend those classes. After that, she learnt painting online by herself and then design. The difference in her family's encouragement that she learns other things has little to do with class fractions within my sample, as her parents are factory workers and received no higher education. The difference in her family and its influence on the development of her 'toned habitus' highlights the importance of education at home for a working-class student's social mobility trajectory, which is similar to the discussion in Chapter 6. More evidence regarding the influences of education at home in Ye Lin's life story will be seen later in this section.

Ye Lin experienced various habitus dislocations when she moved from the countryside of Taiyuan (the capital city of Shanxi Province) to the city centre for junior school and she overcame these dislocations by drawing on her painting skills again, which she described as follows: 'I was very countryside and I couldn't do anything but painting'. Based on her painting skills, not only did she overcome dislocations and fit in at junior school, but she also

made friends and acquired dominant cultural capital by learning from these friends, which she detailed as below:

> I liked to make friends who were different from me, who knew what I didn't know. For example, if he/she had beautiful handwriting, I would observe how he/she practiced. My handwriting became good at that time. And also from that time on, I began to know classical music. My friends lent me CDs. And friends who knew Beijing Opera sang to me and taught me about The Drunken Beauty or Taking Tiger Mountain (two classic Beijing Operas). And with my friends, I began to write diaries, read novels and learn literature.

There is a conversion of social capital into cultural capital in Ye Lin's account. An analysis of Ye Lin's narrative and comparisons with the narratives of some other participants highlight two conditions for the success of this conversion to support Ye Lin's acquisition of middle-class cultural capital at school and access to operas, classical music and literature. One condition is that Ye Lin can meet middle-class students at school. Chances to meet middle class students at school are not equally distributed among my participants. The place they are from plays an important role, which is evident from the comparison between Ye Lin and Xiao Li. Ye Lin is from a capital city so she can meet many middle-class friends at school who can bring forms of middle-class cultural capital while Xiao Li is from a small village and even when she moved from village to town for junior and senior school, she still had few chances to meet middle-class friends as 'there are not many differences between a village and a town'. The place they are from determines the possibility for them to meet middle-class students and to gain middle-class cultural capital. The chance is enlarged in cities and reduced in small towns and countries.

Another condition for Ye Lin's conversion of social capital into middle-class cultural capital is her reflexivity. She observed and made reflections and she consciously learnt from her friends. According to Bourdieu (1986), accumulation of capital, that is, economic capital, social capital and especially cultural capital, needs the investment of time and effort and cultural capital requires particular time and effort to embody. Ye Lin's

account shows the role of reflexivity in accumulating cultural capital. She observed and made strategic efforts to embody middle-class cultural capital by learning from friends. The strategy she reported to make friends is different from that reported by some of my other participants, as shown in Chapter 5, who make friends from a similar family background or based on personality traits. Ye Lin 'liked to make friends who were different from me, who knew what I didn't know'. Learning from friends constitutes a central theme in her life story, which is also evident in her account of the university experience about the influence of the former president of the society in which Ye Lin worked:

> She taught me two important things: one was communication was the best way to resolve problems; the other was presentation was important. For example, I would not send out a document like this (her writing of the book chapters of life). All documents I sent out were formatted with a cover, a header and a footer...She had qualities that I didn't have. For example, she had very strong communication skills...it could be one of the impacts of her family background. Her father was a very successful businessman. Children of businessmen, especially who run a very successful business, are born knowing communication skills.

And the strategy to make friends based on 'difference' and 'excellence' rather than similarities of family background and personality are also shared in the accounts by Juan Du, Xing Guo, Yifan Yang, Yuan Fang and Zhen Liang. However, for them, embodying middle-class cultural capital by learning from friends and working on themselves starts at university rather than at school, which in part can be explained by the few chances they have to meet middle-class students at school and also by their greater acceptance of the performance-centred culture.

Their distance from the performance-centred culture is not only reflected in their strategy of making friends, but also in their initiatives to attend social activities at school. Ye Lin attended the students' union in her senior school and the Model United Nations Society (a group in which students role-play national ambassadors in the United Nations to debate and discuss global issues) where she later became a leader in both societies. She went to Beijing

for two MUN conferences that were attended by students from senior schools in different provinces. Xing Guo was the president of the student union of his senior school and was also responsible for organising the school radio station. Yifan Yang was in the school basketball team. They were all high-achieving students at school but at the same time, they were extensively involved in social activities as well and they developed more than just academic competencies. This had an impact on their university experience, which will be seen later. Compared with the adaptive group, the transcending group have a greater distance and independence from the performance-centred culture at school and they gained a wider range of experiences, competencies and skills than other participants at school. I quoted Liu (2012) in Chapter 6 to discuss the influence of exam-centred culture on my participants and that these working class high-achievers are more likely to be the victims of the culture by over-investing in performance. However, the transcending group seems less likely to be the victims by keeping their distance from culture and maintaining their independence.

**Distance from the working-class self**

The transcending group not only keeps a distance from the high-achieving student self but also from the working-class self. The distance they keep from the working-class self is reflected in their greater awareness of the influence of the working-class position on their habitus and they choose to work on themselves and to make strategic changes rather than to accept 'what comes naturally for them'. The conscious and strategic working on their working-class self is evident in Ye Lin and Xing Guo's accounts of how they 'improved' their social skills at school.

The problem of inadequacies in social skills was reported by Ye Lin as the biggest influence on her by her family background. We have seen earlier in this section a self-reported description of her personality, 'I was introverted'. She explained it further later in the interview: 'every time when we (her classmates at senior school) had a meal together or we played games at table, I became nervous. My parents didn't know how to socialise either'. She was

aware of the problem when she moved from the countryside to the city for junior school. 'I couldn't fit in for the whole of the first year. City students were so outgoing'. We might read this as a dislocation of her habitus in a middle-class dominated environment, which generates 'an acute sense of self-consciousness' (Crossley, 2001). Earlier in this chapter, I detailed the responses of the meritocratic group to their experiences of dislocation. Dislocations of habitus do not guarantee changes and transformation of habitus but may lead to confirmation and reinforcement of habitus. In Ye Lin's case, contrary to the meritocratic group, she chose to work on herself, to make changes to her habitus, rather than to rely on what she had - although she did have 'more' than other participants, including painting skills and also excellent academic performance. Based on the comparison, I would argue that the dislocation of habitus is a trigger for the changes of habitus, but it does not constitute the reason for these changes. Almost every participant in my study experienced dislocations at some point in their education trajectory, but not many participants choose to or were able to make changes to their habitus, especially at school. In terms of the reasons why she is constantly working on herself, Ye Lin explained it in the context of education at home:

> My parents told me we couldn't give you much help. For example, we couldn't teach you when you had questions in studies. We didn't know either. You should seize every chance to ask (others who could help you). For anything you want, you should give enough effort to fight for it. I think it's a very good education idea. It's very important. It influences me until now. It tells me I should seize every opportunity, I should maintain contact with relatives and friends and I could ask them for help. That's why I hold in high regard my contacts with them...I think everything around me can be called 'resources', not only my 'primary environment'. But the primary environment is important because they teach you to have contacts with the outside. It is their teaching, their leading and they told me what they could give me was limited and I should rely on myself to gain resources from the outside and that I have the idea (to make the most of 'resources' around me).

Education at home, the idea 'to gain resources from the outside', was considered by Ye Lin as the main reason why she has the sense to 'educate

herself', to change and work on herself. It emphasises again the importance of education at home, while at the same time the idea that her parents told her, 'we couldn't give you much help', 'for anything you want, you should pay enough effort to fight for it', show some aspects of a 'posture of self-analysis' (Bourdieu, 1999a: 581) articulated by Sayad in *The Weight of the World*:

> No doubt because one knows there are no effective "outside" solutions, to these situations of impasse, no recourse to preestablished procedures, and because one also knows that responsibility for these situations cannot be imputed to some well-defined agent- which excludes even the idea of rebellion- the crucial mode of questioning in these cases touches on the search for socio-logical truth. Except that the apparently disinterested comprehension that one then gains of the situation allows relatively mastery of the situation and turns into the very condition of survival and, in this case, the condition of the final "resurrection".

Ye Lin knew from childhood that no one could help her and what she could do was to work upon herself by using resources outside, which then becomes her 'second nature' (Bourdieu, 1999a: 581). Using resources around her to work on herself is her survival strategy for 'relatively mastery of the situation', while one of the most important resources for her in the early stage of schooling is school friends. We have seen how she acquired middle-class cultural capital by learning from friends at school. She also took the same approach to work on herself, to make up for her inadequacies in social skills by learning from friends. She observed classmates at junior school, reflected on her situation and worked to improve her social skills, as she described in the below:

> I have a sense to educate myself since junior school. For example, if I thought the way this person socialised with other people was good, I would learn that. If I saw someone couldn't get along with others, I would not learn from that person. For example, if someone made jokes to me and I didn't like the jokes, I would not use those jokes on other people.

She is also active in making another kind of resource she was able to access at school to improve her social skills – attending social activities. She explained the reasons why she joined the MUN society. 'One of the reasons

was I thought I didn't have strong social skills. Another one was I thought it was interesting. I wanted to have a try'. Inadequacies in social skills were a serious concern for Ye Lin. For that, Ye Lin had an explicit account: 'I asked the president of our student union (about how to improve my social skills). It was my concern. I worried about my social skills. I didn't know how to talk and how to get in touch with others'. But rather than accepting these inadequacies in her 'personality' and forming 'probable' expectations of the future based on 'what is possible for us' as most of my participants did, Ye Lin made the effort to change what she saw as her inadequate 'personality', as shown by the following account:

> The impact of family background on my social ability was really significant. I didn't know what games I could play with them at dinner, what restaurants and what places we should go to. I was learning by observing them. My classmates were very nice. They didn't feel there was any problem with me...I only followed them at the beginning and then I started to organise a get-together.

The same approach to working on the self in terms of inadequacies in social skills appears in Xing Guo's case, too:

> I didn't like playing with 'good' students. I liked trouble-making kids. I thought they were fun and it was simple when you played with them...I had not been outgoing. But after I played with the trouble-making kids at primary school, (I became sociable and outgoing). They were sociable. They all have their own businesses now. They are good (in socialisation)...I liked observing. I knew what my teachers or relatives liked or disliked if I had one dinner with them. I would order what they like next time when we had dinner together.

Xing Guo is not seeking 'excellence' in performance or a similar personality or family background in making friends; rather, he is looking for 'difference,' as Ye Lin reported. The reason for looking for 'difference' in social skills in Xing Guo's case also comes with an awareness of his weakness as an 'introverted' working-class student. He is looking for friends who are sociable and who are different from him. The account of working on the self by learning from friends, for the third participant in the transcending group, Yifan Yang, appears later on at university:

> Attending student societies means I got to know many people, people from different places. For example, I have many friends on the university basketball team. I often hang out with them and sometimes I was invited to their places. I have a very good friend, who is my roommate, from Ningbo. I went to his place in Ningbo twice. I saw many things. Those would make you learn…I learnt many things about socialisation from my friends. My parents aren't sociable. My father is not in a senior position in the bank, he is a very low-level manager.

Compared with Ye Lin's explanation for her sense of using resources from education at home, Xing Guo and Yifan Yang tend to explain the initiative to use resources for working on the self as a self-realised idea. But their self-realisation also comes with a 'posture of self-analysis' in that they see no alternative but to work on the self alone. Nevertheless, the accounts of the transcending group on how they work on the working-class self highlights the possibility of changing a habitus by a reflexive awareness of 'the conditionings undergone' and a strategic and long-time effort to 'counter their effects', as illustrated by Bourdieu (1999b: 340):

> And that this freedom made nature, which is acquired, paradoxically, by the obligated or elective submission to the conditionings of training and exercise (themselves made possible by a minimal distance from necessity) is indeed, as is the freedom in regard to language and body that is called ease, a property (this is one of the senses that the Scholastics gave to the word 'habitus') or, if you wish, an acquisition and inheritance predisposed by their unequal distribution to function as capital. This then raises the question of whether there can be any liberty other than that to master one's inheritance and acquisitions. Pedagogical action can thus, because of and despite the symbolic violence it entails, open the possibility of an emancipation founded on awareness and knowledge of the conditionings undergone and on the impositions of new conditionings designed durably to counter their effects.

By referring to the case of Farida in The *Weight of the World* (Bourdieu, 1999a: 583- 589), Sayer also suggests the possibility of changing a habitus deliberately by 'repeated practice aimed at the embodiment of new dispositions' (2005: 30). On the one hand, the accounts of the transcending group highlight the possibility of changing a habitus deliberately; on the

other hand, their accounts accentuate the role of Chinese schools in supporting their deliberate efforts of working upon themselves, by learning from middle-class school friends and by attending social activities at school. However, as I discussed earlier in this section, two conditions constitute the role of schools in changing a habitus – one is the reflexive awareness of the person and the other is the possibility of meeting middle-class students at school. The two conditions are not equally satisfied in my sample, as we have seen in the comparison between Xiao Li and Ye Lin. In fact, for the majority of my participants who are from the countryside or the small towns, there are few possibilities for them to meet middle-class students at school and acquire middle-class cultural capital by learning from them and also there are few extra-curricular activities they can access. All three participants in the transcending group had senior school education in a key school in the city and two of them are from the provincial capital. In terms of the other condition, the reflexive awareness of the participants, all three participants had relatively better economic and social conditions in their family, which may contribute to their reflexive awareness. Yifan Yang is one of only two upper working class students in my study, Ye Lin had middle-class relatives and Xing Guo's mother worked as a nurse supervisor in the hospital and his father works as a foreman of factory workers. Jackson and Marsden (1962) also showed that the students with middle-class relatives or fathers working as foremen had better academic achievements and are more likely to continue tertiary education after grammar school. The participants who can meet both conditions are few in number in my study. For example, Xiang He was the other upper working class student in my study but he studied in town schools where he found it difficult to meet middle-class students and gain dominant cultural capital at school. The participants who can work on themselves and developed a 'toned habitus' at school are the lucky within the lucky and the exceptions within exceptions in my study.

**Experience at university: further work upon the self**

Bringing a 'toned habitus' to university, the transcending group report a lesser sense of dislocation and display less evidence of self-exclusion, while

instead they work further on themselves and accumulate more middle-class cultural capital.

We have seen in the last section how Ye Lin and Yifan Yang work further on themselves at university to improve their social skills by learning from friends. In the following account by Xing Guo, we can see the importance of another kind of social capital – tutors:

> Q: Could you talk about the important persons to you in your life story?
> A: The director of the office I worked for at university. She was always kind to me and she was important in helping me to improve myself. First she gave me many opportunities to learn in practice. For example, she asked me to organise the orientation party (which he listed as the most important thing for him at university). She suggested I compete for the leader of the whole university military trainee team (the participant is in the university military trainee programme and graduates from this programme will be assigned to a military team). Second, she was very direct. She would point out my mistakes very directly. No one had done that to me before. For example, she would say, your outfit today was inappropriate. Socks shouldn't be white. She told me where the label should be pointed at and how you should pour when you made tea for others. She cared about details. She was very nice. She was senior, but she was not bureaucratic. We often had lunch together.

The tutor in Xing Guo's account is correcting his dress and manners, to make him more 'professional' or, in another sense, more 'middle-class'. These are the things Xing Guo cannot learn at home from his working-class parents. He is changing his dispositions under the guidance of the tutor he met at university. The account in the above also explains in some sense why he has less of a tendency towards self-exclusion from student societies - he is encouraged and supported by the tutor. He has more confidence, support and 'emotional capital' than many of the other participants in my study. An implicit factor in Xing Guo's account that contributes to his bond with the tutor is his *toned habitus*, which can better explain why he had trust and support from the teacher. He learnt how to get along with teachers and with those superior to him over years of working as the president at the student union at school. He is drawing on his already developed dispositions to work

further on himself. Implicit in his account is a historical link between his school socialisation experience and his changes and experience at university.

However, I am not suggesting that only the transcending group work on themselves at university; some other participants show reflexive dispositions to work on themselves, too, which is evident in the following account by Yun Jiang:

> Introduced by the boss at my first internship, I went to intern at Morgan Stanley for three months…(Fortune) Global 500 companies indeed had their way of selecting and training people and the people they selected could represent the image of their companies. The head of our campus recruiting team (at Morgan Stanley) was such a person. He was very gentlemanly, had a cheerful way of talking, high EQ and could deliver a very clear message. He always had manners. This was who I wanted to be. I wanted to change myself little by little. I wanted to be that kind of person. I could possibly be unable to go into this kind of company, but I wanted to have those manners.

In the same way that Ye Lin showed in her school socialisation, Yun Jiang observed, reflected and worked on herself. She observed the manners of her colleague, reflected on and learnt from her colleague. With an absence of a concrete role model as to what is 'middle-class' in a working-class family, her colleague at Morgan Stanley became the concrete objective, standard and role model that she could work towards. Also like some other participants, friends are another important factor for Yun Jiang to work on herself and to acquire middle-class dispositions and cultural capital, such as going to concerts and exhibitions, and wearing certain clothes and make-up. Her working on herself is a form of deliberate planning, as shown by her account below on why chose Fudan rather than Jiao Tong university. She wanted to change herself, notably her rural affectations, by learning from girls in Fudan.

> When it came to Shanghai, it was also very difficult to make a choice between Jiao Tong and Fudan. Jiao Tong University gave me a call and they said they could give me an offer to study in the eight-year programme in Clinical Medicine. I knew someone who graduated from the same senior school and then was studying at

Jiao Tong. He told me the male to female ratio (at Jiao Tong) was seven to one. If girls were the majority, like in Fudan, you could learn many things from them, like dressing, tastes or manners. You would not dress like countryside people. So when I heard the description of the girls in Jiao Tong by him, I felt that it was not the place I would like to go. He said girls in Jiao Tong were all very boyish and bookish.

Yun Jiang's account supports the discussion at the end of the previous section that some participants may have reflexive awareness of their working-class dispositions and a willingness to work on themselves at school, but they do not have the conditions to realise this willingness until they get to university. It is another hidden constraint for my participants in addition to the many we have seen in Chapter 5. The ability to work on the self by using outside resources is like an accumulation of capital based on a history of investing and working, which makes yesterday's winners tomorrow's, too. Although some other participants can work on themselves at university, the transcending group work on themselves on a higher level with more competencies and less difficulties based on a 'toned habitus'. Their further work on themselves at university based on their enhanced reflexivity drawing on years of practice is evident in Ye Lin's case. Her reflexivity is like an athlete's muscles, which have been trained and toned for many years. Apart from continuing to improve her social skills by learning from friends at university, as I have discussed in the previous section, Ye Lin devised a sophisticated plan for her overseas studies by learning from her friends at university:

Carnegie Mellon is my first choice as their educational ideas are very prescient. They integrated the ideas of business and computer science with design since 1990s, but until now the UI design in China is still unsophisticated. (Since I want to work in this area), I want to go to the most advanced place to learn. And overseas studies to learn technologies would be the best to transfer back to China…online forums are one source (for me to learn information) and the other one is my friends, friends from many other subjects, like Computer Science, Digital Effects, Philosophy, Architecture, Economics, Mathematics and so on. We talked about it (plans to study abroad). UI design is really popular. My friends who study in Computer Science and Software Engineering are also thinking of doing UI.

She took a gap year after the final year at university in order to better prepare these applications. In order to have solid knowledge base and skill training in user interaction design, she found and attended a UI designer's tutorial courses (self-paid) outside campus and she also took a post-graduate course on User Interaction Design at Tongji University (another prestigious university in Shanghai that is very strong in architecture and design). Meanwhile she completed coding courses provided by UCL on Coursera. She demonstrates a very clear ability to use her initiative and resources and to be flexible in attending the post-graduate course at Tongji University. She had a junior school friend who was studying at the College of Design in Tongji, from whom she obtained the syllabus of the Interaction Design department. When she applied to join the class, it was full but she did not give up and succeeded in persuading the teacher to let her stay, as shown in the following account. And through the course, she also made some friends and did some projects together with them, which largely enhance her qualifications and competitiveness in applying for the user interaction programme in Carnegie Mellon.

> I was nervous in the first class. It was a small classroom, but there were many students there. The lecturer of the first class was the director of this college. I was nervous to say, I am a fourth-year undergraduate at Fudan University and I am going to do postgraduate studies in Interaction Design, could I attend the class? The director said, like, can you see the classroom, we have no seats any more. I said, what if I bring my own chair? He was very nice and then he said, OK, then come in. The students were very kind. They invited me to do projects with them. So I did some projects with them.

As Bourdieu commented regarding the ability to make rational economic decisions that I quoted in Chapter 2, 'the propensity to acquire it depends on the chances of using it successfully, and the chances of acquiring it depend on the chances of successfully using it' (Bourdieu, 1990a: 64). That is to say, the ability to be reflexive is based on the experience of being successful in having used reflexivity before. In years of using reflexivity to make the best of the resources outside home, reflexivity is practised adeptly by Ye Lin. The

enhancement of reflexivity and working further on the self at university can also be seen in the cases of Xing Guo and Yifan Yang, which has been shown at different points in this section. While one exceptional aspect of Ye Lin's reflexive accounts is that her reflexive dispositions are not only used in working on herself, to embody middle-class dispositions and to approach the middle class, but are also reflected in her achieving 'commencement' and 'self-emancipation' (Giroux, 1983a: 290). Commencement' was used by Ye Lin herself when she talked about her reflections on her university life:

> I knew in my first year that the graduation at the universities in some other countries is called 'commencement', which may mean a beginning, a beginning to enter society. But at the time when I was preparing for the applications (for the overseas studies for the master's degree), I suddenly realised that 'commencement' for Chinese students may have a deeper meaning. It means the commencement of self-consciousness...we are doing what we are told to do by other people before Gaokao. We are doing the same things, evaluated by the same standards, by our exam performance. When you go to university, you may be in a subject that you don't like, like me. You are struggling at university and then you know what you like and what you don't like. This is 'commencement' for many Chinese students.

'Commencement,' as illustrated by Ye Lin, seems not to happen for most of the participants in my study. The meritocratic group still devote most of their time to exam performance, and most of the adaptive group and the transcending group use reflexive dispositions to work on themselves in order to embody middle-class dispositions and to become middle class. Personal interests, potential and self-fulfilment based on a 'commencement of self-consciousness' are rarely seen in their accounts of university experience and in their life stories. Apart from Ye Lin, only Xiao Li mentioned her personal interest in psychology and took it as a factor in thinking about her future career choice. Yifan Yang expressed his interest in basketball and devoted much of his time to basketball training. When he was making decisions about his future career, he prioritised his personal interest rather than the pursuit of a high salary (he developed an interest in finance through an internship and he chose to work in finance rather than in the Artificial

Intelligence industry, although the latter is more directly related to his subject studies and offers a higher salary).

Analysis of the accounts of the transcending group shows the possibilities of changing a habitus deliberately and achieving some transcendence over class domination. However, the transcendence as analysed is only possible for the few within the few, the exceptions within exceptions who can meet two conditions, being in a city school and having the reflexive awareness to work on the self at school, and also the transcendence rely on long-term, continuous hard work on the self. Moreover, transcendence is most likely to be partial transcendence in the sense that most of these working-class high achievers do not develop a self-consciousness of the consequences and effects of their choices and behaviour nor an awareness of personal interests. They are still subject to a discourse of upward social mobility rather than having a reflexive awareness of 'self', not even to say 'self-emancipation' (Giroux, 1983a: 290).

## Conclusion: self-emancipation is possible but hard to achieve

My participants demonstrate many 'un-usual' accomplishments at university compared with other studies, which seems to suggest that they have countered or superseded the effects of habitus. However, a further analysis of these 'un-usual' accomplishments highlights a reinforcement of their habitus by university experience, rather than a change to or a transformation of their habitus. Most of my participants tend to draw on their meritocratic dispositions to overcome the dislocations they experience at university and 'achieve' by relying on their habitus of origin. This is the most 'natural' and rational choice and strategy driven by the interplay between their habitus and the meritocratic culture at Chinese elite universities. Through the reinforcement of their habitus at university, they are further 're-produced' as meritocratic agents and they are even more driven to be a 'third class'.

Furthermore, their submission to the discipline of meritocracy also demonstrates Foucault's explanation of disciplinary power, 'the chief

function of the discipline is to "train", rather to select and to levy' (Foucault, 1977: 170). My participants are 'made' as subjects, as 'instruments of exercise' (Foucault, 1977: 170) by the discipline of meritocracy, by the rewards they can mobilise in the meritocratic environment of elite universities, by their own rational choices and reflexive responses under these meritocratic mechanisms. My participants, as described by Foucault, are 'no doubt the fictitious atom of an "ideological" representation of society', but are also 'a reality fabricated by this specific technology of power that I have called "discipline"' (Foucault, 1977: 194). Therefore the submission of my participants to the meritocratic discipline should be understood not in 'negative terms' as being repressed or controlled, but being produced and reproduced. As described by Foucault, 'the individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production' (1977: 194).

However, although the embodiment of class domination in habitus is an 'effective' mechanism, 'more reliable than all formal rules and explicit norms' (Bourdieu, 1990a: 54), it also has its risks – people have human agency and reflexivity. People can think about, reflect on and engage in different forms of negotiation as they embody and are subject to domination and they can make deliberate changes to their habitus. The analysis of the adaptive group and the transcending group shows the very complexity of the reflexive responses people may develop in dealing with and embodying domination. They may accept temporary submission to domination but meanwhile maintain a sense of detachment from it, as shown by Xiao Li's case. Furthermore, they can have reflexive distance from domination and use strategies to avoid being totally subjected, as shown by the transcending group. Symbolic domination that is achieved by the operation of habitus is powerful, as we have seen from its subjective consequences for most of my participants, but this does not mean that domination cannot be resisted and the habitus cannot be changed deliberately. There is still a hope or indeed the possibility for transcendence, as shown by the analysis of the transcending group, which may be able to 'provide theoretical opportunities

for self-reflection and struggle in the interest of social and self-emancipation' (Giroux, 1983a: 290).

Having said this, I am aware of the difficulties of achieving transcendence. There is considerable evidence of 'back and forth' struggles in this chapter. One minute we see some progress in reflexive thinking and striving to 'counter the effects' of habitus, the next minute we see profound submission to another form of symbolic control of class, most evidently in Zhen Liang's case. Submission to domination is easy and unconscious, while transcending it requires reflexive awareness, 'chances' and long-term and rarely-rewarded effort. Only the few within the few can achieve transcendence, even when it is a partial transcendence. Being produced or re-produced by class, habitus, and by symbolic domination in different contexts is 'usual', while the transcendence of them is 'un-usual' and is dependent on chances and is limited to the few within the few, the exceptions within exceptions.

# Conclusion: is it possible to transcend class domination?

Is it possible to transcend class domination? This is the question that provoked me to conduct this study. I know the general picture of social stratification in Chinese higher education. I know the difficulties for working-class students to gain entry into elite universities. I know the struggle and pessimism of trying to achieve upward social mobility in China. Moreover, by reading Bourdieu, I know how significantly class shapes one's choices, actions, feelings, aspirations and life chances and how difficult it is to negotiate those inherent influences. Albeit with all this knowledge, I am still wondering, are there any exceptions, can we achieve some degree of transcendence of class domination, can we become a different person, live a different life and have a different future from what is expected or predicted by class position? This is why I focus on a small group of working-class students who have a 'deviant' (Bourdieu, 1996: 184) life trajectory – they achieve tremendous academic successes at school, albeit they experience similar constraints of class position as other working-class students, they succeed in reaching the elite universities in China and most of them thrive at university, academically and socially. I focus on these 'exceptions' with the question lingering in my mind – can we achieve some insights in relation to a positive sociology by turning onto stories of successes. However, sadly, I have few such positive insights to offer. The tone in the concluding chapter is not inspiring but rather pessimistic. As will be seen in the next sections, the evidence and the analysis in my thesis to a large extent deconstruct the concepts of 'exceptionality', 'success' and 'transcendence' and they direct and re-define the question, 'is it possible to transcend class domination', into 'can anyone transcend class domination?'

The working-class people who can transcend class domination relatively have more certain forms of capital. Bourdieu commented on the illusion

based on the existence of 'exceptions':

> The statistic logic of its functioning means that it reproduces established structures with enough exceptions to create the illusion of independence and democratization. For there are exceptions in both directions – failures and success stories – and if the failures are inclined to contestations, the success stories are often the best defenders of elite schools… (Wacquant, 1993: 30)

My thesis can be seen as an analysis of 'exceptions' – 'success stories' - but my conclusion shatters the illusion based on 'exceptions' rather than supporting it. The existence of 'exceptions' does not necessarily mean that they break through the production and reproduction of inequality, while the analysis in my thesis indicates that they experience another form of class domination. I will explain this in detail in the later sections.

I will first offer a review of my research findings in this chapter, which I have discussed with my participants in the third-round interviews. Following that, I will provide some policy suggestions on how to promote upward social mobility in China and how to improve working-class students' educational experiences. Contributions and limitations of my study as well as some ideas for future research will be discussed in the last section.

## Class matters: the normality in the exceptionality

In terms of achieving outstanding academic performance at school and earning entry into elite universities, my participants can be seen as 'exceptions' who seem to have overcome the constraints of their class position. However, my thesis demonstrates that they are far from being exempt from the constraints of class position. Rather, class matters to them, as it matters to other working-class students. In this sense, my participants are 'normal' rather than 'exceptional'.

I use 'five senses' - a sense of deficit, a sense of inferiority, a sense of incompetence, a sense of us and a sense of otherness - to frame how my participants feel, embody and internalise their working-class position and

how their disadvantages are produced and reproduced by the externalisation of this internality, by their 'acts of cognition' (Ball et al., 2000: 92) and by their 'logic of practice' (Bourdieu, 1990a).

Through the discussion of these 'five senses', I demonstrate the constraints of class position on my participants from two aspects – the external framework of available choices and likelihood to them and the internalised framework 'that makes some possibilities inconceivable, others improbable and a limited range acceptable' (Reay, 2004: 435). A 'certain obviousness' (Ball et al., 2000: 40) is that the choices available to my participants are seriously constrained by their lack of forms and volumes of appropriate capital. The deficit in economic capital drives them to make second best choices, a lack of appropriate social capital constrains the 'hot knowledge' (Ball & Vincent, 1998) they can obtain when making important choices, while a lack of appropriate cultural capital makes it difficult for them to achieve excellent exam performance in certain subjects. As Bourdieu commented, although 'economic capital is at the root of all the other types of capital' (1986: 54), different forms of capital have different efficacies. Compared with the influence of economic capital and appropriate social capital, the influence of cultural capital is typically hidden and harder to recognise and challenge. Educational opportunities are not available to all in the same way, while rather those who have more capital are more able to recognise and take up such opportunities and have a greater range of choices available to them. The people who have less capital have fewer opportunities and fewer choices. Even for my participants who have been at elite universities, their potential opportunities before and beyond university have been seriously narrowed down and their imagined futures have been confronted uneasily in some cases.

The constraints of class position experienced by my participants not only play out within their external framework of available choices, but also in their internalised framework of making choices through the operation of habitus. As explained by Bourdieu and Wacquant, 'social reality exists, so to speak, twice, in things and in minds, in fields and in habitus, outside and

inside social agents' (1992: 127). Habitus is a 'structured body, a body which has incorporated the immanent structures of a world of a particular sector of that world- a field- and which structures the perception of the world as well as action in that world' (Bourdieu, 1998: 81). 'An adequate theory of habitus' is offered in my thesis, in which I demonstrate how 'the world' is embodied into 'the body' and 'structures the perception of the world and the action in the world'. Some examples of perceptions and actions are analysed, for instance making choices according to personality, competencies and personal interest. The social construction of these 'natural aptitudes' are highlighted and the relation of 'natural aptitudes' to the working-class position are demonstrated. However, for most of my participants, the social construction of 'natural aptitudes' goes unrecognised, and making decisions according to 'natural aptitudes' is regarded as 'reasonable' and 'effective'. Through such 'reasonable' perceptions and actions, inequality in 'the world' is embodied into 'the body' and is legitimised, maintained, produced and reproduced. As commented by Ball, my participants are 'classified and are classifiers' (2000: 92).

The production and reproduction of inequality becomes clearer when the working-class identity becomes stable, when 'the sense of us' and 'the sense of otherness' to my participants become strengthened by the sharp comparisons with middle-class high-achievers at university. Rational evaluations, emotional injuries and 'the principle of ensuring continuities' and 'the principle of avoiding crisis' (Chapter 5) in relation to the 'internal contingency' of habitus (Chapter 2) are all involved in driving my participants to make adaptations to their deprivation and relative capital deficiencies. Personal and familial history, social position and capital inequalities are reinforced and reactivated by the embodiment of the world and thus the operation of habitus is as commented by Bourdieu, 'more reliable than all formal rules and explicit norms' (1990a: 54).

Not only is 'an adequate theory of habitus' offered in those discussions, but also an analysis of the role of mundane reflexivity in the operation of habitus is provided. Reflexivity, as argued by some authors (e.g., Archer, 2010; Reay,

2004; Sayer, 2005) and as shown by plenty of evidence in my thesis, indeed exists in the formation and operation of habitus. People do think, evaluate, experience, feel, respond to and sometimes challenge the world, but this does not necessarily mean that people can achieve breaks in and transcend the operation of habitus, of unconsciousness and of the maintenance and reinforcement of disadvantage and inequality. As I argued in Chapter 5, reflexive awareness arises from time to time in the operation of habitus, it requires effort, attention and it often involves injuries, while the pre-reflexive operates constantly, 'naturally' and easily. Even emerging reflexive awareness tends to work with rather than work against the pre-reflexive in achieving the outcome of making adaptations to deprivation. Unconsciousness is the normal state whereas consciousness is the exception, which means that while habitus can be changed, change is extremely difficult and the same can be said for inequality - it can be changed but it is extremely difficult.

My participants can be defined as 'exceptions' in terms of their academic success and achievement in gaining entry into elite universities, but they are not 'exceptions' in terms of being constrained by class position, forming working-class dispositions, making classifications and living out disadvantage.

## New identity and a different form of class domination

The above discussion brings up a question – since my participants experience similar constraints of class position as other working-class students, how do they become 'exceptions' and, at least in part, seem to transcend class domination? I offered an interpretation of this question based on an analysis of the habitus of my participants and of the field of Chinese schooling. My argument is that these 'exceptions' do not really transcend class domination, but rather they experience a different form of class domination.

Apart from the working-class self in the habitus of my participants, they do

develop a new kind of identity – that of a high-achieving student, which evolves alongside and in some degree against their working-class self. This evolution or, more precisely, the construction of their new identity is animated by two forces – progressive forces of pursuit and regressive forces of escape. Progressive forces involve a complex of ambition, self-worth, recognition, rewards and personal interest. For many of my participants, self-worth and recognition are the core forces that motivate them to work hard at school. Most of them reported themselves as having an 'introverted personality' as a child, which, as I have discussed in Chapter 5, is in some ways related to their sense of inferiority as a working-class student, while on the other hand school work and their excellent performance distinguishes them from other working-class students and makes them stand out. At the same time, the recognition and rewards they receive based on their excellent performance at school eases their sense of inferiority and reinforces their commitment to and investment in this new identity. The high-achieving student identity becomes their 'primary' identity, which is reported by some participants as 'the purpose to live in the world'. However, the construction of a high-achieving student identity also involves regressive forces, forces based on a negative evaluation of working-class community and living conditions, which fosters and fuels a strong motivation to leave behind and escape from the working-class community, to make changes to who they are and to have a different life from the expected and the effective. Although the high-achieving student self in the habitus of my participants evolves in a large degree against the working-class self, it is not completely divided and separated from the latter. The working-class self in effect determines my participants' reliance on the high-achieving student self, fosters their desires to be different and drives their commitment to the new identity. The working-class self has not been transcended or left behind but is deeply embedded in the construction of the new self.

On the one hand, my participants have a strong desire to leave behind their working-class localities; on the other hand, the strategy they adopt and the pathway they take to leave this behind also distances them from the middle-class to which they aspire. With a lack of support from appropriate

resources, my participants have to dedicate themselves, spending as much time as they can and working as hard as possible, in order to achieve and maintain a high-achieving student identity. The strategy they adopt to ensure exam success has its risks. As illustrated by Reay, 'they have had to focus on intently on achieving academic success in their chosen field that they have forgone wider cultural accomplishments' (2009: 1109). Their strategy for success ignores or exacerbates 'cultural discontinuities' (Liu et al., 2002) so that when they enter a culturally diverse environment where exam performance is not the most important thing, they confront unanticipated dissonances.

Moreover, socialisation in the field of Chinese schools reinforces the risks of 'cultural discontinuities' that my participants may confront in the future. Chinese schools, especially key senior secondary schools, in many ways can be described as 'total institutions' (Goffman, 1961) or exam factories. Access to different levels of elite schools, including to elite universities, is almost entirely based on exam performance; and a set of techniques in school practices, for example monthly rankings and boarding experiences, accentuate the single orientation – performance. A synthesis between the habitus of the working-class 'exceptions' and the field of Chinese schooling is highlighted in my thesis. Performance is the single thing they pursue; meritocracy is the philosophy they believe in; and individualised hard work is the strategy they use and promote. This synthesis, on the one hand, makes my participants feel like 'fish in water' in Chinese schools, which helps ease the sense of deficit, inferiority and incompetence brought by the working-class self in their habitus and also can indeed bring them many opportunities to compete for and obtain substantial educational resources through individual striving. However, on the other hand, they are further reproduced as 'one-dimensional men' (Marcuse, 1964), meritocratic subjects and 'a third class' (Chapter 6), caught between the working-class and the middle-class and they find it difficult to go back and yet also difficult to move forward. Through their successes in the meritocratic environment of Chinese schooling, my participants become firmly committed to the meritocratic illusion that class does not matter, individual striving can bring success and

'intelligence and effort' results in 'excellence' and 'superiority'. Also, as 'meritocratic agents', as 'an eldest son, an heir, a successor, a Christian' (Bourdieu, 1990a: 58) of meritocracy, they will reactivate and revive this objectification in Chinese schools, 'continuously pulling them from the state of dead letters, reviving the sense deposited in them, but at the same time imposing the revisions and transformations that reactivation entails' (Bourdieu, 1990a: 57). Through transforming 'instituted difference' into 'natural distinction' and through embodying objectification into habitus, meritocracy achieves 'complete and viable' (Bourdieu, 1990a: 58), not only in things but also in body.

The risks of 'cultural discontinuities' are deeply buried by my participants' school successes and will be confronted only when they find themselves in a culturally diverse environment. The problem is that for most of my participants, at the time when they realise these risks, it is almost impossible to rectify them. This explains why some of my participants tend to accept their disadvantages at university and in the job market. They have no other choice because they have already become who they are and who they might be. This does not only mean hidden injuries my participants have to accommodate, but also raises questions about the wider participation of working-class students in education. If these intelligent, reflexive and hard-working working-class students have been singled out, trained, transformed and invested in the core values of meritocracy, how can they bring about social changes that will benefit the working-class and that will challenge social inequality?

These 'exceptions' have not transcended class domination, even though they achieve tremendous academic success and exceed the expectations of their class position. Class lies behind their striving to construct a new identity, their submission to meritocratic discipline at school and the consequences of being caught in the middle between class worlds. They, as 'exceptions', come to experience another form of class domination, a form obscured and produced by meritocratic success.

## Diverse reflexive responses to class domination

Class domination is extremely difficult to challenge, but there are always some possibilities to challenge the status quo and achieve transcendence. My thesis analysed the ways in which my participants deal with the sense of habitus dislocation they experience more or less from the moment of arrival at university (see Chapter 7). Diverse reflexive responses to class domination and meritocratic discipline have been demonstrated and also possibilities of achieving transcendence of both have been explored.

Most of my participants retained a commitment to and re-invested in a meritocratic perspective to deal with this habitus dislocation. They were still determined to work on academic performance at university and the strategy they used was still to work as hard as possible, to spend as much time as they could on their subject studies. The analysis of the reasons for which they take a meritocratic perspective indicates the effectiveness of the 'principle to ensure constancy' (Chapter 2: 22) in the operation of habitus. Disjunctures between habitus and field, as argued by Reay (2004, 2009), can generate reflexive awareness, but the evidence in my thesis suggests that it would be too strong to argue that reflexive responses adopted based on conscious evaluations can necessarily be transformative or bring about new perspectives. People still tend to rely on what they have acquired and what they are familiar with to shape their reflexive responses. This demonstrates the effectiveness of the operation of habitus. Even operating at a conscious level, habitus still tends to reinforce consistency and to avoid challenges, change and transformation.

Meanwhile, the strong meritocratic culture at Chinese elite universities supports most of my participants' choice to continue employing a meritocratic perspective. By way of excellent exam performance, my participants can still mobilise enormous benefits, such as generous scholarships, opportunities to switch subjects, overseas experience and employment prospects in some subjects. The effects of this strong meritocratic culture at Chinese elite universities are double-edged. On the

one hand, this environment provides working-class high-achievers with many opportunities and possibilities to draw on their already developed dispositions in order to overcome habitus dislocation, to accommodate associated serious hidden injuries, to maintain a high-achieving student self and to access forms of new experience. In this sense, some of the 'un-usual' accomplishments achieved by my participants can be explained by the 'un-usual' culture at Chinese universities compared with some other national contexts (see Chapter 7). On the other hand, within the meritocratic culture at elite universities, my participants are reinforced in their meritocratic subjectivity and are disciplined by the symbolic domination of class, and the risks associated with the meritocratic discipline will remain buried until they transit to employment. As mentioned earlier, the problem is, the later these consequences are realised, the harder they are to deal with. Furthermore, even in the strong meritocratic environment of Chinese universities where my participants are supposed to be 'fish in water', their success in dealing with and survival of habitus dislocation by employing a meritocratic perspective is still not guaranteed but is largely dependent on 'chance'. This in another way demonstrates how risky is the position of meritocratic subjects. They are always vulnerable, struggling and unsafe, even in an environment that is identical to the habitat in which their habitus is produced.

Not all my participants chose to remain committed to a meritocratic perspective. A more complex relation between human agency and domination is demonstrated in the discussion of the 'adaptive group' and the 'transcending group' in my study (Chapter 7). The adaptive group shifted their focus from academic performance to extra-curricular activities, although to a large degree they did not 'choose' to shift their perspectives, rather they felt it necessary to do so in order to create 'chances' and opportunities for themselves in the future. A detached and disapproving attitude towards the performance-centred culture at Chinese schools arises from the further analysis of the reasons why the adaptive group changed perspective. This brings another level of complexity to the understanding of the school experience of my participants. Although they all demonstrate a

tendency to succumb to the symbolic domination of class that is rehearsed and reinforced by the meritocratic discipline of school, in fact they espouse a variety of attitudes towards the meritocratic discipline and they may be subject to this discipline to different extents. Some participants find some space to negotiate with, to resist and to transcend domination. However, the reflexive distance demonstrated by the adaptive group is a distancing from the form of meritocracy that is rehearsed at Chinese schools, rather than towards meritocracy itself. They still hold on to a strong belief in meritocracy. Their reflexive responses involve making adaptions to different forms of meritocracy in different fields. They are always striving for 'excellence', which is in turn defined as academic performance at school, extra-curricular activities at university or high-ranked, high-earning positions at work, while in these strivings there is still little awareness of 'self', not even to say 'self-emancipation' (Giroux, 1983a: 290). In this sense, although the adaptive group demonstrates more autonomy and transcendence than the meritocracy group, they are still 'one dimensional men' and they are still not transcending meritocratic disciplines and related class domination.

There is a very small group of participants in my study, the 'transcending group' (Chapter 7: 220-234), who demonstrate primary care of the 'self' and have achieved to at least some extent 'self-emancipation' (Giroux, 1983a: 290). They show some different experiences in school socialisation from the other participants. On the one hand, although the high-achieving student identity is important to the transcending group, it is not the only thing that defines their self-worth and brings them recognition. Ye Lin and Xing Guo in the transcending group engaged in student societies since junior school and Ye Lin and Yifan Yang demonstrated a clear sense of their personal interest at school and they developed skills based on that interest. On the other hand, they had a greater awareness of their working-class dispositions and they strategically made the effort to work on themselves. Therefore their habitus cannot be understood simply as a 'divided habitus' (Reay, 2015), that is to say divided between a high-achieving student self and a working-class self, which is the case for most of my participants. The habitus of the

transcending group is more complex, it includes not only the high-achieving self and the working-class self but also some transcendence of both. Given these differences, I coin their habitus as a 'toned habitus', which has been toned and revised at school and which includes less meritocratic and working-class dispositions. Bringing a 'toned habitus' to university, the transcending group reported a lesser sense of dislocation, display less evidence of self-exclusion and they further work on themselves at university based on their enhanced reflexivity, drawing on years of practice at school.

The analysis of the transcending group indicates the possibility of changing a habitus deliberately and achieving some transcendence of class domination. However, the transcendence as analysed is only possible for the few within the few, the exceptions within exceptions who can meet two conditions, being in a city school and having the reflexive awareness to work on the self at school. Also, their transcendence relies on long-term, continuous hard work on the self. Further discussion of the conditions for transcendence will continue in the next section.

## Contingency of reflexivity

The above discussions deal with the question of how my participants become 'exceptions' and how they confront class domination, and those discussions demonstrate the possibility of transcending class domination, to a lesser or greater extent. But there are still other questions begged by those discussions: why do my participants become 'exceptions' rather than other working-class students? And why has the transcending group managed to develop a 'toned habitus? These questions turn the discussion from 'is it possible to transcend class domination' to 'can anyone transcend class domination' and they indicate the relation of 'individual exceptionality' to 'family exceptionality' and the relation of 'exceptionality' to capital. The analysis of these questions highlights the contingency of reflexivity.

The analysis of the 'individual exceptionality' of my participants highlights some aspects of the 'exceptionality' of their families. One aspect of their

family exceptionality is in relation to economic capital. The families of my participants have relatively more secure and better economic and social conditions than their working-class neighbours, which constitutes an economic foundation for maintaining and developing their individual 'exceptionality' – intelligence, maturity, self-discipline and hard work for instance. Compared with that, as demonstrated by the narratives of my participants as well as some other studies (e.g., Postiglione, 2006; Liu, 2016), many poorer students drop out of junior school or senior school owing to economic concerns, so that even though they were exceptional, their 'exceptionality' could not be supported or retained and so would be wasted and lost. Individual exceptionality needs an economic foundation to be maintained and developed, while the family exceptionality of my participants offers this foundation.

Another aspect of the exceptionality of my participants' families is in relation to social and cultural factors. Compared with their working-class neighbours, the families of my participants provide a more supportive social environment at home for them to focus on schoolwork and the parents of my participants are more supportive and more involved in their schoolwork. Some of my participants' parents have received much more education than their working-class neighbours and some participants can get private tuition from older sisters or their relatives. My participants have relatively more economic, social and cultural capital than most of their working-class neighbours. In this sense, a certain degree of transcendence of class domination achieved by my participants is not 'real' transcendence. It is still a production and reproduction of the social order, where the 'social order' here means not the order between classes, but the order within the same class, within the working-class – class fractions. Only the working-class students who have relatively more capital can become survivors.

The relevance of capital to the chances of transcending class domination can also be seen from the analysis of the conditions for developing a 'toned habitus'. The possibilities to develop a 'toned habitus', to gain forms of dominant cultural capital, to work deliberately on themselves, to develop

personal interest and to achieve self-emancipation, are dependent on the chances of meeting 'different others' at school. These chances are not equally distributed among my participants. As evidently seen in Chapter 7 from the comparison between Ye Lin and Xiao Li, where my participants are born plays a significant role in constituting their chances to meet 'different others'. Ye Lin is from a capital city, so she was able to meet many middle-class friends at school who can bring forms of middle-class cultural capital, while Xiao Li is from a small village and even when she moved from village to town for junior and senior school, she still had few chances to meet middle-class friends as 'there are not many differences between a village and a town'. The chance to meet middle-class students is increased in cities and reduced in small towns and counties. Regional disparities in economic, social and cultural conditions penetrate into the habitus of my participants, which forms their different chances to transcend class domination. Inequality between regions is maintained and reinforced, rather than being challenged.

This is similar to the discussion in Chapter 5 that addresses the social construction of 'personality', 'interest', and 'academic performance'. The discussion in the paragraphs above accentuates the social construction of reflexivity – self-awareness, competences to achieve a different trajectory from the expected and possibilities for self-emancipation. Reflexivity is also not entirely an effect of 'natural aptitudes' nor a set of dispositions that are produced automatically at the situations of habitus dislocation. Rather, as Bourdieu explains of 'capital', reflexivity is a set of competences based on possession of certain forms and volumes of capital, socialisation in certain conditions and 'the propensity to acquire it depends on the chances of using it successfully' (Bourdieu, 1990a: 64). This is the contingency of reflexivity. As I interpreted habitus in the light of 'contingency' and 'freedom' in Chapter 2, I tend to see reflexivity from 'contingency' and 'freedom' as well. Reflexivity is not a 'rootless, unattached, pure' (Bourdieu, 1990a: 52) agency, but is contingent on possession of forms of capital and socialisation in a certain field. Capital, especially economic capital, matters to my participants, not only in the sense of forming class constraints, but also in the sense of

forming their reflexivity to bring about the chances they have to break, resist or transcend those constraints.

## Mutations: 'reflexive capital'

Although there is an obvious relation between capital and reflexivity, the development of my participants' reflexivity cannot be completely explained by this. There is another significant factor reported by many of my participants that supports the development of their reflexive awareness and reflexive dispositions - the influence of their parents' characteristics. This introduces an intergenerational perspective to understand reflexivity. Zhen Liang, Ye Lin, Yi Chen, Yun Jiang and Ping Wang explicitly reported the important role of their parents' characteristics in forming their ambition and reflexive dispositions. For example, Zhen Liang explicitly stated the significant influence of his mother's personal characteristics on him, for example as seen from his accounts, 'she is definitely excellent', 'my mother worked very hard', 'you can see my mother in me' and 'if my mother hadn't taught me how to walk, I wouldn't know how to run now; if I don't have shoes, I can run fast'. The reflexive dispositions of my participants' parents, such as ambition, hard work, intelligence, flexibility, resilience and sensibility with resources, are passed on to them and constitute their ambition, reflexive awareness and dispositions. Bourdieu (1986) explains 'capital' as the accumulation of labour and time and it can be inherited at home, be profitable in certain fields and can be transferred to other forms of capital. In this sense, parents' characteristics as reported by my participants can be defined as 'reflexive capital'.

These accounts of 'reflexive capital' propose a different perspective for considering the working-class. Working-class does not simply mean inadequacy and incapacity. People in a working-class position can be 'excellent', 'reflexive', 'ambitious', 'flexible' and even 'sociable', 'relaxing' and 'exquisite'. The fact that they are working-class may have little to do with their 'reflexive capital' and only be an effect of structural disadvantages. As Zhen Liang said of his mother, 'she couldn't go to school because her family

was poor'. Implicit in his account is that his mother could not achieve academic success and a better life not because she is not 'excellent' or 'reflexive' but because she has few opportunities to employ her 'excellent' or 'reflexive' qualities. Reflexive capital needs certain conditions to be activated, employed and profitable. This brings us back to the discussion of the contingency of reflexivity on certain forms and volumes of capital, but it also raises a question about prejudices towards working-class people. There is a strand of research that demonstrates the tendency of a social class to have certain similar characteristics and highlights class distinctions of personal characteristics. These studies have made relevant contributions in terms of understanding the influences of one's class position on his/her dispositions. However, there is a danger that these studies can be misused to propagate prejudices that render 'class' as a label to make assumptions about individuals. As you cannot have gender expectations for a girl, you cannot have pre-expectations for the working-class as well. Individuals cannot be understood simply and entirely from their class position. Working-class people have some un-presumed qualities as well, qualities that are beyond the explanation of economic, social and cultural capital. They may deposit their 'reflexive capital' and wait for the right conditions to be activated.

This intergenerational perspective to understand reflexivity brings a new perspective for understanding the life stories in my study and a new way of thinking about social mobility. Intergenerational transmission of 'reflexive capital' should be included in thinking about social mobility as the 'other side' of the transmission of disadvantage in economic, social and cultural capital. The parents of my participants pass on their 'reflexive capital' to their children, who have access to more opportunities and more support in achieving their ambitions, as Zhen Liang illustrated in his and his mother's story. Also, as Yi Chen commented, their social mobility journey is based on their parents' journey. Hopes and chances of achieving social mobility are passed on inter-generationally. Bringing this perspective to understand the life stories in my study, my participants endure forms of constraints of class on their choices and life trajectories. They experience all sorts of hidden injuries from being caught between the working-class self and the high-

achieving student self. They have to make compromises, consciously and painfully choose to adapt to deprivation and they may experience cultural discontinues, have little awareness of the 'self' and become disciplined as meritocratic subjects. But whether they can achieve some kind of social mobility after university or not, they are nevertheless attending the best schools, the best universities, meeting people they would not otherwise meet, achieving more of their potential and having a better life than their parents. They are passing on more 'reflexive capital' to their children and enlarging the hope, chance and possibilities for their children to achieve upward social mobility. In this sense, they are all stories of success, resistance and transcendence. In this sense, we have every reason to argue for a greater inclusion of working-class students at elite schools and at elite universities, as only this can bring more chances, hope and possibilities to achieve social change, in this generation or inter-generationally.

## Policy implications

As clearly shown in the analysis above, capital, especially economic capital, matters to my participants, not only in a sense of forming material and symbolic constraints, in constructing their 'personality' and 'competences' but also in a sense in shaping their responses to meritocratic discipline, and forming their chances of transcending class domination. Relying on individual striving, talent or reflexive dispositions to achieve transcendence of class domination is for the most part hopeless and almost impossible. It is necessary that the government provides support, especially economic support, to working class students in order to achieve more and greater transcendence. Financial support should be especially offered to those who cannot continue schooling owing to economic concerns. As we have seen in this thesis, there are many excellent qualities, talents and much potential in working-class people, but all these need an economic foundation to survive, develop and flourish. Economic support is the presupposition to achieve the effects of all other kinds of support.

The economic support and other kinds of support that I will discuss later

should not only be given to working-class students in rural areas or economically under-developed regions, but also should be given to working-class students in urban areas. Policies that aim to address educational inequality in China should introduce a class perspective rather than only defining 'disadvantage' from the perspective of the rural/urban divide. Class is undoubtedly relevant to China in understanding and addressing issues related to educational inequality and social inequality. Class profoundly shapes people's choices, feelings, emotions, perceptions, agency and reflexivity in China, as it does in other countries. Policies in China should address the inequalities between classes rather than focusing solely on the established rural/urban division. The first action for addressing class inequality is to recognise it. My study can be seen as an attempt to recognise class inequality in China. We should stop seeing people as individuals and stop seeing their competences and personalities as only individual competencies and personalities. We should stop blaming the victims and stop the victims from blaming themselves. We should see the relation of economic and social conditions that one lives in to his/her personal dispositions and to his/her life chances. The government has every responsibility to provide complementary support to working-class students and families so that they can have more chance to overcome the incompetencies determined by their class position.

Also aligning with many other studies, my study highlights the role of key schools, especially key senior secondary schools, in constituting the chances of working-class students to gain entry into elite universities and in shaping their 'cultured habitus'. To a large extent, key schools for my participants shape who they are and who they might become. I agree with Liu (2012) and many other studies in arguing that we should increase the inclusion of working-class students into key schools. As shown by Liu's study (2012), the provinces with a more even distribution of working-class students in key schools have a larger percentage of working-class students in the total enrolment at elite universities. A greater inclusion of working-class students into key schools means greater chances for them to reach elite universities. Moreover, greater inclusion should not only be in the sense of wider

participation but also in the sense of greater inclusion of working-class students into extra-curricular activities, cultural experiences and socialisation with middle-class students. As shown in Chapter 7, socialisation with middle-class students and participation in extra-curricular activities offer many opportunities for working-class students to develop personal interests, gain forms of dominant cultural capital, generate reflexive awareness, break forms of self-exclusion and strategically work on themselves. Those opportunities do not only mean more chances to achieve social mobility, but also mean more chances to have a reflexive life, to know their personal interests, explore their potential, and achieve self-fulfilment and self-emancipation. Working-class students should have a right and an opportunity to know what they really want, to pursue what they are really interested in and what they are good at and to find, achieve, and fulfil their potential. No life, no talent and no potential should be wasted.

Also, the cultures of schools and universities in China need to be changed to encourage more reflexive awareness, that would mean the introduction of some form of 'critical pedagogy' (Giroux, 1983a. 1983b), the cultivation of personal interests and an emphasis on 'commencement' as illustrated by Ye Lin in Chapter 7. 'Self' should be given greater consideration in teaching practices, curriculum design and teacher training. Education is not just about upward social mobility, even for working-class students. Education should be for discovering, exploring and achieving self-emancipation, especially for working-class students. More support, tuition and counselling services should be provided to working-class students at school and also at university to help them find personal interests and discover their potential, especially at the stage of making university and career choices. We have already seen in Chapter 7 how 'chances' play a significant role in constituting many of my participants' unstable successes at university. We should not base their successes or their survival on chances at stages of important transitions, no matter from school to university or from university to society. More professional advice services should be offered to working-class students.

Last but not the least, we should seriously reflect on the philosophy of meritocracy in schools, universities, media reports, policies and in the discourse of the *Chinese Dream*. Why are intelligence and effort assumed to be superior to other qualities? Why are only those defined as intelligent on the basis of tests selected to go to the best schools? What happens to the majority of working-class students who are not chosen according to this standard? Do they deserve to stay in poor living conditions, have a low-income job and live a life like their parents? Can they have opportunities to be different from what is expected of them in accordance with the place they occupy by birth? Can they have the opportunity to have a dream, a 'real' dream, to discover what they love and to achieve what they love? Even for the exceptions of working-class students in my study who are chosen by the meritocratic standard and who are successful according to the meritocratic standard, can they have the opportunity to have a different life from that of becoming meritocratic agents? Can they choose to become someone other than one who is only good at schoolwork, achieving in exams and who only pursues serious things? Can they only pursue for the self, for the realisation of the self, for self-emancipation? Being meritocratic is only one of the many and diverse ways of living and upward social mobility is only one of life's objectives. Even as only one way of living, social mobility has its problems, risks and dangers. Anyone, whether from a working-class or middle-class background, should not just pursue excellence defined by different fields, should not just work hard and work for achievements, should not have only one choice, one possibility, one way of living. Everyone deserves a chance to make a choice for a life they want to live, deserves a true life that is fulfilling and in which they thrive. Everyone deserves a dream, a dream for the self. There are many ways to achieve this dream but meritocracy is never one of them.

## Contributions of my study

Theoretically, as we have seen in Chapter 2, some authors are developing Bourdieu's theoretical tool of habitus by introducing into it the idea of reflexivity. By focusing on a small group of exceptions of working-class

students who achieve access to a place in which they are not expected to be, by reaching elite universities, in many ways my thesis is an analysis towards 'exceptions' and it offered 'an adequate theory of reflexivity in the operation of habitus'. Some of the arguments put forward by other authors have been discussed and supported in my thesis, such as the existence of reflexivity in the formation of habitus as argued by Reay (2004) and Sayer (2005), the working of consciousness and unconsciousness in tandem as argued by Sayer (2005) and Archer (2010), the generation of reflexive awareness at the disjunctures between habitus and field as discussed by Reay (2004, 2009) and the possibilities to deliberately change habitus as pointed out by Sayer (2005). Meanwhile, through dialogue with these authors and with Bourdieu's original works and based on the analysis of my data, my study provided some original insights into the role of reflexivity in the operation of habitus. To list a few examples: reflexivity indeed exists in the formation of habitus, while once habitus is formed, it tends to operate unconsciously; consciousness and unconsciousness indeed work together in the operation of habitus, but consciousness arises occasionally and it requires effort, attention and training while unconsciousness works all the time and works 'naturally'; the disjunctures between habitus and field indeed generate reflexive awareness but the reflexive responses one takes in these disjunctures still tend to reinforce the old habitus rather than changing it; furthermore, reflexivity has contingency too, which is still based on possession of certain forms and volumes of capital and which is favourable to the people who have more capital. The theoretical findings that are generated from my study are not aimed at challenging these authors nor challenging Bourdieu, but to make contributions to the development of Bourdieu's useful tools to give them more explanatory power.

Empirically, with the aid of Bourdieu's theoretical tools, my thesis offered a thorough analysis of the influences of class position on people's everyday lives, on their thinking, choosing, feeling, acting and aspiring. This is particularly important in China, where Confucian culture emphasises the self-education and self-cultivation of personal morals. Furthermore, the discourse of the *Chinese Dream* encourages individual striving while a

thousand-year long history of imperial civil examination embeds a meritocratic national gene, which means that people deeply believe that exam performance can bring money, position and upward social mobility. The relation of structural factors to personal competences and life chances is often forgotten in this strong individualistic and meritocratic culture. The ignorance of this relation brings many dangers in Chinese society of blaming the victims of structural disadvantages and provokes self-blaming from victims. The thorough analysis of the influences of class on personal life trajectories that is demonstrated by my thesis brings this relation to light, makes the taken for granted problematic and hopefully can generate reflections and introduce changes.

In addition, my thesis provided a critical analysis of the culture at key schools and at elite universities in China. Under the strong meritocratic culture at Chinese schools and at Chinese universities, my participants are regarded as successful people owing to their outstanding academic achievements. However, to a large extent, their successes are deconstructed in my thesis. Meritocratic discipline, a hidden form of class domination and the problematic culture at Chinese schools and at Chinese elite universities, are accentuated by this deconstruction. The analysis of hidden forms of class domination is very important, as only when we bring these hidden forms of domination to light can their effectiveness of maintaining, producing and reproducing social order be realised and it is possible to challenge and change them. If seen from this perspective, the more pessimistic my findings are, the more positive they are.

Also, my study focuses on a national context that has not been much addressed in terms of researching class inequality and this context has many distinctive features, as I explained in Chapter 3. Plenty of original empirical evidence that is different from existing studies has been generated. These differences can be used as reference points to generate international comparisons and to contribute to a better understanding of different relations between domination and human agency in different contexts. Even in themes that have been fully researched, my thesis offered considerable

new evidence, such as the revealing account by Wei Luo in relation to the constancy of habitus, the life story of Ye Lin in relation to how people can deliberately change their habitus and also the thorough analysis of varied reflexive responses my participants developed to deal with the sense of habitus dislocation.

The contributions of my thesis are not only theoretical and empirical but also methodological. My thesis can be seen as an experiment in work combining the life story approach with grounded theory. This thesis demonstrates the possibility, the necessity and the effectiveness of using research methods reflexively and it is also an example of the usefulness of employing pre-existing concepts in the conduct of grounded theory.

## Limitations of my thesis and future work

Some of the findings I have presented in this thesis are based on comparisons between working-class high-achievers and middle-class high-achievers, but owing to the limitations of time and effort, it would be impossible for me to conduct three-round life story interviews and analysis for both working-class and middle-class participants. The experiences of the middle-class students that I used to compare with the experiences of my participants are mainly based on studies of middle-class students in other countries, for example the studies by Ball (2001, 2003) and Reay (2001, 2005). Findings based on comparisons of this kind render some problems as the context of China is very different from other contexts, as I illustrated in Chapter 3. Future work can be conducted on the life stories of middle-class students at Chinese elite universities and that can be used to compare with this thesis. A further understanding of the relation between meritocracy, class domination and reflexive responses would be achieved in such comparisons.

I discussed the significance of the high-achieving student identity to my participants. The high-achieving student identity brings with it hopes of and confidence in achieving upward social mobility, supplementing

disadvantages and easing experienced injuries associated with the working-class self. Given the hopes, possibilities and benefits brought by the high-achieving student identity, my participants committed themselves to this identity and also to the meritocratic disciplines of schooling. I have discussed in my thesis some of the enormous benefits my participants can obtain with the high-achieving student identity. However, the benefits, advantages and hopes to achieve upward social mobility brought by the high-achieving student identity are now being weakened and will continue to be weakened by the trend of middle-class families' investment in international education. As mentioned by some of my participants and also by some other studies (e.g., Xiang & Wei, 2009), middle-class families in China are beginning to shift their strategies to invest in international education as a way to mobilise, produce and reproduce their advantages. This trend could have a sweeping impact on the nature of class struggles in China, on the experience of working-class high-achievers and also have profound effects on patterns and forms of education equality and social equality in China. Shedding light on the trend of middle-class families' investment in international education in future work will bring a further understanding of the changing picture of class struggle in China.

Although I addressed the many problems and risks of the performance-based access system in China, I also demonstrated the role of this system in offering chances to my participants to gain entry into the best schools and universities and to accumulate 'reflexive capital'. However, many provinces in China are now making reforms of this system in which they have begun to introduce interviews and ask for evidence of extra-curricular experiences as well as recommendations from school head teachers in forming student evaluations at the entry to elite schools and elite universities. As shown by Karabel's (2005) study of the admission policies at Harvard, Princeton and Yale, the introduction of interviews means more autonomy for institutions to choose the 'right' kind of students while working-class students are more likely to be excluded in these seemingly 'independent', 'autonomous' and 'indiscriminate' evaluations. Such reforms may have a very profound effect on working-class students' life chances and will seriously affect the upward

social mobility picture in China. A systematic study to address these reforms will generate very meaningful insights.

As Ball said of his participants, 'these are "unfinished" stories' (2000: 117). The stories discussed in this thesis are still changing, evolving and developing. I want to use an account from a participant in the third interview to conclude my thesis:

> What you told me about the situation in UK (I introduced to him BBC's documentary, *7 Up*), I think can be understood in this way. You see a land, first arising would always be the grass and then bushes. Bushes press down the grass. And then trees would grow up. It is another renovation of plant cover, but it is still unstable. When it develops into a forest, it reaches a stable status, a complete ecological system. At that time, a seed winding towards this forest, would be extremely difficult to find a place to survive and to grow up. UK has already been such an ecological system. They (participants in *7 Up*) are difficult to transcend class domination. But for China, I think, the age of grass has been passed, the age of bushes passed too. Trees are now being growing up, but the forest is not yet completely formed. This could be the time your research and the research in relation to education equality can still have contributions. (Wei Luo)

In other words, there is still time, it is not too late to tell the unfinished stories of upward social mobility in China. I hope that it is not too late to make a difference in China.

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# Appendix 1: Information sheet

Page 1

**Leading education and social research**
Institute of Education
University of London

# Working-class students at elite universities in China

## IoE doctoral research project

### 2014 - 2017

Information for student interviewees

My name is Jin Jin (金津). I am studying for a PhD degree at the Institute of Education, University of London. My doctoral research is to investigate the experience of working-class students at elite universities in China. This research will contribute to understanding of the role of education in achieving social mobility in China. By participating in this research, you will provide data which will be of great value in better understanding this important educational and social issue in China.

This leaflet tells you about my research.

I hope the leaflet will also be useful, and I would be pleased to answer any questions you have.

Please feel free to contact me with any questions, comments or concerns:

jjin@ioe.ac.uk

Page 2

## Why is this research being done?

Little scholarship focuses on the university experience of working-class students in China although higher education has close links with social mobility. My research will address this gap by presenting the evidence from China on the role of education in achieving social mobility.

## Who will be in the project?

Participants of this research are senior students at elite universities in China. Working class is defined by economic status and the participants will be selected from students who receive national student loans. The sample will be targeted CONFIDENTIALLY and INDIVIDUALLY by the researcher.

## What will happen during the research?

Before interviews, you will be asked to write your life as book chapters IN CHINESE (around 200 words). Interviews will then be based on your writing and will involve discussion of your experience before and throughout university. With your permission, I might attend some of your academic and social activities at university and in order to protect your privacy I will do this in the role of your "friend". All interviews will be conducted individually and privately. All data will be kept confidentially and will be anonymised in any publication.

## What questions will be asked?

The interviews will be unstructured but will focus on themes in your writing. We will discuss your experience prior to and during university . If there are any questions you do not feel comfortable answering, please say so and we will move on.

## What will happen to you if you take part?

All the interviews will be conducted individually and privately. If you agree, I will tape record some of the sessions and transcribe them later. I am not looking for right or wrong answers only for what everyone really thinks. The interview is of no fixed length and you are free to go into as much or as little detail as you wish.

## Could there be problems for you if you take part?

Participation in this research is completely voluntary. If you choose to participate you may later change your mind and withdraw from the interview at any time. If for any reason you decide not to continue, the data you have already provided will not be used.

## Will doing the research help you?

I hope you will enjoy helping me and I am thinking of ways to reward you as an important contributor to the research. The research addresses a significant issue which is the subject of much international discussion but for which there is a lack of Chinese evidence. I have confidence that this research will gain much attention and will contribute to understanding social mobility in China. To protect your anonymity, you cannot co-author publications with me but I will discuss with you ways to share rewards from any publication.

## Who will know that you have been in the research?

Your involvement will ONLY be known by you and the researcher, which is the reason why I will take the role of your friend during my involvement in your life. No one else will be allowed to know the identity of participants. You are also advised to keep the research confidential in order to protect your privacy.

I will keep tapes and notes in a safe place, and will change all the names in my reports – and the name of your institution– so that no one knows who said what. It is my responsibility to ensure that no one can identify you from any publication.

## Do you have to take part?

You decide if you want to take part and, even if you say 'yes', you can drop out at any time or say that you don't want to answer some questions.

You can tell me that you will take part by signing the consent form.

## Will you know about the research results?

I will send you a summary report of findings as soon as my research is completed. I will consult you before publication of any data related to you. You have the right to access interview transcripts and field notes but only the researcher can make decisions on data analysis and reporting. After research completion, I will discuss with you how to share rewards from any publication.

## Who is funding the research?

The research is funded by the Chinese Scholarship Council which is affiliated to the Ministry of Education of Chinese government.

**The project** has been reviewed by the IoE ethical review for research students.

**Thank you for reading this leaflet.**

# Appendix 2: Consent form

**IOE LONDON**

**Leading education
and social research**

Institute of Education
University of London

**Consent form**

**Working-class students at elite universities in China
2014 - 2017**

I have read the information leaflet about the research. ☐ (please tick)

I will allow the researcher to observe me ☐ (please tick)

I agree to be interviewed ☐ (please tick)

I understand the researcher has the full right
to analyse data and report findings ☐ (please tick)

Name _____

Signed _____          date _____

Researcher's name _____

Signed _____          date _____

# Appendix 3: Notes on the translations of interview transcripts

All the interviews were conducted in Mandarin and all the transcripts were recorded in Chinese for the convenience of returning them to my participants and for the purpose of capturing sensitive meanings in the expression of my participants. The initial analysis was conducted in Chinese, while the second-round and the third-round analysis was conducted in English because the analysis evolved to be more abstract at these stages and conceptual dialogues and comparisons with theoretical tools and literature review became more important than being sensitive to the words used by my participants.

All the translations of selected transcripts used or referred to in this thesis were done by the thesis author, Jin Jin, and was proofread by Lucia Cowan (English native speaker, who holds a B.A. in English Literature from the University of Cambridge and M.A. in Modern and Medieval Languages from UCL). The translations were read and checked by three other Chinese students who have obtained a PhD degree in social sciences from UCL (Dr. Ke Lin) or LSE (Dr. Yimin Zhao and Dr. Yang Shen). The translated transcripts were also used in conference presentations made by the thesis author between 2013 and 2018 in which some Chinese scholars attended and no problems in relation to the translations were reported.