

# Without a Rehearsal— School as a Theatre of Social Myths

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overwhelming forces had transformed life and identity of this cohort of teachers. Their non-official narratives clued in me for understanding the moral field of the school institution and grasping the essence of the institutional habitus. I was grateful for being offered a precious opportunity to get to know students' behaving in and out of class as well as their sense-making process from the non-adult perspective through their reconstruction of their real-life experiences in the form of story-telling which involved those young students' dreams, hopes, ambitions, struggles, confusions, dilemmas, secrets, and grieves with their own individuality. I preserve profound reverence as well as perturbation, trepidation, and panic while I am revisiting their stories and rediscovering the tension between their tellings and behaving, and paraphrasing and rewriting their stories— of great massiness, and to compress and convert them into humble analyses known as “stories of them” in my not massive thesis.

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To my mother.

## ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

In einem Jahrhundert hat China turbulente Übersee- und Bürgerkriege und die darauf folgenden dramatischen massiven politischen Säuberungen, hitzigen Fraktionskämpfen und vielgestaltigen Reformen erlebt. Eigentlich galt das maoistische China als eine klassenlose Gesellschaft, in der der wirtschaftliche Wiederaufbau nach dem Krieg durch verschiedene klassenmotivierte Bewegungen, die sich gegen Großgrundbesitzer und Intellektuelle richteten, die der kommunistischen Ideologie sowohl in den Städten als auch auf dem Land entfremdet waren, stark verzögert wurde. Seit der Enthüllung der historisch bedeutsamen Reform- und Öffnungspolitik im Jahr 1978 erlebt China einen beschleunigten sozialen Wandel. Zahlreiche Ereignisse wie der Anstieg des kommerziellen Wohnungsbaus in den 1980er Jahren, der Beitritt zur WTO im Jahr 2001, die Austragung der Olympischen Spiele im Jahr 2008 und die rasant steigenden Wohnungspreise in den späten 2000er und frühen 2010er Jahren in den Metropolen haben die Bildung von sozialen Klassen gefördert. Gegenwärtig befindet sich China mit fortschreitender Wirtschaftsreform und der Entwicklung der Informationstechnologie in einem blitzschnellen und beispiellosen Wandel. Viele Menschen haben sich eine neue Identität aufgebaut und sind durch Aufwärtsmobilität oder einen ungewollten „Klassensprung“ in die Mittelschicht oder sogar zu Multimillionären aufgestiegen. Im letzten Jahrzehnt ist ein Matthäus-Effekt offenkundig zu beobachten. Das immer stärkere Wohlstandsgefälle tritt vermehrt in das Bewusstsein der Menschen und lässt Diskurse über die soziale Klasse wieder in den Mittelpunkt treten. Kindererziehung und ungleiche Bildungschancen sind beliebte Themen und werden als die „wahren Probleme“ der chinesischen Gesellschaft diskutiert. Erwachsene sind immer mit absoluter Dominanz in Bildungsaktivitäten und - Diskursen im Kontext von „teaching to the test“ autorisiert. Eltern aus der Unterschicht, verfolgen das Ziel, dass ihre Kinder in Zukunft nicht in ihre Fußstapfen treten sollen, haben den rastlosen Ehrgeiz, intergenerationale soziale Aufwärtsmobilität zu erreichen. Ihre Gegenstücke - Eltern aus der Mittelschicht - sind überaus bestrebt, Abwärtsmobilität zu vermeiden und ihre vorteilhafte Position im Rahmen der etablierten sozialen Ordnung zu erhalten. Auf viele Pädagogen an Grund- und

weiterführenden Schulen ist kein Verlass mehr, wenn es darum geht, „wahre Bildung“ zu vermitteln, denn ihr leidenschaftliches Bildungsideal wird durch den überwältigenden institutionalisierten Druck ausgehöhlt und letztlich zu einem gescheiterten Versprechen. Die Wissensvermittlung in den Schulen hat ihren Fokus auf Auswendiglernen, denn das System verlangt von den Schülern, dass sie sich mit den Fakten, die in den Lehrbüchern stehen, zufrieden geben. Vor diesem Hintergrund ist es von großer Bedeutung, den entmachteten jungen Studenten im Bildungsprozess eine Stimme zu geben, deren Verwirrungen und Kämpfe weder dokumentiert noch diskutiert werden. Angesichts dieser Unzulänglichkeiten werden phänomenologische Ideen und anthropologische Methoden herangezogen, um Licht auf das zu werfen, was als selbstverständlich angesehen wird. Der Ansatz dieser Arbeit ist nach wie vor soziologisch, sie konzentriert sich auf die Untersuchung der langanhaltenden Ungleichheit und das Aufzeigen des Umfangs der Bildungsmobilität aus einer soziokulturellen Perspektive ohne Außerachtlassender gesellschaftlichen Komplexität oder Textur durch eine einzigartige Linse der Spannungen zwischen institutionellem Habitus und individuellem Habitus, in einer Art „von unten nach oben“.

Dieses Zeitalter ist für China eine Ära des Nebeneinanders von Chancen und Risiken, Individualismus und Kollektivismus, Vorfreude und Nostalgie, Involution und Flucht, Wankelmut und Depression. In China herrscht ein gigantisches Mosaik aus kompliziert ineinander verwobenen Faktoren, das vielleicht am besten die moderne „Komplexität“ aufgrund einer Vielzahl von ungleichmäßigen, dramatischen Veränderungen in großem Maßstab veranschaulicht. Eine klare Abgrenzung des Forschungsumfangs ist daher notwendig: obwohl dem Bildungsstatus der am meisten oder am wenigsten entwickelten Gebiete in China große Aufmerksamkeit geschenkt wurde, wurde diese Feldforschung an einer im Mittelfeld gelegenen Oberschule in einem neu gegründeten Stadtteil einer Tier-2-Stadt durchgeführt, damit wird diese Forschungslücke geschlossen. Seit dem Ende der 1990er Jahre wurden immer wieder Vorstadtbezirke in die anliegenden Großstädte eingemeindet und wurden somit im Rahmen einer überbordenden Institutionalisierung von Bezirken zu Stadtverwaltungsbezirken. Die Bevölkerung gerät zunehmend in das moralische Feld des Städtischen. Es kam zu Kettenreaktionen bezüglich der

Bevölkerungszusammensetzung, der diversifizierten Herkunft der Studenten, der Kulturen und des Lebensstils.

Bei meiner Forschungsreise beginne ich mit einer biographischen Studie über mich selbst, wobei ich in verschiedenen sozialen Kontexten immer wieder auf überwältigend turbulente Höhen und Tiefen im Laufe der Zeit stoße. Der qualitative Ansatz zeichnet sich dadurch aus, dass er das Abwesende, das Verdrängte aufspürt und die Verstrickung, das Paradoxe darstellt und damit vielfältige gesellschaftlich konstruierte Mythen kritisch entlarvt, was besonders effektiv ist, um die Textur und die Nuancen der chinesischen Gesellschaft zu beschreiben, in der mehrere Grauzonen für die vorherrschenden Operationen von Macht und Kapital auf verschiedenen Ebenen existieren. In dieser Arbeit habe ich beides- die Institution Schule und die jungen Schüler- als Analyseobjekte. Ich untersuche, wie das schulische Feld durch den breiteren sozialen Kontext geformt wird, wie z.B. durch die Bildungspolitik, die Bildungsdiskurse über kulturelle Bilder, den moralischen Diskurs über das „Gedeihen der Nation“, die nationalen Diskurse über engagierte Arbeiter und professionelle Lehrer, die Bildungsmythen über erfolgreiche Schüler und das immer komplexere soziale Umfeld, das im Laufe der Zeit einen unendlich intensiven Wettbewerb zulässt. Außerdem zeige ich, wie intramurale Mythen über beneidenswerte „Talente“, die ständigen Ruhm beanspruchen, durch Routinepraktiken, Rituale und „Nichtigkeiten“ wie räumliche Anordnungen und Transformationen auf dem Campus produziert und verstärkt werden, was auch für die Untersuchung des institutionellen Habitus als entscheidend angesehen wird. In der Gesellschaft findet eine zunehmende Stratifizierung statt - Dinge werden definiert, gewogen, verglichen und mit einem Wert versehen. Die Dinge werden so zu Symbolen, die eine zarte Bedeutungsnuance vermitteln, hinter der sich aber eine unausweichliche Hierarchie verbirgt. Die kolonisierte lokale Kultur meines Forschungsortes ist keineswegs unscheinbar, wo der lokale Dialekt in unglaublicher Weise abgewertet und ausgehöhlt wird. Eine Interviewpartnerin konnte ihre Fassungslosigkeit nicht unterdrücken, die vielleicht eine Herzensstimme vieler anderer Einheimischer darstellte, als sie beklagte, dass es lächerlich sei, dass alle Menschen sich bemühen, den städtischen Dialekt zu imitieren, während sie, ihre eigene lokale Sprache als minderwertig ansehen. Die positive Korrelation zwischen dem Sprechen des städtischen Dialekts und einem hohen Status ist nicht nachweisbar, wird aber in der

täglichen Kommunikation als unzweifelhaft sozial konstruiert. Ein solcher makroskopischer kultureller Hintergrund gibt den Ton für die Entfaltung lokaler Bildungspraktiken an. Schüler aus ungünstigen „kleinen Orten“ haben ein höheres Risiko, Schwierigkeiten zu haben, sich „einzufügen“ und somit marginalisiert zu werden - diese Einsicht spiegelt sich in meinen anschließenden ausführlichen narrativen Interviews wider.

Zu Beginn meiner Feldforschung habe ich diejenigen räumlichen Anordnungen auf dem Schulhof genau unter die Lupe genommen, die einen Hinweis auf Disziplin und Macht geben. Mit Hilfe der verfügbaren Literatur untersuchte ich die Transformationen der Architektur und der räumlichen Arrangements auf dem Campus und deckte ihre sozialen Implikationen auf. Architektur und räumliche Anordnung, als Ergebnis oder Wirkung, sollten als symbolisch und aussagekräftig verstanden werden. Einzelheiten der Architektur - ihre Größe, Höhe, Form, Geruch, Farben, die Anordnung von Dekorationen und Licht, und auch die Beziehung zu anderer Architektur usw., erinnern die Menschen an bestimmte Szenarien, Gefühle, Symbole und Identitäten und haben unterschiedliche Bedeutung. Dies impliziert, dass Beobachter durch einen Vergleich zwischen Vergangenheit und Gegenwart einen Blick auf den Strom der Macht erhaschen könnten. Ich habe mündliche Interviews zum Thema Geschichte mit einigen älteren Lehrern geführt, die diese Veränderungen miterlebt hatten. Anhand von drei Beispielen – dem erneuerten Schultor mit den verschwundenen Dingen, der abgetrennten Lehrerwohnung und dem bewusst hervorgehobenen Park als „kultureller Wurzel“ – wurde gezeigt, wie verwoben äußere Macht – Modernisierung, Ökonomisierung, Moral und Staatsgewalt – in den Bereich der Schule eingedrungen war und das Schulethos immer wieder veränderte. Diese räumlichen Veränderungen zeigen, wie der Schulraum mit der städtischen Landschaft in Einklang gebracht wird, die immer mehr zu einer metaphorischen Welt des Modernisierungskults wird, mit scheinbar kapriziöser Spiegelglasarchitektur, die überall aus dem Boden sprießt und die ständig gehetzten Menschen widerspiegelt, ergänzt durch Myriaden von riesigen Videobildschirmen, die Werbung für Waren, wohlhabendes Leben, Modernisierungserfolge und die Staatsgewalt der aufstrebenden Großmacht ausstrahlen. Da wir mit diesen Dingen bombardiert werden, scheint es natürlich zu sein, dass die Bedürfnisse des Einzelnen einen Platz für alles schaffen, was die Bedeutung des Profitablen, des Modernen und des Kollektiven mit sich bringt. Dies ist tatsächlich der Fall - vor der

Einführung der räumlichen Transformation, es gab Diskussionen am runden Tisch in denen obere Führungskräfte den groben Rahmen auf Basis der nationalen Grundwerte vorgaben. Während der Verlegung der Lehrerwohnungen wird dabei betont, dass der kulturelle Garten die Wurzel der Campus-Kultur ist. Diese Handlung deutet darauf hin, dass Zeichen und Symbole in einer verbraucherorientierten Gesellschaft zu Konsumgütern gehören sollten und die Verwirklichung der Vision von „Leben ist wie Poesie“ wie ein Spiegelbild erscheinen. Daher gibt es, egal wann und wo, nur solche Körper, die übertrieben gehorsam, vorhersehbar und sehr fügsam sind und .von anderen beobachten, antreiben und untersuchen lassen. Obwohl der "private" Wohnraum der Lehrkräfte bewusst entfernt vom "öffentlichen" Lehrbereich platziert wurde, gibt es ironischerweise keine strikte Trennung zwischen Arbeitszeit und Freizeit, Dies prägt zusammen mit der Einrichtung verschiedener Bewertungssysteme und stressiger Projekte den hektischen Zeitplan der Lehrer.

In einem Klassenraum übernimmt der Klassenpate mehrere Rollen als Fachlehrer, Betreuer, Koordinator, Imagemanager und spiritueller Führer usw. Auf der einen Seite verkaufen sie die Idee, dass jeder ein potenzielles „ausgebildetes Talent“ ist, wenn er oder sie die Regeln und die Anweisungen der Lehrer eifrig befolgt; leistungsstarke Schüler, als „geborene Talente“ sollten als Ressourcen für die potenziellen „ausgebildeten Talente“ in einer Klasse fungieren. Auf der anderen Seite zeigen die Lehrer Respekt vor der Wahrscheinlichkeit; sie markieren und kategorisieren ihre Schüler und pflegen sorgfältig den fiebrigen und zerbrechlichen „Traum von der renommierten Schule“ trotz der Existenz von Schülern mit einer weniger günstigen Position. Eine Reflexion des Verhältnisses zu den Eltern ist auch für sie verpflichtend, woran der Schulleiter im Rahmen der regelmäßigen Lehrerkonferenz immer wieder erinnert. Die Lehrer werden daran erinnert, die Identität als „Autoritätsperson“ im Erziehungsgeschehen aufrechtzuerhalten, indem sie eine „gebührende Distanz“ zu den Eltern wahren und es vermeiden, sich völlig zu offenbaren, während sie sich hinter den Kulissen immer mehr Wissen aneignen müssen. Ich habe einen Schulleiter interviewt, um etwas über den Schulbetrieb zu erfahren; außerdem habe ich an Klassentreffen, der Flaggenzeremonie und anderen außerschulischen Aktivitäten teilgenommen, bei denen ich sorgfältig Themen und Diskurse beobachtet habe, die als angemessen angesehen werden, Hauptärgernisse, die Unterdrückung und Bestrafung nach sich ziehen, und die interaktionellen

Besonderheiten der Menschen wie Tonfall, Rhetorik, Mimik, Gestik und sogar die Hintergrundmusik, wenn möglich, um mehr Einblicke in die Machtverhältnisse zu bekommen.

Ein weiterer Schwerpunkt ist die Darstellung des Verhaltens junger Schüler und ihrer Wahrnehmung, wie sie erfolgreich sind oder auf der Strecke bleiben. Sie haben den gewaltigen, blitzartigen gesellschaftlichen Wandel miterlebt; daher sollte die Zeitbezogenheit ernsthaft in die Betrachtungen einbezogen werden, was bedeutet, dass die früheren Erfahrungen der Schüler möglicherweise wenig Ähnlichkeit mit den aktuellen haben, besonders für diejenigen, die gerade erst anfangen, in das moralische Feld der Großstadt einzutreten. Dies im Hinterkopf zu behalten, hilft, die Situation der Schüler und die schulinternen akademischen Ungleichheiten zu verstehen. Ich habe phänomenologische Beobachtungen im und außerhalb des Unterrichts und ausführliche narrative Interviews mit 68 Schülern unterschiedlicher Klassen und sozialer Herkunft durchgeführt, wobei ich mich sowohl auf ihr Verhalten als auch auf die versteckte Wahrnehmung konzentriert habe. Mit der Aufforderung zum Geschichtenerzählen wurden diese jungen Schüler eingeladen, beeindruckende Momente und Episoden auf ihrem Lebensweg zu erzählen, insbesondere solche, die mit Identitätsfindung und Transformation zu tun haben. Inspiriert von der Idee des Multi-Narrativs habe ich auch mehrere Lehrer und Eltern als meine Informanten einbezogen, um die Struktur eines bestimmten Klassenzimmers und die Familienkultur der Schwerpunktschüler besser zu verstehen. Rituale und ein Notfall, der mir begegnet ist, wurden auch studiert, um einen Einblick zu bekommen, wie Menschen sich der ihnen auferlegten Macht anpassen oder ihr entgegenwirken. Außerdem durfte ich die Familien von 9 Schülern besuchen, was es mir ermöglichte, wichtige Anhaltspunkte für die Herausbildung des individuellen Habitus zu sammeln. Indem ich die wichtigen Episoden der Schüler von Verlegenheit, Leid, Schmerz, Frustration und Kampf sowie Mut, Ausdauer, Engagement, emotionaler Verarbeitung und Traum auf ihrem Lebensweg aneinanderreihe, bemühe ich mich, die „Lebensgeschichten der Schüler“ in „Geschichten aus dem Schülerlebens“ umzuwandeln, und dann in weniger problematisches Wissen über den Umfang der Bildungsmobilität und den versteckten Mechanismus der Bildungsungleichheit in der Sekundarstufe.

Junge Schüler können durch eine bestimmte Art des Erzählens gestärkt werden, während sie sich niedergeschlagen fühlen, wenn sie eine andere Geschichte hören. Die soziale Klasse spielt bei der Konstruktion von akademischer Ungleichheit in vielerlei Hinsicht eine Rolle, wobei der klassenbasierte Habitus als eine Art, die Welt wahrzunehmen, eine weitreichende Implikation hat. Problematische Familiendiskurse wie „Du bist doch nur ein Mädchen“ und unbewusste Kommentare von Lehrern wie „Jungen haben mehr Potenzial, um aufzuhören, wenn die Schwierigkeiten zunehmen“ wirken sich auf unbewusste Weise negativ auf die Identität und Motivation von Schülerinnen aus. Ein Strom von Bildern wie Luxusautos, die am Schultor warten, gefälschte Markenkleidung, gewebte Plastiksäcke und die Farbe des dunklen Rosas usw. sind alles Symbole, die jungen Schülern ein Gefühl von Überlegenheit oder Unterlegenheit vermitteln. Generell prägt die Schule die schulischen Leistungen der Schüler ungleichmäßig und dynamisch. Sie kann die Ungleichheit verschärfen, da die vorherrschende Ausgrenzung von Schülern mit niedrigerem Status subjektiv erlebt wird, während sie ein gewisses Potenzial besitzt, die Gleichheit zu fördern, indem sie den Schülern ein einheitliches Leben und den Lehrern ein komplexes emotionales Handwerkszeug bietet, um einige Schüler zu „retten“ und sie zu „ausgebildeten Talenten“ zu machen. Die Schüler bestätigen allmählich ihren Platz in der Schule durch endlose Vergleiche und Kontraktionen, entlang der akademischen, sozialen Klassen-, Moral-, Funktions- und Geschlechterlinie.

Die Klischees über Kinder aus der Unterschicht machen den Kindern dieser Gruppe die moralischen Implikationen des Lernens bewusst; es ist jedoch wahrscheinlich, dass sie im Laufe der Zeit eine Benachteiligung erfahren. Für viele akademisch mittelmäßige Schüler aus der Unterschicht, die eine Diskontinuität erleben, bevor sie das verwirklichen konnten, was von Musterschülern in der Stadt erwartet wird, werden sie auf unangenehme Weise von der Stadt überrollt und leiden unter einer unvorhergesehenen Ausgrenzung und Diskriminierung. Bevor ihre Situation von den Pädagogen vollständig verstanden wird, werden sie als problematisch, schwierig, schweigsam und stur abgestempelt, wodurch ein rechtzeitiges angemessenes Eingreifen erschwert wird. Ihre Ambitionen, die mit moralischen Implikationen gebündelt sind, nutzen sich ab, da sie in einem langanhaltenden Rückfallprozess immer wieder auf akademische und nicht-akademische Rückschläge stoßen. Obwohl der unprivilegierte

Familienstatus ein spezifisches geistiges Kapital aufgebaut hat, das als Antrieb für die Verbesserung der akademischen Leistungen dient, ist sein positiver Einfluss nur vorübergehend, wenn es nicht gelingt, einen benachteiligenden in einen privilegierten Habitus zu ändern.

Ein „Restriktionscode“, der ein konzentriertes Nachdenken über einen einseitigen Imperativ mit immer wieder eintönigen und schlichten Worten und kurzen Sätzen verkörpert, ist in Arbeiterfamilien weit verbreitet, was die Argumentationsfähigkeit der Kinder einschränkt und sie entmutigt, sich auf die Lehrer einzulassen. In der Arbeit wurde auch festgestellt, dass Schüler aus der Arbeiterklasse im Vergleich zur Unter- und Mittelschicht eher in der Subkultur aktiv sind, was wahrscheinlich auf das Erziehungsmuster der Eltern zurückzuführen ist. Im Gegensatz zu Eltern aus der Unterschicht, die ihre Kinder so erziehen, dass sie die Verantwortung für die Familie und die moralische Verpflichtung, die Familie in der Zukunft zu bereichern, betonen, übernehmen viele Eltern aus der Arbeiterklasse entweder die „Freiland-Erziehung“ oder die „destruktiv-enthusiastische Erziehung“. Beim erstgenannten Typ handelt es sich in der Regel um Personen mit geringer Bildungserwartung. Die letztere Kategorie ist ebenso gefährlich und schädlich oder sogar noch schlimmer, wie in vielen Fällen dieser Studie gezeigt wird. Diese Eltern haben eine starke Tendenz, auf ihre Kinder zu setzen, um ihren unerfüllten Traum zu erfüllen, nachdem sie den „Klassensprung“ ihrer „glücklichen“ Gleichaltrigen in den 1990er und frühen 2000er Jahren miterlebt haben; diese Tendenz wird durch das Gefühl der Ohnmacht im sozialen Wettbewerb verstärkt. Mit dem Gefühl, dass sie im Leben von mächtigen Personen versklavt werden, entwickeln sie eine Reihe von kulturellen Repertoires und kognitiven Rahmen, die ihre Erfahrungen definieren und ihr Handeln leiten. Sie erklären, dass sie die „soziale Grausamkeit“ in vollem Umfang erlebt haben und glauben, es gehe darum, „ob man gewinnt oder verliert“. In der Erziehungspraxis neigen sie dazu, ihre Kinder zu warnen: „Das Salz, das ich gegessen habe, ist noch mehr als der Reis, den du gegessen hast“, und sie schimpfen mit ihnen, weil sie „sich wünschen, dass Eisen zu Stahl werden könnte“; außerdem zeigen sie, wenn ihre Kinder Ungerechtigkeit und sogar Mobbing ausgesetzt sind, wenig Kompetenz, um angemessene Hilfe anzubieten; im Gegenteil, einige bestrafen ihre Kinder auf der Basis ihres Leidens mit einer bestimmten Philosophie von „die Opfer sind auch schuld, weil sie nicht stark sind“. Diese Eltern sind schlecht über die Geschehnisse außerhalb ihrer Welt informiert, neigen aber dazu, ihre wahrgenommene Realität als

die einzige Realität zu betrachten und die „Regeln“, die sie für richtig halten, als allgemeingültig anzusehen. Kinder, die ein intensives Trauma und eine niedrige Leistung empfinden, verbünden sich mit „Brüdern“ oder „Schwestern“, die die Autorität herausfordern, wodurch sie innere Stärke gewinnen, sich vom Opferdasein verabschieden und zu „schwierigen Teenagern“ und Tyrannen werden.

Kinder aus der Mittelschicht zeigen die geringste Inkonsistenz zwischen individuellem Habitus und institutionellem Habitus, da sie von der intensiven Erziehung durch die Eltern profitieren. Eltern, die eine Hochschulausbildung nach hochselektiver Prüfung genossen haben, haben ein Gefühl für das Spiel des Bildungsbereiches. Viele haben sich engagiert für die Bildung der Kinder eingesetzt. Die Eltern verbringen mehr Zeit mit den Kindern und legen bei ihren Interaktionen keinen Wert auf feste, rigide Rollen. Dies fördert eine gleichberechtigte Atmosphäre und belastbare Beziehungen, was den Kindern das Gefühl der Enge oder der Angst nimmt, wenn sie aus der Familie heraustreten und andere Erwachsene ansprechen. Außerdem berichten viele Kinder aus der Mittelschicht, dass sie sich gut mit ihren Eltern verbunden fühlen, was den emotionalen Ausdruck und eine tiefgehende Kommunikation erleichtert, mit der sie angeleitet werden, klar und logisch zu sprechen und dabei einen ausgearbeiteten Verhaltenskodex anzuwenden. Eltern aus der Mittelschicht verfügen über einen Überschuss an ökonomischem Kapital, um möglichen Risiken zu widerstehen, und transferieren ihr Kapital in die Bildungschancen und akademischen Vorteile der Kinder. Viele Eltern verfügen auch über das Wissen, wann sie ihre Kinder anschließen und wann sie sie in Ruhe lassen sollten, wenn sie feststecken. Außerdem nehmen sie eine reflexive Haltung gegenüber Hindernissen bei ihrer Kulturübermittlung ein, um eine erfolgreiche Kapitalvererbung an die Kinder zu gewährleisten. Sie versuchen zum Beispiel, die Neugier der Kinder zu wecken, ihren Horizont zu erweitern, ihre Potenziale freizusetzen und zu verhindern, dass sie von verschiedenen Möglichkeiten ausgeschlossen werden. Sie interagieren mit den Lehrern mit einer Haltung der Vernunft und Gleichberechtigung und würden mutig eine bessere Lösung aushandeln, woraus die Kinder lernen, wie wichtig es ist, Hilfe zu suchen und für sich selbst zu verhandeln.

Die „Wendepunkt-“ und „Fehlanpassungsgeschichten“ der Studenten ziehen als Ausnahmefälle einen Zipfel des Schleiers vom Mythos der Bildungsmobilität zurück. In den Wendepunktgeschichten ist das,

was zu einem akademischen Durchbruch beiträgt, eine erfolgreiche Transformation des situativen Habitus in den privilegierten Habitus, was impliziert, dass die Studenten ein neues Denk- und Verhaltensmuster als Teil von sich selbst aushandeln und die Art und Weise, wie sie das Bildungssystem entschlüsseln, verändern. Diese Geschichten haben gezeigt, dass der benachteiligte Habitus der Schüler das Potenzial hat, durch längere enge Interaktionen mit den „Wegbereiter“ in einen privilegierten umgewandelt zu werden, wobei der Aufbau und die Aufrechterhaltung der emotionalen Bindung durch die Wegbereiter sowie die Versuche und Reflexionen der Schüler im Laufe der Zeit die Grundpfeiler waren. In ihren Geschichten fungiert der Lehrer stets als ihr „Wegbereiter“, der sich einem komplexen emotionalen Handwerk bedient, um die Transformation mit einem künstlerischen Ansatz zu erreichen. Das Charisma der Lehrer, das sich in hoher Moral, emotionaler Empathie und der Fähigkeit, den Unterricht interessant zu gestalten, etc. ausdrücken kann, erhöht die Wahrscheinlichkeit einer erfolgreichen emotionalen Bindung und trägt so zur Bildung des situierten Habitus der Schüler bei. Emotionen wie „Scham“ und „Verlegenheit“ und ein Gefühl der Zugehörigkeit spielen zwar eine wichtige Rolle bei der positiven Transformation, aber der neu situierte Habitus ist nicht stabil, da er leicht durch andere Faktoren modifiziert wird und noch mit dem alten Habitus zu kämpfen hat.

Die Misserfolgsgeschichten von Kindern aus der Mittelschicht erinnerten mich daran, wie wenig ich über diese „kleinen Wahrscheinlichkeitseignisse“ wusste, von denen man annahm, dass sie akademisch vielversprechend seien. Geschichten von freiwilligen Minderleistern zeigen überraschenderweise, dass frustrierende Ergebnisse durch die biografische Situation geprägt sein können, von den ungelösten, überwältigenden Verzweiflungen, Qualen und Quälereien, die sich nicht vertreiben lassen. Die Kindererziehung einiger Eltern aus der Mittelschicht wies einige Züge derjenigen einiger Eltern aus der Arbeiterklasse auf, wie in Tings Fall gezeigt wird. Die Mutter, die eine Parallele zwischen einem gut kultivierten Menschen und einer kunstvoll geschnitzten, unvollkommenen Jade zieht, versteht Bildung als den Schleifvorgang eines perfekten Diamanten. Zu diesem Zweck wendet sie eine strenge Erziehung mit harscher Kritik, zynischen Bemerkungen und sogar körperlicher Züchtigung an, die sich als zerstörerisch erweist. Negative Emotionen und psychische Qualen werden von Ting subjektiv erlebt und verursachen ein intensives Trauma. Die Mutter glaubt jedoch, dass das Leiden die Lösung ist, die den

Menschen stärker macht und somit den endgültigen Erfolg und das Glück ermöglicht. Ting fühlte sich wütend auf sich selbst, weil sie akademisch und moralisch unfähig war, woran sie oft von ihrer Mutter erinnert wurde; sie hatte daher oft das Bedürfnis nach emotionaler Verarbeitung und psychologischer Konstruktion und befand sich in einem Teufelskreis. All dies trägt zur selbsterfüllenden Prophezeiung der „Unfähigkeit“ bei. Ein solches Phänomen zeigt, dass das Erziehungsmuster nicht nur durch die soziale Schicht geprägt ist, sondern auch durch andere Variablen wie die berufliche Karriere beeinflusst werden kann, wie im Fall von Ting zu sehen ist. „Korrektur“ und „Autoritätsbeziehungen“ dienen als moralische Codes, die das Navigieren der Mutter in ihrem Berufsleben als Gymnasiallehrerin leiten, und diese Codes werden auf rekursive Weise verstärkt. Das zeigt auch, dass die älteren Eltern aus der Mittelschicht, die mit Geschichten von turbulenten Ereignissen, politischer Verfolgung und wirtschaftlichen Defiziten aufgewachsen, sich im Spalt zwischen zwei Kulturen abmühen. Ihre Situation ähnelt genau der eines Bezirks, in dem die Menschen einen gemischten Akzent aus dem lokalen Dialekt und dem städtischen Dialekt haben.

Zusammengenommen untersucht diese Arbeit das Feld Schule und Beteiligte mit dem Verlaufsansatz in einer maßgeschneiderten Weise, die sowohl Zeitbezogenheit als auch Kontexte ernst nimmt. Die Ergebnisse dieser Arbeit geben einen Einblick in das komplizierte Zusammenspiel von sozialer Klasse, Erfahrungen, Sinnstiftung, Praktiken und den damit verbundenen Machtverhältnissen und deren kombinierten Einfluss auf Bildungsungleichheit.

**Schlüsselwörter:** kultureller Zustand, soziale Klasse, Sekundarschule, Schüler, Identität, Erfahrungen, Flugbahn, Bedeutung, Erzählungen, Bildungsungleichheit, Bildungsmobilität

# CHAPTER 1 - A GENERAL INTRODUCTION TO THIS WORK

## 1.1 Behind this work: myths and identity-shaping

Since this work has its roots in my personal experiences, I finally gather my courage and determine not to imprison them in the dusty box. Although I am not a good story weaver in general, I prevent those experiences from being marginalized and thus offer an autobiographic sketch— one possibility to narrate my story as subjective truths at the start from a particular perspective, presenting my sense-making of a portion of my experiences that have tremendously impressed and shaped me, which I believe constitute a store of inspiration for shaping this work.

### 1.1.1 Family stories that are told and retold

Philosophical positions, extensive observations and valuable insights into social life have been encoded in storytelling. When a particular story is told and retold as it is or is narrated in different ways that have been tailored to different contexts, chances are that it has taken a giant step towards a myth that solidifies a set of ideas that serve particular social arrangements or misconceptions that performs a particular function. Family secrets, stories and myths are undoubtedly important as they set up the basic condition for children who are about to step on a long journey. The family has a powerful meaning to people since its myth about power can harm or heal people (Jones & Warren - Adamson, 2002). Family stories and myths told by the family become part of people's unconscious map of the world (Napier, 1993: 143), and thus have huge social consequences and give rise to unanticipated contingencies.

#### **“He deserved the best”**

Those intricately intertwined forces and cultures—the traditional and the modern, leave an imprint on my mother as a marginal person, tear her identities apart with increased modernity. In traditional China, a highly centralized political and patriarchal system jointly structured the social life, under which men

were preferred while women were educationally deprived (Zhou, 2003). It is known that a dramatic transformation of female roles took place in the 1950s, shortly after the founding of the People's Republic, when post-war economic reconstruction under the context of "political isolation" and "economic blockade" from the U.S. became a huge challenge. The campaign of dragging women out of the house in the 1950s initially took place in the countryside where agricultural cooperation was found for the socialist transformation, which brought women's world upside down. Later, on the national scale, women were called to participate in the labor force under the powerful slogan of "women hold up half the sky" and "liberating women" for the first time. Images of "iron girls" with tooling clothing were created, shaping social expectations on women under the calling of "females are equal with men in every aspect". However, women's liberation remained only a "by-product of the development of society" (Li, 1994). Albeit women's high participation in the labor force, society failed to shatter the patriarchal power structure and bring about a fundamental change in women's oppression status. Women's liberation in China, which calls for their continuous fight, modernization process, as well as democratization, still has a long way to go (Zhou, 2003).

I got a glimpse of my identity construction within my mother's storytelling. My mother spent her whole childhood and adolescence in a traditional society before the phase of China's modernity in 1978. She was brought up in a town enslaved by the feudalist ideology where daily discourses and routinized practices depreciated and mutilated the female and kept telling the female sacrifice herself for the greater good. In that feudalistic family, my mother was disciplined to become a docile daughter and elder sister who strictly respected her parents' authority and scrupulously prioritized others' needs with "the spirit of endurance and sacrifice". Patriarchy empowered my grandfather, making him the absolute power within his scope of power— his family just because of the biological fact of being a male. Even though my mother acted like a "little adult" and took on most of the household chores from an early age, my grandparents treated her and her younger brother distinctively and showed apparent favor towards their son. My mother went to school barefoot while her younger brother could have his shoes. Back then, ordinary families universally felt the pinch and only had luxurious meat in rare sumptuous meals throughout the year. On those occasions when the whole family was sitting around the table, it was my

grandfather who decided which family member was allowed to have meat. It was usually the case that he glutted himself on meat while drinking, and when he was in high spirits from the alcohol, he would signal his son to have two or three slices of meat. My mother talked about that although she had been longing for parents' attention and love, instead of showing the green-eyed monster of her younger brother, she was happy and thankful that her younger brother was nicely treated, because this brother, "with an obvious high emotional intelligence and a pleasant character, was more clever, tactful, diplomatic, and popular". As a social-science scholar who has faith in social constructivist theory, I doubt those descriptions; so I cannot help questioning her if she were given equal opportunity in the family. My mother would then respond powerfully, and sort of angrily that "I could not compare with him! He was an absolutely enchanting and perfect child, so he deserved the best!"

### **A narrow-escape-from-death experience**

My mother narrated and re-narrated her past narrow-escape-from-death experience that happened when she was a seven-year-old girl. Albeit being told in a very relaxed way interspersing with a rain of loud hearty laughter and a sense of humor, this story in fact implied how a daughter was tremendously devalued in the patriarchal structure. I have not been convinced that all those entangled emotions have completely vanished, but rather, they are residing somewhere like a phantom and hence my mother has lingering feelings while telling this story in front of different audiences with divergent impulses. Back then, her family did not have tap water inside the house, and they had to draw water from a nearby well. One day, my mother was about to draw water with a bucket from that well when she accidentally dropped the bucket into the well that was around 15 meters deep. At the thought of the scenario of being hit savagely by her father after coming back home if she lost the bucket for sure, she was weeping and at a loss of what to do next. An idea occurred to her when she saw a person who was passing by. She stopped that person and asked him to assist her in getting that bucket by knotting the well rope around her waist and lowering her down into the well. The mossy well was so deep, and my mother was struggling to touch the wall when going down ploddingly and prudently with arms and legs, feeling increasingly chilly as the depth increased. She finally reached the bucket and clutched it firmly, like catching a life-saving straw.

After she reached the floor from the well, the person who offered the help said that he was wet through and that he regretted offering the help because it was a terribly bad idea. But my mother was super elated despite the danger because she could go home safely with the regained bucket.

When my mother reached home and introduced that thrilling adventure to my grandparents, she was only told by my grandfather that she was not allowed to reveal a shred of this experience within and outside the family anymore, with my grandmother keeping silent just like a bystander. My mother would make a pause after describing that situation every time before she moved on, without forgetting to add that it was not the case that my grandmother had no sympathy, on the contrary, she was an empathetic person, but she had fear of my grandfather's authority, albeit being a professional woman as a middle-school teacher. The female identity, much resembling a whip on the top of the head at any time, always kept reminding my mother of her lowest rank in the family and autonomous sacrifice for her family's collective welfare from an early age. Growing up in that family institution, my mother was good at digesting negative feelings by herself. She gradually negated all those feelings, considering those feelings incorrect and sinful. But I am not convinced that she has totally reconciled with those experiences because those perceptions and feelings would spontaneously pop up at some point.

### **“Use a sprat to catch a mackerel”**

Perhaps the most inspiring thing was that my mother was somehow empowered by education. She worked very hard and did an excellent job at school. She was aware that she must stick to the identity as a high-achieving student since only those very few high-performing students could enjoy tuition waiver at high school, without which she would have been deprived of education for sure because my grandfather would not have agreed to pay the tuition which was a little more than 3 CNY, even though the school was much affordable. She got a very high score in the college entrance examination with which she could have attended a topnotch university, but my grandparents made a choice for her. They demanded that the university should not be far, and it should be a normal university. There were two reasons. Firstly, my grandparents developed fears as they were getting older and told my mother that “while parents are still

living, children should avoid staying far away from home.” The proposal of attending a normal university had been made on the basis of economic considerations. At that time, for counteracting the critical shortage of teachers, normal universities were tuition-free institutions; in addition, normal-university students could receive cost of living subsidies. My mother highly respected her parents’ authority and thus attended a normal university near her hometown.

She was an absolute “overachiever” among victims of feudal ethics with a strong and sterling character who was ashamed of being imperfect while playing her roles. She was a person with zero tolerance of “selfishness” from her side and was interpersonally sensitive with altruism. Thus she is often torn between choices, being extra careful and feeling anxious and troubled. When she left a context, she would recall and re-enter those happened events and trace and go over those interactions, and when particular “negative” things bubbled to the surface in the thinking, she could not help condemning herself for being not so “considerate”, though I doubt that many of her “mistakes” were only her illusions. My mother has the story of “throwing a sprat to catch a mackerel”— an inhouse story with me as the only audience told and retold, which is undoubtedly regarded by my mother as something with valuable educational implications. In China, it is well acknowledged that the relationship between mother- and daughter-in-law tortures the two sides, and multiple reports have shown that mothers have a tremendously high likelihood to feud with a daughter-in-law in Chinese society with the male-dominated power structure. One of the things my mother was most proud of was her good and strong bond with her mother-in-law in the context that very few people could handle well the challenging relationship between mother- and daughter-in-law. My mother told me how she had carefully pleased her mother-in-law and always prioritized her needs throughout their interactions. She was also proud that her spirit of sacrifice was highly regarded not only by my grandparents, but also uncles and aunts from my father’s side, and that she managed to establish herself with a very good reputation in the extended family, which she deemed to be enormously meaningful and important. In this story, it is obvious that personal loss is the sprat while the mackerel serves as the metaphor of the high approval from significant others.

### **Parents could give evenhanded treatment**

In a feudalistic family with the dominant son-preferred value, the daughter is usually treated as an outsider while the son was the real “one of us”. “Dedication” worked as a robust code for constructing the female. The daughter in a feudal family was brought up to internalize her inferior female identity, for which the ruler would first implant female virtues in the daughter which emphasized submissiveness, sacrifice, and unwise, then legitimated her dedication for the collective interests of the family, and then implied or notified the girl that any suspicion of the doctrine was shameful and sinful, better swallow all those miseries alone because those things were normal for a girl— “you are a girl after all”. Even after the grown-up daughter gets married, she still cannot get rid of the plight with feudal ethics floating in the air. Employing “moral kidnapping” as a well-trodden technique, it was not surprising that parents snapped out an order, demanding the “outsider” to support her family of origin economically. This is a game possibly without a bottom line. The situation becomes even more complex if the daughter had a brother where the grown-up sister is expected to sacrifice continuously with her own family’s interests continually being encroached as she is repeatedly reminded that her brother needs to buy a house with a large sum of money for taking a wife in a society that has already entered the phase of the market economy. Society feeds people multiple waves of similar stories, news after news circularly and endlessly, where a sea of female is kidnapped compulsorily or voluntarily.

My mother located and relocated herself through her parents’ parenting, in which she also tried hard to draw a lesson on the basis of sense-making and reflections for better role-playing in the future. With her palpable moral burden, she talked about both firmly and hesitantly like walking a very thin line that, “when I was a young girl at that time, I was always thinking that if I had a daughter in the future, I would definitely invest much time, money, and love on behalf of her without expecting anything in turn. I wish I could show my parents that a daughter could also enjoy everything that a son enjoys, perhaps one day they might find equality is a right thing.” My mother retreated again in the narration, taking a particular place as the origin and around which she took a step forward and then a step backward, just like a tug of war. Although that narration was expressed multiple times, there was always an apparent pause for a word choice between “could” and “should”. Sometimes, the word “should” rose to her lips, but she quickly held it back. Obviously, she is far from being a forceful speaker. She represents a partial rejection of those

feudal doctrines creatively and at the same time, ambiguously—only within a particular framework and according to her experiences and possibilities from those experiences. Shouting out “should” requires much courage implying an unambiguous position a clear-cut attitude against feudalism and its relevant beliefs. But more importantly, it implies a complete breakup of the familiar moral world and a loss of a part of the self. Shattering a deliberately-constructed myth is emotionally drained and exhausted, which brings discomfort and pain that is subjectively experienced.

### **1.1.2 Be a good kid**

When I am looking back on my perception of the self through time, I also commence the action of knitting my life story with scattered impressive events at hand as a memo or plotline. My academic and living experiences through those different stages and in various social contexts as well as the anxiety relating to identity struggles partly constitute the genesis of this work because on the whole. I take on this research issue as a topic which has strong resonances with my tensile life experiences as a child from a teacher’s family with an imprint of the traditional culture in the characterized Chinese educational context and a social-science scholar who has gone through not only role transitions but also significant setbacks. The biographic situation is basic for understanding people, and the so-called concrete facts of common-sense perception are not so concrete as it seems (Schutz, 1996). This research began to take shape with the retrospection of my experiences and their influences in my identity-making, which was becoming especially prominent on the threshold of each role transition. My personal experiences serve as the strong impetus, and the hidden baseline of this study. This study cannot avoid the discussion of the individual’s multiple identities on the axis of time and space.

Individuals’ identities are dynamical and paradoxical across time and space in the era of “fluid modernity” (Bauman, 2013). This work is related to a series of identity-questions such as “who am I?”, “what am I supposed to do” and “how should I behave?” which have been torturing me for a long time. I can offer a chronological sequence of my main role, of course: A child/student who accepted the idea of a planned

life from a teacher's family in the Chinese exam-oriented and teacher-centered context<sup>1</sup>; a social-science student and at the same time a senior who had an intense urge to offer some advice for those highly impressionable younger students; and an Asian doctoral student and a marginal person drifting in Europe who is trying her luck in social science along a winding path. By stringing these main roles and experiences, I sketch my rough life and academic trajectory.

In the early 1980s, my mother was allocated a tiny apartment with only essential equipment in a secondary school, just a few years after the economic reform when there was a significant lack of material comforts. This small apartment lay on the outside of the "yard of female students" accommodating only around a hundred female students, which, together with the yard, constituted a small acquaintance society. Many schools were still confused about their own goals with a fuzzy positioning in the late 1980s, and this school was no exception. It was mainly a grammar school except for a somehow strange non-academic class called "financing and accounting class" which collected students who were falling behind as "academically and morally poor students". This special class was segregated from other classes and located meaningfully in the residential area as our neighbor, which could be seen on the way to the teaching area and the school gate. The teaching staff had been at pains to draw this exclusive and unique class as a vivid teaching material as a negative example, showing their children what is considered bad and educating them to guard against "erroneous" ideas at the outset. The panic of being a bad student has firmly injected into us as teachers' children. I was still impressed that every time we were going through this particular class with our heads high and a clear sense of superiority. The collective identity as a good and obedient child among us teachers' children was being constructed with the differentiation between "them" and "us".

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<sup>1</sup> See Li, Guofang, "Culturally contested pedagogy: Battles of literacy and schooling between mainstream teachers and Asian immigrant parents". Suny Press, 2012: 23. "The teacher-centered approach has standards established for each grade level and specific subject areas are taught separately" and it "uses commercial textbooks such as basal readers that focus on building phonemic awareness and systematic, sequential progression of knowledge and skills in language."

In the early nineties, my family moved into one of those newly-built bungalows in a quadrangle courtyard that were available to the teaching staff. That courtyard was a living community that was quite different from street communities in at least two ways. Firstly, important infrastructure in this daily-life locale—the shared public toilet and slab stones for washing clothes, played a vital role for boosting people's relationship by aggregating them and creating a myriad of opportunities for interactions: adults met and talked on the way between home and public toilet and also during the time of washing clothes together; their children's many activities were also unfolding around the washing slab stones such as playing and pretending, cards playing, hide-and-seek, charades playing, and even the homework doing, among which “teachers and students” was the most popular role-playing game with the most academically high-performing children acting as teachers and the slab stone as the platform. Residential patterns have a significant impact on people's relationships as they make a certain communicational form as well as content possible, which in turn influences people's concept of their “primary group” and makes a traditional acquaintance society possible. Furthermore, we were organized and unified by “collective consciousness” (Durkheim, 1893), which was a series of taken-for-granted beliefs, goals, values, and moral attitudes known, accepted, and internalized by all of the group members. Adults there, with the teacher-identity, many of whom accepted the hard-won tertiary education after the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, were homogenous in that they all devoutly believed in the power of knowledge and education.

Our tile-roofed apartment occurs to me. This apartment, representing the material scarcity in those years, was with the bedroom for the child, the multi-function room (which is also the bedroom for the couple), the tiny yard connecting the multi-function room and a kitchen, and the kitchen. Four lines of this kind of apartments crisscrossed, making up a courtyard. A somber outdoor long-string ceiling lamp, being like a patron saint, was installed in each of the lines of flats. These lamps, hardly conveyed any aesthetic feelings, were far from being lovely, especially when they were dancing rampantly with the strong wind in gloomy days, which created a creepy atmosphere. That kind of lamp, being hanged by a long hemp rope, was uniformly installed in each room inside the apartment as well. My childhood friends and I thought it a nightmare when we had to head to the kitchen from the multi-function room through the dark

yard between in the evening for washing before going to bed. Our story-creation activities around the going-through experiences never stopped. My little fellows repeatedly described their anxiety and fear when they carefully pulled the rope outside the multi-function room to turn on the light in the kitchen across the yard. Stories were differently narrated when they described how they cautiously walked across the dark yard, waited for the sentence from the ghost that might arise at any time, and what happened to them thereafter. Although stories were with different versions, one thing seemed to be common—we should always obey our parents; if not, we would be scolded, punished, and even murdered by the awful ghost in some dark corners in the kitchen.

A cluster of antiquated objects that have been abandoned by this new era also floods my mind— steel plate, iron stylus, and stencil sheet. When computers and printers were not widely available in those days, teachers produced exercise materials and exam papers through the mimeograph. After supper, my mother assiduously sat at her desk, correcting students' homework, and producing teaching materials with the dim light. That set of coherent movements constituted her unshakable practice after class; it was like a mysterious, holy ritual with all piety. It was not suspended even when she broke a bone in the arm after she fell off her bike at a terrifyingly sharp turn with a steep slope. In the drawer of the writing desk, candles were carefully reserved in a drawer in case of an unexpected power cut that happened from time to time. She carved characters in the subtle fragrant waxing paper with confidentially accurate strength, on balance between an anticipatedly satisfactory image and preventing waxing paper from falling apart. It was obvious that she was burying herself in her ideal world while doing this, which could only be suspended by a burst of cheers that obviously celebrated the resumption of electricity supply. In the severe winter, she carved with her hand that was filled with swelling chilblain more cautiously because she was taught by her experiences that waxing paper was more fragile at low temperatures. After finishing wax engraving, the ritual was still unfinished. She fell into the ponder, and sometimes even had some rehearsals, with an obvious attempt to offer the best for students on the sacred platform. The waxing work was then sent to the stencil-printing room, where a skillful worker Mr. Pang was responsible for developing the work. He placed the waxing paper at the opposite of the mimeograph plate, and brushed printing ink on the plate, rolled the cylindrical bobbin adeptly, and then the exam paper was produced.

Mr. Pang was popular among teachers since he was considered as a simple, helpful, and honest guy with a consistent smile and good work ethos. He was glad to do others a favor by accepting additional work and would help to develop the work in hand as soon as possible without any complaint. After finishing developing every piece of work, he scrutinized the papers, and read the beautiful handwriting with a sense of achievement, treating them as precious artworks. On a cold morning, when oxen were still sedulously plowing in the field around the school, grievous news came suddenly— Mr. Pang was diagnosed with terminal non-small cell lung cancer. Some teachers burst out crying with enormous sorrow and regret, lamenting that the toxic chemicals were responsible for his fatal disease while doing the mimeograph work. But soon discourses relating to individuals' sufferings dramatically faded, being replaced by vocabularies of great love and sacrifice that were shaped by the overwhelming national educational slogan of “teachers' candle spirit”, urging teachers to become moral models for the whole society and make a commitment to the nurture of socialism successors and the country's prosperity.

Mr. Pang was quickly replaced and ordinary people's life went on. People adopt a natural attitude in their life-world (*Lebenswelt*) as this “world” is presupposed (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973). I was not given any chance to question the meaning of education and curriculum knowledge then but was imposed the idea that being well educated was the most important and worthwhile thing. My identity as an obedient daughter and a highly-motivated student was quickly negotiated with my dominating “tiger” mother. My father, who was regrettably deprived of higher-education opportunities due to the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, was attaching utmost importance to education and playing supporting roles for my education. For me, life and study were intertwined so closely with each other with my mother's close supervision. I could not separate life from study nor study from life, which made me believe that life was equivalent to study. These practices made obedience, as a moral code, to reside in my mind.

The identity as a submissive daughter was negotiated and confirmed by a series of experiences of living in this secondary-school community, or more precisely, a cultural box, by various means, including passive ones— being trained, being sermonized and being punished as well as active ones— playing, observing, and imitating. Being a good and obedient child, in the Chinese traditional belief system, means

submitting to parents' authority. Furthermore, few people would reject the idea that a good child in modernity is supposed to be a good student at school, preferably acting as a model in the cohort. Most importantly, he or she never fails to achieve enviable good grades in kinds of tests and exams in the exam-centered cultural setting. As a single child from a teacher's family, I understood the importance of education at an early age. Ever since I can remember, I have been bombarded with and most impressed by "knowledge", "science," and "university", which were the most important agenda for their child's education. The bombing of these terms, at the macroscopic level, actually revealed the top-down power infiltration of the state which embraced the ambition of developing itself through science and education for catching up with the developed world.

In this community that was with poor privacy, I, together with my childhood companions, was most impressed about a horrible scene where my neighbor, a good-tempered teacher experienced transient breakdown and asked her daughter to kneel down at the door after a violent hit just because her daughter blew a math exam, which meant to her a disaster and terrible loss of "face". "Stick parenting" was a representative product of paternalist, under which children's struggling growing experiences were shielded and even embellished as "breaking a cocoon into a butterfly". In that circumstance, none of those adults in this community questioned the justification and morality of this corporal punishment because such questioning meant challenging the paternalist that people widely believed in. Later, a math teacher stood out for calming this mother down and expressing his offer of providing some free intensive remedial classes for her daughter. Similar things happened now and then in this community, for which teachers' children were experienced, witnessed, or heard. Once these similar events were seen, reseen, told, and retold and experienced, they were preserved as painful memory and great panic in the innermost soul of children living in the community, making the academic failure of teacher's children an unimaginable thing and rationalizing the corporal punishment. Immersed in the educational discourses and practices praising the high-achievers and punishing underachievers and influenced by a primary group composed of educators and peers with high academic achievement, the majority of teacher's children were obedient and doing well in schooling. In short, I was raised in a traditional acquaintance society with a group of educators and their academically high-achieving children as my primary group, where we closely

monitored and mutually imitated in case of academic failure. We were kept informed of who would be our “learning models” and whom we should draw lessons from. Thus the will of the state— calling on people to become a docile and self-disciplined knowledgeable person for the sake of socialist construction and modernization through certain dominating discourses and practices in the community, silently permeated into my life-world and disciplined my state of mind and behavioral disposition.

I was a silent but absolutely not aloof “insider” at school. This secondary school was a social stage on which young students were deducting their unique vicissitudes of life, leaving a length of the distinct memory about youth and dreams. It was of great significance to me for offering me a small window through which I formulated an impression of secondary school life. Its subtleties with the wider spectrum which was called the society, settled my initial identity, and planted the seeds nurturing my academic interests. Living in the school, with the identity as a teacher’s child, I was exposed to various educational practices, campus activities, and discourses, which enabled me to embrace considerable opportunities for observations of school life while keeping a distance at the same time. In the Chinese secondary educational context where the culture of the mainstream educational system encourages “hardworking” and “conforming” students with hardship-enduring traits, schools manage students by class-division teaching led by a class sponsor with a strict unified schedule, also rigorous school disciplines and behavior control, and some even involve corporal punishments when necessary. However, schools fail to become melting pots for homogeneous, ideal students. Students were sometimes seeking opportunities to “rebel” in this environment filled with rivalry for different underlying reasons.

My mother was constructed as a passionate and sedulous teacher with a high sense of dedication who spent long hours with students and also in lessons-preparation after work. Besides, she never refused close interactions with students’ parents and was always creating opportunities in her spare time for analyzing their children’s learning status at all events. She sedulously and excitedly buzzed over her intense focus— a wide array of things happened within her workplace, heaps of times after work in the family. In this way, I got considerable knowledge and school practices which were supposed to be only restricted to “insiders” and thus, to some extent, better prepared myself at the mind level for further

education from these small daily conversations. Once my identity as an obedient, good daughter was confirmed, I accepted my “deprived childhood” with pleasure when I was sent to various extracurricular classes such as drawing class, zither class, piano class, and dance class, etc. beyond my “part of the job”. I was later aware that I was obsessed with music, which turned out to be one of the most beautiful things that ever happened to me. The teacher from the Music Institute who taught me discovered that I had a talent for instrumental performance and tried to persuade me to spend more time and specialize in musical performance after I passed the highest level for amateurs, but my mother rejected his proposal steadfastly. The stories people live and tell are the repercussion of the lived and told narratives where they are embedded (Clandinin et al., 2006: 2). The selection and transmission of knowledge offer a glimpse of power and control (Bernstein, 2000). Under the macroscopic discourses of “science and technology strengthen the nation”, the values of disciplines were artificially classified and hierarchical— natural science was on top, being followed by liberal arts, and art was pitifully at the bottom in that context. There was a popular saying that “a good mastery of math, physics, and chemistry helps you to travel all over the world proudly” constructing people’s ambition for taking up in natural science. Liberal arts are for less clever students, and art courses like music and drawing, are subsidiary subjects for “fun” but not for exams. This prejudice that repressed individual interest and maximized the state interest shaped people’s popular belief of stressing science over the humanities and belittling art education. Navigating through this kind of belief, people perceive the world what society expected them to know. In this context, people’s worship of science and technology professionals came to a climax. Thus, people believed that only those unwise or underachieving students whose tertiary education opportunities were blocked “had to choose” to study art. The ubiquitous discipline, domestication, and repression, through the configuration of public discourses, rebuild people’s minds, and reshape the desired body, stigmatizing other choices and possibilities, making particular lifestyles superior and others inferior.

At school, the textbooks were published by the state authorities, and courses and exams were designed around those textbooks. We had an exam-oriented educational system with teachers’ authority in the center, under which what teachers said could hardly be questioned, and students mainly played the role of information-receivers and exam-takers. In the exam-oriented system, only “right” and “standard”

answers were acceptable, so the ability to offer the standard and right answers which is trained through teaching activities, endless homework and a good number of “error-correction” exercises is the goal so as to get good marks in exams. For this reason, the pattern is criticized for involving much rote learning. “Just keep your nose to the grindstone.” Students were repeatedly told that and worked quietly with few discussions or reflections because discussions were underestimated compared to exam techniques where technically “guessing” right answers through reasonable inference was an important item. I did not mind if I had any interest in a particular subject or not, but I would make utmost efforts to create the best possible results because my pains and joys depended on my subject teachers’ rating of my exam papers and my class sponsor’s remarks on my school performances on the small red brochure known as student report handbook.

### **1.1.3 A problematic life with role transition: the dilemma of revealing and concealing**

“The sense of being right and being secure that permeated perceptions of the white middle-classes in the last half of the twentieth century, including those of the white middle-classes themselves, is increasingly questionable.” (Reay, Crozier, & James, 2011).

Looking back on my high-school days, I seldom suspected the texts from schoolbooks and took them without a doubt in our educational context with a frenetic climate encouraging “no asking but just throwing yourself to”. Paradoxically, the disposition of being “docile” contributed to students’ excellent command of knowledge acquired by the syllabus. Thus, selected knowledge from textbooks is continuously recognized and mystified; besides, students who have a good grasp of the required subjects become beneficiaries in this educational system. It was through a series of legitimated practices such as teaching and learning, homework doing, answers correcting, as well as successive exams which judged the degree of students’ mastering the required knowledge that my “skepticism” had been subjugated and discouraged. To put it another way, “skepticism” had not been seen, expressed, encouraged, and experienced through practices in my secondary education, neither from teaching, interacting, learning, nor the exam practices, which together constructed my perception of social reality and sense of being.

I experienced a role transition, or more precisely, “discontinuousness” after I entered tertiary education in pursuit of a deeper understanding of human conditions, for which I received systematic training and underwent challenges towards becoming a social-science scholar. Those cultural activities at university, a field where knowledge was produced, significantly contributed to my “skepticism”. With this role transition, the submissive person was becoming increasingly “rebellions”. Staying out of the “game” in the context of secondary education, with an outsider gesture, I had a high awareness of the power relations behind curricula that asserted their truth and legitimacy. This significant stage opened a corner of a different world for me and created some thrusts to move my previous identity. It was on this stage that I became cautious when knowledge was mentioned and first noticed that knowledge was unequally scattered and that how different knowledge and its configuration might work for negotiating people’s sense of being and perceiving, as well as their self-location and relocation.

I was especially inspired by sociological analyses from different paradigms through literature reading and intellectual discussions, among which the critical thinking was the most important but missing in the secondary education that I had experienced. In the meanwhile, my upbringing experiences within the secondary school nurtured my emotional affinity for secondary school students, and I was imperceptibly becoming their reliable senior. Thus my role switching involved both—a social-science student who was receiving academic training and a senior who has gone through the secondary education from whom those younger students perhaps could be benefited a little from information and experiences from my case. From then on, I was no longer a wordless observer that seemly unininvolved or inactive, but gradually changed into a sympathetic senior who had strong will to offer possible help to those young students. I realized that my identity as a senior was possible not only because of my emotional connectedness with those students, but more importantly, it also implied that I possessed some “discourse power” because I was set as a desirable case under this education-evaluation system.

I had some opportunities at times for being invited to “positively influence” high school students because of the symbolic capital I possessed. However, from time to time, I became to realize that I had to compromise by silently slipping into another topic or at least camouflaged my real thoughts at some point

during the process of my monologue in front of those young students because context mattered—I was just expected to be a person who could somehow bring a “positive influence” within the evaluation system. When an individual enters the presence of students, his personal information, including socioeconomic status, competence, and perception of the identity is interpreted by the audience (Goffman, 1959). The statement, as a basic element of discourse, conditions the possibility of knowing and acting (Foucault, 2013). I adopted expedient in this pre-defined context even before I entered where my speech was expected to be “encouraging”, “inspiring”, and “beneficial”. The school, as a bureaucratic organization, is also the component of the state apparatus. Educators’ feeling for the game is already authorized before students enter the classroom (Lawler, 2004). I was unconsciously sided with the educator in this context where a free statement was greatly restricted, and my presentation was highly situated, being subjected to the institutional forces. Giving a lecture for positively encouraging students was actually a game for creating a myth—a fictional social reality, to the rites and institutions of society, which served for sustaining a society (Cassirer, 1946), somehow sacred, moving and inspiring, which required the conspiracy of those above-mentioned educators and me, with the identity as the handpicked “winner”, under that existing educational system.

Private chatting with young students was another story for me because I had a higher level of freedom to make a decision, which also meant that I was vacillating between “revealing” and “hiding”. I had an awareness of the fact that the strong state power was penetrating into both the belief system and school practices partly owing to the textbooks, which were powerful for fabricating myths and disciplining minds. Besides, the truth of the knowledge from textbooks was exacerbated by exams for its considerable input to the culture of routinized, textbook-centered teaching (Kumar, 1986). I found another *me*—the earlier self, in some young students whom I was lecturing—they were also “called upon”, “imposed”, and “trained”, but not “educated” or “cultivated” to be “knowledgeable people”. Exams highly structured “objective knowledge” as standard answers were expected to be written so as to get high marks, during which students are grouped into different tracked classes according to their perceived “academic capacity”. For this reason, there was a range of concerns as I realized that my free-will expressions on some “sensitive topics” were possibly inappropriate as they might increase the likelihood of some

students' emotional crises. It thus, in turn, caused adverse effects on their academic performances. Should I dishonestly conceal some ideas or simply avoid such kind of discussion? Entangling myself in those ethical issues, I gradually learned to adopt situated strategies and was accustomed to making temporary expedients, either revealing or concealing, depending on the location and categories of the students involved. For ensuring the smooth running of this practice, I needed to arrange and label them into different categories by the principle of resemblance, which was the most crucial step as well.

"Resemblance that largely guided exegesis and the interpretation of texts; it was resemblance that organized the play of symbols, made possible knowledge of things visible and invisible, and controlled the art of representing them" (Foucault, 2005: 19)

However, my classification practices were, after all, my subjective judgment, which might be wrong and made prejudice possible, because when I marked one variable of a student, I left many other sides unmarked (Luhmann, 2001). My classification practices reminded me of the possible influences of teachers' similar classification practices and differential treatments, being whether situated or not, in students' identity construction and injustice in the educational process. These classification practices were socially constructed, and my decision of "revealing" or "concealing" were highly situated, which revealed some truth of people's problematic life with a certain degree of crisis in this differentiated society where individual perplex and anxiety universally existed. Given that people's everyday life is problematic, one of the most important tasks of social science is to reveal the involved entanglement before offering a solution.

My identity as a social-science student, together with my experiences of being a kind of educator who was supposed to bring instantaneous "positive impact" on those students, made me unsatisfied with answers for educational inequality from the economic perspective and irritated my impetus of conducting a fieldwork for getting a better understanding of the complex, detailed, and subtle social processes in people's practices both on and off campus which contributed to students' believing and behaving and in turn, the inequality and reproduction, under the framework of the more reflexive socio-cultural approach.

#### 1.1.4 A rocky path with a paralyzed life: inside out and back again

“Missing from most of this research, however, is explicit attention to how people interpret the course of their lives in light of the adversity they have experienced.” (Schafer, Ferraro, & Mustillo, 2011)

The train of my life continued, and it seemed that if no deeply traumatic event happened, I was kept on the prescribed track towards what I had expected. However, the sudden family disaster paralyzed my family and kept me out of the track. The first half of that devastating journey was an unexplained reason for my father’s long-lasting terrible ordeal like obstructive jaundice, gastric distension, pains, insomnia, anorexia, and emaciation, and depression where his doctors did palliative operations two times where they found no evidence of cancer. While the doctors told us to take a watch-and-wait approach, I had a looming notion that the first possibility was bile duct carcinoma, so I kept observing him while burying myself in piles of medical journals, pinning my hope on an earlier diagnosis. It turned out that my father received the clinic report after 11-months intense suffering, being diagnosed with stage 4 pancreatic cancer. The most impressive part was his waning after that diagnosis at an alarming rate. My mother and I watched him shrink from 72 kilograms to only 38 kilograms, turning into a shell of skin and bones. Although I realized all of my endeavors for rescuing my father were probably in vain when I got to know the fact of the lowest survival rate of this life-threatening disease among all kinds of cancers after I gathered all the available data from medical journals and forums, I was still wholeheartedly immersed in doing everything that might help a bit, as a placebo—gaining medical and nursing knowledge, consulting and discussing with my alumnus’ friends who were experts in this field besides my father’s treating physician, searching for relevant information from medical forums, researching on some targeted drugs which had not been approved by China authority but could be bought from informal channels as spurious medicines, and on-line corresponding with other family members of cancer patients etc. On the other hand, back then, I experienced enormous anxiety disorders with the catastrophic situation while putting my academic research on hold.

My father had silent observations on me and could put his feet in my shoes even in that devastating journey. He apparently determined to support me, as ever. I was more than heart-wrenching every time

when I recalled the scene where my father kept reminding me of my identity as a doctoral student who had gone astray in his way while I was staying at home for his excessively painful disease. One day, he abruptly flew into a rage for no good reason with a much furious look, shouting at me with his few remaining energy, *“I’m really worried! There must be something wrong. You are to be ashamed of yourself for wasting time on senseless activities and wasting your life! I don’t want to see you being around me any more! Get out of here and go back to your university! Well, if you stubborn donkey had to be here, get down to your business! Do it right away!”* Thus while I privately continued doing something for my father with false hope, as a placebo, I began to do the “right thing” as far as the identity as a scholar was concerned. I embarked on this work, under traumatized suffering and enormous pressure, by going back and forth between literature reading and trial investigation. I insisted on reading beside him because I knew the time left for us was so precious and numbered by days. My father felt somehow relieved for that, and my mother bore the overwhelming burden, economically, spiritually, and physically. In this most difficult period, with a sense of fear and inability, I always had an unreasonable temper toward myself.

With enduringly extraordinary clutches of cancer pain plus debilitating symptoms, including severe inappetence, insomnia, fever, and emesis, my father developed progressive cachexia, and his body was dehydrating and decaying bit by bit. Having to face the whole traumatic process where my dearest father was devoured by the monstrous and ravage disease was so far the worst thing I have ever had to experience. My family felt completely devastated beyond words that we desperately turned to traditional Chinese medicine as the slightest little chink of light in the cold and dark tunnel when modern medicine bemoaned its inadequacy in the face of this fatal disease, with a glimmer of hope of the miracle. Regrettably, this false hope was quickly smashed by the cruel reality.

It was an inclement winter. I stood by the window that was bestrewed with vapor in a trance. My mother had an uneasy foreboding of the grief-stricken moment in the hospital in that frigid afternoon, so she hurried to her workplace to arrange relevant things about her students for the next three days. She could not help crying inconsolably with unbearable pain because my father met his demise only around half a minute before she returned to his ward, which was the cruelest part for her. I had deep-seated fears to face

that saddest moment, and when it ultimately came in my life, I felt emotionally numb and could not believe the disease had stolen my father in a gruesome and drawn-out manner. This numb faded a couple of days later when I began to realize that it was not a dream but the atrocious reality, being replaced by overwhelmingly stabbing and sharp grief that was coming in waves which I could literally feel. As a daughter brought up in a family with love and immense support, I had included my parents in my future. Countless what-if scenarios tortured my minds. I perceived that all the things I possessed collapsed because I believed that they made sense only if my parents witnessed what I was becoming. I felt at a formidable loss of everything that I would call life, which left me deep trauma and caused post-traumatic stress disorder. For a quite long time, I spent my days in a stream of tears and had endless sleepless nights and numerous moments when my emotions overcame me, which also meant that I could hardly arrange routine pieces of stuff in daily life. Past happy and melancholy remembrances alternatively came in mind, bringing me enormous pain. I avoided going out for protecting myself being hit because every man who was in their fifties reminded me of the loss of my father. I definitely got jealous and collapse in tears when I saw my friend's post where her father had walked her down the aisle, but my father will not show up in my special moments anymore and they ultimately become moments that are tinged with continuous yearning and sorrow. Surprisingly, I could hide with trembles for a whole day, and being crippled with traumatized grief, even a doorbell or telephone ring would frighten me, which was beyond my comprehension. I was impressed that a catastrophic event could overwhelmingly paralyze a person's life, causing disorder, paranoia, depression, and frustration, for which people need psychological reconstructions.

How should I continue living my life with the instantaneously different world? I was reminded that I was not secured a place outside of the vulnerable group which was a purely relative concept. I believed that I should cope independently with post-traumatic stress and feelings, and difficulties that had descended to me. The daunting challenge also came from the situation that I should continue my study as a marginal person in Europe. I generally found myself, was like an out-of-orbit train, in a precarious situation, and urgently needed to reconstruct my self-identity. My first try, unfortunately, proved to be an absolute failure. The thing was that I could not pick up the knowledge I have learned and recover the train of thought

quickly after a long period of depression, nor could I effectively organize my study with an exhausting heart. I increasingly had a sense of guilt for little progress, which made me a disappointing person—“What a disaster I am!” I quickly began to underestimate my capabilities and constantly bemoan my fate again—“Why did I deserve this punishment?” “Do I deserve happiness anymore?” I made continuously multiple conversations with myself, which resulted in a specific opinion—usually the extreme one, forth and over again.

It was through rounds of introspection which made the familiar unfamiliar that I made a better sense of what had caused my status quo. Vacillating between self-bemoaning and self-motivation, I finally ventured to give myself another opportunity. When I embarked on a conversation with my mind, I consciously paid attention to positive self-conditioning by giving more tolerance for my negative perception of the self, which helped to work off my anger and dissatisfaction. Every time I made diminutive and incremental progress, I rewarded myself and gradually found that it was possible to go bit by bit towards the track. I realized that the macroscopic teacher-centered, paternalistic context, and family stories had shaped me as a person who hated to cause troubles in the situation when I get stuck. At the individual level, myths of my family encouraged the formation of my imagination of the tough self, which prompted me to silently and independently cope with struggles, difficulties, and failures. On the other hand, I felt a great tension between a silent person and an effective scholar, I thus was struggling to get myself onto a path by stepping outside the cultural box. It was through this repeated reflection with struggles and detours, twists, and turns, my new identity, which was based on my former self, was gradually negotiated.

“It is through one’s own dearest hopes and deepest fears that the phenomena of this world show up. This is why it is important to constitute these phenomena through a philosophical vocabulary of being-in-the-world, because in this way we can appreciate the human processes through which human subjects come to be of the world of their environment.” (Charlesworth 2000: 61)

Wandering between home and abroad, metropolis and towns through my life journey, I have embraced a cascade of tensions and transformations. I thus have experienced multiple identities and perceived various

self-images, especially, while I was in the threshold of role transition, I was suffering because of a strong sense of self-suspect, which further helped to develop the core idea of this work. Making sense of ourselves, which is easily taken for granted, is not an easy task that required much introspection. I increasingly cannot imagine interpreting other people's lives without a deep understanding of the nexus of institutional factors behind my own self-identity transformations in my life journey. Self-identity sets the limit on the scope of our possibilities; it is not constructed in an isolated way but is shaped and reshaped through multiple continuous or discontinuous experiences with the interplay of various factors. The Annual Educational Statics can be inaccurate and biased while dwarfing individuals' meaningful experiences and sense-making process. My winding experiences studying in abroad reminded me of the importance of the life-course approach for educational studies, especially for current Chinese society that is undergoing tremendous transformations with a sea of marginal persons being coerced hastily by modernity. For deep describing the complexity of how people are in their status quo, I need to adopt the method of the index and turn to the long wire of the very individual's family archaeology, impressive prior events as well as the on-going happenings in the time and space coordinates. The topic was then set down to explore young students' experiences in their life journey with connected or disconnected impressive events and the hidden power relations which negotiated their identities in the secondary-education context in China.

### **1.1.5 From me to younger students with attenuant discourses**

Education anxiety unprecedentedly floats in the air in contemporary China, which is greatly due to the precariousness of the social class in the last few decades. The country has been experiencing rapid transformations at an unprecedented speed and scale. Shortly after the founding of new China in 1949, the fixed assets of the former elite families were confiscated and nationalized with the Chinese Land Reform movement (1950-1952) which declared to eradicate class distinctions. In the decade-long Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), a surprising number of intellectuals and capitalists suffered a heavy blow. In quick succession after conceding the catastrophic costs of this movement, a plethora of national political conferences in the late 1970s and early 1980s introduced socialist reform, announced the adoption of the market economy and thus attempted to produce bourgeois and rekindled their interests,

flipping people's world upside down. Along this road, with major events like the housing privatization in the 1990s and the accession to WTO in 2001, China has experienced an economic boom in recent years, giving rise to the widening gap between the rich and the poor and the correspondingly increasing consciousness and discourse of social class. The widespread opinion about academic success has transformed from "hard work and intelligence legitimate academic success" to "social class and effort together shape academic triumph". As the importance of social class is becoming increasingly well-acknowledged, people tend to take the purchasing power of different families for providing children shadow education as the most significant factor contributing to the scholastic differentiation. Underneath the visible purchasing power are parents' hardly noticeable child-rearing strategies, which involve cultural conditions in the wider social contexts and considerably influence how children are performing and unfolding. As a whole, adults are authorized with dominance in educational activities, while children's voices are suppressed to different degrees in this education system. There is little tolerance of children's expression of the fluid of their emotions and feelings and little space of children's interest articulation, leading to misunderstanding, opposition, trauma, and other thorny problems. In Lareau's *Unequal Childhood*, she has demonstrated that inequality is always awake in the U.S.—a nation with a widespread assumption of equality and the myth of freedom, with education in a variety of families as an illustration. This work is committed to examining the educational inequality and its existing myths in secondary education in the Chinese context with a high school as a disclosure where the disempowering young students are hardly allowed to make a voice.

## 1.2 The background of this research

The ever-growing anxiety in education in an "involved society", the ignorance of students' subjectivity and voices in educational activities, and little knowledge of areas with a "mid-level-modernity" are the main backdrop of this study.

### 1.2.1 Ever-increasing anxiety in education

Discourses of education anxiety are increasingly floating in the air in Post-Reform China. China's modernization lasts for over 40 years.<sup>2</sup> Before that, the concept of keeping the correct political identity with unpropertied status was deeply rooted in people's minds through the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). The initial stage of the reform reshuffled interests, turning peoples' worlds upside down. For the purpose of a more dynamic and productive market, the transformation of a production-led into a consumption-led economy became the government's overriding economic priority. Under this philosophy, the privatization and commercialization of housing came into being and housing prices in urban areas rocketed in a very short time. Monstrous wealth and extreme poverty are attained only within a generation like magic. The period of the most drastic changes in wealth distribution has passed. Having observed or perceived that the previous extreme "leap" or "bungee" of the social class showed increasing signs of slowing down, lower-status groups work against time to catch up, taking every train as the last train. Their counterparts—those who have achieved the middle-class status, being impressed by the vulnerability of such a superior identity, put up a desperate fight to maintain their advantages.

### 1.2.2 Students' silence in narration

In the "teaching to the exam" context, adults are authorized with absolute dominance in education discourses and practices, while young students have long been expected to be mute machines. Sometimes, students do give voices and their voices are heard and transmitted, but chances are that these students are only used by the dominant ideology as pacesetters for their peers; on the contrary, the experiences of the "mediocrity" and "losers" are taken as not being worth mentioning.

"What are we asking this oracle whose voice is almost indistinguishable from the rumble of history to license us, to authorize us to say, when we dedicate to him the writing that one formerly offered in praise of the gods or the inspiring muses? This anonymous hero is very ancient. He is the murmuring voice of societies. In all ages, he comes before texts. He does not expect representations. He squats now at the center

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<sup>2</sup> It is widely acknowledged that The Third Plenary Session of the 11<sup>th</sup> Central Committee of the Communist Party of China in 1978 marks the beginning of China's modernization.

of our scientific stages." (Certeau, 1984, ((v)) For-forord)

The reason why "murmuring voice" of the disempowered group and their problematic life-world should be further understood lies in the fact that the overwhelming majority of current cultural publications report "social reality" from an elitist perspective whose texts exclude, flatten or dwarf the ordinary mass. These narratives tend to simplify the social complexity—to mystify the holiness, stigmatize the mediocrity, legitimate inequality, and punish the apostates with a condescending stance of simply ignoring ordinary people's struggle and sufferings in their life experiences. This situation compels scholars to devolve toward a new understanding of the social facts through more solid work. For education studies, the problem of a lack of ordinary people's perspective was taken seriously after intellectual rebels in the late 1960s. Since 1970 when the British Sociological Association held the Durham Conference to make a quick response to the "linguistic turn" and "semantic turn" in social sciences, there have been calls for a "new sociology of education" pursuing to disclose various institutional socially-constructed myths that underlie the so-called truth. Work portraying the educational, ecological pictures through concrete happenings, micro-events, and people's perception of them is required to be done, which contributes to better understanding the dynamical interplay and tensions among the wider social milieu, the local operations of educational institutions and people's ideographical unfolding experiences. This assignment has been far from being finished so far. Hence this work puts an emphasis on placing people, especially including those ordinary persons, in the framework of specific time and space.

Many ideas of this study are sprouted from critical theories such as feminism, neo-Marxism, and sociology of knowledge. Surrounded by a plethora of socially-constructed myths, ordinary people have never been secured a place without being marginalized or abandoned. However, this does not mean that they would rather be passive puppets. Instead, they have never ceased continuously explicating the meaning of their life, understanding their living conditions, and responding to the external stimuli accordingly. To put it another way, ordinary people are in the non-stop process of becoming somebody through the relational practices of identification (Dillabough & Kennelly, 2010), especially in the current social condition where pluralism is increasingly ingrained in various practices. Resources are not evenly

distributed, and people do not get equal access to knowledge, both of which contribute to social diversity and complexity. People's everlasting receiving and reacting in multiple specific social contexts that set limits on the spectrum of what can be thought and done constitute their unique personal experiences. These experiences, in turn, are essential for developing, constructing, and negotiating their perception of their beings and relations to the outside world, which, together with the on-going experiences, further evolve people's identity. As such, experiences, and identity are in never-ending, interdependent, and interdynamic construction, thus circumscribing people's future possibilities of their life chances.

Education is rather the educational result instead of education itself or is rationalized education since education is only valued if it were rationalized as the outcome of choices made or to be made (Rose, 1996). The tragedy of education today seems to be that people are accustomed to talking about education centering only on students' academic performances demonstrated by standard exam scores from adults perspectives, which is manifested on policymakers' official discourses of the self-evident relation among scholastic achievements, a promising future, and national rejuvenation, extensive coverage of the most successful students' anecdotes from loads of media, schools' rigorous acceptance criteria, dominance from teachers and parents in educational practices, with total ignorance of young students' subjective perceptions and experiences. This phenomenon partly owes to the inclusive social influences of the overwhelming mainstream discourses that appraise "advanced" knowledge, rationality, efficiency, competence and competition, and the social pressure encouraging productive persons at disposal. Society worships the strong, has little to tell lower-status children, with limited resources, how to avoid potential pitfalls and ensure smoother access, just unlike what it has done for their counterparts. Still, their many precious and transient moments when they are feeling pride and also those episodes, which are full of pain, frustration, and despair, are regarded as insignificant and simply set aside. For educators, the paradox lies in that, on the one hand, students' subjectivity is simply ignored and even suppressed because it is regarded as "messy code" or "disturbing variable" for successful educational results, i.e., the ideal college acceptance rate, advocated by the educational system; on the other hand, a degree of an understanding of students' traits, abilities, and mental activities are regarded as a portion of class sponsors' managing tasks that serve the goal of ensuring the normal order of teaching activities and promoting the

school's reputation. A deeper understanding of those neglected, complex, and entangled students' experiences, voices, interests, and identity process opens a new perspective of the educational landscape and involved inequality.

This situation prompts me to delve into the raw and chaotic world where people's stories are unfolding, so as to see what is really going on there and gain a better understanding of what they have experienced, what these experiences mean to them, how they keep locating themselves in the jungle of struggle and tension, how they understand their relationship with the outside world and in which way they react accordingly. So as to further understand the nexus of discourses, meaning, actions, practices, and power, scholars should be less egoistic, more open to other realities and never stop exploring the distribution of beliefs of universalism and the symbolical boundary between different groups (Lamont, 1997: 85) through peripheral details. It implies that more research should be done to follow the pathway paved by the "revolters" of the traditional sociological "orthodox"— Bourdieu, Lefebvre, Schütz, Bauman, Harvey, Luhmann, Foucault, Certeau and so on. First-hand data collection— an ethnographical inquiry into people's experiences and their sense-making of their lives, is the commitment of this work.

### **1.2.3 Deserted corners off the texts**

In the 1978 economic reform, the previous chairman of the nation, Deng Xiaoping addressed the issue of "the relation between 'the rich first' and 'common prosperity'". Deng pointed out that, facing the status quo of the nation, the priority of development must be given to some regions which enjoyed great potential for economic development, making them rich first; after the goal was met, there would be the second step whose purpose was achieving the entire population into development and prosperity through the driving force from those developed areas. Deng put that it did not matter if a cat was white or black, as long as it caught mice. The 1978 economic reform is an important historical time that rendered convenience to urban growth at an astounding speed. According to the sixth national population census in 2010, the registered urban residents have reached 49.68%. In the revival phase from 1979 to 1996, an assortment of policies, including Household Responsibility System, industries owned by townships and

villages, One-Child Policy, the relaxation of state control, and the operation of market reforms, have all together speeded up urbanization (Ruibo & Linna, 2013).

The majority of educational research was done with the quantitative approach in the Chinese academic community. But the importance of the qualitative approach in educational studies cannot be overstated in the current situation. A Chinese scholar put forward that China's educational ethnography helps to promote understandings of those aspects: education and cultural diversity, education and cultural process, education and ethnic groups, education and socially disadvantaged group, local knowledge and academic achievements of minority groups, and the cultural character of Chinese education (Ba, 2008). It is a self-evident truth that China is a humongous country with unbalanced development and different structural systems among areas. The best resources are distributed in the first-tier cities that are with political, economic, and cultural significance, which rampantly causes various kinds of inequality among areas. Hitherto, much of the literature on Chinese education has concentrated either on the highly developed metropolis such as Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen, or the most undeveloped regions, mostly rural areas<sup>3</sup> and the area of ethnic minorities<sup>4</sup>, with ignorance of areas such as second-tier and third-tier cities that were in their rapid process of modernity. The focus of the former is how anxious middle-class parents are fighting for premium-quality education opportunities with a packet of plans,

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<sup>3</sup> Literature includes Shulei Li (1999), “Country’ in the Village: Rural Schools in Cultural Change”, Zhejiang People's Publishing House; Hongchang Si (2009), “The School Embedded in the Village: A Historical Anthropological Inquiry into Ren Village Education”, Education Science Press; Yuanling Tu (2010), “Local Education in the Village”, Shanxi Education Press.

<sup>4</sup> Literature includes Shanze Li (2002), “Fieldwork and Educational Connotation Analysis of the Fertility Culture”, Southwest Normal University Press; Xing Teng (2001), “Cultural Change and Bilingual Education”, Education Science Press; Tongkai Yuan (2004), “Entering the Bamboo Fence Classroom: An Ethnographic Study of Tuyao School Education”, Tianjin People's Publishing House; Zhengfa Liu (2007), “Educational Anthropology Research of Liangshan Yi people’s Jiazhī Cultural Heritage”; Zhanlong Ba (2008), “School Education and Local Knowledge from the Perspective of Anthropology: A Century of Modernity in a Rural Community in Northwest China (1907-2007)”, Doctoral Dissertation; Aga Rehamo & Stevan Harrell (2018), “Theory and practice of bilingual education in China: lessons from Liangshan Yi autonomous prefecture”; Hongcheng Shen (2018), “The Social Logic of Educational Governance: A Case Study of Governing Dropout in Mufeng Middle School”, Social Science Literature Press. The list goes on.

while the concerns of the latter deal with the tensions between modernity and folk culture inheritance, policies and strategies against drop-outs, and left-behind children's education, etc. However, those "mediocre" areas are of equal importance for a comprehensive understanding of the whole picture of the educational landscape in China. Thus this research, which is an ethnographic study, seeks to contribute to filling the research gap by developing the empirical approach of ethnographic inquiry into the underexplored experiences of students with different family backgrounds at an upper secondary school in a newly-instituted district of a second-tier city in China, which was with a different economic structure and social fabric from the highly developed cities or underdeveloped areas like rural areas or ethnic minority areas.

### 1.3 Research purpose and questions

Focusing on an upper secondary school which is embedded in the wider social context and its students whose experiences and voices are usually taken for granted, this work aims to understand how students' prior experiences interact with the on-going practices, which further constructs and negotiates their sense of self in the current educational context which highlights social, cultural and historical, ethical, and emotional aspects in the framework of time and space. Making young students' interests central and their experiences free from being frozen, this work aims to understand students' experiences and the culture inside through participatory observation and students' narratives about their kinds of personal experiences, their memorable moments and episodes which greatly contributes to their identity construction. Specifically, under the background of urbanization, by framing Yeyun school as a field of social disclosure, I study how the cultural landscape shapes their educational experiences in which they are guided into particular ways of knowing and acting, how the social and historical operations are there for creating cultural images, and how people struggle against power imposed on them, hoping that light could shed on these practices for an improved understanding of how cultural inequality was produced and operated through trivial pieces of stuff in the daily practices. Based on this, I will further discuss the hidden thorny obstacles and possibilities of upward educational mobility.

The complexities of different people's narratives may shape new illuminating answers to this question. Meanwhile, this study of school practice raises further questions about what educators are for so as to promote overall students' academic accomplishment but not only a portion of them. This work thus takes a different approach. A principal aim is to examine students' identity construction through on-going campus practices in different spatial locations within the school without ignoring their memory and narratives constructing their past experiences. Employing a critical socio-cultural perspective, this research takes Yeyun school as a field where actors with their habitus and capital are struggling for improving their being conditions; it aims to exhibit the hidden causes of secondary education inequality in the light of social constructionism through the exploration of the process the multi-layer knowledge created by all walks of people including social norms and value systems, authoritative knowledge, curriculum knowledge, tacit knowledge (Polanyi, 1962), undercurrents of shared experience, stock of knowledge at hand shaped by their intended social interaction and their language use in the routine practices. The research aims to achieve these goals: through a careful examination of the knowledge and secret strategies that the hierarchical families employ for reproducing social classes in the complicated situation of jointly scheming for establishing a "field" to disclose the power relations that dominate and construct people's experiences; aside from a careful scrutiny of the intricate relations of knowledge and power, this study emphasizes the great importance of narratives of the participants from all walks of life. It is a study about embarrassment, suffering, pain, frustration, and struggle as it is about courage, emotional processing, perseverance, commitment, and dream, each of which has a particular potential to be a vital turning point in their life journey.

"The realm of being is a mixture of the precarious and problematic with the assured and the completed (Dewey, 2008). Habitus is malleable and adaptable to other contexts of socialization, increasing or decreasing the life chance for mobility (Daenekindt & Roose, 2013). Atkinson has discussed the relationship of institutional habitus (school ethos) and family habitus (family spirit) (Atkinson, 2011) with the conclusion that:

"Sometimes there will be a clash, sometimes there will be compromise or adaptation and sometimes there

will be harmony, but equally there can be all types of contradiction, ambivalence and ambiguity sedimenting into young minds and setting them on their individual trajectories.”

In light of the above discussion, offering an ethnographic picture of students’ everyday lives and experiences are taken as important in this research. This work methodologically emphasizes narratives for understanding people’s past experiences and on-the-spot observations and in-depth interviews for knowing those on-going happenings in the research field. Following this line of thinking, by framing a regular high school in a second-tier city of China as a disclosure and making people’s storytelling central, this ethnographic work aims to better understand the school field by placing it into a wider and radically changing social context as well as people’s narratives concerning their past stories and on-going experiences in the school field, which together have produced accumulative effects on their identity making; on the basis of that, it goes on to discuss the scope of educational inequality and mobility from some minor details of past experiences and “nonessentials” of the current schooling practices, with a shift from viewing school as an organization producing homogenous stereotyped one-dimensional students that persists social media or annual official report who are labeled as either “good students” or “bad students” with the top-down perspective, towards an idea of school as a living social setting in which students are persistently interpreting the meaning of a series of campus routine practices and impressive events in various situated contexts, which contributes to students’ identity construction and possibility with a “bottom-up” angle, without ignoring the broader social context where they are embedded. Another related aim is to understand students’ cultures, and their interpretation as well as the interrogation of their own identities through their unique experiences in the contexts of both the school and family. Students’ identities are highlighted through their communication with parents, teachers, and peers in particular situations, hence the social process for identity construction— interaction transmitting information and knowledge should be carefully studied.

“From a cultural dynamical perspective, it is best to look for situated social activities that may contribute to the maintenance of the cultural differences in conceptions of the self.” (Kashima, Foddy, & Platow 2002: 219).

The current campus daily practice as well as important events, and students' past memorable episodes in their life journey which trigger their identity and also, the dynamical relationship between students' perception of identities and their academic achievement in specific time and space are studied by highlighting both the institutionalized course and subjective biography. The research purposes render themselves into these three series of interlinked overarching questions:

1. How does Yeyun school legitimate itself in society through external and internal operations and demonstrate a particular institutional habitus?
2. Is there a particular boundary of cultural practices of different social status groups? If so, how do children with a specific social origin thrive and flounder at school, thus reproducing ever-lasting educational inequality?
3. How do academic mobilities occur at the school? What can be expected from the school institution for dealing with the everlasting educational inequality?

So as to answer these above questions, more specific sub-questions for investigation should be addressed in the analyses, for instance: How is Yeyun school related to the wider social context socially and politically with the passage of time? What are those explicit and implicit rules for doing school? What are the social and economic conditions of the student population pool there? What kind of value systems their parents try to pass on to them? How are these students navigating in the filtered reality that they have known, making their lives meaningful? Is there any moral boundary among those children? What school and family myths exist there to purposively guide and socialize students, directing certain kinds of identity and causing possible tensions? Which typical practices are likely to intrigue students' reflections on their identities? How are those experiences paraphrased and remembered? How are students' identities further negotiated in the tension between the family context and the school context? In which way students' sense of their identities structure their specific behavioral patterns and limit their possibilities? What are the institutional norms, social processes and interactions that have enabled certain kinds of knowledge to dominate people's daily discussions at school, including why and how students'

sub-culture takes shape, how the social processes and context work to negotiate tacit knowledge and how the internal interaction patterns become structured? What patterns of these students' academic trajectories emerge? How do transformations occur, contributing to educational mobility?

## 1.4 Contents of forthcoming chapters

For achieving the research aim, this work is divided into eight chapters in total, which is described as follows so as to guide the readers adequately. The next substantive chapter provides the theoretical framework of this work. Firstly, it gives an overview of sociology's engagement with education, including inequality and reproduction within different theoretical paradigms. This provides the context concerning which calls for a "new" sociology of education are to be understood. It then moves on to clarify some core concepts and theories which string up and structure the research questions. Chapter three clarifies the philosophical stance, methodology, specific methods, research design that underpin this work as well as ethical issues that are concerned.

Chapters four, five, six, and seven make up the principal part of this dissertation, presenting the result of the ethnographical data. Chapter four, which is divided into two sections, aims to offer an analysis of the interplay of the educational policy and specific local practices contributing to a deeper understanding of the background where people's stories are unfolding. The first section presents the evolution of the Chinese educational policies and relevant historical backgrounds, including the introduction of the westernized modern school system evolved from a traditional basis, the suspension of education in the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, and great educational changes in the new era with a more mature reflection of the balance between the red and expert, as well as equality and efficiency. In section two, I begin to unpack the data, outlining the school in the wider social context, the portrait of the school, as a context encouraging a particular identity, thus praising some students while expelling others, through the minor details such as the emerged important transformations of the space arrangements at school, the current organizational forms, governance, and practices in the crevice between the modern and the tradition.

From chapter five to chapter seven, I present the result of the biographical study of 68 students with a wide range of family backgrounds at Yeyun school. I reveal the comprehensive first-hand data collected in the field in narrative form as students' life stories as well as on-the-spot observations of the on-going happenings, among which chapter five is concerned with the underclass children, then chapter six the working-class children, and chapter seven the middle-class children. These chapters aim to understand student's life-world, i.e., the historical, cultural, and social milieu where they live with certain stories being telling and retelling that shapes their understanding of themselves. The results were interwoven with students' quotations from their narratives since their "voices" are the focus of this study. The respondents' twists and turns are shown here through "thick description"; the distribution of knowledge and power is extended discussed. Reading beyond the lines, I attempt to weave those scattered events, words of those participants, and the current practices at school into cohesive stories, and on this basis, convert those stories on less problematic knowledge about students' experiences and their identity construction, as well as inequality and possible cultural upward mobility in the secondary education in China.

This work ends in chapter eight, which spells out a series of tentative conclusions describing how the school—the field or the container where students' life stories are unfolding, interacts within the wider social context encouraging modernization and the resulting consequences, in an attempt to answer what the school implies for students from different backgrounds with their individual history, habitus, and experiences. This chapter further reveals how educational inequality is negotiated through the lens of students' experiences as well as certain patterns of those circulating school practices, discourses, and misconceptions at school. Besides inequality, the conclusion section also implies how mobility is possible. Finally, limitations, contributions, and suggestions for further studies are dealt with.

## 1.5 Summary

This chapter generally introduces the genesis, backgrounds of this research as well as research purpose and questions. A lack of literature of the educational landscape in second-tier cities with a "bottom-up"

view and the subjective reflexive review of my personal experiences serve as significant impetuses for this study methodologically. On the one side, there are various circulating socially-constructed myths in China's secondary education; the other side is the deficiency of literature about interests and consciousness of secondary school students who are treated as mute objects. Making students' voices heard is a means to make up for the inadequacy in the understanding of the landscape of educational inequality. The tension between the educational mainstream discourses and students' encounters of their struggles should not be ignored. For this reason, making young students' interests central and their experiences free from being frozen with the process of modernization, this study aims to study students' academic disparity through the lens of a sociological study of the school field, students' reconstruction of their previous encounters and their current situations. The complex interweaving of becoming a child, a high school student, and the broader context of social positioning through the operation of power and knowledge in the particular institutional settings constitutes the central concerns of this study. More precisely, the study tries to offer an explanation on students' academical disparity through the lens of consistency and inconsistency between institutional habitus and individual habitus. This requires a detailed examination of students' status quo, putting it under the context of the running of the school, the involved power relations, teacher's knowledge of teaching and management, circulating educational myths and discourses at campus, on-going practices, and their saying, behaving and those involved beliefs.

## CHAPTER 2 - THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND KEY CONCEPTS OF THIS WORK

Theoretically, this research is underpinned by an understanding of experiences of students from three categories of family origins in an upper secondary school that is embedded in the wider social context. To address the hitherto research questions raised above and meet those aims described in the first chapter, this work does not adhere to a sole theory but draws on a broad range of theoretical literature, and take the Chinese context into serious consideration as well when applying these theoretical frameworks that are derived from the West. Given the nature, scope, and depth of complex tasks led by research questions, I adopt a theoretical framework that serves to help effectively interpreting the research items. The literature review is organized embracing the elements of education, knowledge problem in late modernity, the intertwinement of knowledge and power, identity and experiences in the life course, capital-habitus-field, and narratives. This chapter deals with these concepts and related theories, which contribute to a better understanding of the twists and turns in students' experiences and their identity- construction process.

### 2.1 A brief tour— how has sociology launched into education?

Sociology has been yearning to incorporate education into its knowledge while maintaining a distance through a second observation reflexively. Education is embedded in the established social, economic, political, and cultural establishments which are in a dynamical relationship that invites correspondingly a wider range of sociological research with various analyzing perspectives. Especially, educational inequality has long been a lasting interest for sociologists. This section briefly describes what perspectives sociologists have studied education. A systematical literature review under a chronological and comparative framework serves the purpose of integrating the existing theory into the researcher's thread of knowledge and cultivating the consciousness of academic inheritance, dialogue, and development in a specific research field. Academic perspectives accounting for the educational problem are broadly

categorized as two: structure-function analysis with Parsons and Luhmann as representatives, and critical theory which includes perspectives from neo-Marxism, feminism, and sociology of knowledge.

### **2.1.1 The Structure-function analysis**

This approach views society from the perspective of the institutional structures and their specific functions.

#### **2.1.1.1 Parson's structural functionalism**

Structural functionalism, as the most dominant social theory in the 1940s and 1950s, views society as a huge machine composed of innumerable different interconnected parts with each serving a certain function promoting social unification. Parsons accepted the core assumption that different occupational institutions “coordinated and subordinated one to another around the same central organ which exercised a moderating action over the rest of organism” (Durkheim, 1893) and epitomized the thought of this academic tradition. Inspired by “social organism” (Spencer, 1851), “the Protestant ethic” (Weber, 1930), “the division of labor in society” and “conscience collective” (Durkheim, 1893), and also “social evolutionism” (Spencer, 1873), Parsons coined structural functionalism which legitimized the established social order with his overall conceptual framework known as AGIL— adaption, goal attainment, integration and latency (Parsons, 1937). Structural functionalism is thus focused on analyzing the functions of different parts of the society by putting them into the AGIL framework which emphasizes social integration and unification with limited consideration of “social anomie” that gives rise to possible social changes to a large degree. It thus, in fact, praises the established social order and the positive function of its composed parts with a static and conservative stance.

Structural functionalism was significantly developed, and its dominating influence was further enhanced owing to a body of following structuralists' work (Bendix & Lipset, 1954; Blau & Duncan, 1967; Davis & Moore, 1945; Merton & Merton, 1968; Smigel, 1964). Upon this theory, education inequality is viewed

as a normal phenomenon of the society possessing a positive function (Grusky, 1994) as a whole in that firstly, it socializes people by instilling in them belief systems what the society wishes people to accept and passes the necessary knowledge on to them for their successful role play in future; on the other hand, the filtering function of education, which causes inequality and disparity, enables education to locate people in different appropriate social places, thus ensuring the effective social functioning (Blau & Duncan, 1969). By screening out the eligible social members who are competent for the high-end technological works which are considered of more importance in society, it promotes an advanced meritocracy society to take shape (Davis & Moore, 1945). School education, through socialization and the operation of selection, makes for social integration and promotes social solidarity (Parsons & Halsey, 1959), individuals' social achievements (Smigel, 1964), and life chances (Bell, 1973). As education and technology bring significant progress in social development, educational status is the most important factor for measuring a person's socioeconomic status. For this very reason, individuals should maximize their educational investment so as to help them to stand out during the repeated education screening process (Blundell, Dearden, Meghir, & Sianesi, 1999; Orazem & Mattila, 1991), improve their life chances, and become the potential social elites.

It was widely acknowledged that sociology was born as a response to modernity—a discipline that described and explained a wide range of social phenomena and tackled the plethora of social problems which tried to prevent the society from falling apart. Structural functionalism, which was the most dominant theory at that time, by emphasizing on social integration and solidarity, served this very purpose. As a result, Parsons was criticized as a “defender of modernity” (Mayhew, 1984). Structural functionalism suffers from some distinct inherent defects and faces explanatory embarrassment in reality. Above all, with social determinism, it is criticized for underscoring individual's efforts that are inherent in their conscious activities. The social space where various interactions happened is by no means a puppet- show theater but a seeming peace garden with a surging undercurrent; the established social order thus is possibly the result of compromises to some degree with tensions in the ostensible “equilibrium”. Another remarkable pronouncing flaw is that it only emphasizes the legitimacy of the present situation within a

giving society but has been reticent about other possibilities of social modes that may contribute to the construction of a totally different society.

Structural functionalism is based on the “fairness” and “efficiency” assumptions and it is criticized as structural over-determinism by ignoring the fact that the education field is part of the social construction that is led by the upper social group; what it also neglects are the voices, interests, and intentions of the disadvantageous group. As can be seen, it admits the hierarchical social division of labor while simply overlooking the condition of people who are in the lower end of the labor division with inferior social and economic status. For example, different families’ abilities to offer educational investment vary greatly; for people from the disadvantaged groups, even if they are aware of the importance of education and are willing to increase their input, cannot afford the first-class educational resources due to their lower status that is uncompetitive for resource acquisition. These disempowered persons who are inequitably excluded from the advantageous positions in education streaming by their counterparts who possess high socioeconomic status are unfairly blamed for being unsuccessful without sufficient educational investment according to structural functionalism logic, which is, of course, unpersuasive. In addition, this also implies that from the perspective of structural functionalism, the educational institution— school is dealt with as a black box which produces the labor force serving the purpose of the schooling tracking and labor division without giving consideration of the complex social relations, meaningful actions at the microscopic level or disadvantageous people’s struggles and endeavors. In short, the structural functionalism at the early stage has the conservative inclination which views the social structure as being stable and static with expected social actions, and the social evolution process as being single and linear without uncomfortable tensions which may bring about reform and change. This theory thus was even once appealed to be abandoned (Davis, 1959).

Structural functionalism took one step forward towards predicament because of what happened next: the sharp social unrest and political upheavals that the West experienced in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and the scene of mosaic patchworks both from the daily life as well as from the new social media brought about the suspicion and rebellion of the justification of universal explanation power of the traditional

structural functionalism and brought the time spirit of being critical. Merton made a great contribution to the enrichment and improvement of structural functionalism directing some flaws, especially in the aspect of the methodology by firstly challenging the legal basis of the abstract and empty grand narratives and breaking the myth that grand theory could be established without sufficient empirical research. Merton then made endeavors to change the grand narratives into “theories of middle-range” which referred to theories that “lie between the minor but necessary working hypotheses that evolve in abundance during day-to-day research and the all-inclusive systematic efforts to develop a unified theory that will explain all the observed uniformities of social behavior, social organization and social change (Merton & Merton, 1968: 39), exerting far-reaching influences on the later research. Besides, Merton is also remembered for his close attention to dysfunction, latent function, self-fulfilling prophecy, the postulate of indispensability, and so on.

#### 2.1.1.2 Luhmann's functional-structural analysis

Luhmann, with a strong interest in social conditions and consequences, is normally categorized as a social theorist in the structural-functionalism school. However, he developed structural functionalism but not towards the direction of what Parsons or Merton had expected, rather he rebelled against the traditional structural functionalism to a large degree and yielded some divergent but inspiring ideas which contributed enormously to sociology of knowledge. He was also influenced by the unavoidable postmodern debate at that time, but even the theoretical postmodernism shift had been powerful, he refused to be simply sided with postmodernism because in his view, even the fact that the simplification of the architecture after the middle ages was the centralized reflection of postmodernity<sup>5</sup> did not imply that there was a clear cut distinction between modern and postmodern society for which he recommended to go back to history and tradition (Luhmann, 1995). This statement implies Luhmann's determination of developing and revising the cultural heritage left by Parsons with new social phenomena and trend in the process of social evolution taken into account. His approach was the construction of a heterogeneous,

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<sup>5</sup> According to a guest lecture given by Luhmann at the London school of economics and political science in 1995.

interdisciplinary, and rigorous grand theory, which was free from dwelling on a particular topic but was universally effective for a better observation of the whole society (Kneer & Nassehi, 1993: 8-9). Luhmann's general theory was designed to be appropriately applied to philosophical discussions of society and knowledge with a high degree of abstract and complexity as well as empirical analysis of a wide spectrum of issues in sub-spheres of the society— politics, education, economy, culture, law, art, relationships, passions and so on. Although Luhmann's theory is well-known for abstract and sophistication, this does not mean that he is obsessed with wordplay but that he understands sociology as "a science of the second look" with a strategically advantageous position where it questions and thinks in a deeper level (Kneer & Nassehi, 1993: 13). "Everything said is said by an observer", sociology focuses on the observer and how observer makes the operation for observation (Luhmann, 1993). Paradoxically, "Only complexity can reduce complexity" (Luhmann, 2001: 49). Social system theory, which is not just about the evolution of entire societies, but just as Luhmann writes, the analyses of the "paradox of the probability of the unlikely" (Jahraus et al., 2012) embodies a requisite degree of complexity precisely aiming at reducing complexity in the society. His special style of articulation that is characteristic of ambiguous transparency which is distinguished from everyday language style actually promotes the second look for a less problematic description of the society (Kneer & Nassehi, 1993: 13).

Luhmann goes along with basic ideas of structural functionalism, such as society as a whole should be analyzed employing the framework of structure and function. Still, he discusses not only the static structure, order, and integration but also the dynamical process, change, and conflict. He agrees that society is impossible with the loss of certain kind of lubricating solidarity, integration or a minimal degree of common consent which prevent society from falling apart but under the condition when happiness as a comforting and compensating mechanism offered by the ruling group in the previous hierarchical society failed to play the role of glutinous reagent, or morality loses its universal symbol of unity in the differentiated modern society, equally failed is the policies' promise of human's equal and similar condition, people are thus turning to reflective civil society for social solidarity<sup>6</sup>. Given no symbol

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

universally accepted a common sense of unity in the modern society, society is paradoxically possible precisely because of its functional differentiations where “the reduction of the degrees of freedom of subsystems” is its integration.

From Luhmann's view, society has undergone an important change in the 19<sup>th</sup> century where he has detected as a clear break in terms of functional differentiation, which comes into play bringing a surplus of value, changes of the traditional connotation of concepts, and increased complexity of social life. Complexity and the associated problems are challenges for the traditional theories. There was the call to develop theories with a reflexive dialogue with the traditional ones for better reflecting diversity in modern society. In the social system theory, modern society is understood as the functionally differentiated set composed of sub-systems with their own distinctive dominating logic, rules, and communication modes thriving inside guiding actions in tune with the specific function they serve. It means that in a certain domain, routine practices are possible only through a selection of a certain chain of premise, logic, wording, and communication modes from the available knowledge, making it different from the outside world which Luhmann defines as the environment. This system-environment distinction allows for a reflection and, thus, a better understanding of the system's identity and function (Vanderstraeten, 2003). Hence, the system's outward communication is only *about* (*über*) the environment but not *with* (*mit*) the environment. In the decentralized society, politics tries to offer democratic solutions by minimizing privileges of the vested interest group and maximizing the common good; science commits itself to develop theories and methods to answer the unanswered questions; schools develop the individual's capacities for learning; the binary code of law is only restricted to being legal or illegal by excluding other codes such as religious, ideological, or emotional appealing, which are dealt with as messy codes in the legal system; similarly, economy should decide the best timing for production and consumption because being profitable or unprofitable is its binary code (Luhmann, 2001). Theis either-or code, as intended choice (Vorwahl), which strictly distinguishes the positive and the negative meanings ensuring the autopoietic closure of the system; that is because each one of the structures the standard of relevance and in turn, protects its autonomy (Vanderstraeten, 2004).

Although the boundary of the societal sub-system and its environment is penetrable through communication where the environment can irritate the system and cause the adjustment of elements within the system, the social system is not dependent on the environment but possesses the ability of autonomous self-production and self-reproduction out of its internal elements according to its own premise and logic. Luhmann's functional-structural system theory gives priority to function over the structure for better observing the diversified society with of fragmented standards and values (Kneer & Nassehi, 1993: 37-38). Notably, with equivalence functionalism (Äquivalenzfunktionalismus) in place instead of causal explanation (Kneer & Nassehi, 1993: 46), one-cause for multi-effects or multi-causes for one-effect are both possible, which better describes modern society with a high degree of complexity. Furthermore, through the inversion of function and structure, social system theory offers a unique framework from the traditional structural functionalism since it changes from a static and abstract empty-shell to wholeness of a set of non-linear social actions (Kneer & Nassehi, 1993: 31) as well as the context where actions take place (Kneer & Nassehi, 1993: 46) with communication as its basic element, which is filled with various possibilities during recursive selection in the process of self-production and self-reproduction. The research object of sociology is not only social fact but also the condition and the constructive process and the meaning of the social fact. Disenchantment (Entzauberung) makes this differentiated world to become increasingly complex without a uniform structure of value orientations, but instead, with different social systems (Kneer & Nassehi, 1993: 8-9). Bourdieu has also discussed complexity in modern society by stating that there exist increasingly more fields and illuminated the autonomy of the field with different game rules applying to different fields (Bourdieu, 1990). This has given rise to the gap between the extreme world complexity and human consciousness where is exactly social systems come into play (Kneer & Nassehi, 1993: 40). The social system takes the task of reducing the complexity of the world by equipped itself with self-complexity (Kneer & Nassehi, 1993: 41).

Luhmann's analyses of education is also complex but reflexive which proceeds itself from questioning the trace of how education is possible under different social conditions with philosophical debates based on the perspective of sociology of knowledge, stating that education has experienced a significant semantic shift— as a process towards the human's natural perfection realization separated from politics

(Luhmann & Baecker, 2005: 25) to knowledge dissemination and acceptance serving for the division of labor in the modern society and that the “educational crisis” has something to do with pedagogy, which established itself as a false science for treating education as one-dimensional socialization rather than a possibility. The universal acceptance of the public school system has witnessed the religious shrinking and educational collectivization in this modern differentiated society where religious experiences cannot be experienced in other societal sub-systems. Through this retrospect, it is clear that education is only a socially-constructed possibility. However, pedagogy remains a taken-for-granted “reality-based educational science” or “self-created myth” without people’s enough close scrutiny to its legitimacy and penetration (Luhmann & Baecker, 2005: 145).

Luhmann then places education under the framework of social system theory where sociology, which is the environment of pedagogy, provides a possibly valuable and reflexive external description of education, especially when pedagogy is not a full-fledged independent subject which relies upon other humanities such as sociology, history, philosophy, and so on. Sociology offers a reflexive observation on the educators and also how these educators are unfolding their educational practices. From the perspective of social system theory, education is a kind of societal sub-system because it is both an interaction system and an organizational system, and the individual is a psychic system. Then Luhmann’s sociology of education intends to unpack how the social system acts on the psychic system, or put it another way, how one basic element of the social system, communication, which is the fundamental element of the psychic system, acts upon consciousness or thinking (Krause, 2005: 33). According to the social system theory, the social system and the psychic system are in a structural coupling relationship. It means that on the one hand, they are mutually linked, or more precisely, they depend on each other for their existence—consciousness does not exist without communication and vice versa; on the other hand, they possess their own internal closure, which enables them to produce and reproduce themselves out of their own internal factors. The social system, on the one hand, maintains its existence by keeping passing on the simplified information to the involved persons, but it can hardly observe people’s psychic system and individuals; on the other hand, the psychic system makes the self-perceived most reasonable conjectures, according to their judgment which is connected to their consciousness.

Since the establishment of Parson's structural functionalism, socialization is well-known as one of the purposes of education because the docile, controllable, reliable, and predictable persons are in demand in modern society. For the goal attainment—socializing people, education inevitably flattens individuals, endeavors to standardize their intentions, behaviors, and results without taking those coincidences of interconnected socializing events into account. Here socialization is collective-oriented, showing no interest in the individual's requirements or appeals. However, socialization cannot be realized without people's participation, as Luhmann put that, socialization is “the process that, by interpenetration, forms the psychic system and the bodily behavior of human beings that it controls” (Luhmann, 1984). This concept enables individuals, with their history and consciousness, to take part—through the process of receiving and response, encoding, and decoding, in the communication, which causes unpredictable possibilities. But in the domain of education, socialization is dealt with the successful one-dimensional society-expected knowledge spreading in the framework of simplified input and output (Luhmann, 2001: 281) with the students as the trivial machine or information media. The educational system applies “good” or “bad” labels to students—monitoring, marking, and categorizing them not only in class but also in the continuous exams after class and at the same time are supplemented by punishment and praise to emphasize and re-emphasize the boundary. This de-autonomy of education paradoxically brings about a mushrooming of problems which can be seen in students' deviant behaviors; and these deviant behaviors as a form of resistance against the authority have already gone beyond of educational system and extended outward towards its outside world with the public morality panic as a good example, as put by Luhmann, “a system that is structured too improbably and that tries to identify itself entirely with the transformation of input into output ends up having to deal with the problems resulting from its own increase-directed reductions” (Luhmann, 1995).

Communication, composed of information, utterance and understanding, is the most fundamental element of the social system: information is a selection of a repertoire of possibilities, no communication emerges without selectivity; utterance behavior, which embodies a certain kind of intended or unintended language patterns, leads to selectivity as well; besides, people's understanding varies for a selection and of the information and utterance (Luhmann, 1995). Individuals are non-trivial machines and autopoietic psychic

systems who independently choose from the available information and integrate it to their stream of consciousness, thus structuring their perception of themselves and of the past and future, which is unpredictable from the external observation and cannot be estimated with the binary code of good or bad. Paradoxically, knowledge growth in a specific domain also brings ignorance because observers can only mark one side of the research object, leaving the other side unmarked or simply claiming of “none of their business”. This problem brings about new problems that need to be processed in other social systems and in turn, causes environmental risks and crises. On the other hand, systems can also cause problems for themselves and for other social systems if the freedom of their autonomy were overused (Luhmann, 2001). While other social systems are increasingly becoming less dependent on interaction situations, education has gone to the opposite side (Vanderstraeten, 2003). The conditions of the possibility of education reckon on what relationship modes and interaction patterns in education that it allows (Vanderstraeten, 2000). In the current society, education always calculates about dealing with people and “improving” their inner world for socialization, which can be best achieved through the face-to-face interaction, a demanding form of interaction (Vanderstraeten, 2001, 2003).

In short, in modern society, the essence of education is set aside unquestioned, and the alienation of education becomes a severe problem, making education in crisis. This crisis is not caused by the outside environment of education; still, it is rooted in the non-independence of the educational system. As put by Vanderstraeten, if education is an autonomous function system of the society, it should neatly safeguard its own distinctiveness through the employment of its professional careers— educationally relevant operations, and should also reproduce these operations in a network of such operations. On the contrary, education deliberately pursues structural coupling which “enables education to export its own standards to its environment”, for example, the labor market (Vanderstraeten, 2004). Seeing in this light, Luhmann is respecting the autonomy of the social system and against the de-differentiation of the system and the fuzzification of the boundary between systems because de-differentiation and fuzzification seem to harm the social soil which backings democracy (Borch, 2011: 96).

### 2.1.2 Be critical and reflexive

Before discussing critical theories, the social exchange theory is reviewed here since it influences the critical theory for re-introducing the individual's conscious activity and dynamical roles. In the process of constant conversation with structural functionalism, social exchange theory tried to get rid of its social determinism, but with this mindset, it was suspected to go to the opposite side of individualism. As the counterpart of grand structural functionalism, social exchange theory is a microcosmic one with an assumption that people's relationship is based on the rational choice with equal-value exchange actions based on "equal values", by which it contributes to gradual changes of the mighty machine—society. As can be seen, from its perspective, social structure is not pre-given but is shaped and negotiated through interactions at the individual level.

A viewpoint that distinguishes it from structural functionalism in terms of education is that it does not take educational inequality as a natural or normal phenomenon but a result of power configuration. People are acting on the rational calculating principle; through the social-exchange actions, they transfer or sell certain resources which can be money, gifts, and social networks, etc. they possess to get another resource which he urgently needs at the present situation in return; another party—his or her beneficiary is in fact expected to return or compensate for the supplier according to the principle of "reciprocity" (Blau, 1964; Heath & Heath, 1976; Homans, 1958). For education, social exchange theory focuses on various kinds of social exchange actions that happened in the educational context that may lead to educational inequality. For example, parents transform the social and economic resources they possess into the advantages and even monopoly of their children's education opportunities, which expels their peers who are originally from the disadvantaged families. The functional mechanism operates when the upper-class families take advantage of their social or economic resources to reduce competition intensity by expelling other competitors in the process of choosing and entering a school with better teacher allocation and schooling services. Thus, in fact, resource-transformation actions give rise to social exclusion through spatial segregation, which definitely leads to educational inequality. Educational streaming and exclusion caused by economic power can be easily observed in both the West and the East in modern society. Wealthy families send their children to take high-charging good-quality private lessons, which is the most common practice for boosting academic performances. Besides, in many areas where there exists a housing-based

educational policy, premium-quality education resources are only available to children from wealthy families who can afford a school-strict housing near a topnotch school. This is also the case in some metropolises in China. According to the principle of geographic proximity to the school in some metropolis, purchasing a tremendously overpriced apartment near a prestigious key school is universally considered as a very necessary and important practice by the middle class. In this way, spatial segregation is reached at the community and school level as well.

Social exchange theory is, in general, an illuminating one to a certain degree in that it reminds us of paying scrupulous attention to the declared equality of the educational opportunity. In the name of equality, based on “rational choices” of the low-income families, inequality is implicitly achieved under the ostensible principle of “free will”, causing seemingly equal inequality. This theory is especially persuasive in explaining educational inequality led by economic capability. However, its explanatory limitation lies in that it cannot adequately explain inequality caused by other factors such as that caused by purposive system design and public policies (Gunter & Forrester, 2010; Morley & Lugg, 2009; Takeda & Williams, 2008) set by the advantageous group. Much research has shown that educational inequality is greatly influenced by policies (Davies, 1986; Lodge & Blackstone, 1983; Polesel, 2010) reflecting the interest of the privileged stratum rather than social exchange. Furthermore, some ideas from this theory do not stand up to close scrutiny, which restricts its universal application. For example, people are experiencing and interacting in multiple different situations, where people’s intentions and social behaviors vary. This theory is also problematic in that it is established on the utilitarian rationality, which greatly simplifies people’s variety of motivations for their social actions. Some of the individual’s behaviors are motivated by their value rather than rationality, which can be easily seen from the philanthropist and also some dedicating educators with educational ideals in the educational contexts. Thus this deficiency sets an enormous limitation on its explanatory capability and universality.

Cultural radicalism, neo-Marxism, feminism, social representation theory, and sociology of knowledge focus on different kinds of knowledge, meanings of experiences, and implications of daily routine life with a stance of critical reflection. Under the surges of a plethora of social movements calling for

transformations in the 1970s, there was accordingly an increase in critical reflection on the taken-for-granted established social order and the so-called truth in the academic community. Disclosing and deconstructing various myths with a critical, feminist, and postmodern attitude was the trend under which reproduction theory and sociology of knowledge were developing and growing stronger. Sociologists were increasingly maintaining vigilance against the assumption of the artificial binary opposition of individuals and the society with critical thinking. Because of this, these two perspectives that are to be discussed— reproduction theory based on neo-Marxism as well as sociology of knowledge are inextricably intertwined.

#### 2.1.2.1 The perspective of reproduction theory/neo-Marxism

The basic viewpoint of reproduction theory is that cultural inequality is caused by cultural and social reproduction which reflects the logic and power relationship in the capitalist state. The core idea is that the existed education systems have created some special mechanisms for perpetuating existing social inequalities. Reproduction theory can be subdivided into social reproduction theory and cultural reproduction theory. The most prominent representatives of social reproduction theory are Bowles and Gintis, who emphasize the circulation of political power and reproduction of the ruling class while Bourdieu is widely acknowledged for his introduction of the cultural dimension for understanding inequality.

Employing Marxism analytical approach, Bowles and Gintis explained educational inequality (Karabel & Halsey, 1977) by putting forward that the educational system of the capitalist state actually reflects and replicates its unequal social structure. The educational system possesses inherent functions of social stratification and social screening, in which the educational screening function is closely bound up to the ideology and social systems of the capitalist state. The economic system and social structure of the capitalist country are responsible for educational inequality, yet capitalist schooling correlates the inequality between people with their intelligence quotient and marks it from standard examinations in the school field; schools, in turn, distinguishes students apparently according to their scholastic attainments.

Therefore, school education, which obscures and covers up social inequality with a mysterious cultural coat, together with the whole ideology of the capitalist state, provides the bedrock of a legitimate foundation for social inequality, which serves to protect people with vested interests and perpetuate the established social structure.

The education of a capitalist state aims at achieving two overarching goals: the production of the labor force and the replication of existing social systems and relations. Educational inequality is embedded in the unequal social structure, which is reproduced via “the correspondence principle” (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). So as to reach these goals, the capitalist state would: educates students and teaches them necessary knowledge and skills which tally with the economic development and the accumulation of the capital; provides a legal foundation for the existed social inequality with respect to economy and education in the capitalist state by delicately employing a specific distinguishing and selecting mechanism of scholastic attainment; cultivates students’ personality, such as being punctual, high-motivated, disciplined and docile, so as to adapt themselves to the established social hierarchy better and consciously maintain the social order; and instructs students to internalize social norms and values to form their own identity and the strong consciousness of the social rank. Thus, people respect authority and obey the social order set by the elite class; education inequality and hierarchical consciousness enter and dwell in people’s everyday lives. The hierarchical structure of school education reflects the stratum, hierarchy, inequality, and the whole economic and social structure of the capitalist country (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). Coleman’s report found that people universally had a negative attitude toward upward mobility and that the family background was the most responsible factor predicting academic achievements (Coleman, 1968). A typical example of educational inequality relating to class reproduction is the British “asylum flow pattern” that is put forward by Turner: children who are originally from the aristocrats and other elite families enter the specialist schools at a very young age and are subsequently recommended for admission to top universities so as to ensure their elite status in the future (Turner, 1960). Privileged positions are reserved, especially for the offspring of the upper class, the rule-makers of the educational game, and the whole educational system. The diploma works for the differentiation of social groups, rather than technical progress or human well-being (Collins 1979, 2002; Bourdieu, 1977, 1990).

Inspired by Marx, Strauss, Weber, and Durkheim, Bourdieu explained educational inequality from a cultural perspective. The process of being educated is mainly viewed as a process of accepting and inheriting cultural capital possessed by a family. Offspring from the middle-class families who own more cultural capital feel easy in the school and are regarded as having a gift for academic achievement. The function of education is to transform the class-specific cultural practices and habitus nurtured by a family into the academic advantage and accomplishment in the educational system. Schools are social institutions transmitting and legitimating authoritative ideas, thus are responsible for civilizing and transmitting cultural capital. Thus, school is an incubator of social inequality through transmitting and legitimating upper- and middle-upper dominate culture and maintaining their social-economic status. People from different cultural backgrounds inherit different quantities of cultural capital, which can be created, cultivated, and passed on to the next generation like economic capital. Cultural capital suggests that children from upper-class families with affluent cultural capital are chronically exposed to and thus have high affinity to high-status culture, for example, participating in highbrow cultural activities, presence of corresponding habitus and possession of many cultural goods, etc. and hence it is more likely than their peers from lower-status families with little cultural capital to gain educational accomplishments. Cultural capital has an accumulative effect in education and socialization, thus greatly influencing educational achievement and imposing restrictions on social mobility. Since the educational system tends to consolidate and enrich the cultural capital possessed by some families, it helps to consolidate the existing social order. The condition of owning cultural capital is a key factor in deciding personal education circumstances and predicting future social position.

Compared to the previous two schools of thought, critical theory is a more comprehensive and inclusive one that provides a critical and illuminating angle for exploring the problem of inequality and knowledge operation in the educational setting. It greatly influences the current of the subsequent empirical studies about educational inequality. As a conceptual-analysis tool, cultural capital has gained popularity on a global scale along with academic debates by providing reflexive insights of understanding the educational fields. A handful of sociologists have confirmed the contributing effects of cultural capital on educational accomplishment in the West (Aschaffenburg & Maas, 1997; DiMaggio, 1982; DiMaggio & Mohr, 1985;

Dumais, 2002; Jaeger, 2009; Kalmijn & Kraaykamp, 1996; Katsillis & Rubinson, 1990; Lareau, 2011; Nan, Graaf, & Kraaykamp, 2000; Sullivan, 2001) as well as in Asian countries like China (Wu & Treiman, 2007), Japan (Yamamoto & Brinton, 2010) and Korea (Byun, Schofer, & Kim, 2012).

Reproduction theory commits itself to overcome the most controversial academic dichotomy of the micro and the macro by employing a conceptual framework of “habitus”, “capital”, and “field” that are always under dynamic change and development, which bridges the individual interaction and social structure. The employment of such core concepts with great sociological imagination makes the theory a compatible and comprehensive one that combines historical, social, political, and economic factors— both explicit elements and implicit ones, at multiple levels. One aspect which makes it greatly differs from social exchange theory is that it views people’s motivations behind social interactions not as the result of rational thinking but as something experience-bounded as well as context-bounded, which is more intricate embracing different possible results.

#### 2.1.2.2 Sociology of knowledge

The initiator of the sociology of knowledge (Wissenssociologie) Scheler put that there are no absolute, historically constant forms and principles of reason. Truth and knowledge are traditional and given with the established inherent hierarchy inside; the established social structure is an accident. For this reason, knowledge stumbles befogged in a cosmos of irrationality (Becker & Dahlke, 1942). Knowledge is power, which is never neutral; discursive power constructs “common sense” that is inserted into cultural and political life (Fiske, 1989). As a subdiscipline of sociology, sociology of knowledge is the analysis of the functional interrelations of social processes and structures on the one hand and the patterns of intellectual life, including the modes of knowing on the other (Becker & Dahlke, 1942). To put it in a simple way, sociology of knowledge aims to explore the means in which knowledge is produced. In a broad sense it encompasses thoughts, ideas, concepts, beliefs, moral codes, commonly-agreed on symbols, ideology, traditions, and the like are configured (encouraged or restricted) by the hidden non-cognitive, socio-cultural factors such as historical contexts, spirit of the times, national cultural mentality cultural systems,

power in politics, bureaucracy, social hierarchy, interaction patterns, communication situations etc. What connections hold between the social and historical circumstances and the fact that a particular belief, with its particular content, is adopted in those contexts can always be asked (Millstone, 1978), which falters the sacredness of science as the collection of absolute truth. By asking “what knowledge is of most importance”, which is a classical question formulation in traditional sociology, Spencer put that there was a must to rank the value of knowledge, and he considered science as the most important knowledge (Spencer, 1872). With the postmodern perspective, the question of “what knowledge is of most importance” can be modified to another question of “whose knowledge is of most worth” (Apple, 2004) or a Foucauldian question like “what counts as knowledge” which merits multiple reflections.

Sociology of knowledge has yielded brilliant ideas when it has been applied to educational research such as illuminating works of Bourdieu, Young, Bernstein, and Apple (Apple, 2004; Bernstein, 1973; Bourdieu & Young, 1971; Young, 1971). One year after the Durham Conference of the British Sociological Association (1970) where Young, Bernstein, and Apple attended, Young published a high-impact book of milestones, “Knowledge and Control: New Directions for Sociology of Education” (1971) highlighting the conspiracy of curriculum, as “socially organized knowledge” and power, which was widely recognized as has marked the new era of sociology of education. The knowledge issue is both an epistemological issue—the powerful knowledge is acquired at the university and a social justice issue—people have not received the university education are struggling all through their lives<sup>7</sup>. It is necessary to examine in more general terms the implications of a meta-theory or doctrine of control, and what is involved in treating the knowledge as neither absolute, nor arbitrary, but as “available sets of meaning”, which are collectively given. How knowledge is selected, organized, and assessed in educational institutions needs to be documented (Bourdieu & Young, 1971). How a society selects, classifies, distributes, transmits, and evaluates the educational knowledge and considers it to be public, reflects both the distribution of power and principles of social control (Bourdieu & Young, 1971); these practices do not serve the cause of human betterment, but only the interest of dominant social groups. This “curriculum

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<sup>7</sup> An interview in the RSA Journal: quoted in RSA Journal, 2008, para. 6.

turn" in educational research has a great implication which puts the previously taken-for-granted secret garden—the real operation and process in the "black box", including curricula and teaching practices under the spotlight for close scrutiny.

Bernstein has studied educational inequality from the linguistic perspective. Through carefully studying educational inequality across the boundaries of different disciplines such as linguistics, sociology, anthropology, and pedagogy, Bernstein made the argument that there were two types of widely divergent languages in use, two different cognitive dispositions and experience structures influencing people's social identity and academic attainment. Children of the upper class frequently use formal language with elaborated codes while the offspring of the lower-class employ a common language with restrictive codes. The former one is more varied and flexible in word selection, grammar application, and uncertain expression. This duality in language use has a profound influence on people's cognitive and emotional field. Formal language makes for expression of logical relations in multi-levels and understanding of complex constructions (Bernstein, 1973), which greatly serves to academic success.

Another influential scholar in sociology of education, Apple is known as a critical sociologist who endeavors to deconstruct cultural hegemony and reveals the process of ideological reproduction by reflectively analyzing the curriculum set by the dominant group and particular practices such as the legitimated teaching and estimating activities that have taken place in the school context with their symbols and myths. Things are not exactly as they seem to be (Apple, 2004). Social phenomena are by no means natural but with twisted roots and gnarled branches. The curriculum is far from being objective knowledge but actually reflects cultural hegemony which acts to "saturate" the consciousness, thus creating the illusion that the social world in front of people becomes the only reality (Apple, 2004). However, it is only the advantageous group's elective practices of stipulating the "legitimated knowledge" from the available knowledge stock sustaining and perpetuating their competitive advantage in the established social structure (Apple, 2014). Education is both a "cause" and an "effect". The school is not a passive or static entity but a field where knowledge is configured, and high-status knowledge as the

"cultural capital" of powerful groups is accumulated. Knowledge and power reproduce and legitimate the system of inequality (Apple, 2004).

The modern school system with knowledge monopoly and cultural hegemony of the dominant group and students' compulsory attendance which claims plenty of time and energy devotion, is a relatively new phenomenon (Illich, 1973). Illich deconstructed those deeply cherished educational myths, claiming that schooling added a vital pound weight towards success, promoted human well-being and brought liberty by stating that this absurdly demagogic discourse was based on the assumption that for those who wanted to get rid of the poor or powerless status, they had to be equipped themselves with science and technology and avoided falling behind during the wave of "advertised ideal of the consumption" (Illich, 1973: 4). On the contrary to middle-class kids who are with a preferable identity and exposed to affluent cultural capital and educational opportunities through a myriad of activities such as visiting, traveling, and private lessons, children from deprived family backgrounds usually have a sense of inferiority and lack an equivalent educational opportunity. This situation was also reported by Lareau (Lareau, 2011). Education does not offer liberty; rather, it is in a conspiracy with power and consumerism, which encourages a more oppressive and polarized society. Illich also paid close attention to the well-being of those disempowered young children, which functioned as an alarm reminding us that students' experiences and opportunities should be under detailed scrutiny. Illich discussed "childhood" and "school" from the perspective of event sourcing. "Childhood" is not an old term, but instead, it emerges only very recently. Different children have totally different childhood, and themselves are labeled with an imposed collective identity such as "the worker's child", "the peasant's child" and "the nobleman's child" (Illich, 1973: 13). Illich further argues that children have to be "schooled" to be obedient students so as to internalize the mystery, which helps them to earn the basic staple of life in the future. Through schooling, they gradually form a consistent view that non-schooled learning is valueless and "fake", and that how to earn a living can only be taught at school. Children are imprisoned with deprived and wrecked childhood. Given that, Society thus should have the courage to disestablish modern schools.

Willis has a similar social origin with Bourdieu for being originally from the working-class family. They had experienced identity suspect, relocation and “cleft habitus” after they participated in the elite education. For them, identity was always a pronounced problem penetrating in myriads of moments and on multiple occasions throughout their whole lives. Their initial social-labeled identity kept them paying great attention to the identity, culture, and experiences of the working-class group, though they have very different conclusions about the hidden mechanisms of cultural reproduction. Willis did influential research with the non-academic young students on the focus, which keeps reminding us that the understanding of the sub-culture from the deprived groups should not be neglected (Willis, 1977). Employing a bottom-up approach with young students, the “controlled” on the center, Willis found out that the working-class children were not passive but were disrupting and resisting the established class order, resisting the authority and fighting for becoming an achievable hero in a conscious way. They seek excitement and danger and make fun of those bookworms who strictly obey the rules and regulations which actually helps them to better adapt themselves to the future work environment. Working-class children’s efforts to establish their own subjectivity and their abandoned hope of improving their situation precisely reinforce class reproduction and crystallization. Therefore, education works as a buffering and cooling system preventing the lower-class children from complaining about social reproduction.

Sociology of knowledge is actually a self-reflexive scholarly thought and tactics within a specific circumstance inherently with critical thinking and sociological imagination which aims to disentangle the interplay of power, cultural systems, social discipline forces, and individual’s stock of knowledge at hand rather than a doctrine with fixed and rigid conceptual frameworks or analysis procedures. Its situation-oriented feature allows for much available space for empirical studies. This suggests that raising questions about the production, management, organization, and operation of knowledge linking to power and their dynamical relations unfolded in the specific educational setting from the relational perspective can be a much rewarding work which helps to examine people’s daily dominating discourses in the framework of historical and social conditions and thus understand the nature of the essence of the constructed education inequality from a more inclusive perspective and in a more reflective way.

## 2.2 The knowledge problem in late modernity

Modernity is an unavoidable scholarly topic since it coerces and refines myriads of items. With the expansion of capitalism, free markets and the advancement of science and technology, as well as disenchantment (Entzauberung) of people's belief system, the current society undoubtedly presents a myriad of complexity that has never happened in the traditional society (Kneer & Nassehi, 1993: 113). Time and space are becoming relative terms; partly due to modern media, people are experiencing intense time-space compression where the present and the absent mingle with each other at super speed, bringing disruptive impact, disorientation and even paralysis on social practices (Harvey, 1989). Complexity and differentiation of both the social structure and semantics are correlated which constitute the most pronouncing characters of this post-modern society where there is no unified law, but a myriad of possibilities (Luhmann, 2013). In modernity, where the discontinuity of the past and the future demands a decision in almost every single moment, everything that happened has to be attributed to decisions (Kneer & Nassehi, 1993: 113) rather than religious teaching. Aside from differences, modernity also brings "exclusion and marginalization" (Giddens, 1991: 6). There is no single way to capture complexity which is difficult to predict. People's interdependent behaviors, their variable places in hierarchical space over time cause complexity as well, which should be dealt with contextualized within networks, categories, and places (Page, 2015). The realm of being is a mixture of the precarious and problematic with the assured and complete (Dewey, 2008). With the transformation from the traditional status society towards the modern contract society, organizations are becoming increasingly important for structuring people's everyday life. Just as importantly, people must effectively consult with strangers who are taken as different social roles. Anxiety and sense of surreal rootlessness become prevailing phenomena in the chaotic, decentered, fragmented, and risky society. Networks of forces and relationships are so intricate, making social phenomena difficult to be defined and clarified. Hence we cannot emphasize the spirit of inquiry, critical thinking against the "truth" too much.

Having a clear picture of the characteristics of the historicized context in which we are living should be the very beginning of sociological research. The status of knowledge is altered as societies enter

postmodern age (Lyotard, 1984). At the current epoch, embedded in the increasingly differentiated and intricate social structures, knowledge has overflowed its supposed sacred sphere of the universal truth complex and is increasingly invading into time and space of the whole social life by reinventing it meaning systems and offering the legitimacy basis. Being ubiquitous, uneven distributed, social constructed and constantly updated, knowledge has converted people's previous living world into an adventurous one where the dense mist is drifting in every direction, which brought any easy practice in the understanding of the operational mechanism of the true social life into ruin. This historical background has challenged the traditional sociological theories and is inviting more research with sophisticated survey techniques; more importantly, it requires scholars' strategies under a special situation, keen academic insight, and intense compassion, as well as their strong sense of duty for unraveling life's mystery and clarifying the facts behind the entanglement of life situations, knowledge, and power.

### **2.2.1 Knowledge as generative power in contemporary civilization**

After the “disenchantment” of the world, there came the world of clashes of the gods (Weber, 1930). As put by Mills, individuals' private troubles are exactly rooted in the structured social system and its operating mechanisms, people thus are easily become confused of their life chances without a perceptive understanding of the historical backgrounds where their lives are embedded in (Mills, 1959). Only by exploring the inner collusion between the individual and the society in a critical and reflexive way, history and the here and now, people can find the path leads to improvement and liberation. Therefore, grasping the most noticeable feature of the very times background that distinguishes itself from those of other epochs could be the logic beginning of sociological research. At the present epoch, the knowledge-truth problem that ingrained in postmodern knowledge-power entanglement gives a particular connotation of modern civilization with the on-going process of modernity, which inspires an attitude of being reflective and critical in the academic community. More than four centuries ago, the well-known claim that “knowledge is power” was made by Francis Bacon.

“Knowledge may be conceived of on the model of industrial production, with the result that the existing

division of labor and use of machines, especially cybernetic machines, is uncritically accepted.” (Lefebvre & Nicholson-Smith, 1991).

Nowadays, the relation between knowledge and power is becoming increasingly ambiguous and confusing; the impact of knowledge on human society and the intricate roles it plays in people’s world of daily life are by no means been weakened or continues as ever before but is tremendously strengthened. Knowledge attracted scholars’ attention at the very beginning as an enormous driving force of economic development (Bell, 1976; Machlup, 1962; Machlup & Leeson, 1978; Nelson, 1963; Suranyi - Unger, 1963). Economy is organized by modern institutions which are embedded in the wider established social structures with knowledge such as the mainstream culture, widely accepted value systems, historical experiences, official narratives, employment patterns, related policies and subcultures such as managing practices etc. involved, thus the generative power of knowledge is increasingly becoming apparent in that it is embedded in the culture within a giving social context.

It has been decades since Drucker made the prediction that people were stepping into “postcapitalist” society in which people were actually embracing a brand new type of society— “knowledge society”. Within this society, “knowledge is the only meaningful resource” (Drucker, 1993). The dominance of knowledge in this social type lies in that by accomplishing a magnificent transformation, from “private goods” to “public goods”, from static “being” to dynamic “doing” (“to prove itself in action”), knowledge gains generative power, causing the adherence of any other stuff towards knowledge (Drucker, 1993). What was going on followed by that was that the mass was constantly informed by the upper and upper middle class— politicians, policymakers, media journalists, and cultural workers that “knowledgeable workers” were required on a large scale for economic, scientific, technical, and developing grounds. This gives rise to a problem concerning in which way people with inferior life situations get access to educational resources nurturing them into “knowledgeable workers”. At the present time, the increasing frequency of the use of buzzwords like “knowledge society”, “knowledge-based society”, “era of knowledge explosion” etc. is identified at all scales from every nook and cranny. It is interesting to note that when “knowledge” is mentioned by layman on the streets, it usually refers to the common sense

which is universally accepted within a special social context; the cognitive patterns expected by the society; and something utilitarian mainly acquired from formal education and is somehow practical and useful for their further planning and national development that is screened out of ideological hues because of the long lack of interests from the benefits community of discussing the problem of “what knowledge really is” but their lasting stand and strong tendency of displaying it as something objective and valid that is in the interests of both the individual and the nation. However, power and privilege implicitly exist in knowledge and access to the stock of knowledge. “Every power which manages to impose meanings and to impose them as legitimate by concealing the power relations which are the basis of its force, add its own specifically symbolic force to those power relations” (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). The evolutionary history of knowledge gives a hint that it is a term from the ideological realm in nature, which worth careful and critical examination. Without the discourse of social being, the production of knowledge is impossible (Lefebvre & Nicholson-Smith, 1991).

Physical input and natural resources were considered as being overwhelming importance in the self-sufficient agrarian society. People had elegant strides with an unhurried mental state strolling in a poetic world. The sun rose across the hills to the east, and unwittingly, the moon silently climbed the branches. In that poorly differentiated society with relatively simple economic structures, social relations, and less personal desire, aggressive production of specialized knowledge in various domains were not necessary. The update rhythm of knowledge was slow; for the majority of people, knowledge to a large extent was the cultural heritage passed down from generation to generation which was considered conducive to their earthy life experiences; for the nobility, knowledge was a kind of spiritual treasure which kept on reminding them, firstly to be a good and ethical person, then spurring on them to be an elegant and well-rounded highbrow with good etiquette and manners. In this social phase, the functions of education are mainly socialization and mind-cultivation; its function of filtrating and distinctively arranging people was very weak.

The scene of agrarian society is totally changed by modernization, which is an overwhelming comprehensive social process that overturns not only the traditional economic and political structures,

but also coerces power and organizational forms, people's beliefs and estimation systems, cultures, spirits, manners and so on. In the industrial times, with the rapid process of social differentiation, "organic solidarity" became the dominant solidarity category; as the specialization of professional domains and division of labor, people were increasingly dependent upon others; it is through this "interdependency" and "collective conscience", social solidarity could be achieved (Durkheim, 1893). People are in a social network, and the social setting affects everything which is not completed bounded by it (Simmel, 1910). People with high self-discipline had a high affinity to this type of society. Social spaces produce a great diversity of knowledge (Lefebvre & Nicholson-Smith, 1991). Metaphor is a type of narrative mode that pictures social patterns, implies its expectation, and discloses its underlying logic. "Screws on the assembly line" and critical thinking upon which mirrors people's reflection such as "iron cage" of capitalist productivity (Weber, 1930), "docile body" (Foucault, 1975) etc. have the implications that expertise, rational thinking, high efficiency, strict discipline, busyness with little reflective attitude are supposed to be the logic. While knowledge is simplified to knowing, "what is being learned" is taken as the objective world rather than a system of knowledge about the world (Maton, 2013). Besides "knowing what", people should also "know why", "know how", and "know who" (OECD, 1996).

From being self-sufficient to inter-dependent, the industrial society demanded a mountain of healthy bodies, knowledgeable people with professional technology and skills for the large-scale production machines. Thus the highly specialized locale for training the future labor force, the school was born and robustly developed for this purpose. "This institutional is itself the product of schools because sound common sense tells us that only children can be taught in school" (Illich, 1973: 14). There developed a kind of inherent thinking that good schooling was a "must" practice from which people could be proved to be equipped themselves with adequate knowledge, qualified for a specific profession, respected by others, and recognized by the society. What happened next was the hierarchical division of the educational space under the name of fairness and efficiency. So the function of selecting and allocating people of education was becoming increasingly remarkable; social reproduction and the possibility of escaping the curse became prominent problems that invited wide scholarly research.

During the process of the further development of the industrial society, a number of insightful scholars who captured brand new characteristics which were not the logic of the industrial society and declared that the “postindustrial” society was taking into shape. It seemed that many inconsistencies, ruptures, breaks, and contradictions could coexist. The term, “postindustrial” reflected that cohort of scholars was actually at a loss about how to define the puzzling society. Decades later, Drucker made the claim that the society that went after the industrial society was actually the “knowledge society” since everything was contingent upon and overshadowed by knowledge (Drucker, 1993). In the “postindustrial” society, being society-bounded, context-bounded, and power-bounded. Exploding knowledge is increasingly acquiring multifaceted and confusing traits. Thus it displays a state of non-stop changing and capriciousness that redefines and reconstructs people’s daily life world, which causes universal anxiety and disturbance. The present times context calls for much exploration of the dynamical practices of knowledge production, selection, management, dissemination, the reflective interrogation of the intricate relations between knowledge and the power within so as to better restore the live pictures of the real life of people and their living conditions, the real operational mechanisms of the social structure, and the future fate of human destiny. Correspondingly, what happened next was linguistic, cultural, political, and spatial turns in postmodern sociology which rhetorically and socially make knowledge central. All these have witnessed the increasing awareness of the relativism perspective adopted in the sociological research.

### **2.2.2 Knowledge as restructuring power among social layers**

One of the most remarkable problems of knowledge is its uneven distribution among the population affecting social justice, which is fully documented in different social spheres. A compelling body of literature records that there exists a differentiation process of knowledge distribution among people located at different social positions on the global scale. “Technical knowledge is inaccessible to the layman” (Schutz, 1962); “Special knowledge is only accessible to the members of a subgroup” (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973). The most obvious advantage that can be detected from the knowledge people is that they can “form a judgment to make more or less well-founded decisions for own actions” (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973), which greatly ameliorates people’s life chances. Through a variety of intricate

mechanisms such as insulation, selectively emersion, surveillance, “cabinet-in-confidence”, the stock of knowledge is not equally available to everyone.

Knowledge can be insulated from each other through their uneven distribution both horizontally across time and space and vertically with reference to degrees of embodiment in unconscious habits and routines (Reay, 2010). “A bunch of organizational decision-making and practice activities are hidden in black boxes and known only to the insiders; each of the knowledge theoretically available in organizations has become occult knowledge and never publicized” (Jehenson, 1979). “Surveillance” is another influencing factor that controls and arranges knowledge, which determines which knowledge should be seen and popularized and which should be hidden and devalued (Graber & Dunaway, 2017). The political context is a social setting where an uneven distribution of knowledge is conspicuously observed. Within the political context, “the real power in the policy process is the power to make non-decisions; that is, the capacity of one group to prevent ideas, concerns, interests, and problems of another group getting ‘on’ the agenda against the attention of the general public” (Parsons, 1970). At the relatively micro level such as community, knowledge may be connected with a certain income, occupational and educational level due to the position of individuals filling such statuses in relation to the specific community power structure, prestige system, or political hierarchy (Sykes, 1951). Except for Western Society, unequal access to knowledge is identified in the eastern world as well. In the Chinese context, society is culturally differentiated. Society has witnessed the disparity and distinction concerning cultural taste and consumption among different social layers (Wang, Davis & Bian, 2006). Through a careful study of the distribution of scientific knowledge through formal education in Africa, September mapped the process of how education sifts out some students while preparing others to form the pool of potential science-related workers (September, 1990). As to such fact, creating an inclusive knowledge-based society by increasing people’s access to sharing of knowledge becomes an urgent appeal of UNESCO.

The above-mentioned well-documented literature from the academic community have made reflections on the actual life which prompts that uneven knowledge distribution is related to power and hierarchy inside is a universal problem that existed at multiple social layers in different social contexts that sets the

limit of freedom, circumscribes boundaries of social groups and restructures people's life chances. Knowledge problem in modern society has been inviting scholarly attention and further exploration of social inequality caused by the knowledge problem.

### **2.2.3 Foucault: The landscape of power, discipline, knowledge, discourse, and self-governmentality**

"His concern is with something different, namely the historical conditions of possibility for the positivity and facticity of the taken-for-granted rules inhabited by human actors... Foucault's rich body of work remains a deep reservoir of ideas and insights into the history of our evolving present." (Power, 2011)

Foucault's work is well-known for its critical insight centering on those taken-for-granted, least conspicuous clues, such as what is taken as legitimated discourses in the prisons, the hospitals, and the school, etc. and the social process of their formation which give a glimpse of the operation of modern power and bureaucracy. Asking the historical conditions of possibility of what can be taken as truth and relations of similarity that underlie classifications (Power, 2011) in different historical stages penetrates almost all of his work. Foucault argues that behavioral and thinking modes are hierarchically categorized and attributed with different values by comparing and excluding, where the boundary of "normal" and "abnormal", "mad" and "sane" is defined. Social organizations are nationalized with the seemingly absent "capillary power" that is in fact dispersed and ubiquitous with the discipline and governmentality serving as its bedrocks. People are depersonalized that can be measured, examined, categorized, diagnosed, cured, improved and transformed.

Power, in contemporary times, is increasingly subtly penetrating into people's everyday life and becoming "lighter, more rapid and more effective" (Foucault, 1975: 209). Although power is becoming de-central, it is ubiquitous that it is embedded in not only the concrete practices in all kinds of social institutions such as prisons, hospitals, factories, militaries, and schools but also the belief systems in a more invisible way. The previous brutal tortures have retired from the world, being replaced by the relatively gentle art of punishment via surveillance, correction, and training in an enclosed space (Power, 2011) whose object is

loss of wealth or rights, which “automatizes” and “disindividualizes” power and greatly enriches power exercise. Discipline is a “physics” or an “anatomy” of power, a technology that regulates the thought and behavior of all the social actors in the axis of time and space through subtle ways. Drawing the Panopticon, an architectural style as a metaphor, Foucault argues that all-perceived discipline and permanent surveillance are eventually changing people’s mind structure, finally leading to their spontaneous self-governmentality. Placed within enclosed disciplinary institutions with the Panopticon design, individuals come to realize that any of their minuteness of the details of their every small action can be observed by the absent inspector at any time— “one is totally seen, without ever seeing” (Foucault, 1975: 202), thus they must internally regulate their behaviors accordingly. All these processes serve and are served by process of individualization and objectification that serve to draw attention to particular individuals to blame and for correction. In this way, the docile and submissive bodies are produced. In the ideological sphere, knowledge, discourse, and power are also correlated. Knowledge is the “cultural coat” of power, and power always produces and reproduces knowledge. Discourse is always a way of expression, literally or orally, about what can be intelligibly discussed, which embodies the institutionalized factors embedded in a specific historical stage. However, where there is power, there is possible resistance, which brings possible innovative thoughts as well.

The delicate relationships among the “sacred” knowledge, the situated discourses, the ubiquitous discipline, the conscious self-governmentality and the omnipresent power discussed in his work, with a feminist standpoint, is conducive to reflexively understanding the struggling experiences and identity of students who represent the disempowered social groups in the secondary school field where there are omnipresent discipline and the game between educators and students, orthodox and sub-cultures, knowledge dissemination and wording skills.

#### **2.2.4 Knowledge configuration through communication in secondary education**

Knowledge is an explicit problem following social differentiation in modern society, which is becoming increasingly important in all kinds of social organizations. Given its vital role, the social process of

knowledge configuration through interaction in the modern organizations needs to be better clarified and understood. Being a cognitive stylization of communication (Luhmann, 1990; Nassehi, 2004), knowledge gains a duplicated character within organizations which is with a high degree of routine because organizations possess the ability to take for granted what they themselves have formalized, creating the myth of truth (Nassehi, 2004). Educational organizations, being both normatively legitimate and descriptively adequate, may be conceived as involving an interplay and, ideally, integration of truth: the rational dimension, trust: the social dimension, power: the political dimension, and foolishness: the anarchistic dimension (Ellström, 1983). The educational system is a kind of social system where communication is its element factor (Luhmann, 1987). The reason why communication is important lies in that it plays an important role in people's intrapsychic cognitive process and knowledge development (Chapman, 1991). Although the above theories demonstrate that a handful of research is being done to explore the relationship between cultural inequality and knowledge configuration in both social systems— family and the school field, from a more inclusive perspective, those studies are regrettably scarce and frequently judged as being trivial, disheveled, private or individual. In a word, educational research inspired by sociology of knowledge is still in its infancy, which remains largely a slogan and rhetoric because subsequent extensive empirical researches are less robust for various reasons.

Secondary school is a social organization of immense importance in the process of producing educational disparity and social inequality where face-to-face interaction plays a great role for knowledge dissemination. The reason why I aim to explore secondary educational inequality from people's daily life is precisely the paucity of research of the relationship between secondary educational inequality and knowledge configuration within the taken-for-granted microenvironment for the face-to-face interactions. Although "The school is the agency of face to face control par excellence" (Willis, 1977: 65), a growing body of literature suggests that despite the structural uniformity of school system and practices in the same school, there is in actual practice a differential processing between students with different social backgrounds. Similarly, although there is a handful of research realizing the positive relationship between family fortunes and children's academic success, the work is still in its infancy (Neckerman, 2007). The mechanism and specific social process of academic disparity remain chaotic and obscure. The problem

with organizational studies is that it tends to overemphasize the mechanics of the institution without necessarily contributing to sociology of knowledge (Bourdieu & Young, 1971).

This research aims to clarify the link between students' experiences and their possible scope of academic accomplishment by framing a secondary school as a field of social disclosure. Compared to tertiary education, secondary schooling is more important in the aspect of shaping students' views of the world, the values, and their lives influenced by the type of interaction as well as the precarious potential in the period of adolescence. It seems that much attention has been paid to the result while ignoring the investigation of the social process of students' identity construction and their academic achievements. Adolescence signifies an age group of immature students on the way towards increasingly independent adults with future expectations. Impressionability is an unsettled state and process towards being stable, which means all imaginations and possibilities decided by from whom they are mostly influenced and inspired. Knowledge acquired from secondary education is more of an arbitrary existence and is thus more acceptable with the absence of systematic reflection.

Moreover, mass media helps to accelerate knowledge dissemination and at the same time, offers people more opportunities to participate in the large-scale social interaction, by which people involve themselves in the psycho-social production process. The construction and reconstruction of social representativeness are becoming more relevant to the dynamical social process, which implicitly or explicitly reflects social conflicts. Under this social situation with overwhelming complexity, young students are going through many thresholds, conflicts, interrogation, and bewilderment, which has been shaping their consciousness and identity in a dynamical way. Therefore, an understanding of students' interpretations of and their response to the knowledge available to them, as well as the specific social process of knowledge configuration in their life-world, is crucial to understand their academic disparity in secondary education. A careful examination of dissemination and a legitimating process of knowledge that secondary students have experienced through is an effective way to better understand what students' personal troubles really lie from the social structure and in turn, debunk the hidden mechanisms that act on the inequality of secondary education.

Employing a fixed systematic framework and obeying clichés adopted by the official annual of Educational Statics bureau such as “the lack of qualified teachers”, “learning inefficiency”, “psychological/behavioral problems”, “adverse natural environment”, “undeveloped infrastructure”, “resources scarcity”, “economic backward”, “area differences”, “the dual educational systems” to view the problem of educational disparity can be somehow biased and refrains efforts by employing a multi-level and reflexive perspective which helps to explore the hidden, deep, and dynamical connections. Objective data cannot explain the matrix of meaningful practices through which phenomena become meaningful (Charlesworth, 2000). The official description of the space sometimes can be different from people’s actual everyday practices and can be totally opposite to that of the people who use it.

Given the relatively short time after the establishment of the “new” sociology of education, there lacks sufficient empirical research focusing on the relation of knowledge configuration and educational inequality within the school context. A body of research pays little attention to the influence of the production and inheritance of implicitly multifaceted knowledge that formed a tacit conspiracy within a particular group on educational inequality. Besides, the employment of ethnography in education research mainly focuses on ethnic groups and gender. More empirical studies should be done to carefully examine the knowledge being produced, managed, and transmitted among people with different socio-economic status. For studying the specific knowledge possessed by a particular group and its social processes, more attention should be paid to experiences and tellings of people within the given social context, for which documenting their voices and experiences and mapping the complex process of the differential distribution of knowledge among different social groups for cultural reproduction/inequality within a specific social setting are of particular importance. Trying to explore the secret and recessive knowledge production and operation on the multi-level within the school field helps to clarify the capricious faces of insidious power existed in educational practice within the educational setting, thus contributes to understanding educational inequality at a more intricate level.

## **2.3 Identity, experiences, and narratives**

### **2.3.1 Identity**

Identity emerged in ancient Greek, but was not cogently and continuously discussed at that time (Martin & Barresi, 2006: 2). In the sixties and seventies, identity remained an innate, unproblematic and static trait (Bosma & Kunnen, 2005: 10). However, in the current time, it is a social category that is becoming increasingly problematic with the deepening of modernization, urbanization, and globalization and there has been an ongoing major concern on in a remarkably wide spectrum of humanities disciplines such as philosophy, politics, pedagogy, sociology, and psychology.

### 2.3.1.1 What is identity?

“In the late 1980s and the 1990s found historians, anthropologists, and most of all humanities scholars relying ever more heavily on ‘identity’ as they explored the cultural politics of race, class, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, citizenship, and other social categories” (Fearon, 1999: 47).

Identity remains the central site for analyzing the relations between social life and subjectivity in the “liquid modernity”. The process of identity construction, maintenance, and transformation across the lifespan (Bosma & Kunnen, 2005; Cerulo, 1997), the role of emotion plays in identity construction (Bosma & Kunnen, 2005), people’s modern experiences on identity such as “distant happenings” brought by cyberspace identity (Cerulo, 1997) with the intrusion of “distant happenings” (Giddens, 1991: 4) in this era are increasingly becoming three major trends on current research of identity.

Although identity has been much talked about, it embodies a remarkably confusing range of meanings in different contexts. Identity is thus discussed and conceptualized in multiple ways with a sheer lack of standard definition. National identity, collective identity, cultural identity, political identity, gender identity, social identity, ethnic identity, racial identity, organizational identity, community identity, professional identity, familial identity and etc. have been seriously discussed in the previous study. People have multiple co-existed identities in this current society with rapid changes, which may conflict with each other, causing identity crisis; people begin to realize this crisis with them stepping into their adolescence where they reflect their childhood experiences and confront the problem of a wide range of social-roles playing, causing anxiety (Erikson, 1993) and calling for the ability of emotional process.

Individuals have their own self-image and sense of social identity within a social milieu where a certain pattern of practices are available to them. As put by Schutz, all individuals are socialized in a pre-existing world by means of the heuristic symbols of its language, which is capable of referring experience to particular provinces of meaning (Young, 1971). In the knowledge society, identity should be understood relatively, dynamically, and reflexively. Identity rises to be an important problem in the "liquid modern" era where the world is fragmented and individuals' lives are cut into ill-connected episodes (Bauman, 2013). The construction process of self-identity is multilayered and never-ending in those "ill-connected episodes". Thus the multiple identities may conflict and struggle against each other in the same stage of the life course with people stepping in and out of various social contexts.

In this work, identity is used in a broad sense which has two main connotations: the first means people's object social role in a certain social group; the other is people's consciousness of his or her being in a particular time span, their understanding of relationship of the outside world including their estimation of the sameness and the differences from other people with value judgment about good or bad, inner emotion, expectations, goals, and well as the scope of possibilities of life chance in future including what he or she can be and what he or she can do.

First and foremost, identity is an internal "cognitive schema" (Wendt, 1994) which is related to people's self-perceiving and self-categorization. The identity problem is more likely to be irritated in a heterogeneous society composed of various social situations. It portrays "the way individuals and groups define themselves and are defined by others on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion, language, and culture (Deng, 1995). Identity contains the seemingly opposite but intertwined two bearings—the private identity as well as the collective identity. The private aspect of identity includes people's endeavors for positioning themselves in a particular social context, recognizing and reconfirming of his or her unique self, including the deeper emotional structure concerning with commitment, satisfaction, dignity, pride, happiness and pride as well as the refusal, aversion, immorality, shame, and despair. Collective identities are socially-defined and socially-constructed roles such as "Chinese", "parents", "student", "teacher", "leader", "manager", "president", "adolescent" and so on. Within a particular social context, people are

always trying to differentiate "we-group" from "they-group": "the part of the individual's self-concept derives from his or her collective identities as well as his or her knowledge of the membership in a social group, together with the values and the emotional significance attached to this membership" (Tajfel, 1981: 255).

Secondly, identity is a relational concept with "I" as a process of becoming as well as "Me" as a product (McAdams, 2008), which is intertwined with "the backdrop of external transitions and transformations" (Giddens, 1991: 6) with its social dimension: it is not built once and for all in isolation straightforwardly but is constructed and developed through social interaction. Being "imposed upon" rather than "embodied in" people (Holland, 2001: 11), the seemingly private individual's identity construction connects the collective field of available social and cultural factors (Holland, 2001: 5). Identity is in the never-ending process of construction when people are participating in social practices through giving and taking (Wenger, 1999), through any forms of improvisation and dialogue (Holland, 2001: 18). Cultural experiences are represented in cultural categories, which are directly connected to identities (Inglis & Almila, 2016: 106).

Notably, identity construction is a process embracing subjective openness and structural limitations. Young students' identity is influenced by historical time, which emerges as a matter of public concern with the modernization which brings about immigration and public schooling (Erikson, 1977). Students' initial self-identity has been shaping in the family where the cultural capital and various family myths play important roles; then they go outside, with the foundation of individual's history— their identity further develops, which has been reshaped by their family milieu, peer networks, and the school field. In continuous communications, in line with the embedded disciplines, discourses, and symbolic power, students have close attention to and reflection of their own behaviors. Linguistic competence contained power relation, i.e., "awareness of the right to speak" and "the power to impose reception" (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). The process of teaching students as readers and writer is also a process of students' socialization, role-play learning, identity building, situated interaction and symbol systems manipulation

(Bloome, Carter, Christian, Otto, & Shuart-Faris, 2004) because educators set the expectation of what students should be like and employ a series of practices promoting this formation (Grant, 1997).

### 2.3.1.2 Understanding identity in the framework of capital, habitus, and field

Boudieusian habitus is a good interpretation of identity which should be understood in the framework of capital, habitus, and field. Habitus, bearing the individual's history, is a set of perceptions, embodied structures and behavioral disposition that influences people's choices and actions in everyday life and hence set the scope of possibilities of individual's future in terms of preferences and reasoning, mostly in an embodied and unconscious way. In this study, identity and habitus are on occasion interchangeably used. Bourdieu has dedicated considerable time to exploring the mechanisms of the everlasting inequality and concealed conspiracy in the educational domain. His three-dimensional framework— “capital-habitus-field”, with sociological imagination and a fair degree of “self-complexity”, possessed considerable explanatory power for educational inequality overcoming the traditional false structural-individual dichotomy.

## **Capital**

Capital is accumulated labor (in its materialized form or its “incorporated”, embodied form) which, when appropriated on a private, i.e., exclusive, basis by agents or groups of agents, enables them to appropriate social energy in the form of reified or living labor. It is a “vis insita”, a force inscribed in objective or subjective structures, but it is also a “lexinsita”, the principle underlying the immanent regularities of the social world. It is what makes the games of society – not least, the economic game – something other than simple games of chance offering at every moment the possibility of a miracle (Bourdieu, 2011: 81).

After defining capital, Bourdieu further categorized it as three fundamental forms— economic capital, which “is immediately and directly convertible into money and maybe institutionalized in the forms of property rights” (Bourdieu, 2011: 81); social capital, which “made up of social obligations

(“connections”), is “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition—or in other words, to membership in a group—which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectivity-owned capital, a ‘credential’ which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word” (Bourdieu, 2011: 86), and cultural capital, which “which is convertible, on certain conditions, into economic capital and maybe institutionalized in the forms of educational qualifications” (Bourdieu, 2011: 81). Capital, no matter in materialized, dispositional or embodied form, causes “Matthew effect” by reproducing itself in identical or expanded form and containing a tendency to persist in its being and thus sets different degrees of limits and possibilities for the individual achievement (Bourdieu, 1986).

Cultural capital is an important concept to my analysis for understanding parenting styles among those three different social groups. Cultural capital, which is unevenly distributed in the population, is individual’s familiarity with, closeness to and proficiency in highbrow culture: the mental state, wording expression, behavioral code favored and recognized by the upper- and upper- middle class. It is the most important kind of capital in the educational field. Cultural capital can be sub-divided into three forms “in the embodied state, i.e., in the form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body; in the objectified state, in the form of cultural goods (pictures, books, dictionaries, instruments, machines, etc.), which are the trace or realization of theories or critiques of these theories, problematics, etc. In the institutionalized state, a form of objectification which must be set apart because, as will be seen in the case of educational qualifications, it confers entirely original properties on the cultural capital which it is presumed to guarantee” (Bourdieu, 1986: 82).

Children’s cultural capital can be boosted through their parents’ economic capital transformation such as cultural goods and activities purchasing. However, more often than not, it is unconsciously nurtured within the original family with frequent exposure to and imperceptible cultural edification of parents’ language patterns, behaviors, life philosophy and aesthetic tastes (Bourdieu, 1986). Aside from cultural capital in the objected state, there are also embodied and institutionalized cultural capital, namely, durable

cultural-affinity dispositions and certifications proving qualifications as “distinctive signs” awarded and recognized by the bureaucracy. People from different social class inherit different quantities of cultural capital that can be created, cultivated, accumulated and passed on from one generation to another (Bourdieu, 1986). Cultural capital incorporates an inculcation and internalization of the socially-accepted mainstream culture within people’s original family that is conducive to scholastic accomplishment, which carries a strong implication of social and cultural reproduction where Bourdieu was peculiarly interested in. He further revealed that symbolic power and misrecognition play a great role in educational inequality by praising certain kind of knowledge while degrading others. Thus people who are well equipped with cultural capital— knowledge accepted by the upper class, gain the feeling for the game in the educational field, which yields academic achievements. As can be seen above, Bourdieusian cultural capital stabilizes and perpetuates the unequal social structure in an invisible way with the cultural coat of “individual competence”. The practice of cultural capital transmission at the private family level is silent, invisible and somewhat disguised which undermines educational equality. When scholars attempt to discuss individual’s possession of cultural capital which has the indexical properties, they could adopt the index method and turn to the long wire of the very individual’s family archaeology, which takes the family history, myths, archives, traditions, and traits into account.

Social capital is also important for understanding the ubiquitous “guanxi” and the inner operation of complex interpersonal relationships in Chinese society.

“The network of relationships is the product of investment strategies, individual or collective, consciously or unconsciously aimed at establishing or reproducing social relationships that are directly usable in the short or long term, i.e., at transforming contingent relations, such as those of neighbourhood, the workplace, or even kinship, into relationships that are at once necessary and elective, implying durable obligations subjectively felt (feelings of gratitude, respect, friendship, etc.) or institutionally guaranteed (rights).” (Bourdieu, 1986)

Social capital can be “endlessly reproduced in and through the exchange (of gifts, words, women, etc.) which it encourages and which presupposes and produces mutual knowledge and recognition” (Bourdieu, 1986). Guanxi (Chinese-style networking) is an important term which helps to understand the texture of Chinese society. Guanxi (the personal relationship and interpersonal networks), as “one of the components of social capital” (Ruan, 2016: 37) can be understood as the interpersonal relationship and personalistic relationship (M. M.-h. Yang, 1994: 151) which contains the art of relationship with ethical, tactical meanings (M. M.-h. Yang, 1994: 109). In this work, guanxi refers to instrumental or emotion-based personal relationship and interpersonal networks within which the insiders benefit themselves by exchanging information, resources, and capital. China is a guanxi-based society where the network of interpersonal relationships owned by people is a kind of important power and people’s reaction of obedience or resistance is greatly influenced by their perceived power structure in a particular social situation (Huang & Hu, 2004). It is widely acknowledged that Confucianism which has been influencing the cultural circle of East Asia emphasizes kinship, righteousness, ethical code, and worldly wisdom. Guanxi is believed by Chinese people to be very complex, meaningful and of crucial importance because bending rules of the game takes a good chance when people possess Guanxi in various contexts. In the practice of Guanxi, the two sides take not only the other side into account but also a hidden group— his or her possessed complex webs of relationship for mobilizing resources. Therefore, people have means and are willing to devote a lot of energy and time for the establishment and maintenance of Guanxi. The practice of Guanxi is very popular in China where Guanxi is used for institutional causes, cultural causes, courteous and moral concerns (Ruan, 2016).

## **Habitus**

“The different ways to relate realities and fictions... with more or less distance and detachment, are very closely linked to the different possible positions in social space, and consequently, bound up with the systems of dispositions (habitus) characteristic of the different classes and class fractions.” (Bourdieu, 1990: 6)

## **The definition of habitus**

Habitus is a somehow elusive concept embracing great ambiguity (DiMaggio, 1979) but also rich connotations which scatters through Bourdieu's work, such as:

“A socialized body, a structured body, a body which has incorporated the immanent structures of a world or of a particular sector of that world - a field—and which structures the perception of that world as well as action in that world.” (Bourdieu, 1998: 81)

“Both the generative principle of objectively classifiable judgments and the system of classification (principium divisionis) of these practices... necessity internalized and converted into disposition that generates meaningful practices and meaning-giving perceptions.” (Bourdieu, 1990: 170)

“Systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends” (Bourdieu, 1990: 53)

“The habitus - embodied history, internalized as a second nature and so forgotten as history - is the active presence of the whole past of which it is the product.” (Bourdieu, 1990: 56)

“The habitus is the principle of a 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, 1990: 64)

“set of historical relationships ‘deposited’ within individuals in the form of mental and physical patterns of perception, appreciation, and action.” (Bourdieu, 1992)

As can be seen above, habitus is both the sediment/result/product of history, and the configuration that is always in the state of being produced. The state of being produced enables habitus to be transportable. Habitus thus can be understood as the acquired, general, durable principle acquired from people's experiences in their everyday life; The gained habitus, in turn, keeps unconsciously guiding people's actions, scheme or condition of their production (Bourdieu, 1990: 50, 56) that generates all the reasonable, common-sense (Bourdieu, 1990: 55), the system of classification (*principium divisionis*) (Bourdieu, 1990: 190), and disposition systems (Bourdieu, 1990).

The relation- and process-oriented concept— habitus, is a package of unconscious schemes of thought and perception or disposition systems mediates structures and practice (Bourdieu, 1990). As “a spontaneity without consciousness or will” (Bourdieu, 1990: 56), it connects the past, the present, and the probable future because, on the one hand, it is the fabric of the individual's life history; on the other hand, it serves as the unconscious cognitive schemes which gradually formed from his historic track and delimited by his own milieu.

Notably, “scheme”, “culture in the embodied state”, “disposition system” and “pattern” were on occasions used interchangeably with habitus in the collection of Bourdieu's work. The concept of habitus steers scholars' attention toward the institutional forces beneath people's saying and behaving which are taken for granted. This concept is important for this work as it guides to disentangle how students' prior educational experiences are related to the on-going practices in the secondary educational setting.

## **Habitus and distinction**

“The habitus which, at 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 earliest experiences, of the experiences statistically common to members of the same class.” (Bourdieu, 1990: 60)

Habitus is largely acquired in the family in an inconspicuous way. As a system of durable, transposable dispositions, habitus organizes people's perception of the social world, classifies language encoding, produces tastes, constitutes lifestyles, draws a moral distinction and sets taboos, and continually brands ideas, perceptions, expressions, manner, and actions, which expresses or betrays individual's social position because it is gradually constructed by being informed of what worth seeing and the right way to do it from many available choices, usually by parents, which are aided by their social class (Bourdieu, 1990). Being intangible, habitus is embodied and ubiquitous that keeps providing people with individual and collective practices (Bourdieu, 1990). Habitus, unconsciously making a distinction between "the tastes and distastes, sympathies and aversions, fantasies and phobias which, more than declared opinions", which forges the unconscious unity of the class. (Bourdieu, 1990: 77) hence class habitus is "the internalized form of class condition and of the conditioning it entails (Bourdieu, 1990: 101). "Birds of a feather flock together": a group of people possessing similar habitus tends to separate itself from drawing the social, cultural and aesthetic boundaries with another social group. A moral boundary is drawn by people with similar legitimate class positions ("the likes of us").

Inspired by the concept of class habitus, students in this work are sub-categorized as a matrix model—"high-achieving underclass students", "mediocre underclass students", "underachieving underclass students", "high-achieving working-class students", "mediocre working-class students", "underachieving working-class students", "high-achieving middle-class students", "mediocre middle-class students", "underachieving middle-class students" for the further in-depth analysis.

### **Field as the metaphor**

Field, a concept rich in meaning and metaphor (DiMaggio, 1979), is a relational and positional concept, which can be understood as a structural network of social practices and positions related to an area of production (Scheuer, 2003). It is a dynamical setting, a social arena endowed with a certain degree of autonomy, a game space where struggles, battles among people with the different amount of inherited capital and relational networks for positions and resources, power contests and knowledge configuration

are unfolding and taking into shape. The distance, gap or asymmetric relations of different force serve as the generative dynamic mechanism for further development of this field (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

“A field is defined as a configuration of positions comprising agents (individuals, groups of actors or institutions) struggling to maximize their position. Conversely, agents are defined by their relational position within the field’s distribution of capital (resources conferring power or status) and from which they derive properties irreducible to intrinsic characteristics of the agents themselves.” (Maton, 2005: 689)

Field theory has suggestive implications for integrating history or heritage of the field with synchronic explanations (Martin, 2003). People who possess affluent relevant capital and symbolic power are the dominated or the advantaged in a specific domain and their counterparts are vulnerable to be excluded, albeit possible struggles. In the educational domain, the frequency of attending high cultural activities is an important predictor of academic performances (DiMaggio, 1982; DiMaggio & Mohr, 1985). The educational system encourages and rewards cultural capital (Jæger, 2011) which is largely nurtured in the family milieu. What modern schools do is to boast and transmit the unconscious schemes previously nurtured in the family into a conscious system of culture and knowledge of the privileged class reproducing status quo of the social distinction. The condition of owning cultural capital is a key factor in deciding personal education circumstances and future social position (Bourdieu, 1977). Like it or not, students have to go to school and conform to the established educational regulations required by the system, being classified, disciplined, coded, praised, and punished.

“Hierarchies depend on the social arrangements that sustained reproduce them. The persistence of these arrangements, says Bourdieu, itself depends on the systematic misrecognition of their oppressive nature by both dominators and dominated.” (DiMaggio, 1979)

Students with abundant cultural capital which gives them the “feel for the game” feel comfortable in the school field and thus are regarded as intelligent, causing accumulative effective in prejudice and preferential treatment in the education process (Jæger, 2011). The cultural capital nurtured in the family

context is recognized and strengthened in the educational field. Therefore, habitus as an embodied cultural capital is constructed by socialization and cannot be taken for granted as it makes visible the inequalities and class embedded in the social process (Reay, 1995).

Owing to a steady habituated body that has an affinity to the social-recognized upper- and upper-middle class culture is a vital indicator of affluent cultural capital that contributes to people's schooling success. Bourdieu's thinking tools encourage reflexive knowledge, whose purpose is challenging taken-for-granted academic knowledge; its legitimacy is its moral vision; its accountability is to intellectuals; its pathology is dogmatism (O'Connor, 2006). Bourdieu's critical socio-cultural theory, by framing capital, habitus, and field, is inspiring for understanding people's experiences and identity-construction process in the secondary education field which is the focus of this work. With the deepening of urbanization and modernity, the concept of field contributes to an understanding of secondary school as an educational setting in the wider cultural setting and social context. Besides, with individual's increasing consciousness of social class, cultural capital and habitus are two important concepts for understanding the interplay of people's experiences and the research site which has undergone a great transition in recent years.

How to coin or select core concepts which both reduces the complexity of a given problem and structures its vein in a logical way is most critical, for which Bourdieu set a good example. His three-dimensional framework "capital- habitus-field", with sociological imagination and "self-complexity", has explanatory power for educational inequality overcoming the traditional structural-individual dichotomy.

### 2.3.2 Experiences and trajectory

"Unanalyzed experience has broken up into distinctions of facts and ideas; the factual side has been developed by indefinite and almost miscellaneous descriptions and cumulative listings; the conceptual side has been developed by unchecked and speculative elaboration of definitions, classifications, etc." (Dewey, 2007: 96)

"Trajectory is the unity of a diachronic succession of points through which it passes...However useful this

"flattening out" maybe, it transforms the temporal articulation of places into a spatial sequence of points...This is a quid pro quo typical of the reductions which a functionalist administration of space must make in order to be effective." (Certeau, 1984: 52).

Understanding people's experiences in their life journey, a culmination of events and people's sense-making or interpretations of them is the focus of this work. There is each individual's experience itself, which becomes manifest in one's stream of consciousness as an awareness of the string of overt and covert events that constitute the encounter with the latter includes all significant perceptions, feelings, and thought (Flaherty, 1987). Experience presents people with fractional and trial efforts to achieve embodiment of the meaning of anything including the reason, good and meaning (Dewey, 1906). Embedded in the community, people all identify with certain mythic ideas about themselves and their life-journey direction and lifestyle (Layder, 2004). Katherine argues that experience is restrained by 6 factors, namely, inheritance, embodiment, ecological situatedness, social embeddedness, cultural and symbolic conditions, and past experience (Nelson, 2010). Wright disputed that experiences are always conscious organisms, with foci in conscious processes; reflection occurs when conflicts are serious enough (Wright, 1922).

"The new balance between self and other involves a reorganization of the means to identify itself. That self of childhood, derived from significant identifications with important others must, during adolescence, give way to a self derived from yet transcending those foundations—to a new whole greater than the sum of its parts. Others now become important not merely as potential sources of identification but rather as independent agents, helping to recognize the 'real me'." (Kroger, 2006: 9)

As stated above, an individual's identity construction is in an ongoing, non-linear process with unavoidable vacillations. Both students' past embodied unique individual experiences and the currently unfolding daily-practices and interaction are of equal importance for interpreting their status quo. The importance of significantly impressive episodes or moments in the life journey construct, interrupt, transform the identity should not be neglected. Thus, people's every step in their life journeys has

enduring consequences on their life chances, constraining on what they are supposed to do and what is the possible prospect. Following this line of thought, the study has the assumption that students' current situations and their location and relocation of themselves are partly shaped by their prior experiences; those earlier experiences more or less influence their perception by offering them a possible cognitive scheme for understanding their current conditions. Students' academic trajectory or educational experiences, which is the collection of chronological important academic performances over the time, reflects the interaction of the self-identity which is continuously generated and the life-world within a certain period (within which are various micro contexts/situations). Past experiences in people's life course, together with the on-going ones, serve as forefronts to understand the opportunities and inequality in the educational landscape.

Students' social origin and academic achievement are not completely in line with each other, especially in multi-cultural schools with a student pool where people are multi-cultured. Particularly, there exists inconsistency between students' social origin and their different academic performances in different stages.

"People who sit back from the world and write about class structure overlook the essential truth of class that experience of it is always from amidst a world-defining context experienced through the primordial realm in which selves take shape." (Charlesworth, 2000: 65)

In fact, complexity in real life should never be ignored because practices do not operate homogeneously but in a compromised way. For example, transition into next-stage schools involves a stream of practices which more or less reshape individual self-identity as a student. All these factors, being visible or harder to spot, rewrite— broadens or narrows their aspirations and prospects, and academic performances. Therefore, analyzing students' trajectories implies taking into account the structured— objective and institutional, interactive— middle-range, and unstructured— individual and subjective. By integrating Parson's structural functionalism and Dahrendorf's social conflict theory, Luhmann coined the social system theory which seeks to include both integration and conflict, both order and change, both structure

and process (Kneer & Nassehi, 1993: 8-9). A social system (Sozialen System) is inside possible—the correlation of meaningful interrelated social actions of people who are linked together; all other actions that have no relation to the maintenance of respective meaningful contexts and all other non-social entities and events belong to a larger world called the environment (Umwelt), the outside possible (Kneer & Nassehi, 1993: 8-9).

“Time” (Zeit) and “event” (Ereignis) are attached much importance in social system theory which can compensate for the defect of Bourdieu’s reproduction theory to a large degree. Time makes an “interpretation of reality in terms of a difference between the past and the future” possible. “Temporalization of complexity leads to a selective ordering of the linking of elements in temporal succession” (Jahraus et al., 2012). Self-(re)production systems (Autopoietic systems) are temporalized systems where time should be carefully dealt with. While one element of an event disappears and a new one continues on self-(re)production, the event stream is created by recourse of at least the previous event which constitutes time, which appears to an observer as a time stream. Event is bound up to time, which is the socially smallest possible temporal atom—“an indivisible, all-or-none happening”. A single event, then, is a “dichotomizing non-quantifiable happening, and nothing more. A single event, then, is a “dichotomizing non-quantifiable happening”, and nothing more (Luhmann, 1984: 389). Each event makes an overall change of the past, the future, and the present. At the same time, this minimal shift can change the relevance aspect, which structures and limits the horizons of the past and the future. Uncertainty is and remains a structural condition (Luhmann, 1984: 390). Events never occur in the free space but are first constituted by the system autopoiesis. The event makes event context of the self-(re)production possible, and it also allows the continuation of the very event (Jahraus et al., 2012). Each event in the life course rewrites both the remembered past and future expectations. The life course is needed to be rearranged by combining continuity and discontinuity of the sequence of events (Baraldi & Corsi, 2016).

Luhmann’s theory is “multi-layered” that can be used to analyze different and interlaced objects (Baraldi & Corsi, 2016). Social systems as event-based systems with clear operational boundaries, with their own

progression, selectively limit possibilities and thus stabilize or change through variation and selection (Jahraus et al., 2012). Modern society is characterized by differentiation composed of functional systems whose specific mode of communication differs from others. These systems reproduce themselves and determine their respective environmental boundaries through the specific operations they perform systematically in relation to other own operations (Jahraus et al., 2012: 70).

Following this line of thought, I resort to an interconnected dynamic approach of experiences or trajectory. Trajectory brings not static pictures about the current status which easily incurs the notorious fixed stereotype, but rather chronological condensed fluid slides with multipoint measurement behind each of which are ordinary people's ups and downs, impressing episodes, unforgettable memory, and vivid life stories through their life journey. This concept also facilitates me to examine the way in which people's current status quo, as continuity or discontinuity of their prior experiences, has been shaping and shaped. Although this concept may also involve a "flattening", it serves as an enlightening approach to distinguish students' different development patterns without neglecting the tension between structural factors and individual subject multiple practices.

### 2.3.3 Narratives

"What we are doing is telling and retelling, to ourselves and to others, the story of what we are about and what we are." (Carr, 1986: 97)

Autobiography consists of these following factors:

"a narrator, in the here and now, takes upon himself or herself the task of describing the progress of a protagonist in the there and then, one who happens to share his name. He must by convention bring that protagonist from the past into the present in such a way that the protagonist and the narrator eventually fuse and become one person with a shared consciousness. Now, in order to bring a protagonist from the there and then to the point where the original protagonist becomes the present narrator, one needs a theory of growth or at least of transformation. You need a prescription that will allow the callow pear-stealing boy

to turn into the thoughtful St. Augustine now caught in a struggle between faith and reason. The boy, of course, becomes an instrument in the telling. His life becomes dedicated to the theory or story into which his destiny is fitted. In stories of this kind, it is not amiss to say that the old adage is turned around. If initially the child was father to the man, now (in autobiography) the man reclaims the role of being father to the child — but this time recapturing the child for the culture by the use of the culture's theories and stories.” (Brockmeier & Carbaugh, 2001)

It is widely recognized that Aristotle is the precursor of the narrative tradition who put that plot or storyline which strings up scattered elements and structures a whole story is an important element of narratives. The narrative reflects a paradigmatic mode of thinking (Bruner, 2009) or “cognitive capacity” where the narrator logically categorizes the types of people, events and “meaningful expression of experience” from certain cultural assumptions (Archakis & Tsakona, 2012b) which structure their communication and control the communication anticipation when they are narrating. Except for conceptualizing people’s experiences and organizing their social practices, narratives are considered to tighten bonds within a group and reinforcing the sense of belonging through recalling and strengthening certain common perceptions and values (Archakis & Tsakona, 2012a: 40). Furthermore, narratives plays an important role of constructing identities for narrators themselves and their world (Archakis & Tsakona, 2012a: 44) because identity, which is related to the interpretive appraisal of one’s personal past as it takes place in autobiographical narrative, is inseparable from normative ideas of what a life is, or is supposed to be, if it is lived well (Brockmeier & Carbaugh, 2001: 17). With the “discourse turn” in late modernity, the study of narratives has been marked by diversity, deconstruction, and politicization since 1980 (Currie, 2010: 8).

People make sense of events and construct narratives guided by their memorized episodic events; this sense-making is not only limited to past experiences, but also gives a hint to their understanding of their current conditions as well as their future expectations “through goals, expectations, and/or self-fulfilling prophecies” (Merton, 1995). Narratives which make sense of experiences reflect the individual’s reality, his or her innate internal and social characteristics which are both hetero-determined as well as self-

determined. In this study, narratives, or storytelling are narrator's conscious story knitting or "plot" composing activities through meaning-making by virtue of a set of discourses behind which the narrator's past history, experiences and their understanding of the stock of knowledge and belief systems as well as personal inclinations which may imply certain kinds of behavioral patterns are unavoidably weaved into. Thus, people's experiences can be represented as narratives, which can be studied and understood through their tellings. Narratives are classified as personal narratives and collective narratives. Personal narratives are personalized narration in which the individual consciously organize and reconstruct his or her experiences, which can be a bit different within various social contexts and in different life stages. In the collective narratives, social organizations are, in most cases, the authors who make use of historical clues which include tradition, spirit according to the practical needs and goals to produce the cultural scripts. Identity cannot be discussed apart from discourse/narratives as narratives offer the possibility of documenting how people understand their own self, mind, and position and recognize others through storytelling (Moje & Luke, 2009). People's personal myths and sense-of-making are built on the basis of dominant stories-telling with corresponding plots and scenes (McAdams, 1993). Without narrative fabric, it is difficult to think of human temporality and historicity (Brockmeier & Carbaugh, 2001: 15).

"Narrative proves to be a supremely appropriate means for the exploration of the self or, more precisely, the construction of selves in cultural contexts of time and space...human identity— perhaps we can even say, the very possibility of human identity— is tied to the very notion of narrative and narrativity."

This suggests that although it is difficult to unravel the hidden interwoven factors of narratives, narrative inquiry into people's identity construction through space and over time proves to be an adequate and promising research method for understanding cultural codes and intrinsic meaning systems.

Biographical research fills the gap between culture and cognition (Ines, 2014). Narrative inquiry dedicates to explore the told and re-told stories that people are living with (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004). People's Life stories are the stories in which the narrator intertwines the reconstructed past, the perceived present, and the likely future so as to give his or her life a sense of unity, meaning, and purpose (McAdams, 2006).

Though these Life stories are unique and differ from one another, though they are within a particular cultural frame (McAdams, 2001). Thus personal life-stories reflect the reciprocal action between the structured cultures and social norms and their unique personal experiences.

## 2.4 Discussions

Social class, which structures multi-factors— educational policy and its reform, the regional disparity at the macro level, the family strategies and school selection practices with parents' capital chips at the middle-range level, and also the offspring's habitus at the secret trivial level, profoundly shapes the landscape of educational inequality. High-status parents are winners in the school selection practices by reaching a conspiracy with renowned institutions where offspring's better opportunities are provided and their academic success is facilitated. They support their children by deliberately employing long-term strategical actions which facilitate their academic success and social position maintenance (Nash, 1999). These parents are familiar with school practice and regard school as a facilitator for children's access to prestigious next-stage schooling (Reay, 1998). Parents with continuous momentum of cultural investment for children and leading schools with intensive educational resources reach a tacit conspiracy, placing students from the disadvantageous group in an untenable place and thus exacerbating educational inequality. Private schools have a pronounced effect on college attendance (Falsey & Heyns, 1984). School model is adopted in the private school type, which allows parents, as customers play much more important roles in the educational process, compared to their counterparts (Maxwell & Maxwell, 1995). Private school pupils are equipped with the knowledge characteristic of the dominant fraction of the ruling group when they graduate from the school (Kapferer, 1986). Besides, a close relational chain of leading high school and the university is another mechanism for underpinning the cultural reproduction. Top university admission takes secondary school status into account (Zimdars, 2010). In the U.S, through chartering and bartering, leading secondary schools recommend and advertisement their students to Ivy League colleges (Persell & Cookson Jr, 1985). In Great Britain where hierarchy is attached much importance, elite status is with little space for negotiating but ascribed and given through controlled selection process (Morgan, 1990; Turner, 1971). In France, the cultural exception is also pronounced.

Leading high schools offer preparatory classes for students who are with archives (dossier) documenting their high-status family background and excellent performances in the competitive exam, which enables them to be admitted to the elite university (Buisson-Fenet & Draelants, 2013). In Germany, where its school system is consist of academic and non-academic school track highlighting their distinction, educational streaming takes place in students' childhood before they enter the secondary school. The academic secondary school—Gymnasium proves only for parents' aspiration that is socially selective and bound to the social background as significant (Schauenberg & Ditton, 2006). Persistent educational inequality is constructed and fixed through multiple generations (Braun & Stuhler, 2018). The positive correlation of cultural capital inherited from parents and academic achievement is confirmed in a large body of research. Early family education, as a cumulative effect of children's future academic accomplishment, is attached much importance by middle-class parents (Augustine, Cavanagh, & Crosnoe, 2009). High-status parents take education as a “soul project” and have strategies for instillment and cultivation. With the “concerted cultivation” style of parenting (Lareau, 2011), high-status parents use resources to create a family environment serve to high academic accomplishment (Teachman, 1987).

#### **2.4.1 The basis and dilemma of the reference of western-context rooted social theories**

The discussion of this section deals with why and how western theories should be applied to the Chinese social context by presenting China's current social conditions and its domestic sociologists' ideas. Sociology was born in Europe as a response to modernity filled with complexity, differentiation, disorientation, challenges, periodic pain and crisis. Insofar, the existing influential theories are of western origin. Sociology in China is underdeveloped on the whole though has been developing robustly in recent years with the great and important social transformation since the late 1970s with the termination of the cultural revolution and the start of reform and opening-up. Chinese society is still in the process of great transformation towards modernization, which offers scholars a huge laboratory for sociological research. Like in the West, modernization brings an overall social transformation including not only the positive aspects—economic growth, rising education levels, material life improvement, and life convenience etc., but also the negative unintended ones—environment pollution, polarization of wealth, social segregation,

mental anxiety, estranged relationship and indifference as well as utilitarianism, etc. Faced with these social conditions, domestic scholars are vigorously seeking answers and solutions by studying western sociological ideas and trying to integrate them in a tailored way into the specific practices in the Chinese context which is known as the localization of sociology.

Social theories which offer a systematic explanation of both social operational mechanisms and people's action and their hidden meaning systems should admittedly be open meaning systems which encourage and invite wide-range scholarly discussions and stand the test of empirical studies transcending national boundaries on the way towards enrichment and improvement. With the on-going process of modernization and globalization, Chinese people have been experiencing the experiences of modernity in various social organizations. Particularly, as modernization of China is with an incredibly super speed, people have extremely strong feeling about western-context rooted concepts such as "time-space compression", "disenchantment", "social anomie", "iron cage", "alienation", "rationalization", "secularization", "relativism" (just to name a few) as well as, if not better than westerners at the time of magnificent society transformation. The most fundamental reason why Chinese scholars study and borrow western theories with a modest mind lies in the fact that Chinese people are experiencing and living through modernity while localized social thoughts mapping these current conditions are quite laggard. It is exactly the life experiences— of the mass, and of scholars themselves, that triggers keen anxiety and motivates scholars to study, borrow, and implant some of the inspiring western theories in a tailored way into the Chinese contexts. Those influential theoretical thoughts with sociological imagination based on reflection on modernization in the West are both local and global which have already transcended western experience that acquired a characteristic of "disembedding", which is of instructive significance to map the social transformation and structure, and also people's perception and interpretation of various tensile experiences within their daily life.

However, Western theories need to be tested in the practices as validity is a problem when western theories are generalized in the non-western context (Wang, 2006). Less cultural differences make localization easier to succeed and vice versa (Zheng & Wang, 2000), so Chinese sociology localization is a process

of introduction, digestion, and absorption as well as a long process of synthesis, transformation, and innovation (Ji, 2005). How to tally western theories and methods with the current Chinese context in a proper way is absolutely no easy task; it cannot be achieved without an appropriate understanding of the differences between China and western countries (Xie & Yang, 2018). This reminds us that although western-context rooted ideas provide valuable and inspiring perspectives which cast some light on disentangling the complexity existed in the public issue, they should be discreetly employed in the Chinese context when conducting a Chinese study because of the differences in the aspects of cultural, political, social and historical base as well as national character which needs much reflection, avoiding drawing false conclusions.

#### 2.4.2 China's social class construction on educational inequality

The above discussed three perspectives offered some useful insights and examples for understanding educational inequality and mobility in different stages with the deepening of the 1978 economic reform. China has experienced “limited- robust- limited” patterns of social mobility with a sign of increasing class consolidation nowadays. Historical China was a rigid society with population to a large extent, frozen into fixed social groupings (Thrupp, 1959). In the Qing and Ming dynasty, though imperial examination works as a social equalizer counteracting social inequality, non-institutional channels such as intellectual association, nepotism, favoritism plays a part in the official position and marrying (Campbell & Lee, 2008; Ho, 1959). Before and after new China was established, immobility of the working population was pronounced, with only a few people with farm origin achieving social mobility upward under the emphasis of industrialization and modernization (Cheng & Dai, 1995). But socioeconomic inequalities and social mobility took a comical turn in the social transition after reform and opening-up policy in 1978, with class stratification from a rigid status hierarchy to an open and evolving class system (Bian, 2002).

Social class in China has experienced dramatic change from a cadre-dominated social hierarchy to a more robust system (Bian, Breiger, Galaskiewicz, & Davis, 2005). Citizen-subjects were no longer understood

as equal members of collective political body but by the degree of their individual aspirations and progress towards middle-class status (Anagnost, 2008). People with the rural family background can achieve the urban elite identity with outstanding academic attainment, giving rise to social mobility to a large extent (Wu & Treiman, 2007). As soon as the social fluidity began to open a critical corner and sacred myths for the disadvantaged group, people were increasingly having the perception of “class crystallization”. Good education, as a vital factor for the construction of the elite identity and a rising channel achieving social upward mobility, has received serious attention in the society. But the stock of knowledge is not equally seen and available to everyone. Family origin with different amount of capital still has a strong effect impact on intensifying urban-rural educational distinction (Wu, 2010) and shaping educational stratification significantly, which exacerbates educational inequality in urban China (Zhou, Moen, & Tuma, 1998) that is in rapid process of modernization with the simultaneous production of the middle class and increasing inequality (Anagnost, 2008). The disadvantaged group’s life chances of urban residence and educational opportunities are blocked by a dual-track approach (Anagnost, 2008). The present time has actually witnessed not only the well-known structured inequality of dual urban-rural dualism but also internal differentiation among the urban citizens. The increasing “social-class turn” of Chinese educational discourse is proved to be overwhelming, which is reflected by the less-advantageous group’s strong feeling of “years of struggle just for having a coffee with you” and the anxious middle-class parents’ “school district housing” purchase fanaticism and their deliberate calculation about keeping or improving their positions in the “educational chain of contempt”. By anxiously managing the embodied capital, the Chinese middle-class are self-conscious with social-distinction in terms of consumption ability and educational attainment, which serves to stabilize the established social order (Anagnost, 2008).

Socioeconomic inequalities and social mobility took a comical turn in the social transition after reform and opening-up policy in 1978, with class stratification from a rigid status hierarchy to an open and evolving class system (Bian, 2002) and with a cadre-dominated social hierarchy to a more robust system (Bian et al., 2005). This reform made increased social mobility and various channels for that possible, thus promoting the formation of a more vibrant society (Lu, 2010). China has been striving to expand its middle class, which contributes to bring about an olive-shaped society. Lu also put in this article that the

middle class took shape with 22 percent in 2007 and that the prototype of the Chinese middle-class had been formed (Lu, 2010). Through a study of social backgrounds of students who were admitted to China's top university and one key university—Peking University and Suzhou University, between 1952 to 2002, Liang's team found that students were mainly from some key high schools with a significant percentage of peasants' and workers' family backgrounds and claimed that "a silent revolution" took place in the tertiary education (Liang et al., 2012). Under this historical background when the interests were redistributed with people's status mainly determined by their contribution to the economic development rather than their political identity affirmed by the policy, people had a more positive attitude of social justice and deeper belief equality in the first dozen years after the 1978 Chinese economic reform. In the educational domain, disadvantaged young students were motivated to become effective socialism successors armed with knowledge and technology with corresponding mainstream national political discourses glutted with development narrative such as "knowledge and talents are the main driving forces that promote social progress", "knowledge changes the destiny" and "being paid for your knowledge" flowing into the campus. Structural functionalism creeds were never absent at that time: students who had lost the game in the educational opportunities were morally blamed and labeled as being lazy, unwise and useless that could not adapt themselves to the social development.

Efficiency and fairness are not easy to reconcile or kept in positive interaction. Comparing to the condition of Chinese social class in the time span of the 1980s-1990s and that of years after 2000, Sun detected a pronounced difference, by which he referred to crystallization trend of the social class; and the crystallization was reflected by the formation of class boundaries and identification as well as the decreased class mobility and the increased class reproduction (Sun, 2008). Liang's conclusion of "a silent revolution" was questioned for its chosen time period without taking account historical time such as 1978 which made great overall social differences, the role of key high school within a county in educational inequality, as well as the reliability of the collected materials (Ying & Liu, 2015). Based on the Peking university student pool from time span from 1978 to 2005, Liu's team showed the evidence that Peking university students with the rural background were in sharp decline since late 1990: with above 30% from 1978 to 1998 while only ten percent to fifteen percent after 2000, hidden which lay complex power factors

penetrating into different families in different geographical areas (Liu, Wang, & Yang, 2009). Liang's later research, based on data with a longer time span from 1865 to 2014, has also showed that compared to the West, although the elite higher education is more independent with multiplex elites who contribute to a process of continuous transformation of the Chinese society, the current stage (from 1993 to 2014) has witnessed a robust increase of elites from bourgeois families (Liang, Dong, Ren, & Li, 2017).

The younger generation has witnessed the widening prosperity gap and scarcer mobility opportunities with the deepening of the market economic reform, under which they are increasingly dealing themselves with topics involving the social class. The increasing "social-class turn" of mass discourse concerning education is proved to be overwhelming, which is reflected by the less-advantageous group's strong feeling of "years of struggle just for having a coffee with you" and the anxious middle-class parents' "school district housing" purchase fanaticism and their deliberate calculation about keeping and improving their positions in the "educational chain of contempt". By anxiously managing the embodied capital, the Chinese middle-class are self-conscious with social-distinction in terms of consumption ability and educational attainment, which serves to stabilize the established social order (Anagnost, 2008). The relationship of class and educational opportunity, with its transformation from the Chinese dualistic educational system—the distinction of urban and rural as well as the key high schools and ordinary ones intensifies educational inequality and class segregation (Yang, 2005). The academic advantages of middle-class children hinged upon their parents' massive investment in education; the class distinction is mainly reflected in economic capital (Hong & Zhao, 2014). Middle-class parents have taken various measures to increase their children's opportunities for better education in those key schools such as buying overpriced school district housing, hiring family teachers, paying for extracurricular tutorial classes. Housing is related to educational opportunity, and the current data in three Chinese metropolis—Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou, showed that people's class identification is increasingly underpinned of possessed housing (Zhang & Yang, 2017). Shadow education, as the "second battlefield", plays a great role in educational inequality and social reproduction (Lin, 2018; Xue, 2015). These educational situations can be explained by social exchange theory to a certain degree.

With the increasingly awakening of the middle-class consciousness, taste difference and distinction becomes another unavoidable and controversial topic after education input. Inspired by Bourdieu, Bernstein, and Lareau, etc., the domestic scholars begin to examine how micro-practices such as parenting styles and daily linguistic performances construct students' academic disparity. Representative research shows that People have shown little evidence with regard to different parenting styles described by Lareau, which implies that the formation of stable class habitus still needs more time (Hong & Zhao, 2014). But this time with much chaos and ambiguity implies that the time is at the threshold of an era towards being conventionalized and patterned, as put by Zhu that middle-class identification is in construction through various practices including marriage, education, communication, and consumption, etc. (Zhu, 2017). The middle-class make up 12.1% of the population with a higher proportion (25.4%) in the city (Li & Zhang, 2008). Although the middle-class are relatively small in scale, citizen-subjects are no longer understood as equal members of the collective political body but by the degree of their aspirations and progress towards middle-class status (Anagnos, 2008), which implies that the middle-class are ever-growing with many people's status transformation. Consequently, to study the educational practices in this silent revolution of class turn is of great value. This is part of the reason why I choose to study a multi-cultural school in a district that is imprinted with a sea of transformations towards urbanization.

With the academic disputes going on, one thing is certain: in the presence of the overwhelming complexity of the present Chinese society with unbalanced development and the urban-rural dual hierarchical system, a single perspective and method may fail in persuasiveness— can be very convincing in one situation but suddenly sound unreasonable in another one. This calls for various investigations in the specific field for first-hand data collection and analysis. Educational ethnography started from the 1980s in China with a strong focus on the minority. For the moment, we are still at the stage of introducing western research with limited theoretical contribution. Although the educational systems have reformed in many ways, the power and hegemony possess the natural resistance of changes; under this very social condition, scholars need to break up with conventional thinking and understand the taken-for-granted beliefs in the social practices (Zhang, 2013). Reflection on the diversity in education, the cultural progress,

the disadvantageous group in education, and the cultural differences are an integral part of the deepening of educational ethnography in China (Ba, 2008).

## 2.5 Summary

This chapter has discussed how sociology has studied education with a detached distance, which enables a possible reflective “second-order observation”. In consideration of the research purpose and questions stated in chapter one, I was inspired by Luhmann’s structure-function analysis of modernity, Bourdieu’s cultural/social reproduction theory with the framework of habitus, capital, and field, Foucault’s sociology knowledge concerning knowledge conditions, the intertwined relations among knowledge, discourse, power, and discipline. The difficult thing to explain how students perform at school lies in why they possess certain kinds of thinking modes and behavior patterns, which is related to their identity construction through their past experiences and current practices, as well as the capricious tensions and struggles in between. Bourdieu’s thinking tools provide much insight while on the other hand, taking limited consideration of “process” and “key mechanisms”, his reproduction theory seldom handles the liminality problem with the passage of time and transition between spaces, which is becoming an increasingly important problem in the modern society in great transition (i.e. the liminality from a school to a next-stage school). Thus I also turn to Luhmann’s analysis of time and event. Along this thinking path, this work aims to grasp and document students’ impressive episodes and moments in their life journey which have constructed their identity as a student and child within the given social context. I resort to a dynamic approach of the trajectory by studying students’ overall experiences— their suffering and pain, as well as courage and dream which have constructed who they are over time, which brings procedural, chronological, and fluid slides concerning how the social structure acts on people as well as how people act and response within the established structure. Finally, by carefully comparing and combining students’ stories and their on-going encounters at school, I seek to weave “their stories” into “stories of them”, i.e., to re-narrate their stories and weave them in a scholarly way that attempts to connect their private dilemma to the social fabric.

# CHAPTER 3 - PHILOSOPHY STANDPOINT AND FIELD RESEARCH DESIGN

It is widely accepted that there is no broadly shared philosophical grounding or pragmatism available to humanists. It is of great importance to state from the outset the philosophical grounding from which develops the research assumptions which are important in this work in that they structure the effective literature review and clarify in which context that people's speaking and doing is embedded. Hence, this chapter moves on to describe the ontology, epistemology, theoretical perspective, methodology, and specific methods that underpin this work, which will be unfolded in detail in the following chapters—chapter four, five, six, and seven before the final chapter which draws conclusions of this work. The ontology, epistemology, theoretical perspective, methodology, and specific methods are shown in the following table.

Ontology	Epistemology	Theoretical perspective	Methodology	Methods
Pluralism: Multi-realities are socially constructed	Relativism: Unmask what is hidden; Disempower the magic of discourse	Phenomenology and structuralism	Ethnography, narrative and discourse analysis with a tailored qualitative design for knowing insiders' rational	Semi-structured interview, life-course study, oral-history interview, on-the-spot observation
Constructionism: Practices reshape and renegotiate reality to some degree	Interpret the hidden meaning of practices; defamiliarize what is taken for granted	Reflective and critical thinking		

Table 3.1 Epistemology and Methodology

## 3.1 Ontology

Ontology aims to offer a fundamental explanation of the being at heart independent of man's will, which can be questioned like "what exists in the world", "what is the nature of the knowable", or "what is the nature of reality?" (Allison & Hobbs, 2006: 56). There exist different paradigms that guide the research design in social science research. This work draws upon multiple realities interpreted by Husserl and Schutz and diverse experiences that are unfolding elaborated by Dewey in social situations with the passage of time.

### **3.2 Epistemology**

Epistemology deals with the problem of "how knowledge is constructed" or "what is the nature of the relationship between the knower (the inquirer) and the known (or knowledge)" (Allison & Hobbs, 2006: 56). The everyday speaker tends to take "which determines and structures his discourse" for granted (Lefebvre, 2003: 51). This work draws on post-modern constructionism which remains interested in the truth condition of knowledge and the way in which reality is negotiated because of the fact that despite personal will, people are plunged into an unquestioned pre-given cultural box which is not of "our own making" where socially structured stories and myths are repeatedly told and retold.

The study, being shaped by personal experiences and inspired by feminism and neo-Marxism which free individuals from "sources of domination and repression" (Anderson, 1989), has the assumption that knowledge, which is usually taken as truth, is actually socially constructed. The relationship between knowledge and power is important to this study. Knowledge gives a particular connotation of contemporary civilization. The unprecedented high value of knowledge lies both in its generative power and restructuring power, by which it becomes an existence that dominates people's social life and mental state. The generative power of knowledge encourages the remarkable ardor and boom in education; the restructuring power of knowledge invites an array of serious scholar discussions about social justice. Knowledge contains power which structures certain ideology and thus has potential hazards of covering and obscuring other ways of being (Parker, 2014). Philosophical hermeneutics is concerned with understanding how we are part of or engaged with that world and how conditions of our engagement (e.g.,

language, the nature and structures of communication) make interpreting that world an inescapable feature of our existence (Walker, 1985). The study is based on the assumption that people get the filtered reality and can never know the whole truth because the available selected knowledge only reflects a proportion of massive social reality; and that people can make sense of their scattered experiences through a reasonable storyline when they are narrating. Their stories reflect their unique life course and also the institutional factors within a social milieu. Following this train of thought, this work commits itself to make the hidden be seen.

Notably, in the knowledge-based society where information explodes, the jungle of problems concerning culture, code, metaphor, stereotype, and mirror images is inevitable. Given the ontology adopted in this work—the complex, multiple social realities, this work is based on the ground that people's perception of being is hooked up to the knowledge they have learned. Still, knowledge may distort social reality as knowledge is socially structured whose relationship to power and interest cannot be denied. Meaning of human language and action can only be interpreted within a particular context or frame of reference (Schwandt, 2014). Hence, to make the frame of reference or context of narratives visible, reflect and disempower a variety of myths with all kinds of coats, and to unmark and disclose hidden assumptions, things, and relationships that remain the status quo, making them present remain the core tasks of epistemology in this work.

In line with this stance, this research aims to provide a less problematic and critical picture of a portion of people's experiences in the secondary education context in China by exploring the complicated dialectical relationship between “the social structural constraints on human actors and the relative autonomy of human agency” (Anderson, 1989).

### 3.3 Theoretical perspectives

This study is especially inspired by theoretical perspectives of phenomenology and structuralism with reflective and critical thinking. Specifically, some theories and core concepts from Foucault, Bourdieu,

Luhmann, and Schutz provide this study with a valuable source of academic inspiration, which is discussed in detail in the former chapter that concerns the theoretical framework.

### 3.4 Methodology

Guided by ontological and epistemological positions (Creswell, Hanson, Clark Plano, & Morales, 2007), methodology “relates to the process of understanding” which in turn guides the choices of methods and recording techniques employed, and how results are interpreted and reported (Allison & Hobbs, 2006: 56). Qualitative research is designed to know what and how. For the purpose of this study, focusing on some particular groups in a specific social context, I resort to qualitative methods which serve to understand “people’s world in their eyes” in depth (Creswell, 1998) including their social meanings (Brewer, 2000), attitudes and motivations (Bell, 2014), and interpret meaning residing in people’s concrete, particular doing in everyday life and clarify “what the game is” with holistic thinking (Erickson, 1977).

Ethnography is the in-depth (re-)writing about the nation, tribe, community, or people through the lens of the natives' narratives and understanding of what happened to them (Erickson, 1984) through intensive and prolonged on-the-spot observation.

“Common sense is "denounced," not because it shows itself to be false by definition, but because it stems from a "spontaneous" consciousness of the social actors, directly related to their action and therefore unable to give access to the "principle" that can explain their suffering.” (Hamel, 1997)

The employment of ethnography in this work hinges on the adopted ontology and epistemology. Ethnography as a form of representation of social reality is one of the many methodological experiments that have grown out of the intellectual ferment of the 1960s and in the current times, taxonomic descriptions of behavior and social structure are increasingly replaced by thick descriptions of symbol and meaning (Anderson, 1989). The structured procedure fails to capture people’s discourses and their

senses while ethnography does. In the educational domain, ethnography allows for a better understanding of the socio-cultural contexts within which teaching and learning are unfolding, determining what factors may be supporting or constraining educational inequality. Employing school ethnography which help to inclusively study young students' complicated living experiences, I use "thick description" (Geertz, 2008) to understand people's sense-making of their lives and also aim to shed some light the nuanced mechanisms of cultural reproduction and mobility in the Chinese secondary education context from a socio-cultural perspective. Ethnography "generates or builds theories of cultures—or explanations of how people think, believe, and behave—that are situated in local time and space" (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999: 8). Ethnography brings about "reportable significant knowledge and unreportable mysticism and high adventure" (Tedlock, 1991). The ethnographer, through stepping into the concrete context which people are living in, aims to understand natives' conventional ways in which they make sense of their life. In the field, "why is this (act, person, status, concept) the way it is and not different?" can always be asked because the natives' doing and speaking are only one possibility of the wide spectrum of people's behaviors all over the world (Erickson, 1984).

The ethnographical study, with intensive research technologies in a prolonged period of time, which is context-bounded/situation-bounded, requires an appropriate social relationship between the researcher and informants, longstanding firsthand observation, interactive-reactive approach, and the humanistic holistic, well-rounded view (Zaharlick, 1992). And then, the ethnographer analyzes the socio-cultural materials collected from a particular social group in the fieldwork for determining the dynamics of socio-cultural systems (Malinowski & Cairns, 1960). The increasing popularity of ethnography used in educational research where schools are seen as microcosms of the society they serve is connected with problems brought by immigration and urbanization (Yon, 2003).

"Institutional ethnography takes the everyday world as both its point of departure and its problematic. It grounds inquiry in the ongoing activities of actual people in the world. It aims to map the translocal processes of administration and governance that shape those circumstances via the linkages of ruling relations." (DeVault, 2006).

“The appeal for narrative perspective lies in that human beings are the story-telling animal.” (MacIntyre, 1988).

In this study, ethnographical fieldwork is mainly composed of participant observation and narrative inquiry. A group is a collection of individuals continuously in the process of forming definitions of objects and events which shapes their behaviors, thus different group possess their own “objectivity” (Dodge & Bogdan, 1974). Participant observation is an effective method to study people’s “natural” behaviors and ways of speaking in the real social context, which helps to holistically understand the complex social setting and social relationships, for example, a specific organizational form (Bogdan, 1973). In the participant observation, the researcher makes himself or herself a member in the social setting and needs both passionate devotion and dispassionate determination.

“People shape their daily lives by stories of who they are and others are and as they interpret their past in terms of these stories. Story, in the current idiom, is a portal through which a person enters the world and portal through which a person enters the world and by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful. Narrative inquiry, the study of experience as story, then, is first and foremost a way of thinking about experience. Narrative inquiry as a methodology entails a view of the phenomenon. To use narrative inquiry methodology is to adopt a particular view of experience as phenomenon under study experience as phenomenon under study.” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004: 375)

Understanding the use of language involving social, political, cultural, meaning and power relationships is the central task of this work. In the field, people’s speaking is of the equal importance of their doing that cannot be ignored. Thus narrative inquiry helps to know how people give their experiences meaning. Narrative inquiry is a powerful way of knowing which requests the researcher’s ability to structure the data into a form that clearly presents a sense of a beginning, middle, and an end (Bell, 2014). Narrative inquiry, as a methodology entails a view of the phenomenon, narrative inquiry seeks to understand people’s personal and professional experiences that make up their lives, through the lens of their

storytelling (Clandinin, 2006, 2016; Clandinin & Connnelly, 2004; Clandinin, Pushor, & Orr, 2007; Connnelly & Clandinin, 1990). To use narrative inquiry methodology which has the assumption that people's lives and experiences are storied (Bamberg, 2007) is to adopt a particular view of experience as a phenomenon under study. Connnelly and Clandinin described narrative inquiry as:

"Personal and social (interaction); past, present, and future (continuity); combined with the notion of place (situation). This set of terms creates a metaphorical three-dimensional narrative inquiry space, with temporality along one dimension, the personal and social along a second dimension, and place along the third. Using this set of terms, any particular inquiry is defined by this three-dimensional space: studies have temporal dimensions and address temporal matters; they focus on the personal and the social in a balance appropriate to the inquiry; and they occur in specific places or sequences of places." (Clandinin & Connnelly, 2004).

"Learning to live, tell, relive, and retell stories of relational knowing as narrative inquirers, that is, stories in which our ideas were not owned but shared, shaped, recomposed, and reknown through relationship and conversation, held an important place in the inquiry." (Clandinin et al., 2006).

Ideology, work, and social relations are taken up and woven into an analytical narrative. Narrative inquiry opens up an insight into people's local and textured character of experience against the simplifying abstractions of behaviorist theorizing, which enable us to see how individuals make sense of periods of biographical disruption and personal transition (Bamberg, 2007: 3). Narratives not only represent experiences, but might also deepen the meaning through metaphoric linkage (Lichtenberg & Lachmann, 2017: 5). As is suggested by Clandinin and Connnelly, I adopt an "inward-outward-backward-forward" (Clandinin & Connnelly, 2004) framework to study the school field and the individuals who continue their lives and studies in this school field.

### 3.5 Methods and research design

Methods deal with the specific social process of material collection and analysis techniques, which are about “how should the enquirer go about developing new knowledge” (Allison & Hobbs, 2006). With a longitudinal case-study design, qualitative methods including participant observation, narratives, oral history, life history approach, and in-depth interviews were employed to gain a deep understanding of people’s school experiences in the late modernity through their narratives.

By bridging primary schooling and higher education, secondary education plays a vital role in shaping students’ future social-economic status. The secondary school in China, with a lot of “error-correction” practices through the class sponsor’s governmentality, is a social setting where both myths and knowledge transmit and produce, shaping and transforming young students’ sense of self to a large degree. This study aims to deconstruct the myths in the educational field and develop less problematic knowledge of young students’ experience and educational inequality. In order to make young students’ experiences on the focus, it is crucial to carefully reflect on what is taken for granted in the Chinese secondary educational context and to tailor methods so as to respect young students’ interests. Employing school ethnography which helps me to inclusively study young students’ complicated living experiences, I adopt “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) approach, aiming to shed some light on the possible nuanced mechanisms of cultural reproduction and mobility in the Chinese secondary education context from a socio-cultural perspective.

### **3.5.1 Selection of the field setting: accessibility and representativeness**

Taking both accessibility and representativeness into account, I finalized an upper secondary school locating in a newly-established district of a second-tier city in China which had once been a suburban county of this city.

#### **3.5.1.1 Accessibility**

Establishing a trust relationship with respondents is the initial step of an ethnographical study. One of the noticeable challenges is how to adequately step into the field with the presence of the ubiquitous discouragement and cooperation denial from the gatekeeper. My initial proposal was ambitiously conducting a multi-sited ethnography but had to give up when I realized how difficult it was to get the entrance ticket after being repeatedly prevented by those gatekeepers.

An upper secondary school in China is a social setting for exam-oriented training so as to prepare students for higher education based on fixed spaces and highly routine schooling hours on the accuracy of weeks, days, hours, and minutes. That is to say, in the context of credential society, a Chinese regular upper secondary school functions as a springboard that serves the purpose of offering preparations and creating more opportunities for students' entry to tertiary education. Students' campus lives are becoming increasingly structured with fast-paced teaching activities, loads of practices and homework, successive tests and examinations. Just as Foucault has predicted, modern institutions all resemble the jail. Primary and secondary schools are "protected" by progressively expanding access control systems and monitoring devices, which strictly separates the campus life from the outside world. Any possible disturbance from the outside world is becoming increasingly undesirable due to the white-hot peer competition which is described as "crossing a single-plank bridge and standing out from thousands of troops". Except for the intruders' disturbance to the established rigorous order, which may disorganize the schooling rhythm and undermine the university acceptance rates, school leaders' concerns about security risks and potential social negative exposure also put the kibosh on the intruders' endeavors. These conditions make it extremely difficult to gain an entrance ticket to the school institution, let alone a couple of in-depth interviews on the basis of trust-relationship. Furthermore, an urban regular upper secondary school is large in scale with normally more than one thousand people who are living a much structural life, which brought the uncommon eye-catching "intruder" tremendous pressure.

As can be seen, accessibility should be taken seriously before finalizing the research site. Gaining the permission from the gatekeeper and establishing a good relationship with this person in the key position, who is normally the school official with the power for acceptance, is of vital importance. As stated in

chapter one, the forefront of data collection of this work is to study various arrangements on campus, on-going happenings at school and students' tellings about their previous living and educational experiences in different social contexts over time, which are usually underestimated and ignored. After comprehensive consideration, I finally determined to focus on only one school with adequate cases for providing an explanation of within-school academic discrepancy and its evolvement.

### 3.5.1.2 Representativeness

In China, urban-rural dualism persistently exerts influences on all respects of the society which is crystallized with a variety of urban-preference policies such as Hukou (the Household Registration System). Hukou, as “a core institution of the planned economy” (Chan & Buckingham, 2008), with the meaningful feature of class oppression, paradoxically rules and organizes Chinese people “through dividing them into segments bounded and controlled by their Hukou type and location” (Wang, 2004). In terms of education, by influencing educational resource allocation based on agricultural and non-agricultural residency status, Hukou serves as one of the most important causes of academic disparity (Hao, Hu, & Lo, 2014; Wu & Treiman, 2004). Worse still, the cumulative disadvantage of educational achievement bundled with rural Hukou is also reported (Hao et al., 2014). On the one hand, China is in unbalanced development with resources concentrating in metropolises, on the other hand, many places are in their process towards urbanization and modernization, especially those in those second-tier and third-tier cities, which should not be ignored. The transition period has witnessed many struggles, entanglements, and collisions, which should also be paid attention and carefully studied.

As the process of integrating itself into the city, this area where the research site lies is increasingly becoming multicultural with the lives of students with different social backgrounds embedded in various cultural practices and narratives, which makes the identity problem becoming serious. These students' lives and educational multicultural field where the interplay of students' family background, their previous experiences, cultural capital, self-identity, and interactions take place which affects their positions in the school field. For example, some rural students who attend urban key schools are

stigmatized as non-local, boorish students, or being downgraded to a school of lower status which keeps reshaping their identity and handicaps their academic process somehow. Thus this school represents considerable key schools in second-tier cities that are in a significant transition. As such, its mixture, complexity, and liminality problems people encounter are worth being addressed.

### **3.5.2 A pilot study**

There is no doubt that a pilot study can offer ethnographers a valuable opportunity to reconstruct the research design and modify the inquiry strategies. The purpose of my pilot study was to fundamentally test the adequacy of the way questions were introduced and the extent to which questions fulfill the research goals.

From this view, I spent approximately two weeks getting to know about the school's ongoing practices and students' multiple behaviors by observing its spatial arrangements and relations, honor rolls, rules and regulations in corridors, and also interactions on the playground and other public areas during the break time with less supervision from educators. My intention was concealed in this silent observation process. Then I moved on to the second phase after finishing the on-the-spot observation where I shadowed five students and a teacher and then struck conversations with them in the on-campus canteen or the pavilion of the cultural garden with relatively relaxed atmosphere which I thought relatively suitable places for a bank of topics.

I made reflections on the what I saw and heard and began to realize the vital importance of the choice of more appropriate words and necessary groundwork for sensitive questions as well as the order of questioning. For example, I carefully use the word "means of subsistence" in lieu of "income" in the later interview to learn about underclass family's living conditions, the last thing they would like to mention.

### **3.5.3 Creating the sample**

84 people, as main interviewees, were involved in this study, falling into four categories: 68 students, 9 parents, 6 teachers, and 1 school official. I also gained enormously valuable information through oral history interview from some local residents and some teachers. Oral-history interviews with the school official and teachers over the age of fifty with years of teaching and living experiences at the school, together with literal regional materials, were necessary for providing a detailed and vivid description of the world where students' stories were embedded in. My interviews with them covered a diversity of topics relating to the school's major changes while it was struggling between educational policies and local practices in a wider social context, possible anecdotes of big names at school, certain kind of circulated educational discourses involving stereotype, as well as relocation and goals of the school.

Various kinds of students categorized by different social origins and different level of academic achievements should be included in the sample for providing a relatively comprehensive picture of students' educational and living experiences for studying educational inequality from a comparative perspective. The sample of students, categorized as the combination of the underclass students, working-class students, and middle-class students in the social-status line, as well as the high-achievers, the mediocre, and the underachievers in the academic line, was not determined all at once due to the flexibility and improvisation of anthropological fieldwork.

The previous chapter (2.4.2) involved discussions of the social-class status in China. In this study, students' family conditions are categorized as the middle-class, the working-class, and the underclass, which does not follow the typical classification approach in the academic community of the west. However, I insist that that trichotomy accord with China's social situations better than the dichotomy with the middle-class and the working-class. Defining the family class in the Chinese context is actually an awkward task as the society is in great transition where various attributes coexist and overlap. Due to historical reasons, many people were deprived of opportunities for tertiary education, which did not prevent some from becoming economically successful. After that historical phase, immense wealth and poor took place only in two decades. The class structure of urban China has become more fragmented (Bian, 2002). The middle-class group is developing, but on the other hand, it is quite differentiated without a clear and

unified portrait. Since the reform and opening-up policy in 1978 where certain spaces were allowed for private enterprise for the first time with a weakened central control system, intelligentsia, industrials and businessmen have gradually achieved the status of the middle class.

Some children are categorized with the underclass background in this study. My first point is that discourses do reflect social reality. In daily life, “the underclass” is widely used in people’s common expressions. At school, teachers define some students’ family conditions as the underclass automatically without much thinking or doubt. The underclass is different from the working class. To begin with, the family income is very little and unstable. The underclass may live under the poverty line with a dead-end job and need economic support. Secondly, the underclass usually has great pain not only economically, but also mentally. For example, family members had a chronic disease or died at an early age, making the family in a more difficult situation. My subsequent analyses will also demonstrate that this sorting technique possesses a certain degree of rationality as I will show that parenting from these two groups differs a lot, children from those two groups have moral boundaries, and they thus think and behave in a very different way. Also, the Chinese academic community had scholarly discussions around this topic. For instance, Qiang Li put that Chinese society was composed of ten layers from top to bottom (Li, 2008). Liping Sun had the idea that China has formed a “fractured society”. Those disempowering and impoverished workers and peasants degenerated into the unprivileged class, which is socially and economically flung out of the social fabric, becoming increasingly helpless and lonely.

In this research, I adopted Weber’s approach which takes account not only of wealth, but also power and reputation. middle-class families meet these criteria: at least one of the parents with a four-year bachelor degree who are at present white-collared in a professional occupation such as civil servants with an “in the system” job, business owners, and urban white-collared employees, the annual household income is no less than 150,000 CNY<sup>8</sup> and people’s subjective assessment of their middle-class identity. Working class parents included those who are non-university degree holders with a blue-collared job and a living

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<sup>8</sup> The value of the household income is aligned with the local GDP and the type of the city.

standard above the poverty line or with a self-run small business, the latter of which is echoed with the special historical phase when the opening-up policy and economic reform were adopted after long-drawn-out chaos. The underclass refers to those who are undereducated or illiterate and are temporary or seasonal workers, impoverished peasants, and all the unemployed being out of the labor force, financially needy people who need public support at different levels. Purposeful sampling and snowball sampling technique were employed through teachers and students, which involved rich-information cases where students were willing to speak their minds and voice their feelings as well as “silent” students with both typical significance and special situations. The collected data, guided by the qualitative approach, is neatly arranged in the following chapters devoid of complex statistical terminology.

### **3.5.4 Participant observations and narrative inquiries**

Participant observations dealt with particular persons, contexts, routine practices, and also those unexpected events and scenarios. I informed people about my observation as I proceeded to the formal stage. The core task of this work is to depict and understand students’ prior experiences in relation to the on-going happenings in school through their narratives as well as interactions in various spaces at school by the means of prolonged fieldwork, which serves the purpose of better understanding the scope of both educational inequality and opportunities these young students might face. Participant observation was employed in the case study in a tailored way which highlighted the complex motives and interpretations of the symbol and meaning. Respondents’ various in- and out-of-class events concerning interactions and discourses were intensively observed on campus with no less than three times a week, with each observation lasting from one to four hours within four months. Homeroom is a field where symbolic power, discipline, struggle, and resistance, as well as praise and punishment, took place accompanied by the formal curriculum knowledge dissemination, myths, gossips, and sub-culture production. The texture of a class is important in shaping teacher-student relationships, learning atmosphere, as well as students’ dispositions and spiritual states. Out-of-class events where people’s interactions of the natural state and class sponsors’ activities of creating the class atmosphere and managing students through class meetings and supervision of students’ behaviors are of equal importance for understanding educational practices

and narratives in the secondary school field where power takes cover. I also paid close attention to various spontaneous peer groups and the communication ways of students with different family constellations. In the whole process of observation, I paid special attention to people's paces, narratives, wording, and tones of interactions, which were all educational practices implying power and knowledge.

Aside from school files documenting these students' family backgrounds and academic performances, small talks before the narrative inquiry where frequent asking and answering took place: those respondents described their biographical situations including their place of birth, parents' educational status and occupation, and expectations on education, previous experiences of family education and formal schooling, parents' assistance such as spiritual support and family expenditures for purchasing educational resources, and the frequency of teacher-parent and student-parent contacts. The narrative inquiry, which was normally the next step after observations, was organized around these themes: the important decision-making process, those impressive episodes triggering students' identity, the peaks and ebbs in their life journeys, their relationship with teachers and parents, and disruptions or continuity in students' educational process. In the in-depth interviews, attention was paid to create a context allowing for full participation. These interviews were conducted face-to-face in the canteen or the pavilion in the cultural garden at school, and also off-campus café or rest places in urban parks, possibly more suitable places that offered them a relatively relaxed atmosphere for expressing themselves. A small fraction of interview was conducted through electronic communication devices as well. Besides, I was permitted to visit 9 families, which offered me a good opportunity of observing and conducting household interviews for a deeper understanding of their daily interactions and practices of their family life, the involving family culture and value, which are vital clues for the formation of individual habitus. These experiences, I believe, allow different insights that would not be possible with only campus visits. The length of the interview time for each respondent ranged from one hour to three hours, with one and a half hours on average.

### 3.5.5 Data analysis

The data includes in-depth interviews, narrative inquiries, oral-history interviews, aided by field notes, government documents, local reports concerning the school and the area where it locates. Before analyzing the collected data and coming to a conclusion, it is important for the researcher to go over, rearrange it with sentences and paragraphs coded and categorized in meaning order (Dodge & Bogdan, 1974), and a proper selection of it for grasping the nature (Bell, 2014). The collected data was carefully studied before translating into English; close attention was given to people's wording, the plotline of stories, and their critical and meaningful episodes, events, and vital actors involved, as well as the common points, and differences among students' stories. After reading and reexamination of the collected data, I sorted out and extracted key points, then divided them into smaller message units.

This study commits to document and reflect students' life stories concerning their experiences as well as the on-going practices in the school field and to convert these stories to less problematic knowledge, contributing to understanding a portion of the landscape of inequality and mobility in secondary education in China. This would imply that there is a decoding work upon the collected materials, which requires me to go beneath the words and sentences and connect them with the wider social context. I employed discourse analysis to decode the data after they were reorganized to small units. I was reminded by Foucault who stated the importance of contradictory saying and response which was consciously or unconsciously hidden. I considered how respondents had been positioned by their teachers, parents, and classmates. I also reflected on forces and arrangements that people were reluctant to accept by employing strategies in their own way, and also how people unknowingly internalized the labels that others had imposed on them. Besides, the attenuation, inconsistency, contradiction, and conflict that exist in a certain discourse were re-examined for a better understanding of the possible world available to students. Discourse analysis highlights the hidden relations between discourse and power, as well as the tension between the individual and the structural social institution. During the last round of reflection, the tension among social forces, institutional practices, and discourses used by different groups of people were identified.

### 3.6 Ethical issues

Ethical issues are important in qualitative research, and this study takes ethical issues seriously. It is important to always ask for informants' informed consent; equally important is ensuring the safety of the collected data (Bell, 2014: 57). Although impression management is sometimes necessary for supporting a smoother process in the fieldwork, this study strictly guarantees the privacy of the informants. The ethical issues in this work are defined as voluntariness and confidentiality. After defining the ethic issues, I asked for my informants' prior consent.

### **3.6.1 Voluntariness**

I told my respondents that I would ask some questions, mainly open-ended, concerning their prior and current impressive living and educational experiences that might contribute to their understanding of themselves, and their current academic performances, which they were free to answer in whatever way they chose. The honest answers conveying their voices and interests were much valued. I told them that I would be appreciated if they would allow the interview to be recorded, which enabled me to accurately study their experiences. If this caused their suspicion resulting in their rejection, I then asked if I could take notes during the interview, especially during the key points during the interview. In this situation, I took notes on the conversation, organized notes, and literally supplemented details about what happened on the spot immediately after the interview in case some vital points were forgotten or ignored. I also told them that they were free to withdraw their consent at any time—they could leave at the beginning, during, or after the interview. They could also refuse to respond to any question they were not willing to answer, shut the tape, or request to leave the interview setting at any time; but I should be grateful if they would give me permission to return for another possible interview.

### **3.6.2 Confidentiality**

This study specifically focuses on students' personal experiences of engaging with other people on and off campus; respondents were expected to freely and honestly tell their private memorable life-stories of their experiences. Any information disclosure may cause irreversible consequences, putting informants

in a disadvantageous position. The names appear in this study were all pseudonym for protecting informants' privacy. Informants were allowed to choose their pseudonym if they wanted. Participation in this study was confidential in that the only person who knew the interview data was me—the researcher. I assured my respondents that all their personal information would be kept confidential. The tape recordings and related photos were stored on my personal computer and a mobile hard disk drive with password protected appropriately. Hand-written field notes, relevant memos, drafts, and analyses were stored within a locked cabinet to which I was the only holder. I am the only person who can get access to these collected data for further review and it is only for the academic purpose. I am not allowed to correlate any of the information that I acquired from the interview with their real names when I possibly need to discuss my analyses and findings in the future.

### 3.7 Summary

This chapter described the position and assumption of this work, including ontology, epistemology, theoretical perspective, methodology. Pluralism, constructionism, and relativism under the theoretical framework of phenomenology and structuralism are adopted for reflectively unmasking and deep describing what is taken for granted and what is concealed and their social processes. In the section of the research design, I explained how the research site was finalized. I used discourse analysis to decode the data, during which I should be very aware of “making familiarity unfamiliar”, the relationship between “immersion” and “detachment”, and the relationship among power, knowledge, and discourses, keeping a sustaining reflective academic attitude. This section also described how I created the sample, conducted the fieldwork with the application of observations, oral-history interviews and narrative inquiries. In the last part, ethical issues were seriously addressed; the privacy of the informants was strictly safeguarded. The names of the research site and students were disguised by adopting pseudonyms.

# CHAPTER 4 - POLICY BACKGROUNDS AND A SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY OF YEYUN SCHOOL

“Habitus ‘carries the concept of history— both personal history and social, or collective, history.’” (Lawler, 2004: 111)

For fully understanding students' overall experiences, as well as how these experiences are related to the secondary educational setting, i.e., the tension between their identities and institutional habitus encouraged by the school field, the background knowledge of the field where their stories are unfolding should be carefully understood. Institutional habitus tends to reinforce itself, contributing to reproduction (Ingram, 2009):

“A school's history and experiences, as well as its pupils and staff (past and present), contribute to its evolving habitus and institute the dispositions it conveys to its current pupils and staff.”

The condition of the school institution is equally centralized in this work for a better understanding of its ethos that exerts long-lasting influences, from which light can be shed on what the institutional habitus and the desired identity are encouraged by the school setting. This chapter introduces the policy background of education in China, and then moves on to make a deep description of the school field that is embedded in the wider social context where people continue composing their life stories through the medium of oral-history interviews mainly concerning school important spacing from some older teachers who have lived through significant changes of the school as well as the interview with a school official who takes part in the decision-making of the school institution.

## 4.1 Policy background

This section introduces the background—Chinese educational system, as a wider legislative context, for better understanding school's daily practices, people's thinking and believing, clarifying institutional controls and identifying their influences on educational opportunities and inequality.

#### **4.1.1 A chronological review of educational policies in China**

Educational policy, as the blueprint for a nation's education legitimated by the state, guides the logic and prospect of the educational system, which needs to be examined so as to better understand diverse local educational practices. Thus, I begin this section with a brief chronological review of the landscape of the educational policy of China.

##### **4.1.1.1 Educational policy in traditional Chinese society**

Before the rationalization and modernization, besides the family context, educational practices were unfolding in the church in the West. In ancient China, people were educated in state-run schools or civic, educational institutions. There were officially state-run schools which were composed of the central schools such as the highest educational institution called Imperial College (Guozijian or Hanlinyuan) as well as local official schools like prefectural schools where Confucian Classics were taught. Students who passed the internal exam were eligible to participate in the Imperial Civil Service Examination. Confucianism, as dominant official ideology and orthodoxy in traditional Chinese society, played a vital role in the consolidation of imperial power, the maintenance of the hierarchical social fabric, and unfair social order, as well as the solidification of an officially accepted way of life (Yao, 2000).

The Imperial Civil Service Examination institutionalized in the Sui Dynasty (581-619). Based on Confucianism, the exam selected officials for the imperial bureaucracy. A good performance in this vital, high-stakes exam brought people high social status, reputations, and considerable assets, which was regarded as “bringing prestige and honor to their families and ancestors”. A Confucian slogan for education—“a good scholar makes an official” which attaches great importance to education as a means

of improving a person's status, still has a long-term impact on people by constructing the older generations' high educational expectations on their children today. Besides the Imperial College, There were also civic educational institutions known as Academy<sup>9</sup> where the Chinese characters, moral principles, courtesies and accepted standards of behaviors, historical allusions, and poems were lectured by resigned politicians as well as scholars with little intention for an official career, and also old-style private schools (Sishu) in a smaller scale—the educational institutions at the level of villages or a couple of families, which could be run by merchants with well-educated mentors (Xiansheng)<sup>10</sup> as lecturers.

The modern school system in China, with the advantageous group's knowledge monopoly and students' compulsory attendance which claims plenty of time and energy, is a relatively new phenomenon imported from the western world. With the opium and gunboats of Western Powers thrusting themselves into the old China, along with them were the western-originated modern education and school system. For a century, China has been politically colonized by western powers, which passively stimulated multiple political, social, and educational reforms and movements for saving the country and ensuring its survival. Confucianism, as the state official ideology, was questioned for being out of date and backward. Elites with the breadth of vision advocated the eastward transmission of the western learning on the basis of

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<sup>9</sup> Academy is the predecessor of some universities and secondary schools in China. Academy (Shuyuan), also known as the College, was a type of educational institution in ancient China from Tang Dynasty to the late Qing Dynasty before it was replaced by School which advocated practical Western learning in 1901. In Tang and Song Dynasty, Academy, on the contrary to the state-run organization, was a sort of influential civic educational institution for expanding liberal knowledge. However, in Ming and Qing Dynasty, Academy was increasingly becoming a dependence of the imperial authority because the awarding from the Imperial court constituted the overriding financial resource for the running of Academy, which greatly limited the diffusion of liberal knowledge but advocated orthodox learning. In Mid-Qing, the number of Academy boomed while Academy served the purpose of fostering talents for the Imperial examination.

<sup>10</sup> They were usually certified scholars who passed the imperial examination at the county level but not at the imperial level.

learning advanced science and technology from the West which they previously thought of being “uncivilized” for resisting foreign domination in succession.<sup>11</sup>

In 1990, the Qing dynasty was forced to adopt the modernization of the economic system and the corresponding educational system (Martin, 1877: 19-20). The imperial government thus issued reforms to create a three-tier system of elementary, secondary, and tertiary schools modeled along with western lines (Simon, 2000). In 1905, three years after the establishment of the modern school system that patterned on the western world, the Imperial Civil Service Examination system which lasted for more than 1300 years was abolished; and it also meant the end of official Confucianism. Since then, schools in the modern sense with the name of Xuetang were robustly established for western techniques learning. However, people quickly learned that the thorough discard of the traditional culture and infinite westernization also caused appalling problems, on which they were trying to explore the appropriate educational philosophy and methods according to the situations at that time. Then the old Academy Shuyuan returned in this situation which aimed at reintroducing the tradition but at the same time better integrating Confucianism into western learning.

#### **4.1.1.2 Educational policy (1949-1965)**

Since the founding of the People’s Republic of China, educational policies have experienced some significant changes. After the civil and overseas wars, reversing the accumulated impoverishment and weakness was put on agenda. Education, as the tremendous momentum for the “rise of China” at the institutional level and life-chance improvements at the individual level, was given a pivotal place in the overall strategy of modernization with its legitimacy being confirmed by a series of national policies. With limited resources and the ambition of “narrowing the gap and catching the rich West”, high-quality educational resources were preserved for talents. Hierarchical meanings were artificially given to schools,

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<sup>11</sup> Under the long-lasting close-door policy adopted by the Qing dynasty, many Chinese people generally believed that all the outside states were wild and uncivilized at that time.

and also disciplines; natural sciences and engineering were given the greatest weights with the slogan of “With good knowledge of math, physics, and chemistry, you travel all over the world with brash confidence”; the second best was humanities like geography, history, and politics; art was assumed to be only pursued by those who were academically incapable and ignored their proper duties. The arrangement of disciplines was bundled with job opportunities and life prospects.

“Entrance examinations are seen by governments as a meritocratic method of selection, as they theoretically allow the most knowledgeable, intelligent students needed for white-collar jobs to progress higher up the educational ladder.” (Simon, 2000: 6)

“National key university” was first designed in 1954 when the resources were quite limited and things remained to be undertaken. Six universities— Peking University, Tsinghua University, Renmin University of China, and Harbin Institute of Technology were designated as national key universities. Guided by utilitarianism, new China copied the former Soviet model by emphasizing industry and at the same time, neglecting humanities with regard to universities’ discipline establishment (Jiang & Wang, 1998). Traditional Chinese society was a bounded, static, face-to-face rural society where direct, vivid, expressive oral representations prevailed, resulting in an “illiterate society” (Fei, 2012). Based on this, besides tertiary education, the central government also made efforts to increase the country’s rate of literacy at the same time.

#### **4.1.1.3 Educational policy in the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966-1976)**

The above-mentioned situation was disrupted in 1966 when Chairman Mao, the absolute power who was worshipped by the whole nation, launched the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution— an overall social and political turmoil under the framework of egalitarian ideology where young people were deprived of education and pushed to join the "Red Guards" which aimed at suppressing and violently punishing anyone who was suspected of having sympathy for capitalism or Confucianism for a decade. This movement was a fraction of Mao's theory of "continuing revolution" with the purpose of maintaining the

ideological purity of the Party and people all over the country by unhesitatingly sticking to Marxism-Leninism, rooting out the remnant of the capitalism, and thus paving the way to Mao's egalitarian views of "absolute equality". The Weberian theory provides an insight for understanding this social turmoil where collective movements are viewed as being shaped by institutional power from the state as the tools of collective expression to the disempowered group (Della Porta, 2015). Anti-capitalism and anti-traditionalism were used by the ruling class as tools of collective expression from the mass who were only valued according to their influences on this political and social movement.

The hero worship and collective illusion reached the peak then, and the legitimacy of the political regime was based on the charismatic authority of the emperor throughout bygone dynasties in Chinese history (Weber, Gerth, & Ch'ing-k'un, 1964). As long as the agrarian nature of the economy, as well as the state of the centralization of the authority have not been reversed, charisma ideology would not disappear (Zuo, 1991). Mao, as the "closest person to all the Chinese people for saving them from the terrible disaster and bringing them welfare," was on everyone's lips in their everyday life; his photos were displayed everywhere, in both public spheres and at home. Massive cultural production concerning Mao was produced: his quotations were printed in Little Red Book which can be easily carried along, red songs were composed and singed, and large choreographic dances were composed to those pieces of music. During the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, the intelligentsia was the main target of attack and prosecution. Besides, many factories and schools were shut down, entrance exams were suspended, "educated young students were forced to be sent to the countryside to receive the re-education from the poor peasants"<sup>12</sup>. Furthermore, cultural classics and relics were burned and violently destructed, churches and shrines were ransacked and destroyed for demonizing and opposing Confucianism. This revolution

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<sup>12</sup> This was Mao's instruction, which was first put forward in 1956. In 1968, the Official media, People's Daily had this quotation for mobilizing people from all walks of life. Subsequently, more than sixteen million youth flew into the countryside and mountainous areas with their life trajectories being considerably changed.

of the ideological sphere greatly paralyzed the development of economy and education, causing a great gap of senior professional personnel and leaving behind indelible memory of terror in people's minds.

#### 4.1.1.4 Educational policy since the Reform and Opening-Up (1978-)

##### **Bringing order out of chaos (1978-1984)**

The government leaders learned a lesson from the undesirable Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, reconsidered the relationship between fairness and efficiency, and determined that the class struggle should make way for economic construction and intellectual development. "Down to the Countryside Movement" was terminated, and the National College Entrance Examination was immediately resumed in 1977 after the Cultural Revolution. Key-point schools with excellent facilities, as well as good teachers and students, were also reestablished. Mind control was greatly relieved and the study of Confucianism with a reflective attitude of "taking the essence and discarding the dregs" was allowed, among which self-cultivation and education, human relations, as well as virtue and morality such as humaneness, courtesy, and filial respect in Confucian doctrine was revalued in the context of reconstructing socialism and developing economies.

The Third Plenary Session of the 11<sup>th</sup> Central Committee of the Chinese attended by the core leadership of the Party in 1978 was regarded as a landmark for reforming and opening-up where the rigid-planned economy system was disenchanted, and the market-oriented economy was exonerated and gained its legitimacy, which in turn brought a series of important changes in all respects of society. From 1978 to the late 1980s, the educational policy attached much importance on efficiency for talent construction, which was pointed at accelerating socialist construction, modernization, and globalization for catching up with the developed world as soon as possible. After this historical meeting, the fulfillment of national rejuvenating through science and education is gradually constructed as the Party's and the country's

development strategy<sup>13</sup>. Also, a liberal competitive model that gives priority to expert knowledge, students' rivalry, and personal advancement have dominated educational policies (Hannum, 1999).

In the face of scarce premium-quality educational resources, especially after the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, the plan of establishing key primary and secondary schools was also proposed after the hierarchical design of universities by the Ministry of Education. According to the plan, schools were constructed towards a pyramid structure where investment support, operating facilities, and high-quality teaching staff was given priority to the key schools. In 1980, the country's supreme leader Deng Xiaoping clearly pointed out that the youngsters, as "socialism successors", should be groomed to be youngsters with ideal, morals, culture and discipline that were known as "youngsters with four virtues", which served as a reminder of the younger generations' responsibility of socialist construction. The bureaucratization of economic life was making selections for careers by educational attainment increasingly universal, making the competition becoming increasingly intensified (Dore, 1980). Schooling has become a ritualized process or competitive scramble for scarce modern jobs, influencing the quality of education (Dore, 1976). In 1983, Deng further stated that "education should face to modernization, the world, and the future".

### **The adoption of centralization (1985- the late 1990s)**

The national educational policy that was issued in 1985 produced huge changes in the educational landscape, among which decentralization and quality improvements in education that had influenced school-level processes and practices were the most prominent (Liu & Dunne, 2009). For improving effectiveness, the local government assumed the responsibility for decision-making and resource distribution for educational development (Huang & Wiseman, 2011; Liu & Dunne, 2009; Mok\*, 2005;

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<sup>13</sup> An article from People's Daily published on 17 December 2018,  
[http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb\\_xwfb/moe\\_176/201812/t20181217\\_363758.html](http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_xwfb/moe_176/201812/t20181217_363758.html)

(Qi, 2011), schools were required to gradually adopt the “principal accountability system”<sup>14</sup>, which caused striking uneven distribution of educational resources at the level of the region since the local government’s ability for mobilizing resources for education varied a lot (Huang & Wiseman, 2011). These changes also promoted inequality at the school level because the key schools got much more financial backing from the government. In 1986, free nine-year compulsory education for children who reached the age of six was enforced. However, first-rate education, as a scarce resource, could only be pursued by some abundant parents through various means.

### **The introduction of “socialist marketing economy” (in the 1990s)**

In the 1990s, a uniform standard for educational ideology, curriculum provision, teaching methods, and evaluation modes was established, in which the central role of teachers in the teaching process and the importance of the life-changing University Entrance Exam for determining the result were confirmed. The rapid growth of economics encouraged a “Confucius fever”. At the meantime, the government pushed to marketize and nationalize universities (Rhoads & Chang, 2013). The most notable move in tertiary education in the 1990s was the Project 211 and Project 985 which directed at promoting educational competitiveness of key universities at both the national and the global level. Project 211 was launched at the end of 1995 in the context of “developing the country through science and education” which aimed at substantially supporting and refining approximate 100 key universities. Three years later, a related plan called Project-985 university was put on the agenda. On 4<sup>th</sup> of May in 1998, the prior supreme leader Jiang Zeming delivered a speech in the meeting celebrating the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of Peking University that, some universities should be given large amounts of funding for being constructed as world-class universities which paved the way for achieving modernization. Project 985 was then officially carried out on the basis of the Project 211 where nine universities— best ones from the list of 211 universities which was also known as C9 League were among the first batch of Project 985 universities in the Fifteenth National Congress at the end of 1999. The C9 League, which was the flagship of the

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<sup>14</sup> This is quoted from “the Decision on Educational Reform” of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China.

tertiary education in China, produced around twenty percent of the nation's scholarly publications and thirty percent of total citations between 2001 and 2010 (Yang & Xie, 2015). The ideologicalization and politicization of education was intensely re-strengthened in 1990 after the 1980s, but on the other hand, the important role education played in economic development was attached more importance, which made education hovering between political utilitarianism and economic pragmatism with a greater emphasis on the former (Xiao, 2003) or “red versus expert” debate (Simon, 2000).

### **The consideration of educational equality (in the 2000s)**

Shortcomings of the educational system such as corruption and inequality were increasingly becoming serious at the previous stage: with the presence of competition, selectivity, decentralization, market logic, and industrialization in education, the current inequality reinforces itself or may give rise to another kind of inequality (Liu, 2005). The 2000s have witnessed people's enthusiasm for tertiary education and unprecedented expansion in higher education and also the government's attention to educational equality.

The government introduced several policies aimed at supporting vocational education and also education in undeveloped areas, especially in the western regions for promoting educational equality. In 2002, People's Bank of China, Ministry of Education and Ministry of Finance announced that they would implement the plan for improving the state loan for students.<sup>15</sup> In 2004, the State Administration of Taxation declared that education enjoyed numbers of preferential tax policies.<sup>16</sup> A three-year (2004-2007) plan designed for promoting educational conditions in the western regions, including popularizing boarding schools there was issued by General Office of the State Council.<sup>17</sup> In 2005 and 2008, some financial aid policies were introduced to promote the educational conditions in undeveloped counties and

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<sup>15</sup> See reports by Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China:

[http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb\\_sjzl/moe\\_1695/tnull\\_190174.html](http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_sjzl/moe_1695/tnull_190174.html)

<sup>16</sup> See reports by Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China:

[http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb\\_sjzl/moe\\_1695/tnull\\_190194.html](http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_sjzl/moe_1695/tnull_190194.html)

<sup>17</sup> See reports by Central People's Government: [http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2008-03/28/content\\_5702.html](http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2008-03/28/content_5702.html)

rural areas.<sup>18</sup> In 2006, the Ministry of Education released a list of key-point secondary vocational schools for supporting the development of vocational schools.<sup>19</sup> However, under the urban-preference policy, the basic situation of the unbalanced development state between regions, urban and rural areas was still pronounced.

### **Further promoting “equality”, “vitality”, and “competitiveness” (since 2010)**

“The Outline of the Mid-to-long Term Educational System Reform (2010-2020)” adopted by the executive meeting of the State Council indicated directions of educational transformations and more specific measures for “education modernization”. In this current period, The educational system is still in its exploratory adjustment period with more specific policies appearing on the stage including “promoting the reform of examination enrollment system”<sup>20</sup> with the intent of gradually forming a more flexible evaluation system with schools’ higher autonomy of independent students recruitment, students’ multiple choices, comprehensive assessment and multivariate enrollment, “increasing educational input” (2011), “balanced development of compulsory education” (2012) “developing modern vocational education system” (2014), “enhancing the support for rural education in the Midwest (2016)”. Education bears the historical mission of realizing the Chinese dream of national rejuvenation; hence its development continues to be given the priority (the 13<sup>th</sup> five-year plan, 2017).

There were two major policies for tertiary-education construction: 1) the 2011 Plan, which was put on agenda in 2011 by the prior head of state, Jintao Hu at the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary day of Tsinghua University

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<sup>18</sup> See reports by Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China:

[http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb\\_sjzl/moe\\_1695/tnull\\_190169.html](http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_sjzl/moe_1695/tnull_190169.html) and also

[http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb\\_sjzl/moe\\_1695/tnull\\_190186.html](http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_sjzl/moe_1695/tnull_190186.html) 20100219

<sup>19</sup> See Reports by Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China:

[http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb\\_sjzl/moe\\_1695/tnull\\_190174.html](http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_sjzl/moe_1695/tnull_190174.html) 20140207

<sup>20</sup> See the National Education Plan, 2010,

[http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb\\_xwfb/gzdt\\_gzdt/moe\\_1485/201006/t20100603\\_88690.html](http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_xwfb/gzdt_gzdt/moe_1485/201006/t20100603_88690.html) and also

[http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb\\_xwfb/s5147/201902/t20190226\\_371160.html](http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_xwfb/s5147/201902/t20190226_371160.html)

aiming at promoting innovation capacity of universities<sup>21</sup>; 2) The “Double First-rate” plan in 2017 which directed at accelerating in detail the construction of world-class universities and disciplines. The majority of universities from the list “Double First-rate” plan are also 985 universities. However, “Double First-rate” plan emphasizes the traditional advantage of certain disciplines at specific universities; besides, what makes it different from the Project 211 or Project 985 is its dynamic evaluation system, rather than the fixed list.

The goals for ten years from 2010 to 2020 include realize educational modernization, form a study-oriented society, and enter the rank of human resources powerful nation. In order to realize these goals, the government will continue loosening its direct management on education; educational institutions will expand their decision-making power in accordance with the law; a relevant legal system and accountability system will be further improved for supporting this practice. Besides, promoting equality and narrowing the gaps between regions are identified as unfinished tasks. Furthermore, ensuring the healthy growth of modern students remains important— improving students’ ideological level, political mindedness, moral characters, and organizing various social practices in which introducing students for practicing the core socialist values (the 13<sup>th</sup> five-year plan, 2017). At the end of 2018, 40 years later since the reform and opening-up policy, the Ministry of Education reported torrent of what had been accomplished in education, including the increasingly efficient subsidizing system, policy support for higher education for students from rural areas and the Middle West<sup>22</sup>; the Ministry of Education also reported that students with a bachelor degree were 50 times compared to those of 40 years ago, the average years of education was 13 years, which stayed above the global average, and at the same time, the quality of higher education was obviously improved; the further task of the Ministry of Education was

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<sup>21</sup> See China Youth News, 31th of May2013, [http://zqb.cyol.com/html/2013-05/31/nw.D110000zgqnb\\_20130531\\_1-T01.html](http://zqb.cyol.com/html/2013-05/31/nw.D110000zgqnb_20130531_1-T01.html)

<sup>22</sup> See China Education Journal, 17th December, 2018.  
[http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb\\_xwfb/moe\\_2082/zl\\_2018n/2018\\_zl90/201812/t20181217\\_363748.html](http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_xwfb/moe_2082/zl_2018n/2018_zl90/201812/t20181217_363748.html)

continuously deepening educational reform which aimed that stimulating the internal vitality and energy of education<sup>23</sup>.

#### 4.1.2 A snapshot of the current scene of education in China

This section briefly introduces the basic status of education in China, including educational stages, the competitive exam system, and the correspondingly layered school system.

##### 4.1.2.1 Educational stages

The public school system in China is composed of five stages: pre-school education, primary school, lower secondary school, upper secondary school, and junior college or four-year university. Before receiving primary education, children are sent to kindergartens; some of them may also attend one-year pre-school so as to better adapt themselves to primary school life. Primary schooling consists of six grades for children of schooling age, mainly from 6 to 13 years old.<sup>24</sup> The lower secondary schooling is of three years duration (students aged from 12 to 16 years old), which, together with primary education, makes up the “nine-year compulsory education”. Students can choose to leave education after graduation from lower secondary school. The upper secondary education, which is also of three-year duration (students aged from 15 to 19 years old) is a setting where not only academic schooling in regular secondary schools is provided, but vocational education is offered as well for preparing students with necessary techniques for their future professions. However, under the influence of Confucian culture and the craze for academic degrees, people believe that the academic track is always the first choice while vocational schools are despised as the last resorts. As can be seen from the following chart, regular upper secondary schools

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<sup>23</sup> See Reports by Ministry of Education:  
[http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb\\_xwfb/moe\\_176/201812/t20181217\\_363758.html](http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_xwfb/moe_176/201812/t20181217_363758.html)

<sup>24</sup> In just a few areas, it is possible that primary school has a 5-year duration.

with the academic track account for an absolute predominance, compared to specialized/vocational/technical institutions.

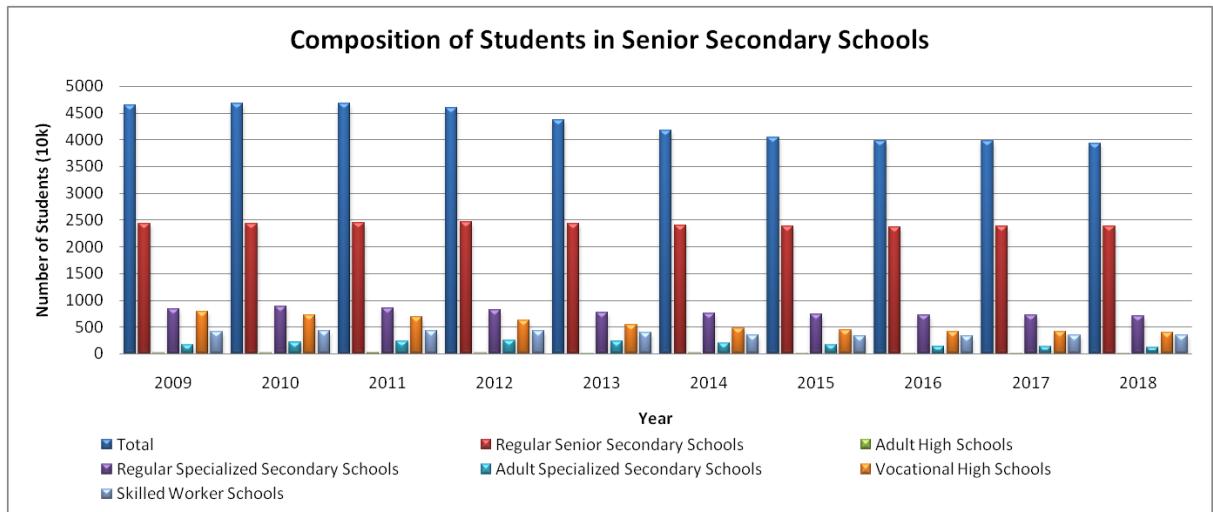


Figure 4.1 Composition of Students in Senior Secondary Schools<sup>25</sup>

#### 4.1.2.2 Gaokao (the nationwide university entrance exam)

The Chinese people in traditional Chinese society believed that “running across an old friend in a distant land, spending with your bride in the bridal chamber with candle lights, and passing the examination with your name in the list of successful candidates” were three major blessings throughout a person’s life. Standing out from intense rivalry for becoming the most successful exam taker is taken as “bringing glory to one’s ancestry”. Besides, the scholarly honor empowered those successful exam takers where they enjoyed multiple advantages such as tax relief, labor duties exemption, and did not have to kneel down in front of officials. They were highly respected as they were a tower of strength of the feudal regime. From 1952, the National College Entrance Examination, the highly competitive and selective nationwide exam, holds annually for two or three days in different provinces except for the suspension in the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. Chinese, math, and a foreign language, which is usually English, are

<sup>25</sup> According to the Ministry of Education, P. R. China, retrieved on 08th August 2018

[http://www.moe.gov.cn/s78/A03/moe\\_560/jytjsj\\_2018/qg/201908/t20190812\\_394224.html](http://www.moe.gov.cn/s78/A03/moe_560/jytjsj_2018/qg/201908/t20190812_394224.html)

examined in the college entrance examination; besides, physics, chemistry, and biology are also examined for science students, and politics, history, and geography are for liberal arts students.

In the educational system, the most important task for a school is to help students to stand out in the unified entrance exams—the junior school entrance examination (Xiaoshengchu), the senior high school entrance examination (Zhongkao) and the college entrance examination (Gaokao), which paves the way for students' entry to an elite university (Wang, 2010). Gaokao, the single determinant for admission to a Chinese university for the majority of students in Mainland China, is socially constructed as the gatekeeper for the dream of “bright future” with its life-determining nature. Hence, Gaokao and the Imperial Civil Service Examination resemble in that they are both “one-shot-affair” determining people's life opportunity, despite their quite different exam contents. Besides, Gaokao is also highly selective, whose cruelty of the competition is well-known as “thousands of soldiers and tens of thousands of horses across a single log bridge”. Not adopting the grading system such as A, B, C, D, E, and F, but rather, the system endorses a scale of 750 points in the majority of provinces. Each point counts a lot and sometimes can determine a student's fate because it can gap away from hundreds or thousands of candidates in provinces with a large population. For its importance and difficulty which calls for students' hard work with much time and energy devotion for over ten years, Gaokao has become the “baton” that conducts the whole educational orchestra and structures students' everyday experiences, promoting the homogeneous campus mainstream culture and impairing students' motivation and creativity for their own interests. Much preparation for Gaokao is planned by all upper secondary schools where the whole year in grade three is designed for lessons review, massive exercises, mock examinations, and error correction practices where students are plunged into piles of book, exercise books, and exam papers all day long. Gaokao is also the focus of all the family members or the battle between families with different amounts of capital, which needs support and devotion from parents and even from the extended family including grandparents.

It is no exaggeration that Gaokao is a blood-boiling national event with a fair degree of sacredness, which is rendered with many activities during the exam days. Many mainstream media design a particular

column for Gaokao in advance before exam days and splash the most successful candidates' stories over the headlines after exam results come out. Gaokao is a systematic project dealing with infrastructure. During Gaokao, everything close to examination centers that may influence Gaokao such as entertainment places, parking lots, road works, etc. must be suspended. The police wagons and motorcycles are in place playing the role of an escort in case there is an emergency that candidates may miss Gaokao. Banners with slogans like "make way for Gaokao— don't drive in exam days!" are observably hung. Considerable vehicles should make a detour just for ensuring the traffic priority is given to those candidates. School-running specialized carriers have police escorting vehicles clearing the way to the exam sites. Candidates as single travelers are entitled to use the railway for free with the exam admission ticket. Canteen dishes are closely monitored for safety and nutrition. Besides, public welfare activities prevail. Sunshades and colorful flags are erected in passageways to the exam rooms, mineral water, and even syrup with green beans is offered to examinees for free to relieve the heat during the exam days in summer time. Psychological counselors as volunteers may also come and stick to the exam site for relieving students' mental tension with professional methods. All in all, Gaokao is the national event, the sacred moment because the result of more than ten years of students' hard work will come out, which determines their life chances and greatly influences their future social-economic status.

Although Gaokao is regarded as a relatively fair assessment method for selecting talents from the large population in China, the regional differences for university recruitment—the quite unequal opportunities for students in different areas with those in the developed regions in advantage, is a sensitive issue of this exam landscape, which has long been criticized. A province or a municipality is taken as a separate origin of students. However, different enrollment quotas are given to different provinces and municipalities. According to the data of the high-profile top 2 universities, they recruit above 1% of students from Beijing, but only 0.03% from some "remote provinces". While it is much easier for students from developed areas to study at a university in a less developed area, it is much difficult for a student from less developed areas to attend a university in developed areas. Therefore, regional inequality is frequently complained since many more quotas were given to municipalities like Beijing, Shanghai, and Tianjin where students

have much higher possibilities for entering (key) universities while much fewer were given to provinces like Henan, Hebei, Shandong, Sichuan, Guangdong, and so on.

#### 4.1.2.3 Steeply layered school system and intense educational-opportunity anxiety

The goal of the education system is to produce the “red and expert” with adequate knowledge and a strong commitment to the development of socialist modernization (Zachariah, 1979), which makes the entrance exam quite selective. Since the 1990s, tertiary education in China has tremendously expanded in parallel with the government’s policy aiming at continuing promoting the overall educational level of the whole nation and catching up with the developed world via education and technology. The craze for academic degrees and qualifications was increasingly on the rise throughout the entire society. On the other hand, educational expansion does not necessarily bring equality. Educational opportunities at all levels increase, while rural-urban inequality also upsurges (Wu & Zhang, 2010). Schools are classified into different levels, ensuring that the best educational resources are offered to the most high-achieving students. The limited national resources of and China’s urgent ambition of “rising” paralyze educational equality. The relationship between schools is characterized by hierarchical levels of superiority and subordination, and so it is with classes that might be classified as fast, average, and slow classes in ordinary schools or elite, key, and parallel classes in key-point schools. Key schools are limited in number and far superior to ordinary schools with a high social reputation for their better chances of resulting in key-point schools of the next stage. Inequality can happen in a very early educational stage since nearby enrollment is one of the requirements of Compulsory Education Law. For gaining a school place in a prestigious secondary school, it is a regular practice for wealthy parents in metropolises to buy school-district housing close to the desired school. In less-developed cities such as second-tier and third-tier cities, some students succeed in enrolling in a better school by employing guanxi (social capital) and paying selection fees, thus expelling educational opportunities of children from lower-income families. The scenario can also be found in counties where educational resources are extremely uneven distributed with normally only one key-point school.

There have been three categories of upper senior high school since 1951. In the light of “Decision on the Foundation Education Reform and Development” launched by the State Council which aimed at promoting educational inequality, fully develop upper secondary education, make full use of the accessible resource, promote the balanced development of compulsory education, and promote educational fairness (Yang, 2014), the local governments promoted the separation of the part of the junior high department from the senior high section within a school in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Key schools are believed to be far superior to common schools in many respects. In particular, students there perform much better in Gaokao. It is previously criticized that students in a key junior high have overwhelming superiority for entering the senior sector of the same school, depriving the opportunities for students from ordinary junior secondary schools. For interrupting the continuity of the junior and post-secondary schooling allowing for resource reorganization and more equality, many current post-secondary schools have experienced throes of restructuring and relocation in line with this policy since the 2000s, though a little laggard. As can be seen from the following chart, in the current time, the independent senior secondary school gained an absolute dominance. However, notably, there is a trend that the best of the key schools in an area are getting increasingly bigger towards “super high school”<sup>26</sup>.

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<sup>26</sup> In recent years, the emergence of “super high school” is one of the most remarkable phenomena of secondary education in counties and small cities where the educational resources are limited. Super schools are inferior, compared to those very few most prestigious secondary schools throughout a province which are given preference by famous universities through independent recruitment under the context of educational reform encouraging quality education. These prestigious universities recruit students recommended for admission without participating in the college entrance examination and students with some gaps with the lowest intake score of the admission criteria in Gaokao. Besides, these prestigious schools have abundant educational resources and a good source of information about education and exam for better preparing their students for Gaokao. Moreover, a quite few resourceful parents send their children to study abroad, which relieves their pressure for competing for a place at a prestigious Chinese university. But at the same time, a super school was the best school within a county or a small city which was usually underdeveloped. The local government had pressure for stimulating economic development, for which education was utilized as the “education industry” or “education market”, a strong driving force for economic growth. Under this context, the best school in an area was given sufficient support and preference by the local government. Super schools then take advantage of this identity, grasping possible opportunities and adhering to reform for rising up. They work hard to snatch resources of high-achieving students far and near without exception, i.e., a super high school recruits not only local students, but also

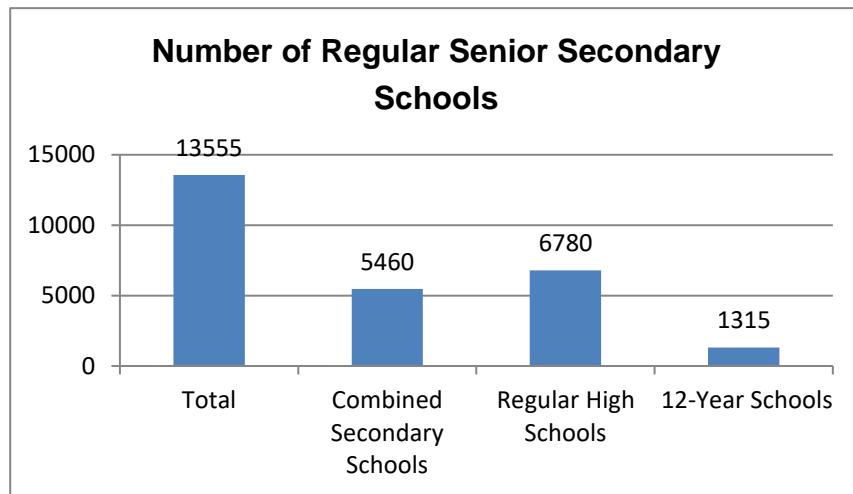


Figure 4.2 Categories of upper senior high school<sup>27</sup>

The higher-education system of Great Britain, France, Japan, and China is known as being intensely hierarchical, among which only very few universities—normally one or two, monopolize the apex of the hierarchy (Han & Guo, 2015). Chinese universities are vertically categorized as “the top 2”, C9-league universities addition to “the top 2”, other 985-project universities, 211-project universities, ordinary universities, and vocational colleges. Universities of different echelons differ a lot in terms of state financial support, enrollment quality, teaching staff, and educational facilities, etc. A sharply steep hierarchy gives rise to cumulative advantage—universities are famous because of being famous. This helps to explain that within the same level such as 985-project universities and 211-project universities, universities can also be sub-classified into different layers according to their educational resources and social reputations. Peking University and Tsinghua University are with the unwavering identity as “the

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top students from adjacent areas with weaker educational resources. At present, a super high school is the most powerful secondary school within an area, with impressive financial support, which is well-known for its monopoly of most experienced teaching staff and top students in the local and neighboring areas, making its scale getting increasingly bigger. Although super high school is criticized by the public as “hell on earth” which trains “exam machines”, deadens students’ creativity and sacrifices their real interests, it is very popular for its reputation as a promising school for preparing their students for the college entrance examination and increasing the admission rates to a prestigious university.

<sup>27</sup> According to the Ministry of Education, P. R. China, retrieved on 11<sup>th</sup> August 2019  
[http://www.moe.gov.cn/s78/A03/moe\\_560/jytjsj\\_2018/qg/201908/t20190812\\_394251.html](http://www.moe.gov.cn/s78/A03/moe_560/jytjsj_2018/qg/201908/t20190812_394251.html)

top 2”, receiving the most massive financial support from the central government and almost monopolizing the best educational resources throughout the nation. Only a small number of universities from the Project-985 list, including Fudan University, Zhejiang University, Nanjing University, University of Science and Technology of China, etc. belong to “the second echelon” as considered by majority of people<sup>28</sup>. As can be seen, the worship of the elite universities, being closely related to “Mathew effect”, paradoxically goes against the communist ideology and the initial intention of the state policy. Firstly, education is taken as a means for the revitalization of the country. Then, achievement ideology is advocated in school where the aspiration of attending a university is encouraged while underachievers suffer from the moral pressure (Barnes, 2002). Furthermore, key-point high schools are the main training camps producing those potential “would-be” elite universities (Liang & Li, 2012). As such, attending an elite university is bundled with a successful-career prospect. This train of thought helps to highlight the individual’s interest while desalting and concealing the extreme collective interest which was previously criticized. Then schools are marked, graded, and classified. Finally, the names of universities, as solidified symbols or labels, are created and accepted, illustrating a person’s ability, social reputation, and status.

## 4.2 Yeyun school in the wider social context

### 4.2.1 Wasting counties and setting up urbanizing districts in leading conurbations

There have emerged some global cities, while remaining several rural and ethnic areas off the development wagon. Sociological studies of education status of the remote and border areas have long been the focus of academic community since the foundation of the Peoples' Republic of China owing to the need of state governance, with a bunch of excellent research being published. Meanwhile, with the modernization process in recent years, middle-class families battle for premium-quality educational resources in highly advanced cities are also carefully studied. While educational status in developed and

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<sup>28</sup> The status of a university is related to the difficulty of being admitted. Some journalistic articles have even categorized those 39 universities from the Project 985 list into seven tiers.

backward regions are given attention, that of areas such as lower-tier cities which were in their rapid process of modernity should be called for more concern.

The proportion of industry and agriculture, the gross value of production, and population size should be the most critical indicators for categorizing areas as cities, counties, or townships, but China has adopted inconsistent definition of cities and towns (Ruibo & Linna, 2013). Since the 1980s, the appointment of cities at the county level has caused overabundance of undersized cities, and “contributed to” urbanization, which distorted the structure of the urban system (Ruibo & Linna, 2013). A conurbation that represents a high level of urbanization and modernization normally has a certain degree of autonomy in the surrounding counties, which with surrounding townships as its jurisdictional areas. A county is with specific rustic meaning as it focuses on stimulating the agricultural development in the surrounding townships and countryside. Under the background of accelerating urbanization and modernization, China’s frequent administrative changes started from the very initial stages of the reform and opening-up policy. Changing a county into a prefecture-level city was a mode that was popular until the end of the 1990s. However, many areas were transformed into cities by magic, even when their economics did not live up to the city standard, thus causing chaos and problems. Realizing this, the central government worked out other means towards modernization. Then another mode—subsuming surrounding counties of certain strategically-important conurbations into their districts in batches according to their importance and economic strength, having been replaced the former, was becoming increasingly popular since the late 1990s. Administrative division reform adjusts the division of powers, by which the jurisdiction of the county is shifted to the city, taking the pressure off from the overcrowded city and making it even bigger. The economic structure of the former county took place, with revised amounts and items encouraging tertiary industry from the support of the State Funds. This situation, in turn, dramatically affects the status of the local education.

#### **4.2.2 Natives’ hometown in the present and the past**

This section has a description of the transition that happened in this area by quoting natives' subjective perceptions. Yeyun upper secondary school lies in a district that is a microcosm of the current trend of withdrawing counties and establishing urbanizing districts. Changes in this place over the past decades have been breathtaking with the spread of industry and modern media. The most intuitive change in the last decades is the geographical spread and the resulting population increase with the current population of nearly one point two million. In the process of urbanization, the previous county brought several townships into its territory, abandoning large swaths of arable land with cottages within and setting up industrial systems led by electronic information and new medical technology. The knowledgeable young adults in the newly-built town of this place are in professional occupations, and quite many of older people in the old part of this place engage kinds of jobs.

A rich body of theories were based on the divisional characters between traditional society and modern society, for example, productive forces and productive relations (Marx, 1867: 405), community and society (Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft) (Tonnies, 1887), mechanical solidarity in the traditional society and organic solidarity in the modern society with a high degree of labor division (Durkheim, 1893), intimacy/kinship and special/impersonal social relationships (Simmel, 1990), rationalization and bureaucratization (Weber, 1930), the increasing refinement of control over emotion and desire (Elias & Hammer, 1939), ubiquitous surveillance and punishment (Foucault, 1975), central hierarchical society and de-central differentiated society (Luhmann, 1984), reflexive identity in the extended time-space (Giddens, 1990: 51), solid modernity and liquid modernity (Bauman, 2000). Urban characters in this place have gradually manifested themselves in recent years. Decades ago, the population there was much smaller, and people's working places were close to their homes, which gave a sense of familiarity. The city is the place where strangers meet (Nassehi, 1999) with modernity knowledge while a county is an extended acquaintance society greatly influenced by local knowledge.

*"I felt as if a hundred years had passed when I think about the prior streetscape when I was a child. Now I'm often confused about where I am without the assistance of the online map in recent years with manifold streets and buildings being constructed. When I was a child, there were only four main streets: East Street, West Street, South Street, and North Street. It took only around an hour to complete a full circuit here. However, without a one-hour drive, you can't get around now. You knew people all around before. If you were down the street, you could always come across an acquaintance. You knew not only about this*

*person but also situations about a handful of other people who were their relatives since the family was once a big concept then which included the person's grandfather and grandmother, even uncles, aunts, etc. And if you chatted with someone who was also waiting for a shuttle bus, it was no wonder that you quickly found that you know someone in common in a few minutes. That's not the case anymore."*

What is also remarkable is the much-improved transportation infrastructure.

*"If you wanted to go to the city, you could find regular commuter buses every half an hour. But it was another story if you wanted to visit surrounding counties or townships because there were no fixed buses. You had to keep waiting in their transit points—with luck, for an hour, but for nothing in the worst case! Now almost every family has a car, of course; besides, buses run every ten minutes for popular lines and twenty minutes for out-of-the-way places. You can use the high-speed train alternatively, which takes only ten minutes to the downtown, or you can choose the metro which runs every two minutes. Online ride-hailing is another wise choice, in comparison with the traditional taxi, I mean."*

The improvement of cultural facilities is also pronounced; such facilities are fruitfully exploited by younger citizens.

*Informant: "Library was a foreign word for me when I was young because there was no public library at all, which restrained people's reading awareness. At that time, most people were closed-minded with little tolerance of different opinions or people who were labeled as 'aberration'. You could never question your teachers or parents; you dared not to talk to your classmates from the opposite sex in case rumors depressed you. However, I remembered that my classmate Tao behaved quite differently because he read a lot. It turned out that his father, who worked in a school with a library opening to its staff, led the way, while the majority of my classmates didn't have such chance. We had only a bookstore with textbooks and tutorials available exclusively where you could only stand by the shelves for reading. Not surprisingly, people left within half an hour. It's quite different today. There are also museums, concerts, exhibitions besides libraries always available to you if you are interested."*

*Interviewer: "Do you think there are enough audience then? Do you think such facilities are well exploited currently?"*

*Informant: "It's tricky. I don't think many people from our generation really like reading, except for scholars or curve wrecker since childhood. So I just took it for granted that there were not many people would like to go there when I factor this and people's busy schedule in. But I'm totally wrong! Education is a big market; children's education is near and dear in many people's hearts. So less knowledgeable younger parents also learn—for the sake of their children! The next generation will be much better than us, given the environment and conditions. But the competition will be more ruthless, correspondingly."*

The city, on the one hand, offers a good variety of commodities; on the other hand, with an array of old architecture bearing people's collective memory being destroyed and replaced by dazzling high-rise buildings, the city belongs to cosmopolitan who inhabit there.

*"We could only buy clothes of better quality in the West Street and cheaper ones in the East Street, so we often bumped against clothes with each other with very limited choices available. We sometimes played the game for guessing from which store others got their clothes. But now it's strikingly modern, and we have everything offered in any metropolis— several shopping malls, a fine assortment of large-scale markets, fancy and specialty stores. If I thought it could still be called a county three years ago, it is now a city absolutely. The bad news is that it has to pay for that— it's regrettably difficult to find some nostalgia snacks and local specialty we had when we were still young."*

Characters of the city— strangeness, distance, impersonality, and anonymity should not be taken for granted as something always with negative meanings; on the contrary, they act as basic resources, resulting in multiple possibilities in the city (Nassehi, 1999, 2010). Although melancholy of the past relatively leisurely life and less utilitarian relationships dwell, people do benefit from strangeness and sense of distance of city life.

*"I'm impressed by people's increasing pursuit of individuality. For example, people have the courage to wear 'eye-catching outfits' as they wish without much fear of being judged since it's becoming harder to run into an acquaintance in the street."*

*"Now we pay property cost every month and acquire a new identity called property owners, which we benefit from somehow. For example, lately, someone upstairs planted a tree close to my kitchen window which blocked much light and I just simply texted the property management personnel. They cut the tree down. Just think of the past, I could be too embarrassed to tell my neighbor if they did a similar thing that upset me."*

The urban conditions have changed people's life prospects as well.

*"In the past, those who attended good universities wouldn't come back on account of material conditions of life, job opportunities, as well as cultural and educational level. 'Don't come back', my parents also said to me now and then. However, they begin to regret it. With the process of integration into the city, house prices soared, the high technology industry moved in, making this place even more attracting."*

As can be seen above, the urban geographies of change have been negotiated the identity of both the city, multiple organizations as well as the individuals.

#### 4.2.3 A place with “weird dialects” in between?

Modernity is a broad concept, which means the separation and rupture with the past traditional society in every respect like efficient economic system, the secularization of the society, rational thinking, bureaucratic administration systems, and a full set of institutional arrangements. The urban conditions contribute to our understanding of the cultural role of cities by offering new insights into the analysis of urban experiences. The transformed identity undoubtedly becomes one of the most vital turning points in its history.

*“That’s a great thing that people in the county are finally city dwellers. We feel excited and proud! Municipal citizenship is important because urban residences enjoy great wealth as a consequence of the cluster-effect of capital, high-quality education, and other public facilities. That was why my father procured an urban-residence certificate for me by money and Guanxi<sup>29</sup> when I was seven years old.”*

*“Many local parents asked their children to abandon the local accent from a young age because it seemed to be self-evident that ‘people from smaller areas should definitely follow urban residents.’ At school, many students are imitating the way their classmates from the inner city are speaking, as well. I believe many people have the same feeling—isn’t it a bit ridiculous that inhabitants don’t speak their own dialect but half the urban dialect and half the county’s dialect? That’s weird, right? But hardly no one had full-throated pushback against it! People are proud if they speak perfect urban dialect but would be ashamed if with the local dialect. But only subconsciousness works when you speak in various situations, except that you are in a language class! Only the minority has a real feel for languages. So the majority can’t speak good urban dialect; they look awkward and clumsy when pronouncing particular words. So they speak mixed dialects—such weird dialect in between! And the pressure of speaking the urban dialect has actually become a trend for so many years.”*

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<sup>29</sup> Guanxi (Chinese-style networking) is an important term which helps to understand the texture of Chinese society. It is usually taken as social relationship (Beziehung) but is not the same thing, actually. Guanxi is instrumental or emotion-based personal bond and interpersonal networks where unspoken rules and sensibilities are important, within which the insiders benefit themselves by exchanging information, resources, and capital. Bending rules of the game stands a good chance when people possess guanxi in various contexts. This also implies that people in a bureaucratic organization even have more complicated relationships involving factionalism. See Guangguo Huang, & Xianjin Hu. (2004). “Face: Chinese power game”, Renmin university of China Press. China is a guanxi-based society where the network of interpersonal relationships owned by people is a kind of important power and people’s reaction of obedience or resistance is greatly influenced by their perceived power structure in a particular social situation.

These representative discourses reflect that the relationship between areas and related people and dialects are by no means equal. Language speaking makes a part of people's identity— of who they are. Listeners would never stop scoring speakers' privately, subjectively placing them to different social status, from the nuance like speakers' accuracy, accent, tones, fluency, and proficiency.

As is stated above, this place, being guided by the city-planning and related policy, is increasingly devoured by a metropolis; it is an outgrowth of urbanization, modernization, and government forces. This has dramatically changed the population-settlement pattern as well as culture and life-style. The influences brought about by those changes on local schools are mainly in these aspects: more fiscal educational expenditure, the increasing diversified student population, the resulting adjustments in the governance patterns, and the awakening of social-class consciousness including people's prevalent imagination of "the urban middle class" and the aspirations and effort towards this identity. These conditions make the school a multi-cultural field with students' lives embedded in various cultural practices and narratives where the interplay of students' family background, their previous experiences, capital, habitus, self-identity, and interactions take place, which affects their locations and relocations of themselves. As the student population is becoming increasingly diverse, the struggles that students culturally experience becomes a problem that should be carefully studied.

Something in this place, no matter valuable or musty, is being lost over time in the pursuit of modernization, causing nostalgia. However, in the face of coercing forces of modernity, this kind of melancholy, together with traditional culture and ideological system, rises up in revolt in some way, which asks for a reflexive stance for grasping the tensions between modernity and tradition by knowing more facts of the collision. "In between" seems to be an important cultural condition and keynote of the social context where people are struggling to be recognized by the overwhelming urban culture.

"Space and time are basic categories of human existence. Yet we rarely debate their meanings." (Harvey, 1989a: 201)

Before proceeding to delve into students' worlds of life for understanding their life stories, I firstly paint a portrait of the school setting, i.e., the shared world of people's unfolding stories, locating it in historical periods and the broader social context, concerning what happened there, the current practices with intricate details, and the school ethos negotiating people's aspirations.

"The Puritan wanted to work in a calling; we are forced to do so. For when asceticism was carried out of monastic cells into everyday life, and began to dominate worldly morality, it did its part in building the tremendous cosmos of the modern economic order. This order is now bound to the technical and economic conditions of machine production which to-day determine the lives of all the individuals who are born into this mechanism, not only those directly concerned with economic acquisition, with irresistible force. Perhaps it will so determine them until the last ton of fossilized coal is burnt. In Baxter's view, the care for external goods should only lie on the shoulders of the saint like a light cloak, which can be thrown aside at any moment'. But fate decreed that the cloak should become an iron cage." (Weber, 1930: 181)

According to Weber, modernity has witnessed the spread of rational spirit that is embedded in the flourishing bureaucracy into every corner of social life; once the rational spirit has gained maturity, it acquires an intrepid existence and plays the role of the engine of the social development, making people its slaves. This argument basically reflects the state and dilemma of modern bureaucratic organizations. On the whole, recent decades have witnessed the increased modernity and discipline as well as the decreased localization and flexibility of Yeyun school.

#### 4.2.4 Portrait of Yeyun school

Yeyun school is a semi-boarding national-level model regular upper secondary school which locates in a newly-established district of a second-tier city in China. This district lay in a flood plain of tropical monsoon climate with a temperate climate, a long frost-free period, abundant rainfall, and four distinct seasons, which, together with the drainage and sandy soil and a dense network of rivers, contributed to its agricultural advantages in history. Locating on the highest point of the county with a river wandering

at the foot, Yeyun school has a long history. It has been a government-established public junior high school since the abolition of the Imperial Civil Service Exam. When the new China was established, the school was small in scale with a couple of teaching staff and around 100 students. The local government then provided unwavering support for its extension, assisting it by offer funds for constructing new teaching buildings and renovating the existing infrastructure, in line with the nation's effort for developing education and producing high literacy rates. During this period, the school has grown into a comprehensive secondary school with both junior high and senior high departments.

The ups and downs of Yeyun school were deeply influenced by the social contexts and political transformations. Just like many other educational institutions, it was closed in the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. After that period, in line with the policy of resuming Gaokao, Yeyun school was designated as a key state secondary school despite its relatively poor educational infrastructure and resources. Taking advantage of this identity, it attracted a few local high-performing students and gained rapid development in the 1980s. In the late 1990s, evaluations and assessments were becoming prevalent; Yeyun school won over the local government's financial support by proving its advantages over its competitors. With the substantial government subsidies, Yeyun school gained further development in terms of the infrastructure including classrooms, labs, canteens, dormitories, etc. as well as more qualified teachers, which resulted in higher college-admission rate. Under this situation, the school was striving for taking a step forward and riding into a key-point state school. Then it separated its junior high department out from the school in line with the national educational policies while refining its senior high department.

"The urban fabric grows, extends its borders, corrodes the residue of agrarian life" with "large-scale urban projects" (Lefebvre, 2003). The high-speeding urbanization is the process of both the territorial expansion of cities and aggregation, restructuring and optimizing the capital. This city where the school located had the ambition of ascending into one of global first-tier cities with a strong force of radiance through an economic transformation by taking advantage of its satellite towns. With the policy of wasting counties and establishing urban districts for accelerating urbanization and modernization, several satellite towns have been integrated into this city since the 1990s.

Non-agricultural population made up over half of the total population before this district integrated itself into the city. With a high population density as well as the increasing proportion of secondary and tertiary industry, the district has achieved a relatively high degree of urbanization gradually. The identity transformation from a county to an urban district implies the expanding influences and the shifted executive power, which has brought about important changes to the local life. Firstly, infrastructure is greatly improved with an increasing number of roads, bus stations, highways, bridges that offers various travel possibilities. Besides, environmental awareness is given more weight, which is reflected in the vigorous river harnessing, the establishment of green belt on the roads and urban gardens. In addition, Skynet positioning, surveillance cameras, as well as high-speed broadband wireless such as 4G are put in place covering the entire area. Furthermore, vast sums of money are spent for alleviating poverty, building affordable housing, renewing old and shabby residential districts, creating job opportunities, supporting self-employment, improving the medical and sanitary conditions, as well as educational status and sports facility. The urban function area is the place where relevant resources and capital are segregated within for producing scale effects. Urban reality is the sum and home of various markets (Lefebvre, 2003). Currently, the overall framework of urban functional areas is becoming structured. Living quarters and financial centers in the eastern and northern part, the administration center in a newly-built new town that locates in the southwest, the cultural and educational center in the southern region, and the rapid-growing burgeoning industry and research centers in a new town in the northwestern part according to the city's landscape plan, are systematically related with each other.

In a decade, with the acceptance as a key-point state upper secondary school and the administrative division readjustment of the place where it lies, Yeyun school has reset its admission policy in the framework of national educational policies. Two significant changes concerning the school's independent recruitment of students and diversified sources of students have emerged in the enrollment policy. The first change implies that the school is permitted to reserve a limited number of places for students who

are talented in discipline competitions, sport, and art<sup>30</sup>. The second change implies that the school is able to recruit high-performing students from other regions within the province besides those who have the right to get access to their designated neighborhood school, which contributes to optimizing the structure of the student source. As a national model upper secondary school, Yeyun school has attracted an increasing large number of high achieving students from other neighborhoods— both the relatively underdeveloped areas and the well-developed old towns. Besides, the newly-established burgeoning industry with huge market potential has continuously attracted a new wave of middle-class people to settle down. With the population of the middle class in the district increasing, Yeyun school, following the tide, opened several high-charging International Experimental Classes.

At present, Yeyun school, with around 300 faculty members and 4000 students from different family backgrounds who are grouped into more than 80 homerooms, is increasingly becoming a super upper secondary school. The school reports that above 90% of its students have made their university dream come true, among which more than half have been accepted by key universities, among which a small proportion is admitted to C9-league universities. On the one hand, although this university-driven school is a relatively high-profile one, especially with the increasing university-acceptation in recent years, it is not the bellwether at the province level. On the other hand, it comprises several star students and affluent students who could have been accepted by those most competitive schools throughout the province and also includes “mediocre” students with different family grounds. The multi-cultural context caused by the diversified population has been exerting a profound influence on the schools’ practices as well as students’ identity and experiences.

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<sup>30</sup> The Chinese educational system has long been criticized for the overemphasis of rote learning and exam scores. Independent recruitment is one of the important measures for enlarging the right of self-management of schools and promoting quality education. With the reform of the educational system being put on the agenda, the Ministry of Education has delivered the “enforcement advice of further promoting the Reform of examination and enrollment system in upper secondary schools” where a certain number of quotas (typically less than 5% of the planned total enrollment) of the independent recruitment of students with talents are allocated to some provincial key-point upper secondary schools, as experimental schools.

## 4.3 A non-official approach of delineating the meaningful schoolyard's transformations

“Things are born, grow, and ripen, then wither, and die. The reality behind these words is infinite.”

(Lefebvre, 1991: 70)

In the 1970s, the spatial turn emerged in humanities for achieving a better understanding of conditions and presentations of modernity. Lefebvre, as one of the eminent theorists of social space, pointed out that time and space are much disturbed by modernity. He further presented that social space, as a process and as being produced and reproduced (Swyngedouw, 1992), is about society and history. Social space is seen as both a humanized product of social practices as well as a presentation of a set of social relations which produce itself (Simonsen, 1992). Since education and modernity is intertwined, I observe one key aspect of the school field by examining trivial things— its spatial transformations for the past few years.

The last decade has witnessed a burgeoning of urbanization with the economic development and the backing policy of withdrawing counties and setting up districts. Along the path to “success”, running of the school has not been strictly in line with educational policies; rather, they have good knowledge of “wise” strategies and the room for “acceptable” operations under the table—for maintaining its advantage and status. Their “good leadership” and “heroic efforts” could be liberally and officially texted, simply ignoring the silent majority. Accompanied by the school’s every quiz of “promotion” through the urbanization process were unceasing spatial transformations of the schoolyard. In this research, older teachers who have lived through many of the school’s transformations had much to say about that, with nostalgia.

The urban spaces are highly planned in China. It seems that the representative landscape for a global city must be numerous high-rise buildings with busy white-collar workers in the day and flashing neon lights in the night without exception base on the purposely ruined old buildings that have witnessed vicissitudes of history. The commercial zone of less developed cities are blindly following that of super cities one

after another where squares and high-rise buildings were built, with the homogenous fast-paced music permeating in the air. Roads have been widening after reestablishment over and over again, decorated by rows of trees of the same species that have been previously planned. Street vendors who cannot afford the rent are expelled and fined, being replaced by characterless street-shops with uniformed plaque written in consolidated characters. All the things remind people of modernity, and all the characteristics relating to it can cause an illusion of “blank cities without history”. In line with the city planning is the school planning as the school itself is a product of modernity.

Some important spatial changes happened in Yeyun school in a couple of decades, among which the newly-built modern school gate with an artificially spacious square, the segregated teacher housing, and the reopening of a cultural-heritage park in the memory of a cultural celebrity in history are impressive. These noticeable changes offer an interesting and valuable glimpse of the dynamic interaction of the past and the present as well as an answer concerning how the school, as a modern bureaucratic organization, is embedded in a wider social, locates, constructs, produces and reproduces itself context over time. This section depicts such spatial changes at school and relevant people's discourse and practices concerning them, trying to pushing the curtain aside and connecting these discourses and practices with the social conditions and forces behind. This section is weaved on the basis of the memory about ideas pushing forward schoolyard's transformations and relevant people's reaction towards them from some older teachers— in the fiftieth or sixtieth who had lived through and witnessed important transformations of the campus.

#### **4.3.1 The refurbishment of the school gate with enhanced monitoring and those vanished kiosks**

##### **The first transformation (from the mid-1990s to early 2000s)**

Architecture can be understood as “resources in struggle for meaning, and by implications, for power” (Sklair, 2006: 21). The school gate is the symbol expressing a school's history and annotating its school

image. Space, as a social product, tells the history (Lefebvre, 1991). Getting to know the spatial practices and the social-spatial realities involving the school gate, to "uncover meanings potentially present in the given environment" (Schulz, 1980: 23) contributes to a deeper understanding of how the school, embedded in the broader social context, locates and relocates itself over time. Lefebvre's imaginary and fertile theory about urban space practices offers excellent insight for understanding the hidden cultural and social implications of these changes.

The current well-guarded gate of the Yeyun school has been refurbished twice during the last two decades. The old school gate before the mid-1990s was simply made from bricks and cement, with the school name in the middle; on both sides, there was a pair of beautiful, flowing inscription vertically written in Chinese calligraphy, which praised the spirit of selfless dedication of teachers who cultivated their students into talents all over the country; banners such as "only development achievements speak loud", "respect knowledge and develop science" hung occasionally above the gate. In the mid-1990s, the location of the gate was criticized for being "out of the way" and its appearance was identified as being "low, shabby, and crude". To make it more noticeable, the school leaders decided that "the school should be relocated, facing the town center". For making it more upscale and attracting, the leaders made the decision that old-style bricks should be replaced by modernized marbles for the gate construction, with various honors and awards such as "civilized school", "spirit-demonstration school", "key-point school", "morally advanced school" etc. hanging next to the school name instead of the previous calligraphy work.

That renovation project for the school gate went beyond that. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the river by the gate has been filled up and remade into a school square in front of the school gate; a row of kiosks by the side of the gate was expelled. The leaders have formed a unified handling suggestion pointing at discarding the river. The principal's statement was, which was recalled by a recently retired teacher:

*“The river was fundamentally rustic<sup>31</sup>. A river has already been filled up for producing a park of the street garden in the adjacent Street a year ago. Farmlands and rivers should be transformed for the purpose of school development.”*

With a trickle of body movements, a teacher recalled another school official’s response by telling me that inspired by the above-mentioned statement, the leader presented with a thick flavor of the “country” and “development” discourse:

*“Education is fundamental to a country’s enduring prosperity. A school, as an educational institution which makes a contribution to knowledge and technology development for the nation, has more valid reasons for doing that so as to better develop itself.”*

Then there came the third and the fourth statement pursuing the common ground:

*“The river was polluted anyway. River improvement was time and labor-consuming. We should abandon it straightforward.”*

*“Every year, there is news about people drown in rivers. The river should not be located by the school gate for security reasons.”*

Space production is frequently used for the sake of city-planning programs in urbanization. The hidden myth is that urban is seen as “an effect, a result, and a means” (Lefebvre, 2003: 41) with “objective, scientific, and neutral” (Lefebvre, 2003: 181) meaning while spaces with rustic meaning are seen as “a lack of education and occlusion” (Lefebvre, 2003: 29).

“The rural-peasant, although primordial and a dominant field for centuries, only took shape after being acted upon by its conquerors, by administrators in the political city.” (Lefebvre, 2003: 33)

Modernism and urbanism succeed in propagating their belief on a large scale in every corner. In the context of development, for the sake of industrialization and urbanization, the natural landscape is

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<sup>31</sup> Society has implicit discrimination against rural areas and its people. See Gong Renren: The Historical Causes of China’s Dual Social Structure. It argues that the unique dual social structure provides the institutional foundation for the longstanding discrimination against people from the countryside.

transformed, and devastated, swallowed up (Lefebvre, 2003: 26). The river, a kind of natural scenery, was seen as unimportant and not worthy of any investment of time and money. The school, as a modern bureaucratic organization and with the moral power for prospering the country, on the contrary, naturally gained priority of development upon the sacrifice of the “rustic landscape”. In the same year, several kiosks which sold snacks, non-stable food, and stationary by the gate was also noticed and given negative meanings by previous school leaders. A teacher showed me those leaders’ main arguments for abandoning those small shops.

*“A cluster of shops selling food right beside the gate! They really had a negative impact on the school image.”*

*“We should drive them away. Who could shoulder the responsibility if children ate something bad? At the same time, we should promote the construction of school-owned corner stores and canteens.”*

*“Those kiosks were so notorious and disgusting that they could always shift the attention of bad students with various strategies. The school had a specific provision that students were forbidden to leave school even during break time, which had a direct effect on their business. But those peddlers quickly worked out an idea that the students ordered what they wanted and paid in advance and they made records in their tally books; then during break time they got in touch with these students from behind the fence, reading out their names from the tally books and throwing those ordered food that was packed into school over the fence. It really spoiled the image of the school.”*

*“Many of our class sponsors had really negative views about them. They had complained repeatedly that those stores greatly increased the difficulty in their management.”*

“Any place that is organized around the monument, the seat of an institution, as the conceivable and imaginary site of collective social life, is repressive and oppressive. With ethic or aesthetic power, it brings people together and at the same time controls them.” (Lefebvre, 2003: 21-22)

The production of relevant spaces of the school has embodied power and control. Modernization and rationalization mean the assimilation of organizations and the increasing refinement of governance techniques centering on people’s bodies in the framework of those repressive organizations (Foucault, 1975). Those school regulations enforce the presence of students’ bodies at a particular time; those various governance techniques, which are increasingly mature, constantly attempt to supervise and correct

students' behaviors, ensuring the presence of the body and the functioning and reproduction of school as a modern organization. Moreover, the modern school system in China was born as a weapon against western powers as well as a calling of making the country thrive with strong ethic power. After the founding of the new China, the school became a kind of repressive state apparatus whose legitimacy was further established by educational policies and exam systems. At the same time, its ethic power was also continuously enhanced with every media report and social response of its performances of cultivating high-achieving students in Gaokao in the context of "strengthening the country through talents". The retailers who did their business too close, being morally indefensible and under the intense pressure of public pressure, totally lost this game and quickly closed their stores in case people would unconsciously establish some connections between them and the school. At the same time, the school square in front of the gate, as a social place, was produced. Those hanging awards issued by state organs conspicuously declared the collusion of school education and state power. The honor roll of high-performing students in Gaokao advertised the desirable products produced by the school.

### **The second transformation in the mid-2000s**

Yeyun school worked with the local government for further improving its hardware facilities for the pursuit of being selected as a model state school. Under this context, it seemed that it was necessary and reasonable to "improve" the school gate again. According to the instruction of the upper echelons, the gate should convey a feeling of modern and grandiose, creating a sense of great pride for people who are approaching it. Then an inspection team was sent out for studying the construction methods and experiences in the "more advanced" downtown. Three changes concerning the extension of the school wall, construction material, and the writing of school name have emerged in this reformation. The group has come to an agreement on the extension of the school wall and the expansion of the square, making them grander and more spacious respectively.

"Ever since the State is born, it determined its logic, strategy, rationality through empty space, broad avenues, the square of gigantic proportions open to spectacular processions." (Lefebvre, 2003).

The rural, the industrial, and the urban, as “images and concepts”, “sensations and perceptions”, “language and rationality”, are three hierarchical levels, among which inequalities happened (Lefebvre, 2003: 28). The urban school, as an integral part of the status apparatus in modern society representing the great achievement of urbanization, should be modern, advanced and magnificent, compared to the rural school, which is incapacious, laggard, and occlusive. The choice of the place, size, materials, structure of a particular architecture is never random but with social significance. Yeyun school thus reminds people of its “standardization” and “authority” as well as the presence of the seemingly absent strong and repressive state force through the artificial arrangement of a spacious social space in front of the gate.

Modernity means constant changes: getting rid of the stale and bringing forth the fresh. Before the construction of the architecture, there is a “conceived space” (“l'espaceconçu”) with certain ideologies, logic, and assumptions in mind. The team, through careful investigations, finally reached a conclusion that “glass could better convey a feeling of modernity, compared to stone” because “among all the architecture, those glass-walled high-rise buildings and steel-and-glass large mansions in the downtown are most modern sites in a city.”

The relation between architecture and metaphor has been intensively studied. Details of architecture—its size, height, shape, displays, decorations, color, light, smells, and the relationship with other architecture, etc., remind people of certain symbols, identities, scenarios, complex, and feelings. Concise geometrical lines, abstract elements, and new materials used in contemporary architecture, as symbols, are believed to be able to represent and reflect modern industrial achievements. With the development of advanced techniques, bulk metallic glasses are produced at a low price and are widely used in architecture. Compared with other building materials, transparent crystals, achieves maximal light transmission, making the architecture brilliant and thaumaturgic, and creating a sense of outspread vision. Thus the metaphor of the crystal-palace or glass-box architecture is overwhelmingly modern, which represents the characteristic temper of an age conveying openness, speed, instantaneity, transformations, changes, mobility, and fashion. The city, with the dynamic mutative image, is becoming a complicated

metaphorical world composed of a myriad of huge video screens that displays everything representing modernity, efficiency, exchanges, and consumption.

The glass curtain wall acts not only as a separation barrier that alienates the school and the outside world but also a modern screen which ensures the continuity of the sight. The area which could be seen through the glass curtain wall is the “front stage” of the school which, for sure, needed to be redesigned. This area has correspondingly undergone two significant transformations during the latest two decades: it was once a large stretch of trees with a toilet close to the gate, and then rows of glass shelves for newspapers, and currently a space of displaying the school’s symbolic capital—rows of larger windows displaying effective leadership, energetic teaching staff highlighting “star teachers”, school honors and pride, and mythical figures—big names of the previous students who were accepted at a prestigious university.

Besides the school’s name, there are the school badge, an award written in both Chinese and English—the first time for the bilingual writing, and a digital screen. The school badge was redesigned, highlighting its long history and “book-aroma” with a proud history, though it seemingly a bit contrived; the school’s name is also written in both Chinese and English, manifesting its international posture. The most crucial award representing the most important identity of the school—national model school, is hanging in the middle with others like “experimental teaching demonstration school”, “modern educational technology demonstration school”, and “green demonstration school” moving into a less impressive place. The digital screen is installed showing corresponding contents according to the actual demands, which is much more efficient compared with the previous carefully designed banners.

After the admissions of universities, Honor Roll of Gaokao performance displaying and proving those school-produced “satisfactory products” is also hang observably beside the gate every year. At the same time, these pieces of information are advertised on the bodywork of buses and screens installed in the taxies. These pieces of news fly across the sky with cabs and buses traveling around, which fully displays the consumer-driven “liquid modernity”.

The entrance guard system is enhanced with the installation of monitoring and warning devices. The school declared that for safety reasons, it had adopted relevant regulations avoiding being “disturbed” by the flashy outside world.

*School regulation for campus safety adopted in 2018*

1. *Closed-off management is adopted in this school.*
2. *The school gate is kept closed and is guarded by security personnel within 24 hours. It is the obligation of teaching staff to safeguard the school by turns during the summer and winter vacation.*
3. *Relevant passes or documents must be shown when entering the school gate; resident students are forbidden to leave school on weekdays without permission, and day students are only allowed to leave the school at dismissal time.*
4. *Security patrol is no less than six times per day; night patrol is no less than three times per day.*
5. *Monitoring devices are installed in important areas of the school, ensuring seamless and clearly surveillance all day and night; videos should be stored for at least one month.*
6. *Alarm monitoring devices are installed and interconnected with the local police station.*
7. *No entry for outsiders; all visitors must state the reason for visiting and sign in with valid identity cards at the reception desk and wear a badge for visitor.*

The increase of discipline and surveillance is in line with modernization and bureaucratization; school, as a representative of the modern organization, is increasingly like a repressive Panopticon constructed by concrete and steel with depressed people who are increasingly imposed to become task-oriented “docile bodies” that can be disciplined, observed, controlled, and examined whenever and wherever.

#### **4.3.2 The segregated teacher housing**

There is the individual’s memory, relying on in which way people develop his or her autobiography; there is generations’ memory highlighting the overwhelming influences of particular historical time on the contemporary or the big events on people in the community; there is also the national memory which is written “pulled” by the national identity, becoming the “historical facts” in the historical textbooks. This section makes a non-official description of the “abandoned” teacher housing by the medium of oral history from teachers who were previously residing there. The official description is at the expense of ordinary people’s struggling practices where phenomena are becoming meaningful.

Teachers' residential zone previously located in the northeast corner of the Yeyun school but was separated from the school by a high wall in 2011. Earlier that year, the local Education Bureau vigorously rolled out "Eminent Teacher Project" and "Extraordinary Principal Project" for promoting the competitiveness of the local education. Leaders of the Yeyun school have decided to concentrate on institutional improvement as a response with more effective measures being launched for strengthening "teachers' devotion" discourses, which is related to how to effectively manage teachers. After a bunch of debates, school leaders worked out a structured scheme with various kinds of check-ups and assessments for measuring teachers' contributions. Perhaps the most controversial decision that was put on agenda was that to exclude the teachers' housing from the school for ensuring teachers burying themselves in their work wholeheartedly. With things as such, teachers cannot leave school during the day without permission and their entering and leaving are, of course, closely watched by both the gate guard and "modern technology".

The segregation of teachers' housing faced fierce resistance from teachers residing there. Almost all these teachers were strongly against this decision and trying to resist. A teacher told me that it put a strain on teachers' family life. She especially felt compassion for her friend—a devastated younger colleague whose husband worked in another province, because it posed great challenges for her to take care of her preschool child. The space with the previous design allowed teachers' life to unfold without a strict separation of work and private life. However, this was exactly what to be eliminated according to the will of the school institution. Many teachers showed their disapprobation for fear of being unable to take care of their family by talking with their intimate friends in the small circle. Discontent was constantly fermenting:

*"It's so unfair, cruel, outrageous, and chilling to drive us old teachers away, just like what they did to our previous colleagues—teachers for the junior high department several years ago. Some of them are still very sad about being abandoned by the school. Now a similar thing happened. We should stick together against this decision."*

This plan triggered this teacher's memory of those teachers who were shifted with the junior-high part being divided out. All memories are related to space (Halbwachs, 1991), and spaces can cultivate the

identity of a particular social group (Nora, 1990). Behind the efficiency are the perceived emotional trauma of many teachers who viewed and reported this event as an expulsion. This decision of school reminded a teacher of her previous colleagues' tellings of their experience of being expelled, which triggered her keen sense of unfairness, disappointment, and grievance.

*“No barrier should be erected. I’ve lived here for more than twenty years. I love every inch of the soil at school, which gives me a sense of belonging. I feel really astounded and indescribable disappointed about this decision.”*

Another teacher showed his sense of alienation by stating his great affection for the school with strong nostalgia and emotional tie.

*“We should definitely say no. Let’s go on strike to show our determined attitude! The explanation they gave was ridiculous and contumelious. Are we prisoners who should be guarded? We are hardworking and indefatigable people’s teachers!”*

This defiant sound expressed a teacher’s resentment because, in his mind, this decision insulted his imagination of the identity as a “people’s teacher”, which structured his thinking and behaving in daily life. This thinking prompted him to be more radical.

When the fight ended in failure, these teachers disappointedly became to realize that any resistance was futile, then some active teachers were trying to make a compromise:

*“Now we fully understand the ‘existential purpose’ of the wall, and we agree if a wall must be set there. But please construct a door in the wall which opens at a particular time during the day. We, teachers, are under enormous pressures and working so hard to improve students’ performances. But we are people, not animals or machines, we deserve respect, and we also deserve some rest during the long day.”*

*“I finally understand that there is no romance in front of efficiency. However, this decision only leads to a waste of time and energy. We strongly suggest the door stay open during the lunch break and commuter time.”*

*“I work more effectively after taking a nap at home. I insist on a door being designed in the wall and open during lunchtime. This is not for the sake of us teachers, but for the students, for the school, because if we had a better rest, we have better teaching performances in the afternoon. The door should also be opened during the commuter time because it saves much time.”*

*“We are working very long hours, in excess of sixty hours per week. And there exist hidden dangers due to fatigue commuting on the way. Once a traffic accident occurs, the school should be responsible for that.”*

Space is always spatial practices (spacing), bringing production and reproduction of space (Lefebvre, 1991). Space limits as well as enables people's certain patterns of behavior in daily life with the presence of the social force, which makes the arrangement of certain space cultural, social, and political. It was evident that these teachers were trying to defend their interests by listing “good reasons” for dispelling the absolute segregation of the public and the private. However, there existed a vital “turn” in teachers' narratives. By changing the individualistic tone into the collectivistic melody such as “for the sake of the school”, and “the school's responsibility in case of a traffic accident during the commuter time”, teachers wished that they could make a bargain with representatives of the school. However, even so, the established fact was that a high wall was firmly erected without a door without allowing for any flexibility within a certain scope. The space transformation at school is always related to spatial planning intelligence because the school is not the sum of buildings and people but a modern bureaucratic organization and state machinery.

“The urban space is filled with multiple strategies clash where institutions and urban agents including powerful people and representative of the institution play a vital role.” (Lefebvre, 2003: 87)

Space makes certain saying and behaving possible while setting limits on them, hence it can be understood as an occasion, a symbol, and a metaphor.

“Prisons resemble factories, schools, barracks, hospitals, which all resemble prisons.” (Foucault, 1975: 228)

The school, as the state apparatus and the interest body of the market economy, is continually utilizing space technology— adjusting, differentiating, designing, and producing its space. The space transformations give a glimpse of the social relationships embedded within. Under the dual forces of modernity and the state, space is increasingly controlled by people with power. The inhabitants are increasingly disempowered and losing their right to participate in the decision and practices. The school

institution is high repressive which maintains the function of production and consumption, encroaching people's "habiting" and converting it into "habitat"; The individual is pressed in the homogenous urbanism, becoming dwelling machines; Romance and any imagination about it are expelled, leaving only basic functions behind (Lefebvre, 2003: 81). The individual's interests are so insignificance which should deservedly sacrifice for anything if it is with the meaning of the "modern", "nationalized", "advanced", "collective", "effective", and "profitable".

#### 4.3.3 Rediscovering and consuming the "cultural root"

A park, taking up around ten percent of the total campus area, is known as the cultural originator of the school. The memorial stones covered by moss are located in the most eye-catching place, overshadowed by various vegetation trees like pines, plantains, ginkgo trees, Firmiana simplex, Nanmu, magnolia, plum trees, and sweet-scented Osmanthus trees, etc. Echoed with those memorial stones, a pavilion, as a type of classic Chinese architecture, was elaborately designed, in an attempt to achieve a harmonious interaction with the winding paths and old trees. The garden is daily tidied by students who are with this park allocated as their public cleaning area; besides, extreme care is taken in the planting of flowers and grass by gardeners, so that no redundant branches or overgrown weed get in the way.

Some antique items recording the school's history were found and covered up because their importance should be concealed, and repressed under the power of ideology and language at the time that discouraged the old and brought forth the fresh; political reasons also led to its necessary camouflage. At that time, when those cultural relics were found, school leaders felt unsettled, becoming uncertain about how to dispose of them properly, because any action might cause "political error" in the politically sensitive time, shortly after the Great Cultural Revolution. They later decided to keep some in the museum while reburying some underground for both concealing and protection.

The garden within the garden—the heritage park at school was kept as a silent prohibited area with fences before the 2010s, being accompanied by a widespread tale that many snakes were dwelling inside, which

generated an overwhelming sense of horror and mystery. However, at that time, some senior staff often silently slipped into the garden, spending a fantastic time there admiring the beauty of flowers and refreshing themselves. Those cleaning workers and gardeners also benefited from the park: they spontaneously made part of the park their private gardens where they grew fragrant plants interspersed with vegetables carefully within an acceptable range in case not prompt antipathy from the officials. However, their idle stroll and bucolic romantic life ended after a meeting in the early 2010s.

With the popularity of the concept of market-oriented economy, political discourses are becoming desalinated while economic discourses are enhancing. Empowered by informatization and marketization, the school leaders became to realize the importance of the brand effect which differentiated the school from others for building a reputation and in turn, attracting high-qualified teaching staff and high scorers as its students.

*“The cultural value conveyed by the heritage park should be highlighted and utilized because it can serve as a guide or spirituality to structure the ethos of the school and the lifestyle of people on campus, which makes this school unique.”*

*“At the present time, almost all architecture at school is excessive modern, which induces a false impression that history or culture leave no vestige here. However, it is the rich history but not the modern-style empty shell that makes our school special and distinctive. The significance of the culture and history to the school must be re-recognized.”*

Those previous school leaders decided that the “school’s tradition” should be the edge and the selling point of this school. Guided by these discussions with dialectical and reflexive meanings, the reforming practices concerning the heritage park took place. Orientation, identification, and memory make up “genius loci”, i.e. “spirit of a place” (Schulz, 1980). In the context of developing the socialist market economy, the marketization of the school, which increases the bet for winning more high-qualified personnel seems to be the intrinsic requirement of the consumption-driven bureaucratic society. For the school leaders, it was this very social context that made their reflections between the modern and the tradition, history and culture, as well as the modern-designed architecture and the “Retro style” constructions possible. The historical origin of the school, as new-found commodity, was hence highlighted reminding people of its rich history and humanistic spirits it bore. Some historical stuff was

then requested to return to the school from the museum, and some items were re-dug out. Currently, some historical items were carefully displayed in the heritage park which was reconditioned to be open to the public. It is no wonder that the seemingly lifeless park has been endowed with great vitality and has gained more considerable significance over recent decades.

As can be seen above, the school space is consciously produced, and the space transformation is the social practices essentially structured by the wider social context. The state power and market economy are quietly woven into the design of the educational space. The state power is not in contradiction with the market economy because the increasingly stronger state with the help of the market economy possesses more cultural influences, moral power, conviction, and charisma. The space transformation reflects the emphasis on constructing the “modern”, “urbanized”, and “professional” educational space which praises “collective” and “international” while repressing “private” and “rustic”. Urban practice teaches people that signs and significations can be sold and consumed (Lefebvre, 2003: 50); the school marketizes itself by making the best use of its cultural resources for building its brand so as to gain more competitive stakes.

#### 4.3.4 Student-recruiting practices behind the scenes

Besides local eligible students who have reached the minimum scores for admission, the school also enrolls some students whose scores in senior high school entrance examination are close to the standard and non-local exam-takers from adjacent districts, counties, and townships, charging them “school-selection-fee”, fueling corruption. A school place of key schools is scarce, while people have a high demand for it, which brings the spread of some parents’ practices of guanxi (social capital) and money paying (donations), albeit officially illegal. It has been frequently reported that guanxi is used by parents every so often for winning a school place for their children in many cases. This school has no exception. Although public schools are not allowed to charge high tuition fees according to the relevant law, however, many key schools charge “school-selection fees” in disguise.

*Interviewer: "I have no idea about what school-selection fee is. Admission is based on the results of the senior high school entrance examination, isn't it?"*

*Official: "In the majority of cases, yes. But limited school places are open for students who pay donations."*

*Interviewer: "I also heard that school leaders could receive many notes<sup>32</sup> and texts during the admission process. Can you tell me more about that?"*

*Official: "Hmm...it's a troublesome affair that a person in my position must face. Sometimes, I'm fed up with those endless calls from my friends where I'm reminded how impressively long diameter of their network I should take care of. My phone keeps ringing not only in the hiring process but actually throughout half a year because the early bird could start calling half a year before the process. It's nothing new that key schools have some reservations for guanxi students and none of these schools can promise you that there is no back-door student. You perhaps know Taibeng school, where up to twenty-five percent of places are reserved for officials' children. (Cleared his throat and made a short pause) You must know that maintaining necessary guanxi is important in Chinese society; financial support is also important for the growth of a school and the recruitment of more excellent students in the long run. But I think the number should be carefully studied and controlled since no school affords to lose the reputation. If not handled properly with careful considerations, future troubles are expected."*

*Interviewer: "You talked about the school's development. Did you also imply that the school had the ambition for growing into a super high school?"*

*Official: "History has verified the competitive strength of the school. It should take the important task for becoming a more prestigious upper secondary school, thus attracting more talents."*

*Interviewer: "What did you mean when you mentioned 'further troubles' just now?"*

*Official: "Determining whether a request can be accepted or turned down is an art where myriads of complex elements should be considered and balanced. Decision-makers can hardly run a school without a good guanxi with powerful persons by pleasing them and also important persons in their network. I'm sorry but I can't tell more."*

*Interviewer: "Regrettably, educational inequality is much criticized nowadays."*

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<sup>32</sup> The notes are written by the requestors who are usually officials with political capital expressing the willingness for getting a school place for their children or children from their relatives or from their important friends.

*Official: "I'm sorry to say that it's unavoidable despite people's good wishes. We won't miss excellent students who have considered studying here. But if there is an unremarkable disparity in the exam results (a pause), we'll definitely consider students' family status and guanxi behind them."*

*Interviewer: "How about those money students? What happened to requestors who get rejected?"*

*Official: "Some of them would give a second try, but it seldom works. The principle is simple if I'm allowed to say—take the money, and correspondently you should let them get what they want."*

*Interviewer: "What's the focus of the school in the future?"*

*Official: "We are prepared for continuous reforms which follow the trends and the inherent demand of the modern education. For this purpose, we have developed another campus nearby, which is so far a real success and has attracted many excellent students; the International Class is another experiment of the reform which has attracted students from rich families. The school benefits from the economic support from rich families, and some children also get greater access to be admitted to an overseas university. Besides, in response to the national educational reform, a bunch of teachers have been sent out to study the innovative teaching methods plus the effective interaction modes with students. Many details are carefully studied, including how to resettle tables and chairs, the display of blackboards in the wall. Moreover, we are constructing effective leadership through multiple meetings and competitions. In a word, the school should adapt itself to the changing circumstances."*

The official's answers were sometimes ambivalent with pauses because of the sensibility of certain discourses concerning the fuzzy boundary between the "illegal" and the "operable". Those pauses imply that the possibility of certain discourse is subjected to its exclusion mechanism, such as the social taboo, prohibition, the differentiation and boundary of the truth and falsehood, discrimination, occasion, audience, culture, and convention, etc. (Foucault, 2013).

Three types of students make up "other kinds of students" besides the regularly admitted students. The first type can be called the talent, who are a tiny minority of preeminent students that are "purchased" by the school with exorbitant prices. The second type is students whose performances in the senior high school entrance examination are close to the cut-off line and those come from other districts; they are also welcomed for paying high "school-selection-fee" or "donations". There are also children of powerful and influential persons with capital, especially guanxi who are far behind the cut-off line. Realizing the inequality in the admission process, the official still attempted to account for the rationality of the irregular

admission by introducing similar prevailing practices from other key-point upper secondary schools. In face of complexity—the remarkable heterogeneity of the school students with different social origins and experiences, as well as the everchanging situations from the outside world, the official was fully aware that the educational quality, i.e., the results of students' performances in Gaokao was the school's focus, and that various kinds of reforms following the tide is its methods. The school has thus constructed itself towards the identity of a super high school.

#### 4.3.5 Inner-school relocation

Mentoring each student in accordance with his aptitude was a Confucian educational view, which is utilized in the current educational practices, i.e., teaching for different learning capacity, which seems to legitimate separate class teaching system. The popular tracking practice, seems as a “common sense”, has also been rooted in a society which emphasizes hierarchy. Students are organized at school according to their perceived competence within the homeroom as a unit.

##### 4.3.5.1 Hierarchization: Homeroom placement practice

Students are vulnerable to be exposed to available influential cultural discourses judging them as being good or bad. The differentiation of a good student and a bad student according to their academic performances has always been the educational myth, which is central to the school operation. Homeroom placement is man-made practice based on the principle of scores in the senior high school entrance examination but can also be involved with guanxi employment as well, from which a number of sub-fields are artificially made. Homeroom differs from the classroom in that students are strictly organized to join all the required courses and other activities in his or her homeroom, which is led by a responsible class sponsor and fixed subject teachers; students cannot randomly switch to other homerooms. “Stratified teaching according to student's learning capacity proves to be efficient.” The official introduced that classes fell into five different categories, which was more reasonable compared to the past when classes were classified only as fast classes and slow classes. Two Gifted Classes lie on the very top of the chain,

which aims at preparing students for entering the C9 universities. Below the glamour level is a Hongzhi Class<sup>33</sup> which mainly contains around 45 students, mainly high-achieving students from poor peripheral areas or local families with financial difficulties who are prospective 985 Project or 211 Project university students. Around six Experimental Classes which aim at training promising candidates for 211 Project universities belong to the third echelon. The fourth kind is six key classes aiming for nurturing both prospect 211 university and ordinary university students. And the aim for those five parallel classes is trying to assure each student can be admitted to a university. Besides, two International Experimental Classes, as a brand new kind for competing with profitable private schools which are expanding in recent years, are designed for poaching of student pools from rich families.

Students receive general education for the whole year in grade one, during which they are offered opportunities to discover subjects that they are good at. At the end of grade 1, classes are reassigned and students are allowed to choose to join either the natural science classes which contain curricula packet including physics, chemistry and biology besides Chinese, math and English or the liberal arts classes which enclose history, geography, politics, Chinese, math and English, with reference to their will and also parents' and teachers' suggestions. Notably, students' previous homeroom type is not easily changed. However, when people might find it too difficult, there are occasions, when they are accepted by a higher-

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<sup>33</sup> The name Hongzhi means that even if the person is economically difficult, he should push himself or herself forward with grand ambitions and strong will. The local Education Bureau issued some regulations in 2013 and 2016, respectively, that Hongzhi students should meet the following conditions. They are holders of the local Hukou, in principle; they were honored as school “three-good student” with grade A in moral conduct assesses in the junior secondary school; their exam scores should be above the acceptance line of the targeted school; and they have no other kind of financial assistance. Under these conditions, students can apply to be Hongzhi students who enjoy tuition waivers and free accommodation. In recent years, it is not uncommon that some unqualified students have been enrolled as Hongzhi students, because of the interplay of political interests, economic interests, and social relationships. A new phenomenon has gradually appeared where some resourceful parents easily get poverty certificate through guanxi practices and pay some donations to the school for enjoying better teaching resources and academically good students as classmates; schools hardly resist temptation for recruiting higher-achieving and richer students; and the local Education Bureau might keep eyes half shut to maintain schools' reputation if they make contributions to the promotion of overall educational results.

track homeroom, for having made remarkable progress on studies. As can be seen, such tracking practice sets the scope of the possibility about whom students can get to know. After the class tracking, freshman should attend the military training with uniformed battle fatigues for a week, beginning from the end of August when the weather is still extremely hot, which conveys the symbolic meanings of patriotism, collectivism, discipline, uniformity, solidarity, perseverance, and obedience.

#### 4.3.5.2 Ubiquitous sub-tracking: Seating arrangements

Seating placement, which is less discipline and rigid, is in parallel with the homeroom placement practice. Different class sponsors adopt various strategies for doing that. Once students' seats are fixed, they cannot randomly move from one position to another in class without the class sponsor's permission. Geographical proximity resulting from seating places is an essential factor of reconstructing a micro-field within the homeroom, and in turn, the atmosphere, and relational networks. Frequent close interaction produces a kind of behavior pattern that is relatively stable, expectable, and predictable.

Students' seats can be relocated after the trial period according to the class sponsors' tentative ideas of creating an environment for various so-called reasons like higher spirits, stronger cohesive force, higher efficiency, and better academic performances of the whole class. Other factors, such as parents' pressures towards change, students' strong intentions, and personal strategies, also play a part in competing for better seats for their own interests.

In the school, most class sponsors in the Gifted Classes and Experimental Classes expressed that, in a general rule, they would normally arrange students' seats according to their performances in the recent major exams, with high-achieving students seating in front, near the teacher's platform. In Parallel Classes, the scene was quite different in that high-performing students were inserted among underachievers, which was explained by some class sponsors for promoting the whole combat effectiveness. However, no particular seating pattern was detected in the International Class and Hongzhi Class.

A school day begins with Morning Reading around 7:15 where students are required to be on time to their homerooms for reading and reciting some writings from the Chinese and English textbooks organized by their Chinese and English teachers in regular succession. Before the Morning Reading, students are supposed to hand in the schoolwork assigned by their subject teachers and a fraction of students are expected to finish cleaning their homeroom and the public area that is allocated to their homerooms, usually under the supervision of the Class sponsor. The covert surveillance from the class sponsor for ensuring students' attendance and homeroom discipline during Morning Reading and other classes is very common. As can be seen, students have a long day with heavy workload, and actually, during the break, they are also expected to diligently do their homework, for preventing what is taught forgotten and making up the deficient subjects. Although Saturday and Sunday are National Holidays, due to fierce rivalry and tremendous pressure to get admitted to a good university, many high schools hold additional classes on Saturdays; Yeyun school is no exception.

#### **4.3.6 The running of the school and classes**

In parallel with the schoolyard's spatial transformation reflecting the modernity and urbanism, the school, as a bureaucratic and professional organization, puts higher demand to its members. Various documents have emerged endlessly for disciplining the personnel.

##### **4.3.6.1 The rhythm of schooling**

The academic year is divided into the spring semester which lasts about five and a half months from the end of February or the beginning of March to mid-July and fall term which lasts around four and a half months from early September to mid- or late- January, several days before the Spring Festival. However, students are required to stay at school in the summer vacation to take extra lessons in the summer vacation between grade two and grade three, making this vacation even short, approximately around 15 days. This school adopts "enforced making up lessons", i.e., students in grade 1 and grade 2 go to classes 5.5 days a week, and students from grade 3 need to study from Monday to Saturday for adequately preparing for

Gaokao. Students from Yeyun school, just like other high-school students, follow a highly structured timetable.

Time	Events	Time	Events
6:20-6:40	Getting up and washing	14:10-14:50	The sixth class
6:40-7:05	Having breakfast	15:00-15:40	The seventh class
7:15-7:50	Morning reading and cleaning	15:50-16:30	The eighth class
7:55-8:35	The first class	16:40-17:20	The ninth class
8:45-9:25	The second class	17:20-18:40	Supper time
9:25-9:55	Exercises at recess	18:50-19:30	The evening study session 1
10:00-10:40	The third class	19:40-20:20	The evening study session 2
10:50-11:30	The fourth class	20:30-21:45	The evening study session 3
11:40-12:20	The fifth class	21:45-22:20	Washing before sleep
12:20-12:50	Lunchtime	22:20-06:20	Bedtime
12:50-14:05	Noon break		

**Table 4.1 Students' daily schedule**

#### 4.3.6.2 Collective lesson preparations— teachers in the bureaucratic organization

The following school regulation locating teachers' tasks in the bureaucratic organizations is one among those which vigorously proclaim teachers' devotion and professionalization and manifest the "normalization" and "expertise" of school management.

##### *Specific implementations and measures of teachers' collective lesson preparations since 2016*

1. *The schedule of collective lesson preparations for each week during a new semester is previously planned by the leader's office before each semester, to which teachers must strictly follow.*
2. *The prescribed places for joint lesson preparation are strictly fixed.*
3. *A teacher is selected to be the group leader who plays the role of guiding the group as the pilot; other teachers should actively give him or her full support and help to make necessary adjustments.*
4. *Full participation and mutual supervision are required.*
5. *The result of collective lesson preparation must be recorded and kept in the archive.*

6. *The trail of adjustment and reflection should be manifested.*
7. *The result is estimated and booked up with bonuses.*

This regulation reflects the conditions of teaching staff in the bureaucratic organization to a certain extent. In the regulation, the time, place, form, present members with a clear of labor are prescribed, and the performances which are related to the school reputation are bundled with economic reward. Instead of corporal punishment, the current punishment is based on the loss of rights and wealth (Foucault, 1975: 15). In this way, the imposed discipline is likely to become voluntary habits through self-governmentality.

#### 4.3.6.3 Homeroom etiquette and practices

The spatial arrangement of a classroom and the exam-oriented teaching imply the teacher-centered scheme where teachers are responsible for transmitting knowledge while students are playing a relatively passive role in absorbing and digesting knowledge. In front of the homeroom, a flag and a clock, with symbolic meanings, are placed above the blackboard in the middle. The timetable, with different combinations of courses each day, is pasted onto the front door. The platform, being designed around 20 centimeters above the ground, implies the teachers' authority and the sacredness and assertiveness of the imparted knowledge. Two special seats beside the platform known as seats for annoying outcast are deliberately designed for "naughty" students who are sometimes "acting wild", which facilitates teachers' monitor and classmates' contemplation when their deviant behaviors happened. This entails the symbolic meaning that students are tamed to be docile with a sense of morality under the joint forces of the nation, the clock, the teacher, and pressure from public opinions. Seats are arranged like the soldiers' queue, facilitating students' "listening" and teachers' "patrol" between columns.

A piece of fixed piano music indicates the start of each class. Before the teacher begins the lecture, all students should obey the student leaders' command of "standing up", and then they stand up and bow to the teacher with shouting "hello, my teacher" all with one voice. Most of the time in the class, teachers are making a monologue, being intersperse with asking and answering. Trying to answer a question

without being invited is usually taken as offensive showing no respect. Students can show their intention for answering questions by raising up their right hand and waiting for the teacher to call their names. The named student should stand up to answer the question and only sit down after he get the teacher's permission. Sometimes, or more often is the case that it is the teacher who decides which students to answer a particular question without taking their intentions into account. Calling students' names can be both random and purposive. Whispering, passing notes, sitting lazily, shaking legs, chewing gun, rotating the pen, playing phones, and sleeping are taken as offensive and worth a "reminder". A student showing distraction without the "right attitude" have a greater risk of being called to answer the question, which brings much tension because the system of "teaching to the test" which encourages only "correct answers" enables students to feel embarrassed and guilty if their answers are wrong. It is a common situation that students who have the wrong answer, failing to cooperate with the teachers' performances in the front stage, blush up with shame if they are told by the teacher that they are wrong. This sense of shame can be greatly strengthened if the next named students show a "contrast" by offering a correct answer. There is room for limited teacher-driven debates so as to arouse students' interest and place them at a higher position; student-driven discussions usually only happen in a class meeting with a specific theme that aims to mutually "discipline" classmates corporally and spiritually.

#### 4.3.6.4 Faculty meeting— management and governmentality backstage

The faculty meeting hosted by the director of the general office<sup>34</sup> and attended by all the teaching staff holds every Monday after the ninth class. The faculty meeting discloses a corner of the running of the school. Before I got the opportunity of attending one faulty meeting, I have experienced multiple rejects.

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<sup>34</sup> The director of general office is in charge of teaching staff with the bureaucratic work of communicating with the school and the Education Bureau, organizing relevant meetings, conveying the will of the leaders' ideas, assigning tasks before a semester begins, handing out various forms to be filled out such as marking and rating, and evaluating teachers' teaching performances, etc.

I expressed that I would be appreciated if I were allowed to attend such a meeting for one time but was initially declined for being considered as being “unworthy”:

*“Now that you are studying students’ experiences, this kind of thing is irrelevant.”*

*“It’s not mysterious or interesting at all but very routine.”*

*“If you wanted to get to know something new, ask me directly. That’s much better!”*

A high-profile official straightforwardly said with a slightly confused and disdainful expression, *“Why? It doesn’t make sense. I think scholars should study the knotty educational problems.”* But they finally permitted me to attend the faculty meeting one day.

“*Seeing that everybody is here, I declare the opening of this meeting.*” After headmaster was seated, the director looked around and said gently and imperturbably with a deep voice filled with a fair degree of stateliness. Then the applause fulfilled the hall on time. There was a small awarding ceremony where credentials were awarded to newly-recognized teachers with the senior professional title. After that, the director briefly summarized both the achievements and problems existed in teaching and management. He notably stated that teaching efficiency, quality of education, relations between teachers and students were of equal importance. Then the director lowered his voice when he was talking about the phenomenon of conducting private lessons for economic returns. “*Last week, a parent reported that some teachers were still conducting private lessons for reward<sup>35</sup>.* Our school has put a strict end to this behavior with a clear statement. Teachers have long been regarded as human soul engineers and models of virtue for the whole nation. Our profession is ordinary, but it’s also great with substantial implications. As people’s teachers, we should love our students with sincere care and passionate dedication. This kind of behavior can lead to serious consequences; for example, it influences teachers’ operating state, disturbs teaching order, and damages the school image. As a result, this behavior is strictly forbidden in our school.”

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<sup>35</sup> See reports by the Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China:  
[http://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A10/s7002/201507/t20150706\\_192618.html](http://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A10/s7002/201507/t20150706_192618.html).

For the sake of developing quality education and alleviating burdens on students, the Ministry of Education released a regulation on 30th of June in 2015 which explicitly indicated that it was legally banned for teachers in primary and secondary schools for offering private lessons with financial rewards.

*The headmaster walked those audiences through the philosophy of running the school, its striving goals, administrative rules, and those short- and long-term goals (it seemed that these items are frequently talked in the faculty meeting). He continued the topic of conducting private lessons for economic returns. “Our school pays much emphasis on our brand construction. Everyone should stand in awe with school regulations. Conducting private lessons are forbidden, which should be mutually supervised. Any deviant behavior must be reported and severely punished.” A teacher, being set as an example, was named and praised in recognition of his professional dedication and teaching performances. “Mr. Zhang always works hard without superfluous words. No wonder his students’ academic performances are getting increasingly better. His dedication spirit and magnanimous mind are worth learning. I have still got informed of those who have conducted private lessons out of class, this time I won’t call their names, but next time, I would disregard your ‘face’. I hope all of our teaching staff will keep strengthening their own moral cultivation and guiding students under their own words and deeds.” Then the headmaster laid emphasis on the quality of teaching, which was regarded as the cornerstone of the school. For this purpose, collective preparing lessons, homework design and correcting, the relationship between teachers and students, the relationship between class sponsors and subject teachers, the relationship between student leaders and other classmates, and the weekly tests should be given much careful thought.”*

*Then the headmaster had a meeting with class sponsors while asking subjects teachers to leave. He then put forward some of his comments on class sponsors’ class management. “The work of a teacher in charge of a class is very complicated with art and techniques. The quality of this work is directly related to the well-being of our school since it greatly contributes to the school ethos and reputation. To begin with, as class sponsors, you should equip yourself with both knowledge and virtue. This means that you should always keep learning, strengthen your moral cultivation and share joys and hardships with your students. Only in this way, the teacher’s authority can be established. Secondly, you should sharpen your management skills and properly handle various kinds of relationships. This means that you should apperceive students’ mental activities, always knowing what they are thinking about. Moreover, you should advance your leadership so that student leaders can be your capable assistants. Besides, you should strengthen the construction of the class atmosphere for which the combination of discipline and persuasion should be served as an important means. Furthermore, don’t forget that parental involvement is of equal importance. Genuinely taking care of students is your responsibility. Furthermore, you must construct the identity as a knowledgeable and eloquent teacher in front of them. I’m now talking about something that is difficult to ascend the hall of elegance but is quite important and practical: you should keep a distance from them, and you should have intelligent views. Don’t make yourself fully understood; otherwise, it would not give them an impression that you are an expert!”*

- Field notes taken on the 20<sup>th</sup> November 2017

The former part of the meeting was quite stylized, which covered both achievements and problems in teaching and management except for the small award ceremony where the name list was dealt with an arcane thing before released. The officially-constructed myth of teachers’ selfless “candle spirit” with the extraordinary moral and emotional appeal was frenziedly praised by the director when he was warning

against some teachers who conducted private lessons for economic returns. On the contrary, the principal's speech seemed to be more rational and technical with an emphasis on the school's rules, goals, disciplines, and reputation. Although the principal did not disclose teachers with this "problematic behaviors", his speech obviously had an enormous deterrent effect. After that, he took a very dedicated teacher as an example to make a contrast and also echoed the director's speech about "what makes a teacher", which actually made a contrast to those teachers who offered private lessons for payment. In the second half of the meeting attended only by principal and class sponsors, the principal had the anticipation that class sponsors should be multi-faceted where they should give different impressions to the public, the students, and the parents while keeping professional.

The secret kept between school leaders and teaching staff reflected the importance of impression control in the differentiated modern society. It is important for the maintenance of the team's performance that each member, with the "presence of the mind", plays his role with disciplined, dramaturgically speaking, avoiding committing unmeant gestures (Goffman, 1978: 137). Rather than the representation of the real emotion, people, with some necessary masks, selectively reveal and conceal some facts by employing various techniques of impression management when they are expressing themselves in line with their roles, making the interaction situation retouched. In modern society, teachers' performances are required to be highly structured, situated, and professional through the control of other irrelevant factors because the script is preexistent and socially determined. And these performances are continuously strengthened through myriads of governance. On the one hand, the information senders infuse their behaviors with various codes. On the other hand, the information receivers recognize and categorize the senders through codes, clues from the episodic discourses and behaviors. Teachers are told that they must keep recharging themselves by keeping abreast of cutting-edge knowledge in the ever-evolving social context while in the front stage, they must show teachers' external characteristics— their profession, competence, expertise, and a wealth of knowledge and experiences. The headmaster of the school lay emphasis on the teachers' authority establishment and interpersonal skills through "very complicated with art and techniques". Then he showed them the possible correct path which "is difficult to ascend the hall of elegance", i.e., keeping a proper distance from parents and avoid making teachers themselves fully understood by parents while

being knowledgeable and eloquent. Parents who are regarded as not having adequate knowledge to fit into the upper secondary school are still expected to involve with their children's study under the teachers' authority. Hence, any expressed characteristic of a particular group is crafted with meticulous care by complicated instructive cultural and social factors where the insiders share a sense of conspiracy.

#### 4.3.6.5 Character setup— Constructing the “class collective”

A homeroom in the bureaucratic sense, as a unit, is composed of the class sponsor, subject teachers, student leaders, and ordinary students. Student leaders play the roles as department managers of a class as well as teachers' assistants and spokespersons. A class sponsor conveyed that she stressed the importance of establishing student leaders' authority among ordinary students, but they might incur more severe punishments if they made mistakes because they are expected to be models guiding other students. Discipline and governance are embedded in various activities organized by “the class collective”. “Class cohesion” is consciously emphasized through a variety of rituals and events such as class meetings, the sports meet, and various cultural performances.

The class sponsor, as the mentor, organizer, and educator whose job involves connects the relationship between the school and parents, takes over responsibility for students' thoughts, daily behaviors, safety, health, study, and life<sup>36</sup>, which greatly contributes to the conventional teaching activities. The regulation published in 1988 stipulated that the basic task of the class sponsor was to actively manage the class for cultivating students into citizens with patriotism, ideals of socialism, morality, culture, discipline, and health for realizing socialism modernity<sup>37</sup>. The class sponsor's authority is legitimated by the education system and endowed by a particular school, as the arms of the state. The authority is strengthened at the

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<sup>36</sup> See reports by the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China:

<http://old.moe.gov.cn//publicfiles/business/htmlfiles/moe/s3325/201001/81878.html>

<sup>37</sup> See [http://www.law-lib.com/law/law\\_view.asp?id=5195](http://www.law-lib.com/law/law_view.asp?id=5195)

morality line by Confucianism which emphasizes on respecting teachers and valuing education. The bureaucratic structure also exists within a class by imitating the structure of the level of teaching staff where student leaders— class monitor, committee members, subject representatives are in place for the class governance.

Class meeting with a specific theme, a well-known activity in primary and secondary education, is a form of self-education held by student leaders who are with special identities as teachers' assistants as well as students' models, which holds approximately every two weeks there. The class sponsor should, at irregular intervals, identify a topic in accordance with specific situations in advance and inform the rough ideas to student leaders. Then they work together, designing the meeting and setting the scenery, including the replacement of tables and chairs, also producing contents in the bulletin board, producing the opening statement and closing speech, arranging the interactive session, and working out specific procedures. Despite the assertion that a wide range of issues can be put on agenda for discussion, in the most cases, the topics are quite selective which serve the purpose of contributing to establishing students' "correct" ideology such as patriotism, respect, appreciation, solidarity, courtesy, modesty, sacrifice, cooperation, self-restraint, hard-working spirit, punctuality, endurance, integrity, confidence, optimism, diligence, enterprise, and perseverance, etc. The following was an episode of a class meeting where addition to the class sponsor, two student leaders had keynote speeches at the beginning of a new semester.

*Class sponsor: "You face many new competitors as you get to the next stage of learning. From kindergarten to university, rivalry is becoming intense. The past is not important; dwelling on the past prevents you from growing; so just let bygones be bygones. From now on, you should work very hard together with your classmates. Establishing a good relationship with your classmates, as an essential quality of high school students, is of paramount importance since it creates a sense of belonging, a high-spirit micro-environment that helps you to thrive in the cruel competition. Besides, cooperation is one of the basic skills for your future career. Now let's welcome our monitor to speak to us."*

*The monitor employed some proverbs, accompanying by related stories, to highlight the importance of the collective and individual's team spirit. During this process, frequent asking and answering were involved.*

*Monitor: "Our class, with endless strength and warmth, is our second home. The glory or failure in the last stage has been the history. The only thing we can grasp is here and now. By integrating ourselves into the class collective, we gain friendship and power. For this purpose, we should communicate with our classmates with an active attitude without narcissism, so that others*

*can know better about us. Besides, we should actively help our classmates who need help, for which we gain support and friendship in turn. We shouldn't forget that the friendship among classmates during school time is sincere and precious. Thirdly, we should take an active part in activities organized by the class collective. Lastly, remember that we are always a part of the collective, so we should try our best to win glory for the class with an overall viewpoint and collective interests. Now our Commissary in charge of the study has something to say. Welcome!"*

*Commissary in charge of the study: "Dear classmates, my statement is that hard work and a good relationship with others help to promote our academic performances. You'll be admitted to a C9 University if you worked hard at the very beginning in grade one; you will enter a 985 or 211 university if you worked hard from grade 2; then only an ordinary university if from grade 3. If your classmates are absent-minded in class, or they use mobile phones at the wrong time, give them a well-intentioned warning and keep your teachers informed on this situation; this also means helping ourselves since we play as a unit. Although our motherland is vigorously developing, there's a long way to go for catching the developed world, which needs contributions from us—the younger generation. We should fight side by side for this purpose. Three years of torment will result in the last beautiful blossom. We—brave soldiers, with great ambition, will go to a glorious battle at the end of grade 3, for ourselves, for our class collective, and for our school."*

*Class sponsor: "Teenagers are active in thinking, but don't be too distinctive. Everyone should always follow the school regulations and the class rules. Otherwise, you get punishment by the whole class. Some students like to complain about teachers for asking too much, which does serious harms to your study. Teachers are experienced in assisting you on your academic journey. Jin, you seem to be very impatient. Tell me, what have you learned from this meeting?"*

*The named student: "We should respect teachers and study hard for Gaokao."*

*Class sponsor: "Anything else?"*

*The named student: "Hmmm..."*

*Class sponsor: "I knew you failed the math exam lately. You wouldn't have got this result if you stayed focused while studying in class. After the meeting, follow me to my office. I'll talk about your attitude problem."*

*After the class sponsor's halfway involvement with such deterrence, the whole class apparently became more devoted to the meeting and consciously tried to actively take part in the subsequent discussions.*

*— an episode from a class meeting on 19<sup>th</sup> September 2018*

It is worthwhile exploring the discourses that happened in the homeroom in more detail and linking the reflexive theories with ethnographical study in homerooms. This presented class meeting was designed

for encouraging solidarity among students as a unit. It emphasized high-achieving students, as recourses, should help those students whose academic performances were not competitive enough, and also the obligations of those students with poorer grades for making efforts and preventing from becoming the “black sheep” in the class.

The upstream and downstream information flow are becoming effectively facilitated through narrative of key roles, like the class sponsor and student leaders. Through this practice, the passive infusion from the school is subtly converted into voluntary expressions from the students. A portion of the teacher’s power was transferred to student leaders for the league construction, making them superior in a flood of aspects such as power and morality, compared with other students. Monitor stressed the collective interest of the class—“our second home” and commissary in charge of the study tried to boost morale through fighting “side by side” for the sake of both the individual and the state. Rewards and punishments at school are always related to discipline, comparison, contrast, and hierarchy. Besides “comparing mechanism” for deciding the rank, “contrasting mechanism” is often used in the educational setting where the differentiation of “bad students” and “good students” are always necessarily constructed as stories that continue unfolding. Punishment in education has also increasingly moved from the physical to the mental. The class sponsor punished the students who were scatterbrained in the meeting with a very blaming and negative position by pointing out that the students’ unsatisfactory exam performance was only a result of his or her attitude problems, but not those structured factors.

The class meeting offered a glimpse of the ways the class sponsor spoke of their assistants, and ordinary students, in collusion with the state power, ethics, and morality, reflecting how students are managed and repressed in the school institution. The roles were rigid and structured somehow in this context. It was mainly the control between teachers and students rather than interaction or negotiation; Students are expected to speak and behave in expectable, controlled, and disciplined ways in order to be “good”.

#### 4.3.6.6 The Winter Sports Meet— The creation of the “oneness” myth

Schoolwide extra-curricular activities such as winter sports, artistic performances, as well as charity activities in gerocomium and tomb-sweeping in Martyrs cemetery off-campus are uniformly organized by the class unit occasionally. In spite of different purposes they serve, they have one thing in common in terms of molding the sense of belonging and the spirit of hard work. The spirit of hard work and mutual help, the sense of collectivism, and patriotism are deliberately strung up through various practices in the sports meet. The school has worked out detailed procedures for the annual winter sports meet which lasted three days in December in 2017.

***Important items and the procedure for the Winter Sports Meet 2017***

1. *Relevant persons, including volunteers, referees, speakers, the camera crew, and medical personnel should be in place before the sports meet begins. These should be inspected by responsible persons.*
2. *Ensure the normal functioning of the audio systems.*
3. *The presence and performance of the square matrix of student performers, which are inspected by the inspector section.*
4. *With the Flag teams and Ritual team around the playground, students do gymnastics after the square performance.*
5. *Hosts make introductory remarks.*
6. *Raise the flag and play the national anthem. All stand at attention and salute!*
7. *Principal on stage delivering welcome messages.*
8. *The student representative gives a brief speech.*
9. *Hosts (affectionately) announce the beginning of the sports meet affection.*
10. *All people should have a collective sense of honor. Unexcused absences cause marks-deduction of the rating of the performance of a class collective.*
11. *For safety reasons, class sponsors and medical staff should always be present in the whole journey of the sports meet.*

Square-matrix show is the traditional item for the sports meet. All the students, organized by the class unit, are required to march in the square matrix around the playground. There is normally a student leading the square matrix with the class card lifting high. This kind of square-matrix marching in the secondary school imitates the military parade, conveying the meanings of “individuals obeying the organizations” and “collective interests above everything else”, which highlights a high degree of discipline, compliance,

hard-working spirit and willpower. All the square matrixes, with a number of a whole class around 50 students, are required to shout their self-designed slogan while they are approaching the rostrum; at the meantime, they display their exquisitely prepared repertoire: some may release the newly-bought pigeons or colorful balloons that they hold in hands, some may change their formation pattern, etc. Such square-matrix shows increase the fun of the sports meet by creating pleasant surprises for people from other homerooms, and especially, people who sit on the rostrum. However, these shows are also watched, examined, and rated in an atmosphere of encouraging student to strive to be pace-setters. For this show, students need to squeeze time for multiple rehearsals without sacrificing the normal teaching activities, which means sacrificing the shreds of their rest time. On the playground, students from a Gifted Class were pouring with sweat during the rehearsal under the supervision of their class sponsor and the student leader in charge of sports activities. The leading student gave his orders in a firm and stern voice, “Stand still! We must complete this mission today, no matter how hard it is!” Ruo, one of my middle-class informants, described her feelings and attitudes toward this practice after that rehearsal:

*“Sports meet only holds annually. We were looking forward to this grand meeting, taking it a escape from the heavy work, but it turned out to be a thorough disappointment. It should be supposed to provide a precious opportunity for students to release pressure, relax themselves, and enhance mutual understanding, etc. However, few students would admit it’s a pleasant thing free from pressure. I didn’t think many people enjoy the countless rehearsals before the procession show at all, including our class sponsor— he had to give up his spare time for doing this. There was one time when we finished the rehearsal in the cold wind after a two-hour training, several girls, including me, burst into tears spontaneously. I was not sure why we cried all at once, perhaps because we were moved by our impressive perseverance, or possibly we marveled at the overwhelming force of the so-called collectivism.”*

In the Winter Sports Meet, nobody is allowed to be free to do what else he or she wishes to do. Athletes were struggling in the game, being afraid of losing the game as it meant the loss of honor of the class collective. The audiences, being uniformly dressed, are expected to shout loudly to cheer the athletes in the competitive game. Otherwise, they would be considered desultory or selfish without a collective sense of honor, especially, all their behaviors were supervised and evaluated for grading the overall performances of the class-collective where “misbehaviors” result in quantitative score deduction. It seemed that everybody was unconsciously kidnapped by morality and collectivism in this game.

For avoiding awkward moments of silence and mobilizing the atmosphere, students were encouraged to write manuscripts for giving the impression that everybody greatly enjoyed themselves in the sports meet with enthusiasm. During this game, broadcasters received a tide wave of manuscripts and read them out with the microphone in public for encouraging those athletes.

*“Your sweat is spilling on the runway; our eyes are suffused with tears. It is you, our brave athlete who make this meeting meaningful. We are here to cheer you up. Just go ahead, fight for yourself and your class collective!”*

*“You might hesitate and wander in front of obstacles ahead, or perhaps you want to give up halfway due to difficulties you’ve met. But no pains, no gains! Move on in spite of all those obstacles! The dawn of victory is close at hand! At the end of the finish line, you’ll be greeted by fresh flowers and a burst of applause.”*

*“As you firmly set your feet on the court, birds begin to softly sing for you. The aura of youth is emanating from your body, just like the brand-new sun. On the track, your sweat and tears you’ve shed have watered the flowers of success. You are such a brave warrior, blazing with youthful enthusiasm and dreams. We are always here for you! Don’t stop your footsteps towards success.”*

*“You chose to bravely set foot on the runway; when you leave the starting point, you’ve manifested your great courage; your firm steps indicate your victory and glory. Please continuously equip yourself with high spirits and go all out for our class honor. We are looking forward to the miracle you bring for us.”*

*-An illustration of some manuscripts in the Sports Meet*

This practice of students' contributions creates a false oneness or a myth that people are guided to believe in. These manuscripts were written with intense emotion and seriousness without any sense of humor or tolerance for other different ideas. Paradoxically, these manuscripts, although written with multiple rhetorical devices such as personification and parallelism, are seemed to be with striking resemblances. Students are called to the playground for such compulsory entertainment, acting for their homerooms' interests. Under the ubiquitous surveillance, the stadium becomes a scenario of the social context where people are experiencing peer rivalry with their emotions being repeatedly appealed by the spirit of perseverance and collectivism.

## 4.4 Summary

This chapter is made up of two major parts, with the first part describing the educational-policy background in the framework of space and time which shapes the educational landscape in China and the second part delineating the school field in which stories of people with different social origins, perceptions of the identity, and experiences are unfolding. The second part gives a glimpse about how the school interacts with the broader social context with the passage of time and the running of the school by interviewing “the silent majority” who has lived through those transformations as well as school official who takes part in decision-making; besides, this section also documents some on-campus practices and episodes and the involved circulating created myths, from which clues of running of the school and moral field of the school can be captured.

In the first major part, Chinese education policies at different historical stages and the corresponding social contexts were addressed. This section then moved on to introduce the cultural and social significance of the blood-boiling national event and the sacred moment— Gaokao, and the steeply hierarchical school system which contributes to the current buzz word— “chain of contempt” among schools. The status quo of the state, people’s increased strata consciousness, the fact of China as a guanxi-based society all together make parents’ contest between capital and power such as paying school selection fee, giving “red envelops”, establishing and maintaining guanxi (social capital) for gaining a school place increasingly common.

The second part, composed of six sections, made an in-depth description of the school field in history as well as the current social context dynamically. A bunch of scholars developed the habitus concept and suggested that it could also be understood at the collective level. Institutional habitus is a useful concept for analyzing how a school, with certain ethos and dispositions, shapes students’ academic trajectories. Habitus is difficult to be operationalized, but one thing is still clear— habitus is a complex interplay between history and present. I studied school’s spatial practices, exams how it deposits its culture, and also how it manages people through on-going practices. I assume these items kind of annotate the school’s

institutional habitus. People's destiny and the ethos of the school closely related to the wider social context of the change of the administrative area—the newly-set urban identity, which remains important in the Chinese society which adopts urban-rural dualism. To put it another way, variations of the outside world negotiate the rearrangement of the school institution, which constitutes to the institutional habitus and ethos influencing the current practices at school. Specifically, the first section introduced the transformation of the area where the school lay, implying the status of the local education as a result of the demographic and cultural changes. In the second section, reminded by Foucault who lay great emphasis on identifying power through minor details, making use of oral history collected from some old staff who had witnessed those transformations, I presented the social implications of the spatial changes emerged in the schoolyard with three examples: the transformation of the school gate, the segregated teachers housing, the redefinition of the cultural park as "the cultural root" and make it available to students. Generally speaking, these changes have praised modernity, urbanism, and specialization while degrading antiquity, localism, and flexibility where the state power and moral significance for revitalizing the nation were silently interwoven. Every change in the spatial arrangement decided by people at the top injured some people's interests, but these interests were simply ignored in front of the items that the nation was pursuing, which also reflected people's dilemma in the bureaucratic organizations. These people's positions, struggles, and discourses were also addressed in this section. The third section described the admission policies and the actual operation in the admission process where several "other kinds of students" were admitted to the school, which was in line with the human relational society, peoples' increased strata consciousness as well as the market economy. Then the fourth section went on to introduce the location, relocation practices of students in which they were assigned a pinpoint place, sequentially being classified and labeled in accordance with their academic ranking and parents' negotiation. The fifth section introduced the schooling rhythm, implying that in the bureaucratic organization, not only students, but also teaching staff were precisely disciplined whenever and wherever for good performances in the solemn moment—Gaokao. In the last second section, taking some school regulations, a faculty meeting, and a class meeting with a specific theme as examples, I described how the school and its classes, as the bureaucratic organizations, were operated through prevailing educational discourses and practices led by key persons, and the social construction of the class sponsor and then, in

turn, revealed the possibility limited by these practices. In the final section, I revealed how students were forced to “entertain” themselves in those extra-curricular activities uniformly organized by the school with “the oneness myth”, being enslaved by discipline and collectivism, with the example of the grand Winter Sports Meet. These happenings offer a glimpse about what the institutional habitus exists there and how people, with increasingly remote chances to resist the mainstream culture and institutional force, are precisely disciplined with increasingly exquisite governance.

## CHAPTER 5 - ATTENDING TO UNDERCLASS STUDENTS' STORIES TO LIVE BY

“The significance of the phenomena of class, inequality, deprivation and powerlessness must be understood through their effect upon the manner with which people come to exist in the world; the ways in which their inhabiting or dwelling in a space of intelligibility, opens up for them affective states or sensibilities that are social in the sense that they are prior to a particular individual’s feelings and govern the range of feelings available.” (Charlesworth, 2000: 64)

In this chapter, the study results from the data analyses of 22 underclass students whose parents have long been struggling for survival in the crevice are presented. Underclass people have been made clichéd as “marginalized persons” out of step who are blamed and stigmatized as being undereducated, fatuous, narrow-minded, and possibly unruly as well, particularly after the “ruptured society”<sup>38</sup> is increasingly recognized, while their struggles and perceptions remain to be easily ignored. They might do an unstable, thankless job in an environmentally harsh workshop with sweat pouring down like raindrops. They perhaps do illegal small businesses with a free stall setting up selling bargain goods in a corner where folks are coming and going, looking up at them with hopefulness while taking precautions trembly against city inspectors who have authority to write out a ticket at any moment. They may also intensively till the land under the sun with a blotched, sallow and aged face, with their back and arms being cut by corn plants and stung by rampant mosquitoes that are circling overhead. There may come a burst miserable crying hinting the immense suffering which discourages them, furious quarreling concerning money earning and spending, or jangling discords with respect to in which way should be connected to their relatives from their primitive dwelling after a long hectic day. They have come up with a cognitive system and survival strategy through their living experiences, but these strategies are particularly vulnerable to

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<sup>38</sup> Inspired by French sociologist Touraine’s viewpoint about French society where he employed the metaphor of “falling behind in the marathon”, Chinese sociologist LiPing Sun made this argument to describe the underclass people’s gloomy conditions of being flung out of the cleavage social fabric.

being despised as improper “vision of the poor”, which makes them even indignant and confused. In spite of the strenuous life, they are enduring and struggling for “hanging in there” empowered by something called hope— they are nailing the dream on their offspring. An assortment of research has shown that underclass students are more likely to be assigned to the lower track schools. With the introduction of policies counterbalancing the growing level of educational inequality, some small subset of underclass children have gained opportunities for receiving education in the upper track of schools. However, less is known about how underclass children's prior experiences reconcile with those more advanced educational settings, which causes severe identity problems. Following this train of thought, collecting underclass student's life stories appeals to me because of the discontinuity, which provides precious materials for understanding the social force perpetuating inequality and reproduction.

“Narrative inquiry can advance a social change agenda. Wounded storytellers can empower others to tell their stories. Testimonios, as emergency narratives, can mobilize a nation against social injustice, repression, and violence. Collective stories can form the basis of a social movement. Telling the stories of marginalized people can help create a public space requiring others to hear what they don't want to hear.” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018)

In line with the theoretical and methodological frameworks, questions guided the inquiry to students' experiences were much open and broad. Semi-structured interviews highlight important themes such as their impressive peak and ebb experiences and improvised narrative inquiry, allowing for students' sense-making of their beings and perceptions. Events that are important in people's experiences and people rely on them, as plotlines, for composing their personal life story should not be left out so as to understand their characteristic experiences which negotiate their location and relocation of themselves.

## **5.1 Mobility desire for destiny transfiguration: taking school as a springboard**

The habitus acquired in the family milieu is fundamental for understanding how their school experiences are structured (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 134), which suggests that the individual's personal history should be carefully studied for a better understanding of the status quo of a specific person. Impressive memory, which is repeatedly presented through narratives, is not the direct reflection of experiences but is blended with people's personal interpretations, arrangements, and reconstitution relating to sense-making and reflection. This section is based on underclass students' discourses about their living and educational experiences, and also their major life choices, which provides a glimpse into students' location and relocation of themselves—as a child and at the same time, a high school male/female student.

Those underclass informants are discriminately scattered into different types of classes except for the International Experimental Class, with the best in the Gifted Classes and the Hongzhi Class, the middle-ranking in the Experimental classes, and the less good in Key Classes and Parallel Classes. Yun, with an outstanding score of 649 out of a maximum of 700 in Zhongkao (the secondary school entrance examination) was “bought” by this school through its talent fishing plan. This student enjoyed tuition waivers and free accommodation; besides, he received a large sum of money as an “encouragement” from the school side. He was a significant figure at school since he was among the three budding candidates who harbor the hope of being admitted to “The Top 2”, which would bring the school glory.<sup>39</sup> Yun is from a single-parent family that is so strapped; his father has difficulty making ends meet from time to time. This student almost had no impression of his mother who passed away when he was just a four-year-old

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<sup>39</sup> Because of the steep hierarchy among schools, the Mathew Effect is obvious. The operation of social capital plus a top-notch school attending are two most important factors shaping elite university admission. See Yanan Zhang & Yijie Wang: “Inequality and access to elite universities in China: reexamining the interacting multiple capitals model”. With the juxtaposition of the large population and scarce high-quality resource, the competition is immensely intense. According to the data released in 2019, in recent years, the average acceptance rate of Peking university and Tsinghua university is 7 out of 10,000 and these “rare birds” who rank very top of the college entrance examination are becoming increasingly monopolized by few top-notch high schools. Besides, the reason why key-point high schools are closely related to admission to these national key universities lies in that, independent recruitment of a university from the list of 985-project and some 211-project is becoming popular in recent years where students from key high schools are more likely to pass the independent recruitment exam, for which from 10 points to 60 points are added to their scores of college entrance examination.

child. His father is an intermittent worker temporarily working as a helper in a vehicle repair garage, besides, he sometimes helps in a nearby restaurant to supplement his income. This middle-aged man had something to say, with a kind and humble smile which was also bitter somehow. While this father vented his grievances as throngs of underclass parents might do, he obviously felt immense pride when talking about his son. He recalled that Yun was a quiet child who enjoyed reading while other children in their living community were playing outside. He believed his son was a “born good child” while considering himself as an “incapable father”.

*“His mother died early. She was a generous and forbearing woman who was always reminding me of having the overall situation. She was an optimistic person and didn’t disdain me for being poor. Her death was a great loss for our family. I even thought of following her into another world (an apparent pause with around five seconds). But I couldn’t, because I promised her to raise and educate our kid, no matter how hard the process was. Yun became such a wrecked child with the loss of his mother, and I’m an incapable father. ‘Poor children manage household affairs early’, I told him. To my relief and pleasure, he is mature beyond his age in every aspect- at home and at school. He was born as a sensible child. He has experienced much that other kids shouldn’t have experienced at his age. He has shown restraint and endurance at a young age, behaving like an adult. Many poor children, including Yun, have strong motivations to change the family situation; besides, I feel especially gratified that he has the ambition to become a mathematician despite our family conditions; that’s not easy. I’m ashamed of being an uncultured father with no advanced educational ideas, but I try my best to give my kid support, spiritually.” (Yun’s father)*

Yun recalled that he had thought of quitting school when he witnessed how his father was tortured by life stress one day. Although this experience caused a rare conflict between the father and son, it provided Yun an opportunity for a calm and deep reflection of his path forward. When he was narrating his life story, he described his father as a responsible, tough, and forbearing person from whom he inherited some valuable qualities. He was empowered by education, which provided him a sense of security and dignity as he was developing and thriving at school.

*Interviewer: “Could you tell me some of your experiences that impressed you a lot?”*

*Yun: “I started to panic when I was a primary school student due to poverty. Fortunately, I gradually learned that I could do fast math and perhaps I had a gift for math, though I still needed to make a great effort on other subjects if I wanted to become a top student. My father’s work was exhausting. He suffered from varicosity after years of overwork, for which sometimes he could hardly stand up. In extreme cases, he must continuously work up to 24 hours without any sleep. When I was at primary school, one day, he came back home with mosquito bites all over the body. I cried, ‘How I wish I could help you, father. I have*

*no choice but to quit school.' Hearing that, my father gave me a sound slap, and blood came out of my nose. 'Like me? Only knowledge makes people powerful! As long as I have breath, I don't want to hear it any longer. I'm desperately trying my best to offer you the best possible education. That's my responsibility. And don't forget your responsibility!' I cried a lot."*

*Interviewer: "Did you hate your father when he hit you?"*

*Yun: "No. Absolutely not! I cried not because of the slap. If you knew our situation, you would not have asked that! Children from families with economic difficulties think in a different way. Actually, many of us are not self-centered because we have learned from the hardship at an early age. My father is really miserable. I cried on the thought of our sufferings from poverty, which gave us a sense of the lasting insecurity and hopelessness. More importantly, I cried because I did want a good weep before the long and bitter journey ahead to go. I determined that I must be stricter with myself from then on because only if I was tough and firm enough that I could shoulder the responsibility for my family. There's no retreat. I've invested with all my energy because I have put all the eggs in one basket. This is a battle I can't afford to lose. That's the way my life is supposed to be."*

*Interviewer: "Anything else? Are there other factors that motivate you and make you successful?"*

*Yun: "Attending school provides me with a meaningful life. When I was young, I caught up sight of something which could be called 'passion' and 'pride' from my teachers. What a wonderful thing if people can do the job they like and excel at! I became to look for things I was really interested in. I then confirmed that I liked math; then I gradually found many other subjects, especially science interesting. I remembered that when other classmates were complaining that 'it's finally over' after school, I always wanted to stay a bit longer working on some problems. I'm obsessed with the feeling of growing, transformations, and promotion at school."*

As some underclass students are talking about their biographical situations, their discourses are filled with understanding and sympathy with their parents and their endeavors for improving their family situations. Yun used the expression of "if you knew" to show his great efforts to explain her family situations which seemed to be difficult to be understood by people from a different family background. He did not directly inherit any cultural capital from his family, but was taught by misfortune an impressive lesson that only being equipped with knowledge could he relieved the sense of insecurity which the miserable life had brought. He has a strong awareness of being an underclass child who has a low self-focus, hoping to be secured in the future through his willpower and great long-term effort. Yun's discourses were filled with impressive terms such as "must" and "have to", which showed his great forbearance, courage, determination, and responsibility for the construction of a bright future in the face

of life adversity. On the other hand, he discovered that math was something that fascinated him, which contributed a lot to his meaningful and positive campus life.

Another respondent from a Gifted Class with the underclass background is Qing. Qing was a top student in the lower secondary school, and she had a keen desire and a great possibility to be accepted by a Gifted Class. Her parents were proud of her and had high educational expectations on her and thus supported her when she revealed her intention of attending a Gifted Class. She gave up applying for the status of a Hongzhi student and entered a Gifted Class with a slight advantage above the minimum score for that top-grade class. Apparently, although she also studies in the gifted class, her situation is quite different from that of Yun. Being an average student in the gifted class, she is in an awkward position as she is not entitled to enjoy preferential treatments like Yun, nor can she enjoy the Hongzhi treatment, which tortures her a lot.

Qing's father lost workability three years ago due to a work-related injury which had crippled him for life. Her mother, as suggested by her extended family members, sets up a stall in the street selling small items such as clothes hangers, brooms, fruit baskets, and buckets, which is, at present, the source of her family income. Qing mentioned more than once that a large portion of her pressure came from her relatives who thought that she should have applied for becoming a Hongzhi student so as to reduce her family burden. She has negative feelings— being bemused, hyper-stressed, morally ashamed, and painful when talking about her class-selection decision.

*"I always believed that I was qualified to enroll in a Gifted Class. My relatives thought that I was a sensible child since I was always considerate of my parents. Hence I should have dispelled the idea of going to a Gifted Class. They had never thought that I could be so stubborn and selfish on this matter. They kept asking me, 'what's on your mind on earth?' I could only say 'I've no idea' as a response. I thought they didn't know what the 'dream' means for a student who aimed for the best. Who would willingly relinquish the opportunity of studying in the best class with the most excellent students? Finally, my parents determined that I gave up applying for Hongzhi concerning my academic excellence and strong intention, for which I often regretted. My parents had only small savings and had to borrow some money from my relatives to support me. I hate myself. Why am I so selfish? (while hitting her head)"*

Qing confessed that she apparently regretted the choice. The identity as an ordinary student in a Gifted Class tortures Qing by reminding herself of “selfishness” and “unwisdom”. She told me that for the identity as a Gifted Class student, she gave up the identity as a child who was attentive to her parents for seeking to become a “conceivable higher-performing student”. However, from her view, she lost the bet; it now appears that this identity brings no good for her because it increases the economic burden of her family, and it seems to be a false promise without making her more competitive.

The Hongzhi policy encourages the admission of academically high-achieving students from low-income families for giving those disadvantaged children who are with a strong urge for changing their fate more opportunities and thus promoting educational equality. The official document has introduced the rule that underclass children with good exam performances in the senior high school entrance examination and grade A in moral conduct assessment are entitled to apply for the status of Hongzhi students. In the sample, all underclass Hongzhi students, with the university dream and family commitment, developed the spirit to withstand tough times and excelled at academics through extreme self-disciplined hard work in their previous studies. Their academic abilities were repeatedly confirmed and reconfirmed in the past bunches of exams. And most critically, they all did an excellent job in the senior high school entrance examination. These students are highly aware of their disadvantaged life situations, taking it as a wake-up call. Dan defined herself as an independent child who was willing to save her parents worries. She talked about her parents’ bitterness with a strong emotion and keen melancholy.

*“My parents get up at 3:30 a.m. in the morning for making leaf-wrapped rice and steamed buns. They start out at 5:00 a.m. on time, traveling 6 kilometers with their electric tricycle to sell those self-made breakfasts near a factory whose workers can be their regular customers. No matter what the weather is like, they would be there punctually because it’s very important to keep those customers. I know how they are struggling to make ends meet, and I don’t want to be their burden. Our life condition is so bad that every family member should try their best to escape poverty if there were a glimmer of hope.”*

With a simper, Fa said that he was even given a name with the meaning of building wealth. His concern for his parents’ health status serves as a powerful motivator in his studies. He loves his parents, but he does not regard his parents’ lifestyle meaningful. Although Fa’s parents had high expectations on him for improving the family situations in the future, they were sometimes discouraged by their neighbors who

frequently complained their children's academic inability. However, their confidence arose after Fa proved his academic ability multiple times. Given the circumstances, they support their son in their own way, such as minimizing his housework duty and encouraging his concentration on his studies.

*Interviewer: "What inspires you to become a high-achieving student?"*

*Fa: "I want to work off poverty by my own efforts, and I want to make my parents happy, pride, and healthy. Can you believe that? Many people in our residential community hardly go to the hospital for economic reasons."*

*Interviewer: "Including your parents?"*

*Fa: "Yes. Frankly speaking, I'm worried about their health conditions. I always want to raise their health awareness, but they turn a deaf ear, unfortunately. I guess that's because they are regrettably overwhelmed by life. When I have a successful career in the future, I'll have more utterance right, and I'll then urge them for an annual physical check-up immediately. This mission drives me."*

*Interviewer: "Any other factors that motivate you?"*

*Fa: "My parents' lifestyle doesn't make sense for me. I was asked to give a hand to my father's job and also the housework, but I found his repetitive work boring somehow. I'd rather read some books when I had some spare time, so I read books, when possible. Perhaps this good habit facilitated my later academic success. Like many surrounding parents, my parents didn't expect me to do well in my studies initially, but their attitudes were changing little by little in response to my exam reports and our neighbors' remarks like 'your child is not ordinary, and perhaps he can be a scientist in the future!' Farcically, I was then asked to do less housework and at the same time spend more time on my studies."*

Hua told me her story of growing up in the context of her family—the story of who she was and her relationships with her family members.

*"I'm from a family with economic hardship. We—my parents, my younger sister, and I, used to live in the countryside. Society has undergone earth-shaking changes. Thanks to the Hongzhi policy, otherwise, I would not have attended my highly desired school. (Pondered for around eight seconds) I remembered that I wanted more candies on New Years' Day when I was eight because I thought my sister was too young to have many. My parents scolded me for being selfish, though in a modest way, making me feel bad. You see, I had a negatively impressive festival that year. I didn't explain anything because my parents always showed no interest in knowing my ideas, which were regarded as only sophistry or excuses (with a slight pause). But that doesn't mean that my parents don't love me—they are very traditional parents. Anyway, it's natural that many people*

*tend to love the youngest child. I realize that I can't count everything on my parents because my younger sister also needs their care, perhaps more."*

Sheng realized the weak position of the underclass families for competing for educational resources. Even so, he tried to concentrate on his study with a positive mindset when he started his new life at this school as he was frequently reminded of his hard-earned educational opportunity, as a contrast to her mother's educational experiences.

*"Although everyone wants to stand out, it's unrealistic, especially for children from a family with economic difficulties. In recent years, it's beyond argument that students from abundant families are more likely to successfully enter a key university. We envy rich families, indeed, but we should do something instead of groaning. My mother often recalled her old time. She told me how she wanted to go to school, but was deprived of education because of her female identity. Her story reminded me that my situations were much better with parents' full support, and I should cherish everything. My father also encouraged me by telling me that 'no gains without pains'."*

Yan grew up in an extended family with her parents and grandparents who were all farmers "without culture" in the countryside. Her parents need to take care of her grandparents physically and economically as they are getting older with chronic diseases in recent years. Yan is growing up with a strong sense of avoiding being a burden in her family. However, the undesirable habitus might prevent her from thriving at school.

*"Although my parents are poor without culture, they respect knowledge and intellectuals. Frankly speaking, I don't like reading very much, but there's no alternative way to get rid of our current situation. I just don't want to be a burden of my family. That's shameful!"*

Wei has the same opinion by expressing that the identity as a good daughter relieving her parents' pressure is always the wheel that keeps her moving forward.

*"I grew up pretty poor. I worked hard with the thought that I should do everything I could to relieve my parents' pressure. I found pursuing academic success was not difficult previously. I was then so happy when I got a certificate of a reward from school because it made my parents happy. Every inch of success adds a glimmer of hope to our family. Every time, they would carefully hang my awards on the wall. Then I felt a sense of pride for being a good daughter and perhaps the family saviour."*

Juan talked about how accepting education was viewed by her family. She had an elder brother who was successfully admitted to a key university two years ago. In modern society, it seems that parents' love is becoming commercialized, conditional, and measurable with certain criterion such as children's academic achievements. Juan recalled that her mother's expression of love was related to her child's academic performances, thus creating an environment of "going higher to the hill". Juan's fear of losing her parents' love spurred her. Although this environment caused great pressure on Juan, she felt relieved that her parents, without the traditional "son preference", encouraged a "fair competition".

*"A poor family doesn't necessarily mean a problematic family. What is worth cherishing is that my parents are fair in dealings with their children—I mean the boy and the girl. I know my parents are always proud of my elder brother. He was such an excellent student at school. Hard as life was, my parents offered us as much as possible. I asked my mother when I was seven years old, 'who do you prefer, my brother or me?' She replied, 'I love you both, but I also have to admit that I prefer the one who has a better performance at school.' I worked hard under such pressure. Although my thought was perhaps ridiculous and childish, it really served as an important motivation for my study."*

With the logic of "not to be", Chang declared his moral distinction with those "fatuous persons" without a university degree and his determination for shouldering the heavy burden of his family.

*"Although my family has moved into a small flat in a town near here for six years, I still can't forget my earlier experiences of living in a distant village where I have witnessed various sufferings. Many people there have been doing badly-paid heavy work... (with a sigh) Some of them even died at an early age because, you know, unhappy life, crying and shouting all day long, ignorance, gambling, smoking and alcohol abuse, domestic violence, abortion, school dropout, family tragedy—a vicious circle. Without a university degree, many youths there have ended up with the same lifestyle of the older generations. That's horrible! I can't imagine following them in the future! I must work hard to attend university."*

Gui's elder brother was not academically good and thus quitted his study after graduating from a junior high school for giving more opportunities for Gui. With the utilitarian logic and the sense of obligation for the family, Gui told me about what he was going to do— majoring in a discipline that helped to make more money, such as computer science and finance in the future.

*"I've ever wanted to be trained to be a teacher, which I thought was a sacred calling, but I have to reset my goal. My case is special. My brother gives me additional support and pocket money with a job working as a deliveryman. I can't forget this scene forever: one summer night after the Zhongkao scores were issued, my brother sighed with grief, and said to me, 'I've made up my mind to go out to work. I've done bad, but you have more talent. I was born bad while you were a sensible person. I*

*hope you can learn a lesson from me to avoid the bitterness I'm going to face. As your elder brother, I should support you. You must work even harder so as not to live with bitterness anymore. We'll count on you in the future.' He then turned around and abruptly burned his previous exam papers. We then cried hard together. So you see, my brother has already sacrificed a lot for me. He didn't do very well indeed, but he should at least have finished post-secondary education. That would be helpful for getting a better job. I'll get majored in software engineering or finance in the future because they are lucrative professions. When I have money, I'll return my family's kindness. Otherwise, I feel guilty."*

Many vivid scenes and images came into my mind as these underclass students were going into great detail with dignified expressions on their faces. They were sometimes lowering their heads to ponder those tough times that made them helpless and melancholy and sometimes looked far ahead with hope, ambition, and determination while narrating their biographic sketch.

Ying's mother lives a frugal life and counts her pennies because, as a single parent, she has greater pressure of raising Ying and her younger brother and getting them into school. In the most challenging time, Ying recalled, they depended on her relatives from the extended family even though her mother was a tough woman with a strong personality and high self-esteem. Born as the first child in an economically difficult family, Ying was particularly sensible and had a strong sense of being an example for her younger brother. She was a straight-A student, and when she had time, she often helped her mother to educate her younger brother by stating how hard life was, as a "stimulation for working harder". Jiao is from a single-income family whose father does a low-paid job to make ends meet. Her parents are willing to try their best to invest in their children's education while they are quite economical in food and clothing. Life is getting harder for this family since Jiao's elder sister also needs money to pay the tuition.

*"My parents were both with the junior diploma and were super glad when my sister was admitted by a university. They, with a high educational expectation on me, always said that a favorable beginning was half of the success. I want to be a good student whom my parents can be proud of, just like my sister." (Jiao)*

Kang and Guo could have attended a lower-track high school so as not to live in the dormitory, which saved money. However, their families chose to give full support to children's education; even it meant that they would have a more difficult life.

*“My parents thought that attending a key state school maximized the likelihood of being admitted to a key university. Otherwise, I would have attended a nearby school. My parents often quarrel about money, and it really hurts. However, they spare no expense to get me enrolled here, for which I feel enormous self-accusation and pressure.” (Kang)*

*“I know I’m always given the priority in my family. My parents sacrificed a lot and said that they would give up the last shot in the locker for getting me enrolled here, as long as I passed the minimum qualifications. Although I passed, I was not excellent enough for entering the Hongzhi Class. I often blame myself privately for that.” (Guo)*

A similar situation happened to Can, who was considered significantly valuable in her family, especially her parents have previously experienced several pregnancy failures. Likewise, Qiang was also much valued in his family and could have entered another school close to his home. If so, he did not have to live on campus, which saved some money that was important for his family.

*“My parents hesitated because the expenses for boarding and lodging were a heavy burden for them. They were not sure, so they consulted my previous class sponsor who was a friend of my uncle. My teacher specified some of the advantages of attending a key-point state school; my parents made up their mind immediately. They stated firmly that they would give all in exchange for a good education for me. As a poor kid, I feel hyper-stressed here.” (Qiang)*

Jun and Feng expressed that they were above average in lower secondary school. They felt happy and lucky to step on the admission line of this school. They expressed that they had wished to grasp this educational opportunity for achieving a different life which their parents have not yet scaled.

*“I was a helpless student here. I bumped into good luck in the senior high school entrance examination. My parents were really ‘big trumpets’— almost all of the neighboring families were informed of this news. My parents even held a victory banquet, inviting our neighbors to attend. I felt great pressure and a burdensome responsibility upon my shoulders. I was then excited though a little afraid on the thought of starting a new chapter of my life here.” (Jun)*

*“My parents and elder sisters were so happy that I had passed the fractional line. My sister didn’t do well in the study, so she had to go to a vocational school. I knew all my family members were counting on me, and I would hate to fail them.” (Feng)*

As can be seen, those focused underclass students were unexceptionally used to be academically high-performing students and had their glory— big or small in the previous schooling stages. Otherwise, they were not likely to come to this urban key-point school. With limited family resources, only when those children, in most cases, could repeatedly demonstrate that they are the “seeds of hope” of the family who

could shoulder the heavy burden for transforming the destiny of the whole family, their parents, in turn, could get up the courage and desperately try to do the best for those “quick-witted” children. Hence they come here, with tremendous pressure that stems from their family context as well as those urban-rural unequal social arrangements, taking this school as a springboard to realize their dream of attending a good university and transform the destiny of themselves and their family.

## 5.2 Encounters between previous experiences and on-going practices

This section shows with a strong impulse for transforming their destiny, how underclass students thrive and flounder— how they are academically differentiated at this urban key-point school.

“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 form of schemes of perception, thought me and action, tend to guarantee the “correctness” of practices and their constancy over time, more reliably than all formal rules and explicit norms.” (Bourdieu, 1990: 54)

Bourdieu put forward that habitus, based on people’s past experiences, played a great part in thinking and behaving, and thus the possibility of the future. Giddens found that memory and perception were closely linked, and in day-to-day life, the continuity of activities persistently integrated people’s senses (Giddens, 1986). Underclass students’ prior living and educational experiences shape how their stories might unfold at Yeyun school, and the current day-to-day life at school also modifies their identity perceptions. The school setting can be perceived as the Utopian World, a training camp where both the bitter and the sweet exist, a field for transformations, as well as an excruciating inferno, which is subjectively experienced by underclass students.

### 5.2.1 Continuing composing the magnificent chapter: “school is the Utopian World!”

Fa and Yun are both top students who have their expected successful experiences in terms of both academic achievements and interpersonal relationships at school. They reported that excellent academic performances and interpersonal relationships were positively related to each other, which kept them thriving at school.

Fa enjoyed his campus life where he learned efficiently, enriched his amateurish life, and developed an interest in music. He felt comfortable in this school and integrated himself into the middle-class culture without difficulty.

*"I feel good; everything is fantastic. The school ticks all my boxes. I know my teachers are high on my prospects. I have to mention that the study atmosphere is much better than that in my previous junior high school. Many of my previous classmates whispered and chatted in class, so teachers regrettably had to stop their teaching activities and spend plenty of time to emphasize the homeroom discipline. In my current class, students are all ears in class and do their homework with earnest attention after class. Moreover, there's not only competition and pressure but also cooperation and friendship, which have negotiated my interest in music! The school holds a sing contest every semester for releasing the pressure of study and promoting friendship. Before that, the music teacher would have a couple of hectic days for chorus training—allocating us into different voice parts, teaching us those beautiful songs, and gathering us for rehearsals. We sang 'the Ends of the Earth' in our last performance. The melody is so beautiful that I sometimes can't help humming it."*

Habitus generates a repertoire of possible actions which reserves a breathtaking space for transformation (Reay, 2004). Yun reported that he was excited to get to know different people and enjoyed his limited leisure time by combining with a couple of his classmates. He regarded that classmates were naturally grouped in the light of interests rather than family origins. Yun believed that hard work, passion, and intelligence all together legitimate academic success. He studied above fourteen hours every day on average, except for the most significant festival in China—the Spring Festival. Passion and intelligence are closely interwoven with each other in his narratives. He often expressed that blind pursuit of high marks on math—his favorite subject implied an insult to this subject. "*An unintended willow grows*", he employed this metaphor to show that, more often than not, his great passion nurtured his academic achievement, instead of the opposite. Yun is very emotionally attached to the school where he enjoys a host of advantages. Feeling immensely personally fulfilling, he considers this school as "the Utopian

world" which prepares him as best as possible and helps him to unlock various potentials such as public speaking skills, and achieve self-worth.

*"Despite the socioeconomic disadvantages of my family, I still feel happy studying here; I'm living a simple life of the three-point line between dormitory, homeroom, and canteen. I was appointed to act as class monitor by my class sponsor because of my Zhongkao score. Hmm... it was a challenge for me because I was an introvert person. In my family, my father talked very little, and in my previous school, although I was also class monitor, I didn't talk much. The interaction between my classmates and I was restricted only to study and discipline when necessary. I noticed that talking ability was attached more importance here. I was required to say something immediately after the appointment, which gave me a sudden surprise because things were not done like this in my previous school. At that time, I was actually very nervous when I noticed that everyone sized me up, and I also realized that the majority of my classmates were more experienced and knowledgeable in many aspects, but in that situation, I had to pretend to be unperturbed. I didn't talk well without preparation, but I gradually realized that public speaking was the 'short slab' for me and many other poor students with the similar family background. But why not trying to consciously cultivate this ability? No achievement, big or small, comes naturally. I increasingly like my role in my class and take it as a precious opportunity of experiencing and growing. I think this school is a lovely place where I can get to know different interesting people. How exciting! Although students from the city have obvious advantages in artistic and sports performances, I don't think there is much discrimination against students from low-income families since high school life mainly consists of monotonous teaching activities, study, and review, as well as tests and exams. Even if some rich students go shopping after exams, I don't envy much because they are nice to me and keep me informed of various clothing brands, and most important all, I have alternative options— I can still have a good time with those who share the same interest with me. One of my roommates plays guitar well and is more than happy to teach us. So we have a wonderful span of time— though really short, after the night self-study but before the rigidly enforced bedtime in the evening. On the weekends, I set aside some time to learn to play soccer from some classmates. Now I'm a team member, which I've never thought before! Besides, I make good friends of them, which greatly relieves loneliness and pressure. Yes, I become more confident; now, I won't try to conceal the thought of my dream of becoming a mathematician in front of people. There are many things available here which I couldn't imagine before, for example, our Chinese teacher is amazing, and her classes greatly arouse students' interest in poetry appreciation and writing. Some classmates even spontaneously organized a group of poetry fans where we read poems of Shelly, Tagore, Pushkin, and Petőfi, etc. and shared beautiful sentences and paragraphs with each other. When I come back home in summer and winter vacations, I feel that I'm back to the earth from the Utopian World or the glorious heaven with music and poems. My father's cracked hands resulting from the low-paid heavy work from dawn to night pierce my soul. I know I can't help a little bit at this moment but have to work even harder to change our family conditions in the future."*

Without dwelling on the past glory, Yun negotiated his identity in this new educational setting in a relatively harmonious way; Little frustration and uneasiness were expressed in his narratives. Being empowered by education, he had the belief that people were doomed to encounter hardships if they continued to go and race against themselves.

These two students' names frequently appeared on the Honor Roll, which posted students with excellent exam results and progress in the study plus their preeminent exam scores and ranks. The bulletin board is erected in an eye-catching place in a frequently used square where people are frequently coming and going. These mythical figures on the bulletin board, echoing with another Honor Roll that displays students who have been admitted to a topnotch university, are admired and talked through people's numerous stopping and gazing. Students who have made impressive progress are also worth being vigorously praised because they are expected to become another type of educational myth in the interest of the school—"the trained talent". Those artificial spatial designs add strong atmosphere to the school ethos and the environment of "*catching up with and surpassing*", as well as the mainstream value which appreciates the exam-oriented system. However, this work also has found out that it also brought some underachievers' sense of "hidden injury" and exclusion, being proved by their responses such as "*I'm classified as a person in a group that doesn't deserve teachers' attention.*", "*I feel confused, stressed, and sometimes embarrassed and in a word, I don't have a place at school.*", "*We deserve nothing because the high-achieving students have squeezed us out.*", which is addressed in the last part of this section.

### 5.2.2 Stories of smooth-integration

Jiao and Ying are both above-average students in their homerooms. They reported that they were well-adjusted and fairly satisfied with their mid-level performances, making allowances for the lower track schools where they had received education before.

*"I would estimate that a top student from my previous school is approximately an average student here." (Jiao)*

They both talked about their integration experiences, identifying integration as an essential factor contributing to academic success. Jiao, with a fairly high degree of confidence, successfully integrated herself into her class collective. Ying also gained a good peer relationship through her multiple reflections and endeavors.

Jiao was one of the best three students in her lower secondary school; now she normally remains to be the top 25 percent in her class. Without interpersonal-relationship problems, which are common for quite a few underclass students, she gets along very well with her classmates, contributing to her pleasant school experiences. Jiao was quite affable in the interview where she talked about that living and studying at the school helped her to become a better problem-solver in every aspect. She defined her current experiences as a mediocre success. She was aware of the importance of a tough and zealous character for getting along well with others and winning respect. She took the event of homeroom cleaning before their first class at school as an example where she identified cleaning as something that showed her strong points. After a series of similar events, she was constructed as the bureaucratic good<sup>40</sup> with exemplary behaviors and was in turn, accepted and respected by her classmates as a person with hard-working spirit and “suffers personal losses for serving her classmates”.

*“My parents drilled into me the importance of being tough, confident, generous, and zealous in spite of my family status. On the first day of school when cleaning the homeroom was required, many students only chose to do some light work, but I would love to do everything. It was not a big deal for me since I had been asked by my parents to do some housework since I could remember. So to speak, I specialize in housework, taking it normal practices of everyday life. I know many urban children don’t do housework at all. Through the cleaning practices, I could show some of my strengths in front of my classmates, like destness. I’m serious about doing many things, and I’m glad to help others. So my classmates voted me as commissary in charge of physical labor. Meanwhile, I feel lucky that the school culture represses upward comparison in terms of material wealth. My experiences here are generally pleasant, though not extremely successful. I felt delighted to live in the warm and cozy dormitory, unlike the flat where my family lived, which was even with a leaking roof in the restroom. I get along very well with my roommates who are all from the city, and they are very nice persons. Maybe you can’t imagine, in our dormitory, we speak only Mandarin. Guess what? They are so considerate that they know I hate speaking my native dialect without mastering the correct accent of the urban dialect; speaking Mandarin avoids such embarrassment.” (Jiao)*

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<sup>40</sup> See Thompson G. Acting, accidents and performativity: Challenging the hegemonic good student in secondary schools. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 2010, 31(4): 413-430. The author has identified six rationales framing “being good” at school in different lines through students’ experiences, including “the docile and disciplined good”, “the pastoral good”, “the bureaucratic good”, “the gendered good”, “the conflictual good”, and “the affiliated good”.

As can be seen, she managed to win her classmates' favor by wisely transforming "disadvantages" from the urban-rural inequality into advantages that entailed the community spirit. In this single-earner family, Jiao's mother, unlike the majority of the underclass parents, is a tough and assertive woman who has chosen to be a stay-at-home mother for supervising her children despite the family's enormous economic pressure.

*"As parents, we value education despite the fact of being poor. Under the joint influences of us parents and her elder sister, Jiao understands that education is her only chance. She thus has been working hard. You might think most of the stay-at-home moms are from rich families. That's true. However, after we carefully thought of the pros and cons, I decided to stay at home and do something more meaningful. I'd rather spend my time with my children for their interests than do a job with a meager income that makes little difference for our family status. I'm so glad that her father also liked this idea." (Jiao's mother)*

The mother reported that she had taken "a different path", and thus had to cross the river by feeling the stones. She enjoys participating in her children's growing, turning a deaf ear to the gossip which questioned her laziness and irresponsibility. She was not sure if she could be capable of guiding their children until her eldest daughter succeeded in academic studies. She had a great sense of achievements after she overcame various challenges and witnessed her children's thriving.

*"Someone would suspect that I'm lazy, inept, or irresponsible because I don't seek to go out to work with a healthy body. After we made the choice which we thought best for the entire family, I must try to make something of my commitment, ignoring what people were saying on this matter behind. My basic principle was that children couldn't be spoiled. Although the study was the most important thing, they should also do some limited homework where we normally did together, which helped to cultivate their responsibility and a sense of cooperation. I had many doubts about whether I could succeed at the beginning; I also had many confusions when I met thorny problems, which I almost had no friends to discuss with. No matter how many setbacks I've met, I always remind myself to be a hardworking, tough, and brave mother after I calmed down. For example, I'll make an active response when there are teachers' requirements or feedback. Besides, I keep observing my children: when they are inflated with pride, I'll remind them that there is always someone who is better than them, and when they suffer setbacks and lose heart, I'll tell them that victory and defeat are both common for a soldier. Moreover, I accompany my children as much as possible. Although I have very little education, I believe my presence mutedly conveys the information that they are not alone, I'm always there for them, and we fight as one. Jiao is like me in some way, like being tough and strong-minded (with a shy smile)." (Jiao's mother)*

Ying's experiences at this school are also essentially pleasant, somehow similar to those of Jiao— she is an above-average student with a good interpersonal relationship. She reported that she was once a bit

perplexed for her identity as a child from a disadvantageous background at the beginning but soon readily accommodated to this new educational setting strategically. She was impressed by one of her previous classmates whose academic achievement was negatively influenced by her bad interpersonal relationship. Hence she prepared herself to integrate into the class collective by becoming herself without “pretending” and evading possible “antipathetic behaviors” in the interaction through multiple reflections.

*“Frankly speaking, I had a bit inferiority and fear concerning my family background. I knew the majority of my classmates would be local students who even knew well about each other. I felt I like a clumsy, ugly duckling when I thought of the scenario of my arrival. I was afraid that I would be judged. I also had concerns that I would be isolated as my background and experiences were totally different from those of the majority. I even wanted to pretend to be one of them in the summer vacation before the school got started, like I was thinking that I made some money in the summer vacation for buying two chic dresses for myself. I could be informed of the fashion trend from the media, of course. However, when I thought of my younger brother, I gave up the idea. Our mingy money should be spent on important items such as education rather than clothing. My mother’s tough character and practical mind have lasting influences on me, making me increasingly realize that I should bravely face reality and live my life rather than spend time worrying about things that cannot be changed. But I must pay attention to building good relationships with other people, which is of equal importance because it helps to create a friendly environment for my study. I often remind of one of my previous classmates from the lower secondary school. She had very negative experiences without a good relationship with others because of her unpopular and odd character, together with her terrible open family secret that her alcohol-addicted father often hit people when he was drunk. She could hardly stay in our class and switched to another class. She finally went to a vocational school. Now that I’ve realized that many classmates are from better backgrounds, I pay attention to good manners, for example, I am always smiling, I privately listen to radio for correcting my accent when speaking Mandarin and English; I pay attention to other things, like if I accept my friends’ invitation to dinner, I must invite them next time. I don’t like the concept of seeking petty advantages.”*

It was through autobiography and future-pointing imagination of a specific period of life that Ying had achieved a relocation of her identity, which facilitated her integration in her class collective and contributed to her academic progress.

### **5.2.3 Stories of turning-point with teachers as trailblazers**

Many teachers have expressed the stereotype that underclass children are extremely silent and compared with other students, they are less likely to be changed. Arduous life experiences bundled with low family status were seared- with self-reproach- in their memories as a wake-up call. As conformists, they are self-disciplined, but at the same time, they are preoccupied, taciturn, and tended to identify themselves as

being inferior with the poverty-stricken identity and in turn, feel constraint to ask for help at school, which hinders them from thriving. However, this section, with Mei, Lian, and Jie as representatives, will lay out in broad strokes the three students' experiences towards how they have achieved academic breakthrough and become the anticipated class travelers. These underclass children's counter-attack stories that set examples of breaking the class curse are highly inspiring.

Name	Trailblazer	Turning point
Mei	Math teacher	Her math teacher's self-disclosure after an exam
Jie	Class sponsor	A heart-to-heart conversation in the class sponsor's office
Lian	Class sponsor	An illness experience with her class sponsor's attentive care

**Table 5.2 Underclass students' turning point stories with the key person and event**

Except for being dinged to be an obedient child for the sake of the whole family and instilled in the university dream, which serves for freeing the whole family from the woes of the world, none of these students had any specific memory about other kinds of family education in their childhood. Underclass parents generally believed that painstaking effort was the most important and perhaps the only factor legitimating academic success— “*if you wish to rise above the ordinary, you should suffer the bitterest part of hardship*”, “*you reap what you sow*” while having little knowledge of many deep-rooted factors that are responsible for academic failures.

As is put by Foucault, knowledge is hierarchical and selected. The contents of textbooks are hand-picked with particular mainstream values and middle-class culture. Although students are perhaps quite familiar with particular mainstream values for having heard them many times, they can be still clumsy in front of middle-class culture without being nurtured in a middle-class family atmosphere, which is proved by the fact that considerable under-class children are weak in language subjects. Jie was such an underclass child. He was struggling with Chinese and was at a loss when he was making an attempt to integrate himself

into the middle-class taste of the language flow. However, his struggle was not understood by his parents. Bounded by livelihood with little knowledge about learning contents and educational practices in the school field, his parents blamed his substandard academic performances for not working hard.

*“I really couldn’t appreciate the classical literature because the context it described and my real-life experiences were miles apart. I was always working hard but... I was guilty of being an underachiever. My parents believed that if they were given the same condition, they could be definitely successful through hard work. They could spend the whole evening grumbling to me about my exam score. They couldn’t understand me and often poured cold water on me.” (Jie)*

Mei has also identified her experiences of working hard with little payoff and her parents' misunderstanding. She talked about that her parents had always lectured her on how hardworking spirit legitimated academic success.

*“My parents were anxious about my exam results and often blamed me for not working hard, which was not the case. I felt disparate every time while they were repeating those contents over and over again.” (Mei)*

Those repeatedly reported cross-generational misunderstandings imply that parents and children are living in different moral fields with different subjective truths, which discourages in-depth dialogues. This situation limits the possibility that parents act as trailblazers for those children who harbor the ambitious dream of changing their destiny.

### **Mei’s turning-point story**

Mei grew up in a peasant family with a distance of around thirty kilometers away from this school. Her parents, both with primary school education, spoke only the local dialect. She had intense math anxieties—math was a subject which she thought it was impossible to master anyhow. However, her academic trajectory was enormously altered to a great extent by a new math teacher who had a similar family background as she did.

*“Mei was a very hardworking but also a timid student who wouldn’t ask for anything, but I knew that feeling because I once had a sense of inferiority due to my family economic status as well. The sense of inferiority is nonsense and can be a stumbling*

*stone in careers. Since the same happened to Mei, I easily detected the crux of her problem... I just wanted to instill in her the idea of bravely asking for help without a sense of guilt.” (Mr. Li, Mei’s math teacher)*

Mei failed a math exam again one day and was invited to her math teacher’s office. She believed that teachers played an active role while students should act passively, which was taught by her past experiences. That day, she was much impressed by Mr. Li’s frank self-presentation because she had never had a sense of equality between teachers and students before.

*“Even before I attended primary school, my parents told me that I should always obey and respect teachers and avoided causing any trouble to them. I believed that was the right way to be a student. When I knew I failed the exam again, getting a scold for pulling down the average score of the exam was prepared in mind because I thought I had caused trouble to my math teacher for being a nerve-wracking student... It was common for teachers to boast their successful educating experiences, but my math teacher sincerely exhibited his own ignominious experiences that happened in his life. What encouraging news that students and teachers can equally communicate with each other! Nothing could describe my astonishment and gratitude.”*

With the awareness of correcting her previous thought about what made a good student, Mei took her first step afterward by getting out of her habit and causing Mr. Li “troubles” by asking questions out of class afterward and then made surprisingly remarkable progress in math, which gave her much confidence. Mei finally overcame her fear and formed the habit of turning to her teachers for help if she could not understand in class and made breakthroughs in other subjects.

### **Jie’s turning-point story**

Jie’s father worked as a temporary deliveryman, and his mother had been unemployed since she was laid off as a bus conductor. For Jie, his class sponsor’s regular day after a monthly exam became his personal history moment in life. Jie’s story is about the created situation from which he has experienced “sudden enlightenment” concerning the feel for literary language. With a disconsolate mood, Jie strolled around among the embrace of wind with hope and despair and imperceptibly reached the door of his head teacher’s office, seeing the teacher Ms. Huang was “*still marking exam papers tirelessly and enthusiastically, with her expressions alternated with frowning and relieved state from time to time hinging on students’ answers.*” The image of “*the mother in the candlelight in the textbook who is sewing*

*clothes for her son—the distant wanderer”* recurred to him. When narrating his turning-point story, Jie’s face stiffened with indescribable respect and gratitude. He repeatedly brooded on this context:

*“It was two hours after the ninth class. She should have been at home and enjoyed a nice meal with her family but chose to fight together with us. She then noticed me unexpectedly and warmly invited me in and said, ‘What’s the problem with you? You can frankly show me. It takes the teacher to transmit wisdom, impart knowledge, and solve doubts!’ In this very context, I was surprised to find that I could suddenly appreciate the exquisite charm of classical literature. I thought I was such an ordinary student that teachers showed no interest to cultivate, but it turned out to be that teachers were actually so busy that they just couldn’t take care of everything. I was used to avoiding talking with teachers unless I had to because I thought they had no time for students who were not brilliant. From then on, I thought I was wrong and thus made some adjustments, especially on teacher-student communication.”*

During the meaningful two-hour office hour, under the teacher’s patient guidance, Jie opened his innermost concerns. Ms. Huang helped him to reconstruct his self-identity and help him to gain a new perspective by patiently offering her opinions about his questions that are accumulated at the bottom of the heart for many years concerning impoverished students’ identity, youth, and aspiration. For the teacher, that meeting served as a rare opportunity to get to know this student better, and impressed Jie that many of his previous ideas “might not be good ideas”. Subsequently, Ms. Huang was highly aware of giving him encouragement every time he allowed his ideas to be communicated. Jie had gradually developed the habit of asking questions after independent thinking. He talked about that his transformation had stunned his parents, so that during a long period of time, while Jie was introducing his active interaction with teachers and showing his exam report, his parents were carefully staring at him in disbelief.

### **Lian’s turning-point story**

Lian did considerable farm work when she was a child. Living in the school dormitory and speaking with a strong accent, she struck her roommates as a cranky sort of a person and was thus socially isolated. She reported that her roommates looked down upon her and even overtly unfriended her in the online social networking, which hurt her feelings and created a diminished sense of self-worth. She is also not emotionally close with her parents, but she did not forget her identity as a child from a family with economic hardship, obviously. She has such a complicated, fragile, entangled, and sensitive inner world

which she hardly shares with other people but enters and exits herself. But iceberg of this inner world is inadvertently seen by her class sponsor, Ms. Ye.

*“Why I feel an enormous sense of isolation and futility, that I am fighting unsupported? My family barely makes ends meet. Although I’m angry with myself for not doing well in exams, I will constantly strive for my family!!! Never give up! Everyone should learn to weather the storm of the test from life. But I still want to punish myself...” (from Lian’s diary)*

Lian’s class sponsor stumbled upon her diary documenting her helplessness and since then had silently tried to give her additional support by setting aside some of her spare time for small talks. Even then, Lian was still trapped in her own world with few words and a defensive stance, especially after the experiences of being excluded by her roommates. However, her diary disturbed Ms. Ye, making her uneasy. The teacher then began to notice her in this way, and kept an eye on her for preventing her from “running to an extreme”.

According to Lian’s narratives, her turning point was about her experience of illness with a high fever. With her parents’ miles apart, Ms. Ye squeezed time between lessons to visit her multiple times and accompanied her with meticulous care in the hospital after work. Besides, student leaders were organized to visit her in the hospital, bringing fruits, milk, and textbooks. She felt overwhelmed by the unexpected favor because she had previously developed a sense of her identity as an economically difficult student with mid-level academic performances and an unpleasant character.

*“Ms. Ye comforted me that there was no need to worry about academic work for my absence in the class by telling me that she and our subject representatives would help me with lessons. I didn’t think I deserve that since I was an ordinary and poor student, also with an acknowledged unpleasant character. Although my parents expected that I would be more optimistic, outgoing, and talkative, I didn’t know how I could develop into that kind of person! They both had reticent demeanors; I mean they don’t talk much when the whole family were together. Once I thought about my family status, nothing could cheer me up. How could I be such a person with that good personality? So I was accustomed to camouflaging my inner frailty and conceal my emotions in front of people to maintain my dignity. I was really moving that day when my teacher and classmates visited me in the hospital, and I actually moved to tears after they left.”*

Ms. Ye identified self-discipline as an essential factor contributing to academic success according to her teaching experiences. She noticed that Lian was a hardworking student with intense motivations, but at

the same time, she was quite sensitive, which hindered the implement of her aspirations. This situation and a sense of empathy urged this teacher to do something strategically for “moistening the mind”. After Lian’s illness experience which encouraged a closer relationship, Ms. Ye took the chance— with great empathy, she invited Lian to her home and cooked her impressive meals on weekends.

*“My beloved teacher treated me like her own child and guided me to view the world from a different angle. She cared much about my life, mind, and emotional needs. I began to notice that I sometimes I even felt the urge to start a conversation with her. When I told her my earlier miserable life experiences, she showed strong empathy. She was impressed by my strong determination of jumping out of the farming gate<sup>41</sup> and kept encouraging me by telling me that she was always there for me. She shattered my self-perception and previous understanding of educators. I gradually overcome the fear of reading in front of classmates and talking with teachers; with increased confidence, I also relate better with my classmates.”*

Lian reported that those unexpected favors sparked her thoughts and shattered her self-perception and previous understanding of educators and what happened at school. She then gradually overcome the fear of reading and answering questions in front of her classmates. Feeling the more friendly environment, she finally cast away a high portion of inferiority complex and became increasingly confident in engaging teachers, which provided her with the best possible academic result.

These three underclass students acquired important knowledge for decoding the education system by engaging teachers, which was crucial for their academic progress. Gaining the crucial knowledge changed the way they thought, the choices they made, and this established paradigm became part of them. Their turning-point stories were all about their class sponsors’ establishing and maintaining emotional relationships with them. Previous studies have supported that close teacher-student relationships serve to offer students a better understanding of “rules of the game” and change their perception of the “hostile” schooling environment, thus improving scholastic performances (DiMaggio, 1982; Lamont & Lareau, 1988; Nan et al., 2000), which is the "teacher- selection" effect (Kalmijn & Kraaykamp, 1996). In these

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<sup>41</sup> This is a popular educational discourse for people with rural backgrounds because of the dual system and structural inequality between the city and the country. The talented rural students can change their rural identity by achieving high scores in Gaokao, and underachievers are supposed to go back to the rural areas.

three cases, teachers treated students with great affection and chose some relatively private places outside the homeroom to conduct informal, heart-to-heart talks, which brought them a sense of belonging, emotional resonance, and spiritual support. Those students formed situated habitus after the turning point, a kind of transient habitus provoked by those affectionate conversations. Situated habitus, teachers' following continuous encouragement and positive feedback as well as students' improved academic records in the later exams were hinges for transforming transient habitus into the internal and stable one.

Lower-status parents, under the influences of traditional value systems and reverent culture with priority in rank, have respect for teachers. They tend to understand knowledge in a utilitarian way; they are aware that knowledge is a "*good thing*": being knowledgeable, as a means for winning social respect, could not be measured by material standards or be replaced. They take teachers as authority figures who are well equipped with adequate knowledge and are prone to warn their children against corruption without "causing troubles". On the other hand, being less educated, they offer limited assistance to their children academically and spiritually and rely much on educators at school. Their children have a low likelihood to naturally develop the privileged habitus encouraged by the school field. But notably, underclass students' respect for teachers and their strong incentives for changing their destinies, which rooted in the deepest of their minds, actually can be taken as a kind of capital— spiritual capital which spurs them on in a society that had witnessed limited opportunities of intergenerational upward mobility. In the Confucian circle, learning is a moral endeavor (Li, 2010), which involves much self-improvement and enduring hardship. Particularly for those low-status children, being educated is a "task" that has been appended to ethic meaning, which has a direct bearing on honor or disgrace of a family. Hence underachievement is supposed to "fail to live up to parents", which makes some underclass children sitting on the thrones. As can be seen, students' urgent desire of changing destiny with moral implications, their respect for teachers, and teachers' display of respect, empathy, patience, and the subsequent feedback work together to transform those students' individual habitus into the desired habitus expected by the school institution.

#### 5.2.4 Stories of "dancing with shackles"

Part of the collected data reveals young students' tensions between their prior experiences and the current practices, which further reshape their identities, attitudes, and behavior. Through their discourses about educational and living experiences that have been making who they are, this part reveals the pervasive suffering between some students' prior identity and expected identity, and the tension between their individual history and current situations they face at school.

Except for Yun, the sparkling academic star, who is constructed as a myth at school, and Fa, who is always able to stay the top 2 in his class, as well as Jiao, who is constructed as a moral example, other underclass students reveal negative experiences at school with different degrees. Qing, Hua, Juan, and Dan expressed that their academic performances were "just above average" or only average no matter how hard they tried, and they were enduring catastrophic discontent with the outcome. In the face of experiences which they have constructed as being negative, they try to desalt them and keep reminding themselves of "just focusing on the study" rather than ask for help. They are sometimes tortured by their identities, as a daughter, a sister, a niece, and a high school student.

Qing, with thick glasses, is a very silent and self-disciplined student, and maintains an uncompromising focus on academic excellence. Her struggle is conspicuous— everybody can detect the gap between her endeavors and exam results. It seems that she cannot relax a little bit— she seldom smiles or takes the initiative to talk to others but buries her head in the huge backlog of study materials during break time. Qing has a pessimistic view that she will never be popular among her classmates like Yun. She defines academic success as being a top 10 student in the highest track class at school. Her position of a slightly above average is, of course, incongruent with her expectations. She is thus tortured by the juxtaposition of a sensible child and a not very competitive student who imposes her family an extra burden.

*Interviewer: "Your teacher said that you were hardworking and devoted a lot of time to your studies. Do you have a bit of leisure time?"*

*Qing: "No, I don't. When I wanted to slack off, I simply got to feel guilty. Compared to those of the junior high school, courses are more difficult, and questions are immensely more complex. It's true that people quickly get tired of monotonous and boring*

*life with endless tasks preparing for the college entrance examination, including me, but this is too insignificant to mention compared with the joy of getting admitted to your dream university.”*

*Interviewer: “How’s your life going on at the moment?”*

*Qing: “It’s generally ok. Teachers here have a strong sense of responsibility, and classmates are all striving to become better. But my pressure is overwhelming, from all directions.”*

*Interviewer: “Did you mean anything else except for the peer rivalry?”*

*Qing: “Yes, I’m stressed out because I’m not academically good enough. I’ll die without proving myself. That’s so depressing. You know, my parents and relatives are well-connected, and they discuss a lot about family affairs, big and small. I know it’s morally wrong to speak ill of my relatives in their absence, but I really hate them! My experiences in this class are far from being successful. I’m not as clever as some talented classmates. Every time, when there is a test or exam, this bunch of people (referring to her relatives) can’t wait to know the result, and they always want to be proved to be “right” and foresighted. When I screw up the exam, there would be a real fog on my mind because I know they would find fault with me and criticize me for being selfish and disregarding of my family. So if I spoiled a test, I would cry on the thought of the cost spent on attending this class and their scorn and denouncement. When I think of those persons who look down on me, I’m even more motivated to achieve academic success.”*

*Interviewer: “How do you define academic success?”*

*Qing: “I would say at least the top 10 in my class.”*

*Interviewer: “It’s by no means easy! By the way, how’s about your relationship with your teachers and classmates?”*

*Qing: “We enjoy the strong academic atmosphere in this class. There’s much less discrimination of students’ social origins and gossip about other things other than study, compared with other class types like the parallel classes. In our class, most students are from rich families who seem to be polite and talkative with a glib tongue. They get on well with each other and teachers like them, but they stay cold and distant with us and don’t talk much with us. Sometimes, they exchange ideas about their prior experiences of taking private lessons from various musical instruments, painting, calligraphy, as well as their experiences of traveling and buying those expensive things. As a person who hasn’t even attended a cinema, I can’t join those topics, but frankly speaking, I often silently listen without being noticed, and then I’m thinking how wonderful if I attended a famous university, which brings me greater pleasure compared with buying those stuff from famous brands. So you can see our situation— students like me are somehow lonely and hyper-stressed. Sometimes we are terribly self-conscious because we are really ordinary in this class with mediocre achievement, without any talent, but we don’t show our sense of inferiority. We talk very little and focus ourselves only on study.”*

The family made the decision that Qing attend the Gifted Class while her family was financially struggling imposed great pressure on this student, making her believe that she “must” achieve success for becoming one of the best ten students in her class anyhow. She hates the composed stigma of being a selfish child given by her relatives. The identity of a good and docile child who considered of her family a lot, with moral implications, which remains still important for her, reminds her of the sense of guilt and spurs her to go higher towards a top student but at the same time tortures her as she locates herself as “a good but not top student”.

The leading role of the eldest child in the family is always emphasized by Hua’s parents. Hua has long hoped for being a good example for her younger sister, for which she foremost needs to be a high-achieving student at school. She actually has a small success, but she defines academic success as being the top 15 in her class, which is still competitive. However, she finds that her ability falls short of her ambition. She is struggling alone without making her situations understood by her parents and teachers.

*Interviewer: “Please tell me something about your experiences. How are you getting along with your studies?”*

*Hua: “My parents always said, ‘if you did something, your sister would imitate and follow.’ There’s no one who can be the initiator for changing my family status except me. Recognizing this, I’m always trying to serve as a good example for my younger sister. But now I feel a bit powerless. I found the difficulty of knowledge in the upper secondary school is extraordinary, but teaching processes are rapid because the sooner they finish teaching, the sooner we start the review stage for the college entrance examination.”*

*Interviewer: “Have you got any support from people when you were in trouble?”*

*Hua: “I desperately envy students with knowledgeable parents who can help with their studies. Pity, neither of my parents has any culture. Education was undervalued in my parents’ families when they were young. Normally, I don’t turn to teachers. They like brilliant students; I don’t want to give them the impression that I’m stupid. However, mutual help among classmates is much more common; I sometimes turn to my peers, asking them to help me solve a problem. But generally, I think the effect is minimal. I think I can do much better if I took private lessons for promoting my weaknesses, such as Chinese and English. I heard that some students had made great progress by taking private lessons. But no way, we can’t afford the courses.”*

*Interviewer: “Do your parents learn about this situation?”*

*Hua: ‘No, I only tell them the good news while concealing what is unpleasant. I don’t want to hurt their feelings or cause any anxiety or panic. I feel that I’m a failure, and I’m always blaming myself for not setting a good example. Now I have no alternatives but to gather all my energy to catch up.’*

Hua has a high sense of responsibility for being a model elder sister and a child who saves her parents' concerns, which enables her to desalt other unpleasant factors from the environment, and at the same time, digests negative things she encounters by herself without making her difficulties understood by her teachers and parents.

Juan and Dan also hate their identity as an average student, and they have never stopped trying to continue to climb the table. They have expressed that they are struggling with Chinese and English, which seemingly require a high demand for the language sense—exactly the “feeling for the game”, or cultural capital.

*“Before I got my feet in the school gate, I managed my study at ease. I used to be an enviable top student. There were only twice that I ranked the fifth in my class, which was the worst result I had got. However, I found no subject easy now, especially English. I have no idea why I’ve lost the strong learning capacity, which I previously owned. After the magic halo disappeared, I felt upset for being an average student, especially every time when my parents ask my ranking in exams. I always want to do better than my brother who really sets a good example! I’m afraid there’s nothing I can do but work even harder.” (Juan)*

Dan also attaches great importance to painstaking efforts with illustrations of how she takes full advantage of those patches of time.

*“Every time I think about the picture where my parents are painstakingly working with only little economic return, I feel painful and guilty. I thought that I could continue to be an excellent student to make them happy. However, the reality is cruel. I’m far from being clever! I thought I should work even harder, so I recited knowledge units of politics while my classmates were playing in recess; I did math problems, taking the time off the gym class; I read in the toilet; I learned English new words by heart while I’m commuting; I was anxious about my study problems while having meals. I did badly, especially English and Chinese. I dared say that I’d tried every possible method suggested by our teachers, but I still failed to make any progress. I just felt like I only slept but awaked from the sleep to surprisingly find the fact that I was in another world, when comparing the past performances and the present ones.” (Dan)*

The school is a social space which creates various educational myths and witnesses conspiracy consciously or unconsciously. Both “the born talents” such as the star students and “the trained talents”

which refer to students with remarkable progress are mystified at school. Students who are considered talents have the most important point— “learning ability” which is repeatedly uttered by teachers. Teachers spare no effort to sell the idea that “*if you are not a born talent, you can also be a trained talent through painstaking efforts*”. Juan and dan, with strong aspirations, revealed their frustration about the phenomenon that their academic ranking seemed to have little progress after multiple attempts, feeling powerless. They believe the existence of “the born talents” who are with high intelligence, but their expressions like “I’ve no idea” and “I’d tried...but...” demonstrate that they are suspicious about the idea of “the trained talent” that have been repeatedly stated by their teachers. Even so, they believe that non-stop hard work is the only way to made up for the lack of natural talent in this marathon but they hardly consider other possible effective means.

### 5.2.5 Stories of being left behind

The remaining eleven underclass informants have reported their negative experiences at this school at a much deeper level by revealing that not only academic performances but also their family origins influence how they are treated. Many of them initially declined joining this project with a similar consideration that they were the so-called inferior losers who were not entitled to say anything. The trauma of starting upper secondary education in this new educational setting is impressive for them. They have suffered from questionable identities and the painful tensions between their biographical background of impoverished families and the identity of urban key school students. They face ubiquitously abrupt embarrassment and multiple risks, which contributes to a decline in learning motivations and academic performances. Their discourses are bound up with their memory of family suffering, the sense of insecurity, and most importantly, their feelings of being inferior. They stepped inside the school gate with a fair degree of self-confidence at the very beginning but then abruptly experienced a range of disruptions and setbacks relating to their identity which entailed negative meanings. Negative experiences and uncomfortable feelings could commence at the very beginning of this new journey and always accompanied them as they were gradually going through a series of campus events, like learning practices

in the homeroom and also collective activities outside the homeroom. For them, every other tiny stuff can be the last straw.

#### 5.2.5.1 Becoming outcasts: “it turned out a bit of a damp squib”

Navigating in the highly-coveted school is not without its challenges for many underclass children with a lack of pre-school training before they embark on this learning voyage. Educational inequality is continuously constructed through daily discourses and practices at school. Those interactions enable students to identify acceptable patterns and boundaries when they make continuous paraphrases of what happened to them. The moral boundary among students with different family backgrounds is common and remarkable, which initially comes as a shock for many underclass children. Feng talked about how she felt when her classmate related her rural identity with the cleaning work. She is less willing to decline people’s requests, even in the situation when she harbors intense resentments because she has long been educated by her parents to be an unambitious and cautious person in case of conflicts with others.

*Interviewer: “How’s about your school life?”*

*Feng: “Too bad! I thought I was underappreciated and then I realize that I have an awful lot of trouble. Social class is an unavoidable topic in my class—the worst type of class throughout the school! I felt very uncomfortable from the first day when we were required to do the homeroom clean-up. One classmate from the urban family came to me and said with superiority and something that I called hypocritical politeness, ‘Hey, I know you are from the countryside and are for sure good at doing housework. Would you help me to get a basin of water for cleaning the window?’ It seemed that I had no reason to reject it. ‘Damn it’, I silently cursed her in my heart, but I did what she had requested with great reluctance and stabbing pain, though without showing my feelings.”*

*Interviewer: “Really, the first day of school? But how did she know about your family background?”*

*Feng: “I’ve no idea, that was exactly what happened. Hmm...But I had some clues. Those urban children are deft to grasp details. Perhaps because I unwisely dressed an outdated coat which I inherited from my elder sister. Oh, it was with the dark pink and flowers, which was regarded rustic by those so-called city dwellers, and of course. I didn’t realize that it was outdated before. The second (the basis of that judgment), I guessed, was that I got tanned, while most urban classmates were whiter. During the summer vacation, many of them didn’t go out a lot but stayed comfortably at home studying or went to private lessons.”*

Interviewer: "You meant that they naturally had a meticulous observation on others?"

Feng: "So what? Those were all little tricks. It was a pity that I didn't know before. I'm influenced imperceptibly after a long period of time—I mean now I'm not bad at paraphrasing those details."

Interviewer: "But if you didn't want to do something... let's go back to your orientation-day experiences, why not directly rejecting your classmates' request in the cleaning?"

Feng: "My parents always tell me that forbearance and tolerance are people's fine qualities which help to decrease conflicts among people. I agree and I won't abandon this good quality. I don't like them (referring to urban kids), and I can never be one of them! They are really spoiled, arrogant, and they are always asking too much!"

Feng's mother has little trust in her daughter's promises, abilities, and frowns upon her daughter's "character". When Feng felt an urge to seek help from her history teacher one time, her mother overwhelmingly discouraged her in a negative way, doubting if the teacher was willing to spare no effort to help "an unprepossessing child" just like her daughter. The mother believed that her daughter's request would come out of the blue for her history teacher. This scene happened in Feng's family on a weekend.

Feng: "Mom, I won't come back next weekend, ok?"

The mother (was looking aggressive and impatient): "What are you thinking about? Tell me! What are you calculating about again?"

Feng (was trying her best to deflate her feeling of sullen antagonism): "The journey back home takes long. I plan to stay at school so that I can have more time for my studies."

The mother: "Don't cheat on me! Otherwise, you know! Never a nice thing to happen!"

Feng: "I certainly won't do that (with a macro pause around ten seconds). Oh, there's one more thing, for which I've no idea who else I can discuss with. Our history teacher treats us good. I'm hesitating if I should take the initiative to talk to her about how to improve my history learning via the opportunity of consulting her a couple of difficult academic questions."

The mother: "Your idea stinks. I've no idea what your teacher would think about that. Maybe she doesn't want to have a conversation with you at all. If you really want to, I suggest you carefully consider what you want to say and how you're going

*to say. You'd better write them down in advance. Now you know, you pay for your bad character, against which I keep warning you. You're not a kid who has knowledge about how to please others at all!"*

*Feng: "Then I won't do that. Forget it!"*

*The mother: "You're so useless and wrecked."*

Feng's mother anticipated that her daughter might be treated as a biased way, so she had offered her useful and pertinent suggestions before her daughter started her schooling there, hoping that it helped her to adjust to the new environment, but it was not adopted by Feng. When this problem happened, the mother could not effectively help to cope with her daughter's interpersonal situation of being excluded at school, complaining that her daughter failed to live up their expectations.

*"Girls care more about details in their nature. I expected there might be problems studying there at the beginning, but her father and I had decided to take a chance despite a barrel of money. I warned her before she headed out to school, though she would never listen, considering those contents useless. I told her like 'you don't like talking and smiling. It's wrong! You must change— to learn to be more outgoing.', 'It's very likely that your urban classmates won't like you, but it doesn't matter. If so, focus yourself only on your study, no matter what others are talking about you. The hidden reason is obvious: only when you are academically better than them, they admire you, and vice versa.' However, no matter how hard I've tried to persuade her, she bears a heavy psychological burden and let me down for caring too much about not being popular among girls in her class. For example, when her classmates are talking while laughing, she would suspect if they are laughing at her. She would even remind me of wearing 'proper' clothes while attending the parent-teacher conference. I don't want to attend such a meeting because it gives me a funny feeling. I mean, only parents of high-achieving children will be glad to attend such a conference as it brings them 'face'. Poor families are more likely to meet a perfect storm of problems! I have no clue how we get where we are today, and I don't know who is to blame, but it couldn't be us— her parents, because we've tried our best. She would sometimes complain that she often stayed at home without parents' company when she was a little child. It hurts so much. We had no choice at that time, and we were exhausted from a plenty of heavy work."* (Feng's mother)

Underclass parents are struggling to solve the problem of food and clothing, while their children are stigmatized as persons with a low taste of dressing and talking at school. Except for the dark-pink pullover, the oversized woven sack also serves as the symbol of poverty and the flavor of the provincial society. Qiang also realized that personal belongings had betrayed a person's status after experiencing exclusions from his classmates. He has lived through negative experiences at a deeper level through peers' abuse, in

terms of mockery and name-calling. He swallowed his sufferings since he did not know how distressed their parents would feel, which he felt shameful.

*“A suitcase costs about 300 CNY. We thought it was an unnecessary expense while a sack could hold all the belongings I needed. Besides, a large sum of money has already spent on studying and living here. Hence on the day for registration, I came with a woven sack. Then I noticed that they had a meaningfully contemptuous smile towards me. I was so naive that I had thought that students in a key-point school only cared about academic performances. I have subsequently encountered many tricks from some classmates. I knew I was nicknamed, but I had to pretend that I didn’t know in case of more troubles.”*  
*(Qiang)*

Jun is no better in terms of interpersonal relationships in his class. He is becoming even more solitary after several months of studying there, expressing that he is “the lowest of the low”. He usually eats and goes to the dormitory alone. He is terrified when he is called to answer questions during the class in the presence of his classmates because public contempt paralyzed him and made him “at breaking point”.

*Interviewer: “Could you tell me something about your school experiences?”*

*Jun: “I’ve encountered many setbacks since I am here. I had no talents for study, and I quickly discovered that I was unpopular among my classmates, which together lowered my learning motivation, though I wanted to be good. Those idiots are snobs and are extremely offensive and hurtful to me! When I was invited to stand up to answer teachers’ questions, some even began to laugh secretly.”*

*Interviewer: “Is your teacher ok with that? Wouldn’t your teachers stop them?”*

*Jun: “Our class is the worst at school with many bad students who are with problematic behaviors. Teachers stop them at the beginning, but once similar things were inundated, they gradually turn a blind eye, at least in many situations. Worse still, if the teacher didn’t stop them on time, they might even guffaw and scream. I’ve never thought about this scenario before.”*

Integration is no less important than the study for a student. The need to “find a niche for oneself”, which requires not just fitting in academically but also fitting in socially (Power, Edwards, & Wigfall, 2003: 57). Social isolation brings high school students about the difficulties of navigating in the adolescence milieu, thus leading to academic difficulties in modern society where social networks are important (Langenkamp, 2011). Discriminations suffocates them. Kang said that many students from rural families were always

trying to hide the rural identity there since it was closely bound up to negative meanings. However, it seemed that many happenings at school kept reminding them of this identity. Those seemingly “inconsequential” behaviors, which have no relation to academic achievement, are also labeled as something ridiculous and bad in a closely-monitored space encouraging etiquette.

At school, academic success brings a higher position not only academically, but also morally and socially. Both Yan and Sheng from Hongzhi Class have identified the sufferings for the identity with the combination of an impoverished child and a below-average student.

*“I don’t think it a pleasurable experience of studying here, though I cherish this opportunity a lot. Stress, you know. It seems that many students around you carry unique skills. Another annoying thing is the discrimination against needy students who are not academically excellent. If you are extraordinary, for example, the top 5, there’s no problem! Everyone gives you a green card; no one would say a negative word about you; and you win everybody’s respect. But the extraordinary also means the minority, after all. Being a poor student, you win respect only if you are academically good enough.” (Yan)*

The identity as an underclass student can be abruptly awakened if they were not one of the top students. As mentioned earlier, Sheng was well aware of the relationship between social hierarchies and academic outcomes. When he was introducing his experiences, likewise, he paid great attention to people’s different social origins by stating how “false” Hongzhi students treat needy students with different academic performances.

*“Perhaps you know, some of my classmates with resourceful parents have also been blended in our Hongzhi Class. For example, everybody knows that Hui’s parents are rich for doing timber business, so Hui is not a genuine Hongzhi student at all. I think some fake Hongzhi students are canny and unreliable. They are nice to my classmate Fa because they are snobbish—they know Fa is breathtaking intelligent who can solve their problems relating on their studies. Without the identity of a high achiever, I’m treated totally different. The identity of the combination of a child from a poor family and an underachiever brings a lot of grievances, annoyance, and inequality, though this situation in Hongzhi Class is not as serious as in other types of classes.” (Sheng)*

Underclass students’ inferiority complex in front of the upper-class advantage was frequently reported, especially in lower-status classes. Chang narrated his experiences relating sufferings from inferiority

when his distasteful behaviors and “bad habits” were detected by his classmate, with a somber and dazed expression on his face.

*“I thought boys are more tolerant, but I was wrong! I was laughed at for making noises while I was having meals in the canteen. I felt embarrassed and made up my mind to correct what they consider as misbehavior. But before I planned to show them my revised behavior, I made another mistake tragically—I picked up some rice on the table subconsciously, which was a knee jerk reaction. Later, I sadly found that it became a public laughingstock among some classmates quickly. All in all, we’re second-class citizens without dignity.” (Chang)*

The then-and-now comparison of how they are noticed by the group also profoundly shapes their self-location and perception of the relation between “them” and “us”. Wei stated how the same reaction is regarded totally different between her prior school and the current context; she realized that people were always expected to “say something” aptly in the conversation gap in this educational setting.

*“Students from my previous schools were not competitive enough. I was then noticed for repeatedly achieving good exam results. My teachers said like ‘Only you have worked out the difficult problem.’ or ‘You’ve done well in the exam, and your parents will be proud of you.’ In that case, I would just respond with a smile with modesty, which I thought a proper manner. However, you would be judged like ‘oh you are shy and introvert. Why don’t you say something? How bad that you don’t know the ways of the world!’ (Wei)*

Anguish, anxiety, trepidation, fear, worries, and self-criticism are frequently expressed among underclass students when they are stuck with difficult things such as unavoidable public speaking, which means that they are forced to step out of their safe zone so as to behave properly. Wei continued to talk about the public-speaking experiences with an illustration of a practice in English class where students were instructed to pair up and make situational dialogues.

*“The most horrible thing is, of course, the presentation which I’ve never done before. In primary and junior high school, teachers explained while we were taking notes in class, and we did many exercises after class. Hmm... so I’ve never thought things would happen like this—we’d been invited to make those unnerving presentations! This activity creeps me out. I couldn’t prevent feeling overwhelmingly nervous, and nothing could work off my nervousness. It was a nightmare that when I was named by our English teacher to make dialogues with my partner in a given context and display our work in the presence of all. I knew they laughed at me for my weird pronunciation and also the damned quivered voice with stammers and overstrain.” (Wei)*

Before Wei had finished speaking, her classmate Gui popped up to fill in a short pause and expressed that he felt the same way.

*“Public display is such a nerve-wracking time. I guess this stupid, unnecessary practice is because of the pressure from the so-called urban educational reform. This practice is intimidating, and you can’t imagine how nervous I am. For example, even if I can work out a math problem, when I’m invited to the platform in front of a large crowd of people, I feel my heart pounding, and my hands sweat pouring down, and my brain seems to stop working immediately, being completely blank. Then I lose my train of thought with incredible fear. That’s shameful! Oh, can you suggest our teachers canceling this way of teaching and the like?” (Gui)*

Besides, Gui was always trying to hide his frugal lifestyle resulting from his family conditions. He realized that the different ways to spend money had influenced interpersonal relationships among classmates—“straightforwardness” brought friends while “ungenerousness” repulsing friends.

*“I grew up in a poor family, and I must live a thrifty life. I spend as little as possible for eating and clothing while some classmates are spending extravagantly to show their straightforwardness. That indeed helps to make more friends. I also criticize myself for my taciturn demeanor, which is not popular at all. But I still find it difficult to join their topics because when I speak, I suspect they would pay close attention to me and discover my cheap clothing as well as my unpopular and annoying accent. Last time, a classmate even unreservedly said, ‘You are not good-looking, you are poor, and you don’t study well. What are you going to be in the future? It hurt me so bad!’ (Gui)*

After the interview was finished, Gui expressed again that he still wanted to talk to me concerning “other matters” where he showed his appeal where he expected me to help to solve the problem which made him feel extremely bad by persuading their teachers to adopt the total monologic teaching method, leaving the students sitting still while taking notes.

Knowledge possessed in a particular social group can also lead to social divisions. Embarrassment is also reported to exist in peers’ discussions about hobbies. “Hobby” in the context is not a hobby in its broad sense, but actually, an enviable “specialty” or Bourdieusian cultural capital—individual’s abilities or gifts that are proved and confirmed by the official bureau. Unlike their urban counterparts, underclass students were naturally raised in a family without attending any interest-oriented classes or Mathematical Olympiad courses which flood the market in the city. However, the deprived opportunities caused by

economic shortfalls are unconsciously exchanged into “a lack of talent”. Guo felt a strong sense of inferiority when he quickly discovered that he did not have any specialty in a self-deprecating way, compared with his urban counterparts.

*“We are congenitally deficient. We don’t stand at the same starting line! Li got a prize for prose writing; Zhang passed 10-level for violin playing; Wang got a certificate as a ‘national-level-athlete, and so on. Many urban classmates have at least one specialty, mathematical ability, linguistic intuition, musicianship, or something else. When it’s my turn, I cannot say that I can also be taken as an athlete because I can quickly climb up a tree. Or can I?” (Guo)*

Can has the awareness to hide her rural identity by imitating the clothing and manners of her urban classmates, which reflects the powerful existence of the overwhelming mainstream culture.

*“Poverty-stricken student is a sensitive word for me. I have a strong character, and I want to be esteemed by other people. I always know that with the identity as a poor student, I must be a top student if I want respect. But it’s not so easy to be successful, especially in a competitive school. I’m not excellent, so I’m observed and scrutinized, and so I deserve contempt and grievance! Overcoming external influences is not that easy. They anyhow laughed at my funny haircut, dressing, and table manners. I couldn’t forget the first day I was here with a pair of fake famous-brand shoes brought by my mom from a stall, which I didn’t realize before. It was so embarrassing that two girls from rich families noticed that very quickly, and they scornfully laughed at me. I thought it was my parents to blame for not taking good care of my image; after all, I don’t have another chance to make a first impression. I was angry with them, but they were so surprised to know that this ‘trivial matter’ could bring me annoyance! It’s hopeless to expect any understanding from them. They don’t know what’s happening at school but only tell me that as a poor child, I shouldn’t compare with others, and that I should automatically screen out anything that is irreverent to study, but how is that possible? Hmm, I admit that my previous hairstyle and clothing were really funny, boorish, and unacceptable anyway!” (Can)*

Their narratives remind me that events and practices in the school field and people’s different worlds cannot be taken for granted. For underclass students, this unintendedly unfriendly educational setting is like a giant net with pervasive powerful surveillance where they navigate very carefully within—like dancing on the thin ice. The slightest little bit of inattention to their manners would betray their social origins. All the events remind them of the imposed abominable label—the rural or needy identity that cannot be thrown off. The sequence of events reconstructs their life-world, rewrites their sense of being, relocates their expectations, reorients their trajectory, negatively influences the outcome of their multiple struggles, and dampens their flaming dream of transforming the status of themselves and their family.

Discourses contain various inner binary codes which are special forms of well-rehearsed distinctions whose two values are related in a way that the negation of one side implies the affirmation of its opposite (i.e., man/woman, true/false, right/wrong, mind/body, reason/emotion); codes themselves are amoral since no value can be universal (Jahraus et al., 2012). Although programs allow a certain level of flexibility, they are evolutionarily created and established by repeated selection providing classification schemes (Jahraus et al., 2012). These students' narratives apparently convey their anxious preservation of the distinction of "hick identity", which should be abandoned, and "oppidan identity"—the appreciated code. Hick is stigmatized while oppidan is ennobled—"hick" implies the stereotype of ignorance, economic difficulties, greed, and conservation while oppidan for knowledge, elegance, generosity, and innovation. The modern school system is both a representative and reflection of the culture of the oppidan and the middle class, which guides its orientation of programming, categorizing students, and placing them in different positions. Underclass students have to identify and "rediscover" themselves through endless observations, comparisons, and contrasts for clarifying the distinction between "they" and "we". Stereotype mystifies and conceals the hidden complex power relationship and assigns individuals to the hierarchical positions. As can be seen, underclass students' identity plays a vital role in their academic achievements in secondary education. It is likely that they live in a world of duality and are unwittingly expelled as outsiders in this urban key-point school field.

#### **5.2.5.2 Marginal persons with the identity problem**

These underachieving underclass students are swept by the modernization process, experiencing dramatic life reconstruction involving experiences of embarrassment, frustration, and exclusion, thus relocating themselves as being inferior and unimportant at school. These students' life and educational experiences are marked with moments of scattering and transition as they enter the moral field of a key-point urban school. The paradox lies in that the majority of the underclass students does not benefit from their highly-coveted school. Migration brings about not only geographical movement but also the breaking of home ties, making people "marginal" men living on the margin of two cultures (Park, 1928). Risks and pitfalls

scatter in different contexts, making it the pulverizer of some students' passionate hope of changing their destiny.

Underclass students seldom easily gain academic achievements in this higher track school. On the one hand, the education they previously received took place at schools with fewer resources; on the other hand, setting aside the family support, many students at this school are much more competitive compared with those in lower track schools. However, for underclass students, there lacks preparatory assistance which ensures a smooth transition from junior high to senior high much easier. The school seems to be a new world—an unfriendly environment for quite many of them.

*"As I came here, I'd say that I fell behind. In the summer vacation, many of my urban classmates went to private lessons while I was helping my parents for their small business. We didn't expect that it made such a huge difference at all." (Can)*

*"Some local students knew each other before school started since their parents had learned who would be our subject teachers and sent their children there for taking private lessons in the summer vacation. Some of those parents are like rainmakers! They are knowledgeable and doing professional jobs, and they easily make friends with teachers. It's a sad thing of falling from the height; I meant the shift from an excellent student to a bad one." (Chang)*

Underclass students' academic excellence, which they have previously experienced, is pending in this relatively competitive school—a new world far from being certain. They observe in which way they are observed and the problem of identity arises. It seems that there is nowhere to place their souls. Some students have expressed their haze for their identity: they neither belong to the urban school nor to their rural home. In their homeland, they are seen as urban key-school students, but at school, they are labeled as students with economic difficulties relating to the rural areas and rustic tastes. Their identification is ambiguous and perplexing. In their community, they remind themselves of their identity as the oppidan—they try their best to pretend to be; but in the school, they lose their sense of place. These mental stresses paralyze them. This has largely influenced the outcome of their academic endeavors—a decline in motivations and performances, which in turn, causes great spiritual pressure and a sense of guilt for "letting parents down".

When underclass children are making transitions in the new school field, the field restructures their identities. These students' stories show the inequality in the moral line, which negatively influences their relocations of themselves. When the field appears to be a brand new world for them, the situation can be quite risky. Before approaching the school setting, many of them had little consciousness or limited preparation for the liminality that they were going to embrace. "Liminality" is an unavoidable problem in postmodern society embracing many uncertainties, tortuous changes, and complexity. Liminality is "betwixt and between" where something is not classified, and not yet classified with both ambiguous disorientation and new possibility; it is a stage of reflection involving interstructural character (Turner, 1967), and it is also a stage of being experienced by the person on the threshold making the transition (Cook - Sather, 2006). In the liminality, the previous continuity is severely interrupted. Students' many embarrassing and negative experiences are one of the social effects of the sweep of liminality. It is difficult for them to construct a positive prospect with too much presence of anxiety. They immerse themselves in liminality without previous spiritual preparation and tutoring or a pathfinder after they enter the field. Their motives and enthusiasm are wearing away through a series of events with negative meanings. Besides, when they are struggling to know what is considered as being appropriate in the new world—the natural thing for middle-class students, they have been experiencing mental stress and declines in academic performances.

### 5.3 Summary and discussions

The first section of this chapter introduced underclass students' reconstruction of their previous experiences, including their perception about their own identity and the relationship with the outside world, as well as their responding thinking and behaving induced by their habitus. In this urban school, underclass students who are at the bottom of the academic ladder significantly outnumber those who are at the top. Students who luckily have had their impressive turning-point stories for achieving academic breakthrough are rare. There is still a good proportion of underclass students who are struggling to maintain the medium level. The second section moved on to discuss underclass students who were grouped into five categories: Star students who have had successful experiences involving outstanding

academic achievements and good interpersonal relationships, with the representativeness of Yun and Fa; Students with around-average academic results generally had pleasant school experiences without a problematic interpersonal relationship, being represented by Jiao and Ying; Students with an around-average or average academic performances who are still struggling to go higher, with Qing, Hua, Juan, Dan as representatives; Students who have achieved upward academic mobility, with Jie, Lian, Mei as representatives; Underachieving students— those who have been experiencing unprecedented exclusions and setbacks with the identity as both an underachieving student and an impoverished child, represented by eleven students— Chang, Kang, Sheng, Yan, Guo, Gui, Qiang, Can, Wei, Jun, and Feng.

### **5.3.1 Educational cliché about underclass students**

On the whole, the upper secondary education where peer rivalry is increasingly getting intense is a new challenge for the majority of underclass students. Underclass students are overwhelmed by multiple forces that altogether negotiate their identities and situations. In the context of “developing science and technology for socialist modernization”, they are told numerous stories by society that they can be empowered by education and achieved the destiny conversion by becoming successful candidates in Gaokao that is closely related to a person’s future status and life chances.

### **5.3.2 Children’s family commitments and parents’ little support**

Underclass students have tremendous moral pressure to be academically successful while their parents are providing limited support for their study.

#### **5.3.2.1 Study as a moral endeavor**

In the Confucian circle, learning is a moral endeavor (Li, 2001, 2005), which involves much self-improvement and hardship enduring. For the lower-status children, being educated is a task bundled with the ethic meaning, which has a direct bearing on honor or disgrace of a family. Underachievers are

constructed as those who fail to live up to their parents, which makes those overburdened children sitting on the thrones. The traditional belief systems have constructed the myth enabling their parents, relatives or elder persons with a certain authority in their communities to believe that children are treated as parents' private property; those who get accepted by a topnotch university is a shining event that brings "face", i.e., the sense of priority of bringing "a glory on their ancestors", through which they could "hold their head high" in the neighborhood.

"In Chinese families, the child's personal academic achievement is the value and honor of the whole family.

If you fail [in] school, you bring embarrassment to the family and lose face. If you do good, you bring honor to the family and do not lose face. A lot of value is placed on the child to do well for the family. "

(Chao, 1996)

With an underfunded pension system, quite a few Chinese underclass parents hold the idea of bringing up children so as to support themselves when they are getting old.<sup>42</sup> These parents thus rest their hopes on their children for converting the poverty status of the family, which has, together with the former factor, converted into underclass students' tremendous moral pressure. With the identity as underclass children, their successful experiences are socially constructed as positively moving and stirring saving-the-family stories with tremendous pedagogical meanings, totally ignoring children's interests; underachievers are subjectively and arbitrarily labeled as lazy, irresponsible, and thankless persons demonstrating bizarre behaviors.

### 5.3.2.2 Overcome the bitter to be better

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<sup>42</sup> In China, there are three patterns for eldercare so far, with an underfunded social welfare system, family-supporting is dominated, accounting for about 90 percent.

Except for being told to “be a good child” where good means being controllable and docile, few underclass children had reported any memory about family education in their childhood. Underclass parents believed that painstaking effort was the unitary factor legitimating academic success— “*if you wish to rise above the ordinary, you should suffer the bitterest part of hardship*”, while being not aware of deep-rooted cultural causes. For instance, in Jie’s case, he floundered when he was making an attempt to integrate himself into the middle-class taste of the language flow. However, bounded by livelihood with little knowledge about learning contents and educational practices in the school field, his parents blamed his low performances for not working hard. Void of understanding, dialogues between parents and children tend to get disagreeable. The sense of dual guilty was reported to prevalently exist among the underclass students when they felt that they might cause trouble to teachers or their academic performances failed to live up to “parental sacrifice”. However, paradoxically, these two things are actually interconnected.

The traditional family structure, together with the “teaching to the test”, has endowed parents with great authority in children’s educational activities. Under this system, children’s important life events such as profession and marriage were not the personal stuff but on the command of parents, being bundling with the family interests and commitments. Authoritative parents, under the influence of Confucianism, believed that “spare the rod, spoil the child” was the proper parenting if their children were against their will and authority. Most underclass informants reported that they had experienced corporal punishment in the family context. Confucian teachings reminded people of the filial piety and fraternal duty through dutiful children’s touching stories of undertaking the family responsibility. A plethora of such practices, aiming at achieving a close parent-child connection, significantly restrict children’s freedom and impair their mental independence. Growing up in this environment, many underclass children hold a very conservative attitude in front of new things, gradually falling behind as they enter the new moral field of the urban with rapid changes. Moreover, many of them have reported that heart-to-heart conversations are severely lacking between underclass parents and children. When parents are informed that their children encounter adversity in their studies, they do not have effective solutions but just repeat what they have said multiple times, such as “*you must work hard at school and avoid embarking on the old road*

*that I have been through.*" Children find this "advice" big and bland, and they chronically develop an immune to similar telling and retelling. On the other hand, educational myths also advocate that hard-working spirit assists students to become "the trained talents", when it is not the case, they feel enormous confused and powerless with their existed old habitus after multiple attempts prove to be unavailing.

#### 5.3.2.3 Meager family support

Underclass parents provide minimal help for their children's study due to the lack of both cultural capital and economic capital. Although they know "what", for example, they are aware that knowledge is a "*good thing*": being knowledgeable, as a means for winning social respect, could not be measured or replaced by material standards. They are also aware that knowledge changes a person's destiny; for example, in the interview, all the underclass parents equate knowledge with the capability of making money or securing an official position. Based on this consideration, they are willing to "*bite the bucket*" for providing their children with the best education within their limits and abilities. However, Being an academically successful student is, for many of underclass children, only a beautiful wish after all while the process of realizing it is much more difficult and complicated, for which many underclass parents have little knowledge about the tough process and the "tricks" involved. Confining to their life-world with insufficient cultural capital or academic qualification, these parents do not know "how", for example, practices that are happening inside the school wall are foreign to them and they have very limited knowledge about how to scientifically guide their children's academic work; many of them even lack verbal communication or patient company. They rely much on teachers in a passive way. Secondary education in China has been alienated into an ever-increasing "arms race" with the increasingly cut-throat rivalry. Children from resourceful families are likely to grasp the chance to excel with the help of their parents' allocation and dispose of their economic, social, and cultural capital for getting shadow education. On the contrary, underclass children are deprived of opportunities for taking such private lessons, which also minimizes their academic success in this education system that advocates peer rivalry. As can be seen, many underclass students feel the great tension between their ambitions of getting admissions to a

desired university for assuming the responsibility for their families and the “cruel reality” of the unsatisfactory academic results.

### 5.3.3 Identity, school context, and problematic educational discourses

As shown in the above analysis, underclass students are gaining a certain amount of educational opportunities for studying in key-point schools with the implementation of a set of policies encouraging educational equality. However, the production and restructuring of the main educational discourses only focus on the result with dichotomy of “good students” (high-achieving students) and “bad students” (underachieving students), totally ignoring those “lucky” underclass students’ struggles and psychological cost resulting from the tensions between their prior experiences and the current practices at an urban key school which probably means a brand new world. For many of those underclass children, at the heart of the serious problem they face is identity problems, making “opportunities” for underclass students a beautiful but false promise. Students should not be taken as the “trivial machine” or the information media. All the underclass informants embraced this new educational setting with a strong desire to change their destinies and the hope of being knowledgeable, productive persons needed by modern society. They have thus gathered all their strength for preparing Gaokao while the results were not all necessarily desirable due to multiple factors such as inadequate mental preparation, insufficient cultural capital, exclusion, discrimination, and lack of familiarity of the urban key-point educational setting.

The school is a place where the use of standard language is encouraged. In the previous years in this school, only Chinese and English teachers taught with Mandarin; other teachers, especially natural science teachers, used the dialect beyond all doubt. However, in recent years, the school has been advocating teachers’ use of Mandarin in the teaching activities through various means like supervision and requiring teachers to deliver demonstration courses, bringing them tremendous pressure. In the school, there is an apparent hierarchical relationship among Mandarin, the urban dialect, the local dialect, and dialects of other less developed areas. Considerable underachieving underclass students reported that they

had been jeered at or discriminated against for their accent, which implied a strong “rural flavor”. The myth of the relationship between the accent and standard pronunciation is that the former is socially constructed as something that should be educated, corrected, transformed, and conquered by the latter. No wonder underclass students’ “ridiculous accent” which implies the speakers’ “lower class” is repeatedly noticed and laughed at by some of their urban counterparts. Students’ previous continuity can be severely interrupted when they are entering an urban key-point school. Their negative experience that is related to their identity is one of the social effects of the sweep of modernity and liminality. Modern schools are places for realizing this transformation through various means of governmentality such as ceremony and discipline, infusion and imitation, praise and punishment, repetition and recitation, and so on. In the school institution, the tough exam-oriented tasks and routinized practices with discipline and punishment almost occupy all the students’ time while discrimination and exclusion are still awake, which are subjectively experienced by many underachieving underclass students. Those unpleasant school experiences, in turn, tend to be negatively related to academic achievements. Despite all the obstacles in front of underclass students, the educational discourses remain silent about those students’ perceptions of their identities and conditions; worse still, many parents can barely help their children to get through the liminality.

Besides guiding the action through instilled values, culture also shapes patterns from which “strategies of action” is constructed (Sewell Jr, 1992; Swidler, 1986). For most underclass students, they were raised up in an environment with “restricted codes” which were in parallel with their parents’ multiple struggling and a straightforward life. For their families, the world that is composed of the written language, or “elaborated codes” is an imposed world which belongs to the urban rather than the rural, the affluent families rather than cash-strapped families. Underclass students at the stage of current social transformation are mobilized by urban culture and educated to worship urbanization, modernization, and globalization while are lacking a growing environment in parallel with the moral field of the urban middle-class.

### 5.3.4 Teacher as the magic hero

As is stated above, underclass parents lack Bourdieusian capital for nurturing their children. However, under the current social context and the traditional educational beliefs shaped by Confucianism which praises knowledge, together with the corresponding prior imperial examination systems from which the poor could be an official with wealth and a high social status, they believe that being undereducated is to blame for their awkward and difficult situation and thus have faith in formal education, taking it as a means for reaping benefits and improving the family conditions in the future in this knowledge society. Therefore, material deprivation does not paralyze underclass parents' ardent wish for their children's future success by means of schooling. At the same time, it is hard for underclass students, from disadvantageous backgrounds, to gain privileged habitus—a kind of habitus which is encouraged by the school institution. As a result, most underclass students feel enormous pressure and confusion for trying to become academically good students in this current social context. The section of underclass students' turning-point stories helps to unravel the puzzle concerning how some mediocre students to push beyond their limits by gaining new habitus.

Being ambiguous and reflexive, knowledge is not self-evident or equally available to everyone (Nassehi, 2004). Academic success is not only a matter of learning but more about how to decode the system (Stantonsalazar, 1997). Habitus is one way of looking at how the “stock of knowledge at hand” plays a role in everyday interactions, making the “taken-for-granted” reseen. Underclass students entered a different moral field with less “feel for the game”, thus were in an unfavorable place until some “lucky” ones got adequate support from the trailblazer—usually the teacher. Although students with upward academic upward are rare, their successful experiences provide valuable information for understanding how underclass students' upward mobility is possible as well as its scope in the secondary educational context in China.

For those students who have had magnificent turning points, their teachers possess quite complex emotional craft for effectively establishing an emotional bond, providing thoughtful guidance, helping them to express their concerns, and establishing a close teacher-student relationship through those heart-to-heart talks and storytellings that serve to foster students' sense of belonging, equality, and emotional

resonance and help them to gain a new perspective of the landscape where they are in. Close teacher-student relationships are important in that they offer students more opportunities to get to know about “rules of the game” in the field and change their perception of the “hostile” schooling environment, thus improving scholastic performances (De Graaf, De Graaf, & Kraaykamp, 2000; DiMaggio, 1982; Lamont & Lareau, 1988). They formed situated habitus after their reported turning point, a kind of transient habitus provoked by those quite emotional meetings.

In these cases, “misconceptions” about the role-play of a good student, such as “saving teachers’ troubles” as the less “feel for the game”, were preciously deep-rooted in many underclass students’ minds since knowledge was unevenly distributed which led to various kind of inequality. This dilemma has reflected the mismatch between the individual unprivileged habitus and the institutional desired habitus. Teachers’ intricate emotional craft is a kind of governmentality that can be a mixture of the teacher’s moral power such as dedication and “candle spirit”, personal charisma with both authority and caritas, communication skills such as the ability of persuasion, insight with psychological knowledge, etc. These students’ struggles were occasionally noticed by their teachers, and they were actively trying to take the initial step of turning their teachers for help under teachers’ complex emotional craft. Teachers’ emotional skills may stimulate a kind of situated habitus that is unstable and mutable, which energizes students anyhow. Afterwards, these underclass students acquired knowledge that these students would otherwise not to know for decoding the system with new habitus formation led by teachers’ emotional craft for purposive cultural capital transmission. Gaining this new knowledge changed the way they thought, and this established paradigm gradually became part of them. After that, there is also a long winding road in front of them because of the “cleft habitus”— the old habitus shaped by the prior experiences and the newly-gained habitus negotiated by the on-going practices. These two different kinds of habitus may conflict with each other, which means that the positive changes can be stopped by many external temptations or the top ceiling.

What finally contributes to upward cultural mobility is the realization of the transformation of the old unprivileged habitus, which calls for the trailblazers’ long-lasting support after students’ attainment of the

newly situated habitus. Teachers' following continuous encouragement and positive feedback, as well as students' improved academic records in the later exams, were hinges for transforming transient habitus into the internal self-motivated one. Besides, what cannot be ignored is that the omnipresent underclass students' respect for teachers and their strong incentives for changing their destinies, rooting in the deepest of their mind, actually work as another kind capital—spiritual capital, which spurs them to keep going in the long marathon. In the interview, students with a significant turning point at the high-school stage—Mei, Jie, and Lian show that they have never forgotten their teachers' unexpected heartwarming help and frequently used affectionately sentimental words such as “savior” and “hero” to highlight their trailblazers' profound impact on their life course.

# CHAPTER 6 - ATTENDING TO WORKING-CLASS STUDENTS' STORIES TO LIVE BY

In this chapter, the study results from the data analyses of 21 students from working-class families are presented. Contrary to those “far-sighted citizens”, working-class parents, with a below-bachelor diploma, are often stereotyped as “vulgar folks” with “false values”. They are unsung heroes who are perhaps doing the dangerous and bitter work in a construction site in the corner of the city with the dust flying over around all day and night, contributing to the miraculous “China Speed” physically. There may be mountains of parcels in front of them to be delivered in the shortest possible time in the era of the cyber-economy boom<sup>43</sup>. They are perhaps painstakingly lying down under the chassis for security check before the bus embarks on a long journey or driving extremely long hours to provide provincial bus service in the transportation department, with a hectic schedule in public holidays. Being sleep-deprived, they perhaps wake up doing dirty work at the break of dawn before birds breathe a song into the air for maintaining a neat city appearance. They perhaps do a tedious job “with little prospect”, working in a shop as a cashier, a restaurant as a server, a cafeteria as a chef, etc. They may belong to the immigrant group who suffer from urban bias and exclusion<sup>44</sup>. They can even be fortune-tellers making a creepy prediction and performing mysterious rituals for money in this unsettling, highly competitive, ever-changing era with paradoxically a swelling of people’s religious beliefs. Compared with that of the underclass, their income is more stable for securing a life, but they are restricted in many ways due to a lack of economic capital in this knowledge-based society where manual labor is cheap anyway. They are stereotyped as bean counters with street wisdom, who notoriously care much about mundane affairs. However, what cannot be ignored is that there is another special type of the “working-class” growing up with the reform and opening policies in mainland China. They have achieved upward “jump” through

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<sup>41</sup> According to China’s courtier sector, there are about 200 million packages per day to be delivered on average in 2020.

<sup>44</sup> There are multiple policies resulting in discriminations against migrant workers, see Shukai Zhao and Andrew Kipnis, “Criminality and the policing of migrant workers” (2000).

arduous struggle and bizarrely shocking insight and incredible courage without receiving higher education; some of them perhaps have made the most use of the “grey zone”. They can be peasant entrepreneurs selling fermented bean curd, rich farmers doing the poultry-meat business, labor contractors who allocate workers for carrying out construction work. Therefore, without the equipment of the middle-class culture, this group of people is socially constructed as “local tyrants”<sup>45</sup> whose economic status is not in line with their educational status.

What have working-class children experienced and instilled with such kind of parents who are whether with limited economic resources or the mixture of abundant economic resources and barren cultural capital and how they, with their personal history, reconcile with the school setting? Likewise, they were interviewed in an open way where they were talking about episodes in the family and the school institutions which very much impressed them as well as their sense-making of those events. Working-class children are scattering among all the class types at Yeyun school with the majority clustering in the lower-track classes—Key Classes and Parallel Classes.

## 6.1 Stories of being successful through overcoming limitations

"Mobility implies the acquisition of the elite mannerisms, behaviours, and 'rules of the games'" (Lee & Kramer, 2013)

This section shows how some working-class children, with Peng and Xiang as representatives, overcome the class limitations, gain privileged habitus, and score tremendous achievements.

### 6.1.1 Striving toward the ideal image

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<sup>45</sup> Local tyrants mean rich and powerful landlords suppressing economically and politically poor farmers in the old times and is currently a buzzword meaning gold-tufted persons with a low-ranking taste and culture.

## Peng's story

Peng, with an ever-present peaceful smile without showing her teeth, has been a straight-A student since primary school. She also has an excellent academic record here, remaining one of the top students in a Gifted class, which implies that there is a good chance for her to be admitted to a C9 League university. She reported that she enjoyed the study there, feeling like a fish staying with water. She made friends with a couple of high-performing students in her class and often shared various topics with them. Her life story is filled with episodes of her struggles and pains with every step forward and her rupture with her parents' unprivileged habitus.

She is not very emotionally close to her parents, who work as a long-distance coach driver in a transportation company and a cashier in a supermarket, respectively. She recalled several episodes of her unhappy family life that was filled with conflicts of her powerful mother and underprivileged father, where she was expected by her mother to stand out assertively to support her.

*"When I was young, we didn't have much time staying together as a family because my dad had to drive following a fixed extra-long route where a round trip cost around four days. He was exhausted every time after finishing the task. I was so happy to have him at home that I was almost about to give him a hug when he came back because that moment was precious. However, all the happiness was gone very quickly when my mom began to complain about how hard it was to take care of me and the housework, giving me the feeling that I was an encumbrance. In her eyes, the world is so unfair that she is more pitiful than anybody else. With the feeling of the conceived 'unfair treatment', mom had no-tolerance attitudes towards us. She was grumpy and would loudly reprimand my daddy if he wanted to sleep in the morning for not preparing breakfast for the family. What was even worse, she would also scold me and even push me if I wasn't on her side, which meant that I should together with her, criticizing my father. I had pity on my father but sometimes got annoyed with him because of his weak personality. Why not packing his suitcase and taking me away from home?"*

Peng was aware of the boundary between herself and her parents. She narrated that she strived to build her spiritual world because the environment provided by her parents was depressing. Her parents often spend their free time watching TV, especially those programs without contributing to knowledge enrichment, which Peng does not like.

*“What broke my heart was that I wanted to watch some documentaries especially concerning animals for getting more knowledge about those interesting living creatures and also CCTV news because I wanted to be informed of the happenings of our days, especially when they were introduced by the graceful anchorwoman whom I admired very much but normally couldn’t make it because it were my parents who hogged the remote control and both of them enjoyed watching fictive imperial-harem competing plays with ubiquitous calculation and plays of the Anti-Japanese war with much fighting and killing which I didn’t like.”*

Peng talked about that her parents did not value knowledge very much and that she was profoundly inspired by a remote relative whom she seldom met. In Peng’s turning-point story of her earlier years, she was much impressed by the knowledge and demeanor of her cousin, who visited her family from abroad. Although she admired some knowledgeable persons on the screen, she got shocked when she saw a person she admired in real life face to face.

*“One summertime when I was eight, a distant cousin who was studying abroad visited us. I was so impressed because she was so special, so different from people I’ve met in my life. She was so erudite and informed that she gently introduced me to knowledge I was interested in and patiently answered all the questions I asked even some of them might be ridiculous. She also politely joined adults’ topics with a soft and warm smile for a courtesy even I noticed that she didn’t really enjoy those chats. At that time, I came to understand what real cultivation was, which was still abstract for me though I often heard of. One eyewitness is better than ten hearsays. I admired them and desperately wanted to be one of them. My parents never stop bombarding me with their understandings of the so-called principle of interaction with others, which is nonsense from my point of view. I hope I can broaden my parents’ horizons when I’m culturally and economically affluent one day in the future.”*

Peng’s target has been firm since she was impressed by the model she wanted to desperately learn from. Her enthusiasm was light up, and she reflexively realized that for becoming the person she admired, she must take the first step— escaping from her familiar life-world. Although she respects her parents, she still draws a moral boundary with them, considering that they “are not from the same world”. She sometimes felt guilty with these thoughts, but she was becoming increasingly assertive after much deep consideration. She kept reminding herself of imitating her cousin, imagining what she would behave and talk in a variety of contexts. This led to her gradual internalization of superior qualities that her cousin had demonstrated. Realizing the social distance and moral boundary between her parents and herself, she chose to “rebel” against her parents’ authority, though not easy in the current social context. For dealing with this fact, she made up an excuse for living on campus, concealing her real thoughts in front of her parents in case of hurt. She believed that only success could endow her certain discourse power and

freedom in her family, and she hoped that she could reconnect with her parents in the future in the premise of a transformed mindset and interaction.

### 6.1.2 Striving to be a “genuine” Hongzhi student

#### **Xiang’s story**

Xiang, having got a school place in the Hongzhi class through her parents’ guanxi practices, also has had successful school experiences. Her parents own a small family-run shop selling household appliances in a nearby township. Stumbling and suffering multiple losses in the business for around ten years, her parents expressed that they understood better than anyone the importance of “human connection” which brought a lot of convenience and benefits. Thus when they were informed that Hongzhi Class was composed of “earthy and excellent students”, they could not resist the idea of getting their child enrolled there “through the back door”. Studying in the Hongzhi class, Xiang has been impressive about the marvelous achievements made by those students with minimal family resources. With the fear of being reproached as “students with money and guanxi” due to bad academic performances, she keeps on spurring herself on by reminding of herself the identity as a “fake” Hongzhi student, which she is desperately trying to reconcile with.

China is a human-relationship society with the human-sentimental culture, which is profoundly influenced by its long-existed agricultural civilization. At that time, people propagated from generation to generation in a highly fixed space with little mobilization in history. Living in their small world with familiarity, people paid particular attention to their relations with others during their lifetime. Guanxi is personal connections and interpersonal networks within which either emotional tie or interest relationship plays an important role in the exchanges and acquisition of resources, which is also of importance, albeit with less influence in modern society. For the operation of guanxi, the initial part firstly needs to pull strings and make contacts, scraping up an acquaintance with another part, which can be greatly facilitated if there is an intermediary who knows both sides. After the establishment of guanxi, guanxi practices, as

complicated art, are needed for maintaining it. Gift, money giving with a red envelope, and mutual help with capital owned by both sides for the instrumental purpose are common guanxi practices in China. Gift giving is normally not once and for all, which plays an important role in maintaining a long-term relationship (Yan, 1996). Fetters and entanglements are produced through such practice: people who get the benefits are aware of the favor he owned the other side and would reciprocate in a proper time in some forms; otherwise, his reputation gets harmed. Then the circle is formed where people inside, becoming aware of the benefits, tacitly maintain this guanxi where they properly show their intentions, implicitly in most cases, for consolidating their places or realizing a profit in the future. This operated Guanxi is well-known as nepotism in an institution producing corruption, which can be more severe and complicated in small areas.

*“I turned up my nose at what people called sophisticated guanxi building when I was a student at school. Guanxi sounds frumpy and indecent; Guanxi building is taken as heterodox doctrine at school; hence, formal education at school wouldn’t teach you the practical stuff you need in the future. But everyone would finally enter society, right? Society would teach you what is lacking in school education, albeit in a cruel way. With guanxi, you can do many seemingly impossible things. Then you’ll find a good relationship with people in a certain critical position is much more important than the knowledge you’ve learned from the school. After the years, I finally become the kind of person who is good at building various relationships needed for the individual interest, also whom I looked down upon when I was young. But for the most time, especially when I reap financial gains, I am congratulating myself on my lucky escape from the orthodox I learned from school. In my opinion, children should at first accept formal education at school as the diploma carries weight in the current society. As Xiang’s father, it’s my responsibility to teach her the practical skills for navigating society. Not now, but after she attends university in the future. I know well about my daughter. I’m confident about her abilities. However, without experiencing difficulties with a grim period of life, she’s not very mature and hardworking. I didn’t think it a wise choice to send her to study in the International Experimental Class, concerning her situation, even though I could afford the tuition.” (Xiang’s father)*

Xiang’s father, with an open attitude towards education, was well aware of the existence of different kinds of knowledge and their correspondingly different roles in the individual’s life journey. He did much work before making a class-choice decision in the context that the school deliberately desalinated the fact of different locations of various class types for strategic considerations. Xiang could not have been a Hongzhi Class student due to both her family status and exam scores, but made it through her parents’ guanxi making and the acquisition of fake paperwork through the admission process. After she was “thrown” into the Hongzhi class, the strong cognitive dissonance serves as her motivation for going higher. She is always trying to become a Hongzhi student who is good at both conducts and academy, with the

hope that her excellent academic performances could serve to desalt people's interests in her background as a "back-door student".

*"I screwed up the senior high school entrance examination by getting a mark that was just around ten points higher than the minimum score for admission. I should have been located into a key class. My parents weren't satisfied with that result, so they made up their minds to 'negotiate' a better homeroom for me. We were confused about those dazzling classes with baffling names and didn't know which type of class was suitable at first. Then my parents decided to consult some insiders in the education system. They quickly got in touch with a teacher there through one of their friends. We were told that there was little chance of attending a Gifted Class which was strictly controlled, especially for my situation— my score was too far behind. It turned out that the Hongzhi Class was the second best with earthy and excellent students from low-income families. It's dramatic that I study in Hongzhi Class. My parents' focus was that those hardworking, excellent students who might exert positive influences on me because they thought I was a playful child who didn't work very hard. My focus was on Hongzhi's identity as the second-best class in this school, without overthinking about other things. I thought, 'Wow, I'm fortunate that I perhaps can attend a much better class with my unsatisfactory Zhongkao scores.' My parents finally got me enrolled in Hongzhi Class through guanxi and money."*

Touched by her classmates who were economically difficult, Xiang was aware of her identity as a back-door student and was always trying to hide this identity which she thought ignominious.

"The chief point of discrimination between shame and guilt is, crudely put, that guilt is about behaviour, shame is about being. In other words, shame is the result of a discrepancy between their perception of their actual selves, and their own vision of their ideal self. Guilt, on the other hand, is a perceived discrepancy between actual behaviour and an individual's idea of how they ought to behave." (Jones & Campling, 2001: 97)

As has been discussed, being a high-performing student implies moral superiority. Although Xiang could not "degrade" her family conditions, she hoped that she could at least catch up with those high-achieving students and gain respect through hard work. She had a great sense of shame as a fake Hongzhi student, and thus she felt reluctant to "disclose" herself to others in the homeroom.

*"When I came there, surrounded by economically difficult classmates with an insatiable thirst for knowledge, at least for the vast majority, words failed to describe my feelings. Then, 'getting in by the back door', 'cutting corners', 'pulling the string', frequently came to my mind, making me feel ashamed, agitated, embarrassed, and negatively 'special'. I got a strong sense of nervous discomfort when there were some situations I was expected to talk about my parents' work and some of my prior*

*experiences, always wishing to keep them out of my statement. This was so much my parents could do for me— they've tried their best; how to continue going through the rest of the way they paved for me was totally up to me. Studying here, on the one hand, I was impressed by how marvelous achievements students from economically poor families could make, which empowered me. On the other hand, I didn't want to be an appealing topic of people's conversation over a cup of tea. But I knew very well that I would be judged in private if I didn't do well in my studies in such a class with many excellent students. I was so afraid that perhaps one day, some people rushed forward and said, 'you're not entitled to study here' or 'you are here not through normal admission channel.''" (Xiang)*

Xiang was aware that staying academically excellent was a blessed thing which could make her identity as a back-door student easily forgotten. Xiang reported that panic of her identity exposure and her interests in academic subjects were positively interlinked, and she had seen a significant rise in her learning motivation and performances.

## 6.2 Stories of turning-point: from old habitus via cleft habitus towards new habitus

Four students, Ming, Long, Xue, and Di have their memorable turning-point stories in the high-school stage, which are all about the relocation of the themselves and reconstruction of their friend circles.

Name	Trailblazer(s)	Turning point(s)
Ming	Class sponsor	Seat rearrangement (sitting by the commissary of study)
Long	Mother and class sponsor	The living experience with his previous class sponsor; His mother's sudden death
Xue	Mother and class sponsor	A heartwarming talk after the incidence of exam-marks tampering
Di	Class sponsor	His tortuous introspection through trailing after the dribs and drabs his class sponsor had done after a math class suspension

**Table 6.2 Working-class students' turning point stories with the key person and event**

### Ming's story

Ming's father was a clerk responsible for the logistics of loading trucks and shipping packages for an urban construction company, and his unemployed mother was addicted to cards playing and playing it all day long, both of whom hardly support Ming's study. Ming had made abundant reflections on his life journey when he was narrating his prior life and educational experiences.

*"I don't have a good family origin. My father does a low-grade job, though relatively stable, and my mother only knows cards playing. Except for my grandpa from my father's side who was a senior herbalist doctor in a hospital, my grandpa from my mother's side, as well as two grandmothers were peasants, who hadn't attended school at all. My parents' original families didn't attach importance to education. Growing in this environment, my parents were both playful without ambitions. My parents later knew each other through a matchmaker. They are not good parents at all if I'm allowed to say. They think only if parents can solve the problem of food and clothing, then they are successful parents. They gave birth to me with such an idea. They often said to me, 'We've provided you with food and drink'. I was brought up by my grandparents until I attended grade 2 at primary school. I was still curious about kinds of knowledge then, especially knowledge taught in natural science classes. I remembered, with intense curiosity, I asked if the frog's tongue could be used for making glue. I had many questions on my mind, but I couldn't get any answer from my parents or grandparents. I didn't ask teachers because I thought I was belittled concerning my family conditions. I moved back to my parents' home from the second grade in primary school. My mother was trying to find a job at that time, but failed. This brought a series of changes: feeling empty in life, my mother had to continuously search for meaning in other activities such as cards playing; her value systems were negatively influenced by those people who were playing cards all day long; then my parents divorced after the break of all the accumulated family contradictions. They inconceivably remarried after a period of time perhaps because of me plus my father's weak character; I had no idea, but our life hadn't changed since then. I envied some classmates a lot because they were happily waiting to be picked up by their parents after school while I was so lonely that I had to walk back home alone. I had terrible academic performances, but I didn't think that I was more stupid than others, even though my teachers might think so. Everyone was born like a leaf of blank paper and gradually tried to imitate people around."*

Ming moved on to introduce his on-going experiences in this school to me with a reflective attitude. He was previously influenced by subculture in a small group composed of academically bad students until his class sponsor gave him a hand by changing his seat, with a high-achieving student as his neighbour.

*"I didn't have pleasant experiences here at first. Without a solid professional knowledge base, and more importantly, lacking both interests of thinking about problems and good learning habits, I found the knowledge taught from textbooks awesomely difficult. I had no confidence in my studies anymore, and my terrible family secret made things even worse, I meant my cards-addicted mother, which led to my inferiority complex. Inferiority complex could thoroughly ruin a person as the person, lacking confidence, surrendered before making another bold try. I made friends with those academically poor students. We didn't study at all, and we looked for entertainment at any time. What I had given up was not only study but also myself! Luckily, my class sponsor didn't give me up; even I had almost abandoned myself. She tried various means to rescue me, like getting me in her office for talking, and asking for my parents' involvement, though the latter didn't work."*

Owing to Ming's class sponsor's "*unerring ability to spot my gift in natural science*", Ming was placed in a much better micro-environment by seating next to the commissary in charge of the study in his class. He reported that he was also encouraged by teachers that boys increasingly enjoyed advantages at high-school stage with the difficulty of knowledge increased. Teachers' emotional competence and effective homeroom management have a positive impact contributing to the class atmosphere encouraging learning, thus promotes students' academic achievements (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Ming's class sponsor was an enthusiastic educator with "candle spirit" and wholehearted devotion who had no clear division of working time and off-hours. He was highly conscious of the construction of class atmosphere with "mutual assistance" by cohesive force: a class was a big family where high-achieving students help their underachieved peers to promote the whole morale and construct the best study environment. He adopted a strategy of a combination of the hardness— strict discipline, and the softness— moral construction to accomplish the goal. The spirit of dedication was advocated in this multi-cultured school field where both traditional beliefs and utilitarian coexisted. There is an effective student-leader group in this class whose member is influenced by the philosophy that high-performing students can be the resource.

*"Our class sponsor always told us that we were one as the whole, and we shared weal and woe. If we allow those underachieved to shape themselves as they would, they may totally disturb the class one day, thus, in turn, will influence us. As a student leader, I have an obligation to assist the teacher so as to avoid this situation. Furthermore, I got a sense of achievement when students whom I helped made progress." (Lei, Commissary in charge of study in Ming's class)*

After got his seat changed, Ming still had ambivalent behaviors like a pendulum with his state of mind going through meandering changes. While his class sponsor and Lei were making great effort to "rescue" him, his prior peers often disturbed him by seducing, caustic mocking, and even intimidating. After a long time, Ming's ethical dilemma arose when Lei spent a phenomenal amount of time to help him without cooperation. The conflict between his "promising good student" identity and "playful student" identity made him realize that it was time for him to make an either-or choice. Ming had to admit that "*there's going to be a landslide, and the emotional scale fell in the teacher's favor*", and recognize that what he was doing was morally wrong. Then he began to move a step closer to becoming a straight-A student and live a responsible life driven by the strong impetus of transformation.

It is worth noting that Ming's transformation was also probably related to his location in his previous friend circle—he was not the central person. He talked about that for proving his loyalty, he had to follow the code of brotherhood previously whether he liked it or not.

*"I remembered I ghostwrote love letters on behalf of my brothers though I didn't really want. However, I highly valued our brotherhood as they considered it a kind of brother loyalty display and gave it a good rating. Now I'm doing fine. Everything is working perfectly as a good student without the stress of being caught by teachers for doing something goes against the class regulations; neither do I have the panic of parent-teacher conferences."*

After the transformation, the identity as a high-performing student helps him to win friendship from other classmates as well as more support from teachers.

### **Long's story**

Long was perhaps the most peculiar case in turning-point stories. This section included Long as a case since his two turning points had oppositely tremendous impact on his life trajectory. Long grew up spending most of the time outside his family by living with his aunt and teachers and also at school. Running a small-scale business selling groceries, Long's parents lived a productive life in a plateau region inhabited by ethnic groups with an altitude of more than three thousand meters geographically and a severe shortage of education resources culturally. Years of arduous work wrinkled his mother's face and hands but she always wore an honest and gracious smile in her face. She was considered a woman with excellent reputations and the traditional virtues of women among neighboring families—a brave, courageous, hardworking, caring, persevering, and benevolent woman who was willing to sacrifice all of her individual interests for her family. I had several precious formal and non-formal interviews with Long's mother before she died of cardiac infarction. The mother reported that she had experienced a lot, including those life-threatening experiences before she started her current career.

*"It's a really bumpy and laborious process. I was tricked to a pyramid scheme organization where I had an unforgettable, bizarre, and dangerous experience of escape. Now we have a much better life with our business thriving, but the work is really laborious. Besides the overall planning, I act like a man or a machine for carrying on those goods. I sometimes have no time for meals or sleep when there are so many things waiting to be done. No matter how much money the business might bring, I*

*won't let my son carry on this career. His father also had horrible experiences for our business. Sometimes, he needed to transport the required goods over a distance of 500 kilometers from the downtown. Anything could happen in this long journey, such as car accidents, storms, landslides, floods, hails, heavy snowfalls, making the dangerous and complex mountain roads increasingly dangerous. I was impressed that we saw a speeding sport utility vehicle falling from the cliff on a hairpin turn. There was still one time, he encountered heavy snow forces in a stretch of complex road in a deserted place, and the road ahead was closed. Feeling extreme hunger and cold, he was tough enough to get through finally. There were still other breathtaking experiences. It gave me the willies whenever I thought of another bad experience that frequently appeared in my nightmares. Every time, it woke me up immediately. Though I knew it wasn't real, I couldn't help crying out. His father was so tired on the way back from the downtown after continuous night-time driving for more than four hours that he almost fell asleep halfway. My son was also in the car, shouting, 'Cliff ahead! Father!' It was a close call; they would have died if my son were sleeping in the car as he normally did; they would have died if his father hadn't braked within the one-tenth seconds." (Long's mother)*

Long's mother was the brain of their family, and her husband gave her full support. The mother placed considerable value on education. She admitted that the business they did helped them to gain wealth, but they also lost much other precious stuff. Notably, they devoted too much time and physical power to the business, damaging their health, and reducing parent-child communications. For this family, parents' cultural capital rather than economic capital was of scarcity: they managed to buy a house with a three-spring layer and a spacious terrace close to Yeyun school but "*being a boor*", her mother reported that she was in a dilemma of stepping into her son's inner world. Long had lived in the school dormitory since enrollment and refused to share any of his ideas with his parents before his turning point of living in his previous class sponsor's place. This mother has pinpointed Long's root of problematic behaviors as something to do with the sub-cultural group, thus she tried to distance his son from it. After the failure of her endless effort for cutting their connection by reasoning with and even tailing after him, Long's mother adopted a strategy of "*long-term soaking of spirit and value*". After the consent was obtained, Long's mother put him at his previous class sponsor's house.

*"I'm a boor; thus, I turned to his previous class sponsor (from Long's junior high) who was so helpful. She retired but was still wholeheartedly concerned about her previous students and was glad to offer help. She is a teacher with a strong ability of management art with multiple strategies. What made me sad was that Long was not sensible but still naughty and playful with his age. It happened several times that I left my work, traveling hundreds of kilometers to educate him, accompany him, and tail after him. This brought no small losses for our business as his father was a person with a rascally mind and was not careful enough to handle all those tanglesome kinds of stuff alone. When I was informed that he had problematic behaviors at school such as smoking, skipping school, cheating in the exam, playing with bad children, and so on, I felt really anxious. I then told his father, 'I must go.' He would say, 'just go ahead! I can't help with the school, but I take care of our small shop.'*

*I'm glad that there's always a tacit understanding between us. We had didn't care much about gains and losses in our business because these two children's education was the most important thing." (Long's mother)*

Long was labeled as a “bad kid” at school, a term with a particular ideology which meant not only the intellectual lightweight but also was often particularly stigmatized as the “morally poor student”. Long’s previous class sponsor Ms. Zhan made Long feel at home and de-stigmatized the label. She did not force Long to quit the group but established a fixed emotional tie with him and carefully maintained it through countless “heart-to-heart” conversations, constructive remarks and encouragement, sincere care in daily life, academic assistance, also companionship and sharing. On the other hand, Ms. Zhan set specific rules of praise and punishment and made a careful estimation twice a week. Ms. Zhan’s concept of a teacher deeply influences her behaving.

*“There are two kinds of teachers: persons who are engaged in educational work and ideological educationalist. I am trying my best to be the latter.” (Ms. Zhan)*

With the logic of “*not to be*”, Long’s mother considered herself as a living proof of miserable life and thus did not appreciate her own lifestyle, stating it backbreaking and thus kept warning his son out of that.

*“Come on, Long. The college entrance examination is not far away! Your parents are doing bitter and tiring work for supporting you. But you can have a totally different life. I'm hanging on to see the light at the end of the tunnel.”*

Long’s mother was always motivating him in this way. She expressed that she was going to liberate herself from their heavy work in business and took some time to enjoy life after Long got admitted to a university. She wished their children, being armed with knowledge, to become respectable persons living a decent life without the laborious manual labor they were experiencing in the future.

Stuck between two forces, Long was in a struggling life with inner torment, feeling unhappy and confused. On the one side, there are those ethnic-identity discourses, which construct his hometown, as a remote and beautiful place and its people as brave and industrious persons who live a trouble-free, free-spirited, and idyllic dream life. He has a strong sense of his identity as an ethnic student who is stereotyped as

being good at art and sport rather than the required subject. On the other hand, there are the country's discourses, together with her mother, who is "too special"— who has a high educational expectation on her children, unlike their neighbors. It seems that he is doomed to live a life that is different from his peers in his hometown, with much tension and pain.

*"My mother didn't want me to follow in their footsteps in the future. She was a distinctive person in our community who unexpectedly had admiration for knowledgeable persons but not rich ones. Realizing her own limitations, she was always hoping that there were some knowledgeable people around who could positively influence us. I have left my hometown and studied in a township near here since I was five concerning the educational conditions in my hometown were very backward. I lived with my maternal aunt when I was in primary school; most of the time in lower secondary school, I lived with a teacher who was a friend of my aunt. Depending on others for living, I behaved scrupulously. I thought I could enjoy more freedom living in the dormitory or our house, but my mother got me out because of my bad academic results. My parents were so busy that they frequently forgot to have meals. I knew my mother was worried about my studies, but I was kind of...well, I hate going to school, considering it boring. Maybe we ethnic minority are of one blood. You know, we like singing, dancing, fearlessly riding a horse on the grassland, enthusiastically eating and drinking while sitting on the broad grassland...pity these are brutally suppressed in the current society, which emphasizes only career success. I don't know who is to blame. I thought I would never like academic studies until I lived with Ms. Zhan, my previous class sponsor, an educationist. Ms. Zhan always had time for her students and enjoyed the time with her students. Her previous students visit her for suggestions from time to time. I gradually noticed that whenever high-achieving students came, she paid attention to leading the conversations to influence me."* (Long)

Ms. Zhan made use of other examples to formatively influence Long. Long's mother also expressed that by mentioning that Ms. Zhan's grown-up child, who studied at a prestigious university, spent one of her summer vacations accompanying Long with heartfelt talks and coached him, which made a tremendous impact on his mind. Long's mother gave him positive feedback to effectively cooperate with Ms. Zhan's work. This turning point greatly shattered Long's previous perception of his identity. His motives for going to tertiary education were constructed in this situation. He then automatically quitted the sub-cultural group and passed an important exam with flying colors.

Unfortunately, Long's glory quickly stopped abruptly and this student sunk into a deep depression due to his mother's sudden death, a significant loss for the family. This shadow loomed large, bringing deep spiritual trauma to Long. He came quite silent and depressed, being overwhelmed by pain. An individual's psychological reconstruction is usually slow and challenging in front of calamity. In the follow-up interview, Long expressed that *"I dare not to recall my mother now because it brings unspeakable pain.*

*I'm never ready for her leave. Why should I experience bereavement at such a young age? Only several months ago when we were at the airport to see my eldest sister off, my mother said, 'Long, you have to study even harder! I hope that you'll get admitted to a university in Beijing, and at that time, I'll also come here for seeing you off with great joy. She didn't keep her promise, and she stripped me of my motivations.' Although many efforts were made in the light of "plans for rescuing Long" advocated by his previous class sponsor and some of his current teachers, Long chose to abandon himself. Whenever his name was mentioned, everyone who were informed of his experiences had a long sorrow groan.*

### **Xue's story**

Xue is from a reorganized family composed of her mother and stepfather. Nurtured in a double-teacher family, Xue's mother was regrettably not admitted to a university. She worked as a kindergartener and gave the highest priority to her child's education. The mother even reported that the disagreeable educational philosophy was the leading cause of her divorce with Xue's biological father. Although this stepfather, without his own child, always wanted to have a child of his own, had to get rid of this idea because before their marriage, Xue's mother insisted that the best spiritual and material support should be undividedly given to her daughter's education. Xue's academic performance was contrary to her mother's expectations. Complaining that her mother about not giving her an intact family, Xue had a rebellious attitude towards her mother and gradually attracted by a sub-cultural peer group where they had involved themselves in adolescent love affairs and spent much time in discussing animation, music, superstars, and fashions. She had a sense of insecurity and threatening in this "problematic family", though both of these two adults had done much for supporting her. The identity as a child "with two fathers" tormented her and diverted her attention from the study.

*"After my parents got divorced, my mother quickly married that man. I happened to know that two female classmates were taunting me of having two fathers, which made me angry and embarrassed. I didn't know who was the outsider of the family, but there must be one, he or I."*

The contradiction of her poor exam marks and Mother's high expectations got on Xue's nerves. She then made a decision to tamper her school report. The mother quickly found the double-cross and spanked her on her face so hard.

*"I've rested all my happiness and hope on her, and we've satisfied a lot for her. I felt the end of the world when I knew that she did terrible in the exam and tried to cheat me by tampering the exam report." (Xue's mother)*

Before Xue managed to "run away from home", she was picked up and escorted to her class sponsor's home. The mother told Mr. Zhu about what happened and fully described her family situations so as to better solve the problem. Seeing the wound on the side of Xue's right eye, the class sponsor was suddenly aware of educational issues in this slightly complicated family.

*"Emotional problems are common among students. The teaching profession is also an emotional profession. (Mr. Zhu, Xue's class sponsor)*

With years of educating experience, Mr. Zhu was highly conscious of the importance of psychological construction and educational management. He then had private talks with the mother and Xue, respectively, and then a meeting with both of them. Xue thought that her identity as a bad student had gone deep into her class sponsor's mind, but she surprisingly found that her teacher turned out to have more tolerance to assist her.

*"I thought I would be scolded by both of them simultaneously because this event was really severe, relating to a person's quality and morality. However, my imagined horrible and humiliating 'condemnation ritual' turned out to be a heartwarming talk. I was caught several times being late for class, talking in class, and copying homework. I thought my teacher didn't like me, recognizing me as a bad student. But I was moving that he didn't abandon me even after he found all the serious problems from me. I was surprised to find that our class sponsor turned out to be a man of subtle and refined sensibility. Mom has changed a lot since the meeting. Later I learned that Mr. Zhu had three suggestions for Mom: the spirit of equal communications, no boasting of parental 'sacrifice', and setting good examples. I could not tell exactly why, but since Mom's changes, I have automatically accepted my stepfather without prejudice and gradually appreciated what he had sacrificed for us." (Xue)*

Xue's mother worked effectively with Mr. Zhu to spiritually guide Xue in a way she felt comfortable. Xue then automatically quitted the previous small group and entered a new one where the peers discussed academic problems and gave each other valuable support.

### **Di's story**

Di reported that his parents grew up with little awareness to education. his family condition is somewhat similar to Ming's in that education is much undervalued in his family. Moreover, he grew up in an environment with parents' endless quarrels.

*"The economic condition of our family is not good. Worse still, we don't have a harmonious family life. My mother was often angry with my father, stating that he often fooled around with loafers from the factory he was working in. One time, she even slammed the kettle and hastily kicked the bucket. The kettle with boiled water was exploded with debris flying all around; that's horrible. She is always comparing other children's advantages with my weaknesses or even comparing an illusory child with all children's advantages with me, and came to the conclusion that I was much worse than them every time, causing my inferiority complex. Language violence is much worse than people have ever imagined. In a word, my mother always scolded us at home, and my father, in turn, had his countermeasures. He made up excuses for staying away from our family, having fun, and drinking together with those loafers, just as what my mother was complaining. My father keeps aloof from my study while being loyal to his friends. He hardly refuses his friends' request of borrowing money though he's impecunious, while generously adding that, 'no hurry to pay back the money, only until your money is not very tight.' I formed a weak character under my mother's despotic power and father's indifference."*

Di's turning point at this school was not so straightforward with some particular events with a clear thread. Instead, it was his tortuous and deep introspection through trailing after the dribs and drabs which his class sponsor had done for them. Through this kind of reflection, Di weaved those twisted roots and fragmentary episodes into his life story with a coherent plotline. Di reported that he was empowered academically and morally by this teacher with charisma and moral power. Under his teacher's influence, he was struggling to abandon his inferior complexity, conquering the fear from interpersonal relationships, and overcoming difficulties in the study with great courage.

*"I find it impossible not to think of my class sponsor when I'm telling my turning-point story. You know, I study in a parallel class. It's the worst class here with many playful students. I was a victim, often being robbed and hit by those guys. This greatly affected not only my study but also my physical and psychological health. At the beginning of the second grade, our class sponsor*

got a temporary transfer for supporting the education in an adjacent less-developed township. 'Wow, it seems that we meet the minor probability event. That's really exciting news', I thought. Many classmates thought that she had fingers in so many pies! She strictly controlled us, and if I didn't make any change thereafter, she would invite my parents, though, in fact, it made no much difference. Since she was away, we thought that we gained much freedom to do what we liked. However, to everyone's absolute shock, she came back to us every week where she held a class meeting stating the importance of education every time. I just muddled along without a goal when she was away. The 'nightmare' finally came back after that semester, resuming as our class sponsor. Her passionate math class turned into a political class one day after she got angry because some students dozed off in class. 'Class is over; you can do anything you want!' She threw away the ruler and turned away. The classroom was so quiet that the falling of a needle could be clearly heard. Everyone was frightened, finding it hard to breathe. At that moment, I didn't know why something she had said sprung up to me, like 'You have a cold if you didn't work hard in grade 1, the cold will develop into pneumonia if you continue in grade 2, if you still let it drift, you'll finally get incurable illnesses.' I was a bottom student even in that class; my parents looked down on me. I knew many parents had reminded their children to stay away from me. I was even sadder than before with the thought that with the identity as an underachieving student, my young beautiful chemistry teacher—the goddess of my life would also despise me. I didn't like my image in other people's eyes, how did I expect that she likes me? This brought me great pain. I thought I could at least make friends with two or three of my classmates if my ranking could be improved a bit. Then I struggled ahead, for not being looked down upon by people around and also making some friends, perhaps. Everything is really hard before it gets easy. I walked into a strange circle—I read books, listened carefully in the class, took notes, did exercises, gave up, started again, and then gave up again. I was a stubborn person and was still hanging on. Finally, one day, I surprisingly found that I could become to appreciate the beauty of math while my teacher was refreshingly and enthusiastically giving a lecture. Even if I still couldn't work out a math problem, I really had some clues in my mind! Then I began to consciously observe our class sponsor. Every time when I walked past her office, I saw her discussing math problems with other teachers or silently correcting our homework. My eyes were abruptly dimmed—she was such a teacher who silently sacrificed for her students. She wouldn't have to work so hard to be so responsible for us. Realizing this, I felt increasingly guilty. The so-called honor seemed to have nothing to do with her. For this, I faintly knew the hidden reason—she was such an upright person who hated various face-saving projects. When the donations—of course, the forcible donations, were proposed by the school, class sponsors would employ many strategies persuading their students that "the more, the better" while our class sponsor just said, 'you donate as you wish...just muddle through it.' When students were asked to have a rehearsal for some the school play, our class sponsor made use of the time—to teach us more or ask us to do exercises while she was correcting. That was all because she regarded our interests—our prospect as the most important thing. She worried about us in daily life as well, like a loving mother. I remembered that she often had lunch eating fast food such as instant noodles at the fastest speed, so that she could go on patrol around nearby snack bar selling junk food to stop us if she found anyone there. What she did was sincerely for our good while I was muddling along. Thinking of it, I was stricken by conscience. I don't want to see any sign of disappointment or upset in her face for us academically poor students anymore.' I said to myself. She always encouraged me, 'You are at the crossroads of your life. It's never too late to make a difference.' She was such a sacred person with wisdom, and I had faith in her. I didn't want to abandon myself any more. I wanted to change my life. I found I could increasingly relate the knowledge taught with happenings in real life, especially for physics. I remembered that I took the radio into pieces and then reassembled it; I also played with batteries when I was young. How interesting when the seemingly sterile knowledge from textbooks is related to practical happening! I increasingly found that things were not that hard as I perceived. The problem lay in that I had a preconceived notion due to the sense of inferiority. I think that a good family environment as well as a fantastic atmosphere at school is of great importance for a refreshing change. It is impossible without our class sponsor's strict discipline and the classroom atmosphere where quite a few good students scramble to ask questions. What is the most important in teaching is not always keeping on the rails, but cultivating students' independent thinking. When I devoted myself to study, I unexpectedly made

*some friends! I was moved that there were a couple of kind classmates who would help me. I also found that I made contact with teachers in a more natural way, which was brought by confidence. The teacher's office for me was a nightmare, but after I made notable progress, I actively stepped in and asked questions. My changes, together with my class sponsor's multiple talks with my mother, also brought my mother's change—she was influenced bit by bit and finally quitted gambling. My hope and prospect were lighted by my class sponsor; I'll never forget her love and kindness, I'll definitely inherit the spirit of integrity and love." (Di)*

### 6.3 Stories of staying mediocre

Chao and Qiao have different stories of staying mediocre academically. Chao failed to attend a Gifted Class with three marks and got a place in Hongzhi class through his relatives' guanxi practices. He is a student who has some endowments, from his teachers' perspective, though maintaining an average student in his homeroom. Chao has modified his expectations according to his perceived academic abilities and future scenarios soon after he entered the school. The hyper-competitive environment demotivated him. Unlike Xiang, he found the class atmosphere stifling, regarding his classmates as hard-working exam machines striving only for the inhumane game—Gaokao. He constructs Gaokao as a game which does not require much IQ, but inhumanely hard work. He has a relatively clear location of himself as someone who was suitable to do some practical work in the future, which also refrained his ambition and reduced the pressure of "having to" thrust into a top research university.

*"I was a top student in the junior high. Now I'm only average here. I was a bit sad about this fact but gradually accepted it. Although our class atmosphere is known as relatively simple, I think it abnormal, feeling depressed here. Everyone is so determined and working extremely hard, indeed, but boring. They care nothing but exam marks. A classmate who was unsatisfied with her chemistry exam cut her index finger and wrote in blood, 'I swear I'll make top ten next time!' I can understand them because, after all, the majority of my classmates are from families with extreme economic difficulty. Many told me that they couldn't afford to fail Gaokao. Frankly speaking, I don't think Gaokao requires an extremely high IQ; rather, it calls for a band of the desperados who dedicate themselves to this inhumane game. As far as I know, those good students from my class study over fourteen hours on average per day. I really can't do that. And I don't think I have to attend an elite university. In terms of the future profession...hmm... I know I'm fit to do something practical rather than academic. A relatively lower-track university also works for me. At the university, I'll build up a wide range of abilities that needed for the future employment."*

Qiao first turned me down when I invited her to join this project, with the thought that her experiences were perhaps unworthy of mentioning. Qiao said that she could not stop crying when his parents put four

piles of money into four envelopes for gaining a place in an Experimental Class for her, and she promised to be a high-performing student from then on. However, although she sought to be a better student, she was suffering from her academic-incapability experience and the troubled educational identity. She has an open-minded father who works as a dispatcher for a transport company, and a caring mother who temporarily works as a helper in a small clothing shop. Qiao is regarded as “a kind-hearted girl” by her friends who would like to help others. She sometimes generously shares her snacks with her friends. She always listens wholeheartedly in class while seriously taking notes. Her brows would suddenly furrow when students around her begin to whisper in class, which disturbs her. She seldom relaxes after class but sits still reviewing what has been taught. She sometimes asks the student who seats behind her or her best friends who sit farther for help, while remaining wary of turning to her teachers. Her good friends often come to her seat from time to time when she needs encouragement. They would comfort her while touching her head, “*Don't worry. We work it out together, ok? I help with your worst subject, math, and she helps you with your English...*” At noon break, two female students—her best friends, are always waiting for her for heading for the canteen and having lunch there together. A friend told her that if she wanted to make markable progress, she needed to cultivate an interest in the academic subjects, hearing this, Qiao lamented that she thanked heaven if she knew how to cultivate such an interest. Qiao often says that she feels like that she has been cursed, which prevents her from becoming a student with higher achievements. When she thinks of her identity as “a money student” who makes her parents’ life even harder, she blames herself for being a below-average student with much pain and shame.

*‘When I was young, my father often told me, ‘Qiao, you are from an average family. In this sense, you are an ordinary person. But remember, you can be ordinary, but never be vulgar. You can create a bright future with a happier life with your hard work.’ I've never forgotten it. I clearly remember the expression on his face and the tone while he was speaking. My parents have a high educational expectation on me, and I am ambitious. I want to have a different life, but the fact is that I'm not good in my class. This means if I were lucky enough, I could barely attend a second-tier university. My parents are great even they are non-college educated. They had no guanxi, but they also managed to contact the leader through twists and turns. They were not rich, but they paid much money for getting me a place in the experimental class; otherwise, I would have studied in a key class. But now, their effort is wasted because it appears that it makes no difference where I stay. I screwed up the mid-term exam, and it was not the first time, of course. When I came back, my parents asked my exam result with the last crumb of hope. I sat there, lowering my head in dumb silence, and knowing how to confront the disappointment which was seemingly permeating in the air. They didn't force me but said instead, ‘We won't blame you. Try your best.’, just like ever. I've tried my best indeed. I gave up all my interests, such as cartoons and music, for a full concentration. I came here without wearing glasses, but now I have nearsightedness. The exam result of the whole class would be posted beside the homeroom door every time after*

*an important exam. I only privately go and see it when there is nobody, which brings much pain. I had a crazy idea. I thought I became liberated from all the suffering if I died. But I can't because I know what it means for my parents. I'm always in this circle: screwed up an exam, felt sad and depressed, encouraged myself, adjusted and recovered, then screwed up another one again..."*

## 6.4 Phenomenological happenings of “problematic” students in and out of school

“Culture and communication are closely related. This relationship can be viewed three different ways: culture as a communication phenomenon, communication as a manifestation of culture, and culture and communication as a reciprocal relationship.” (Earley, 1993: 119)

This section introduces some episodes of underachieving working-class students with problematic behaviors in different situations. As stated above, Confucianism believes learning is a moral endeavor (Li, 2001, 2005); thus high-achieving students are superior not only academically but also morally. On the contrary, academic failure is much more than just a phenomenon but is more a symptom around which people are continually having their discourse practices in a creative way. Resistance can be understood as a radical critique of the “common sense”— unquestioned school practices (DePalma, 2011). In the educators’ discourse, students’ academic failure can be ascribed to personal qualities such as laziness and bad habits, personalities such as dissocialness and pessimism, attitude problems such as reverse psychology and making excuses, moral issues such as selfishness and ungratefulness, family values such as ignorance and backwardness, family status such as poverty and “single-parent family”, while ignoring the structured factor relating to the wider social context. Teachers were never tired of holding forth the phenomenon of cliquism of underachieving working-class students. Previous research also found that peer group serves as an important social context for socialization and development in Chinese children, which moderated parenting and school education (Chen, Chang, He, & Liu, 2005). Inspired by these studies and information, and based on the consideration of underachieving working-class students’ awareness of the moral boundary between themselves and me, as an “achiever” in the schooling ladder, I

paid great attention to how they are interacting with their “trustworthy” friends who share the same subculture in different situations in and out of school.

#### 6.4.1 In the classroom

Ru, from a parallel class, is known as a “female bully”. The school rule clearly stipulates that students should avoid wearing accessories and high-heel shoes, but she is a “recidivist”. Ru has her best friend Tong, who often privately dyes her hair, puts on perfume, makes her up for consciously helping her from outside and in. Their seats are far apart, being deliberately rearranged by their class sponsor. However, this cannot prevent them from playing tricks on other students together, through which they gain much fun. Their desks are scruffy with doodles. Their victims are quite selective: those “soft” girls with a mild character whom they deride as “docile sheep” are their main targeted attacks; sometimes, they also cause troubles to “effeminate” boys whom they laugh at as “candy boys without masculinities”. They never publicly provoked strong male students or high-performing students, but they would never give up the idea of secretly punishing them for giving them a black eye such as stealing their homework, privately sprinkling nasty water on their exercise books.

*The next class would begin in around four minutes. A “docile sheep” was hastily passing by Tong for going to the toilet without realizing the potential danger. Tong deliberately tripped her up. “Wow, a hard fall! Be careful next time!” Tong then giggled while explaining that she was not on purpose. The bullied girl turned red over her laughter, swallowing anger. It was not the first time. The bullied girl didn’t believe her, of course. Then Tong said coldly, “Don’t tell our class sponsor, otherwise, you know what you’re gonna get!” The girl held her temper, scrambled to her feet, and left as quickly as possible. She kept alert for not bumping into Tong, so she made a detour reaching her seat when she was back.*

- Field notes taken on 6<sup>th</sup> November 2017

*Ru is also notorious for bullying others in the class. She was observed to play a trick on her neighbor by hitting his elbow while he’s writing a week ago. The class would have their biology class soon in the afternoon. Ru suddenly said that she couldn’t find her pen which her cousin had bought from abroad. She sputtered, “who stole my pen? Give it to me right now. If I found it out, you’ll be in great trouble.” No one replied, then she began to wantonly and rudely search through all the drawers from her classmates with adjacent seats, making a muddle of all of their personal belongings. None of them dared to say anything. She still couldn’t find it until the class began. In the class, she looked restlessly, with her legs always shaking and her right foot heavily stamping on the ground from time to time. She didn’t consider that her behaviors might bring any trouble because her*

*biology teacher was just a “novice assigned from the countryside”. The teacher made a temporary decision that she would ask all the students to the lab for showing an experiment for the second half of the class. “Ms. Wang, I can’t go there. I feel bad because I’m on my period.” Students except her were then leaving for the lab. “Have fun!” Ru poured a glass of water on a male student’s head and snickered.*

- Field note taken on 28<sup>th</sup> November 2017

Their class sponsor expressed her frustrations for having to face up tenacious misbehaviors without their parents’ cooperation. She sometimes has to make a concession by telling them that “don’t be too ostentatious” or “be careful not to be caught by teachers from the moral education office”.

*“As class sponsors of parallel classes, we can hardly manage some challenging situations. I mean we feel helpless because each parallel class includes a couple of problematic students who have no interest in the study at all. I’d even heard of some of their ‘heroic deeds’ before they were here. Teachers feel it really a headache, no matter how experienced they are; worse still, those students’ parents are irresponsible who let things drift. The worst situation is that some parents can be unreasonable and counterproductive! Perhaps you can’t imagine, some parents are even proud of their children because nobody dares to ‘provoke’ them; they would give their child backing when they feel that teachers are ‘too strict’ with him or that their child is ‘bullied’ by other students.”*

Contrary to this teacher, Ni’s class sponsor is well-known as an “iron lady” who has invited Ni many times to her office for “ideological education”. Ni is an overbearing female student who frequently bullies “skinny little girls”. She sometimes gives them the hard sell, i.e., she forces them to buy snacks from her at a price higher than the market value through intimidation and trick. Her class sponsor has set a strict class regulation on the basis of the school rules, which includes that students are forbidden to take their mobile phones into the teaching area. Ni was privately playing with her mobile phone in a history class without noticing her class sponsor, as an elusive observer, who was snugly watching the whole class through windows from the rear. One day, Ni had no luck because nobody warned her against the teacher by telling her like “Hey, here comes Ms. Jiang!”. After the class, Ni was invited to her class sponsor’s office.

*Class sponsor: “Do you know why I put you here?”*

*Ni: “Sorry, I don’t know.”*

*Class sponsor: "Ok, I remind you. What have you done in the history class?"*

*Ni: "I was listening while taking notes."*

*Class sponsor: "Anything else?"*

*Ni: "I...I..."*

*Class sponsor: "I saw you playing your phone."*

*Ni: "Sorry, Ms. Jiang. I won't do this again."*

*Class sponsor: "You know it's forbidden. We have set our class rule in advance."*

*Ni: "I made a mistake. I don't do it again."*

*Class sponsor: "What does the rule say if students were using the mobile phone in the teaching area?"*

*Ni: "The phone would be destroyed in public."*

*Class sponsor: "Give me your phone. You'll have an ideological class instead of math class for the first half part of my course next time where I'll announce your misconduct and destroy your phone in public."*

*Ni: "No, my phone is expensive!"*

*Class sponsor: "You must take responsibility for your own deeds."*

*Ni: "Yes, I know. But don't destroy my phone this time. My father won't agree with that as well."*

*Class sponsor: "Ok, now, I call your father. I'll open the amplificador so that you can listen too."*

*Class sponsor: "Hello. Is that Ni's father? Your child played her mobile phone in history class just now."*

*Ni's father: "Oh, damn kid! No wonder she did badly in the study. I did feel that there must be something wrong, but I couldn't tell!"*

*Class sponsor: "This behavior not only influences her study but also breaks the class rule, causing a very bad influence on other students."*

*Ni's father: "So you called me for what? Now I know this situation. Please feel relaxed, Ms. Jiang. I'll beat her after she comes back."*

*Class sponsor: "According to the class rule, the phone would be destroyed in public if students bring it into the teaching area."*

*Ni's father: "What? I didn't know this before. No, you can't destroy it. It cost more than three thousand Yuan, and I'm not rich!"*

*Class sponsor: "Then you shouldn't have bought a phone for your child if you knew her well. She suffers from a lack of self-control."*

*Ni's father: "Ok. We both made a mistake. But please give her another chance. Please don't destroy the phone."*

*Class sponsor: "Will you keep your child using the phone in the future? Spoiling also means harming. Mobile phones and Gaokao are incompatible. Gaokao or mobile phone, you should reconsider the problem! Besides, everybody knows that I'm a person of my word. If I didn't punish her this time, other students would follow her and violate the regulations. At that time, I find it hard to play the role of the class sponsor. I hope you can understand that. Now you have two choices. Let me destroy her phone in public, or you come for getting your child together with her phone back."*

*Ni's father: "I've never thought it should be so serious! Ok, I agree with you about destroying the phone. Dame child, I'll give her a great lesson after that! Goodbye, Ms. Jiang."*

*Subsequently, Ms. Jiang did what she had said. In her math class, she brought a basin full of water and then put Ni's mobile phone into the basin in front of the whole class, emphasizing that nobody should violate the class regulations.*

- Field note taken on 12<sup>th</sup> December 2017

#### 6.4.2 On the playground— “Let me show you how to surf the campus!”

Happenings in particular school spaces provide a powerful spatial landscape for understanding the cultural processes underlying young people's struggles for legitimacy in sub-cultural groupings (Dillabough & Kennelly, 2010). The playground is an adequate place of observation where various

problematic behaviors may unfold. Ji's homeroom locates next to a key class where Chi and Ran study. Sharing a similar attitude toward studies, they soon got to know each other and became good friends. Ji is always complaining that he has an extremely strict class sponsor, for which he has worked out some practical methods for privately acting against him. He gushed about his secrets with great pride, carefully warning their friends against teachers by adopting tricky strategies. Ji talked about how to safely play the mobile phone in class.

*“Although the mobile phone is forbidden in the class, the following tips can help you if you want to do that. You’d better place your phone in a higher position with some books on your knees. Be wary of the ceramic tiles if you sit close to there because tiles reflect the light. In this situation, you should erect a book, better with a hardcover by the wall, and put off your glasses.”*

He also shared some points about how to take a safe snap during the class.

*“Don’t support your head by your hand when you want to sleep in the class. Lower-grade players often make this mistake. It’s also useless to hide behind a book attempting to interrupt the teacher’s vision. The right way is turning your head with an angle of 30 degrees, with your ear bent towards your teacher. Don’t forget to hold a pen, pretending that you are seriously taking notes. You should also consciously shake your body and nod your head with your teacher’s further proceeding.”*

Chi and Ran listened very carefully with shiny eyes. Then these two guys could not wait to share their own experiences of “doing thrilling things” against the regulations while escaping from being punished.

*“Smoking is forbidden, but people can still do it if they were smart enough. The wood behind the toilet is the best place for that. You can also smoke in your dormitory, but only after midnight after the dorm teacher sleeps.” (Chi)*

*“Well, you guys can date girls in the garden or the playground sheltered by trees, but pay attention to the patrol who takes the flashlight! Cherish every second! Those people normally come out twenty minutes after the last night class. In my experience, they won’t be there before 10:00 pm. I’ve tried many times. Repeated tests have shown that it works well!” (Ran)*

Ji filled in Ran’s short pause and thrillingly talked about the best place and strategy for escaping from the school.

*“If you try to escape from school, better to be especially attentive! You are in danger of being monitored because surveillance cameras are installed in many places. But there’s none by the side of the basketball court, near the second basketball stand, in*

*which you can easily climb over the wall and slipped away. But the most desirable way is making your leave permit, which gives you free entry and exit. Cool? Sounds like magic? Well, I tell you what to do. You can ask for a written request for sick leave when you are ill next time. Don't hand it in before you finish copying your teacher's signature. Practice the signature until you attain perfection— then next time, you can make it yourself. Our school is huge with so many people. The doorkeeper won't say anything when you show him the sick leave."*

Chi proudly introduced their experiences of deflating the tyres of his class sponsor's electro bike under the cloak of Ran for seeking revenge to Ji.

*"Damn class sponsor! Last week, We gave her a great lesson! This person (referring to Ran) stood watch, and I punctured the tyres of her new electro bike, making it a total clunker. Isn't it interesting to see her reaction? After school that day, we peeped around the corner. She seemed to be really restless and agitated without an idea of what to do. We were wild with joy seeing her funny face! She later went out in low spirits and called a taxi. The idiot had to repair her clunker the next day, and we skipped two classes and had much fun on the playground."*

#### 6.4.3 Flag-raising ceremony attending without mandatory school-uniform wearing

The flag platform is located at an essential place in many elementary and secondary schools, usually being highlighted in the middle, which voicelessly declares the presence of the state force. Echoed with this is a flag pin handed above the blackboard right ahead of each classroom. In line with this space arrangement, patriotic education remains an important task in primary and secondary education. Academically and morally good students are taken as suitable flag-raisers who are responsible for the ritual every weekday— raising the flag in the morning and lowering it in the afternoon. During the flag-raising process, all the people must set aside things they are working on, stand still facing the direction of the flag platform as soon as the national anthem is announced. The expansion of school enrollment and the enlargement of the construction area have encouraged each other at Yeyun school. What has not been changed is the centrally located flag platform with the flag fluttering in the wind. Every Monday morning, there is a grand flag-hoisting ceremony where the whole school are demanded to gather on the playground beside the flag platform. This is a routinized ritual where strict discipline and the uniform dress are required. However, there emerge some rebels "*demystifying the solemn rite from time to time, posing great challenges to management.*" Bo and Liang, regarding the school uniform ugly and rustic, pretend

to forget to wear it irregularly and unpredictably so that their teachers have to make a guess until they show up.

*Around 7:25 on Monday morning, students were walking in order from their classrooms toward the playground when the national anthem “Military March” was played. Bo and Liang looked very striking in the crowd because all the other students were wearing the school uniform for this ceremony while they were wearing a wrinkled pullover in fluorescent yellow and fluorescent green, respectively, together with loose pants. Their hair was apparently done at the weekend, looking fluffy and stylish. While they were walking with arms around each other’s shoulder, their class sponsor stopped them with a furious expression on his face, “What are you doing? Why do you dress like this again? It’s outrageous! Shame on you! You are such a bad influence, an affront to our national flag, to the flag-raising ceremony! Get back and stay quiet in the classroom during the ceremony. After that, come to my office. I’ll also invite your parents.” After their class sponsor turned back, these two students snapped their fingers, looking recalcitrant and giving a smile to each other and leaving with their head shaking. Later, Ji went out of his homeroom and declared that he also forgot to wear the uniform. His class sponsor recalled him at once and wisely handed him a pre-planned costume from somewhere in the homeroom. The teacher then urged him to the playground while telling him that he was not entitled to attend the first class but to face the wall and ponder his misdeeds in her office.*

- Field notes taken on 26<sup>th</sup> February 2018

#### 6.4.4 In gloomy corners away from the sight of all-powerful educators

Cun, Dong, and Zhi, being regarded as “villains” at school, are “sworn brothers” who share secrets with one another. This conversation happened in a corner beside the toilet sheltered by a row of trees. Their discussions gave a hint that the working-class disposition— masculinity was much highlighted and was the very code of conduct. They paraphrased a man with masculinity as a man who dared to do thrilling things such as smoking on campus, chasing after “hot” girls, and extorting money from those “soft bookworms”.

*Zhi: “I want to pick up a hot girl.” (with a cigarette)*

*Cun: “Haha, you fucking asshole! (while lighting up his cigarette) I’m still single, but you’ll go on a date? Anyone I know? What does she look like?”*

*Zhi: “You might not know, but I don’t have to tell you!”*

*Cun: "You dude! Don't leave us hanging! Come on!"*

*Zhi: She's a student of a nearby junior middle school, with big boobs, round ass, oh, also big eyes (an apparent pause) without glasses, not like those boring bookworms. I can't take my eyes off her, especially while she's walking because you know... " (with the hint of a smirk on his face)*

*Dong: "Sounds like a bitch (with a dirty smile). You wreck! How long have you known her? Need help?"*

*Zhi: "An unmanageable bitch. Last time I met her on the way and was overjoyed to strike up a conversation. She said no and ran off. I was angry and pedaling faster to catch her up. She seemed to be frightened and almost started to cry."*

*Dong: "Should be much tender to the missy, you idiot! Girls of that age harbor a romantic fantasy."*

*Zhi: "Be tender? Are you kidding? Just like those bookworms? Last week, I got CNY50 from a soft persimmon. Next time when I meet her, I'll invite her for a drink with the money. Act tenderly! (making a face while twisting the body)"*

*Cun: "Of all the nerve! You'd better write a letter first. All girls like unpractical romantic kinds of stuff."*

*Dong: "Invite us to dinner after it's done! But you pauper should be careful not to knock her up. You can't afford the medical bill for abortion."*

*Zhi: "A deal! I'm now going to shit in the toilet."*

— *A conversation among Cun, Dong, and Zhi at a secluded corner of the bush in the campus park*

#### 6.4.5 A resounding truancy— Qi dropped a bombshell

During the on-the-spot observation in the research site, there was a resounding life-threatening truancy that made waves. Qi, from a divorced family, was adopted by her mother. His father works in the public security bureau, and his mother does a small business selling clothes in a minority settlement with around five-hour drive. He lived with a maternal aunt in another city when he was in primary school. He was mainly brought up by his grandfather from his mother's side who lived in the district where the school lay during the high-school stage. Qi's mother visits them as long as she managed to set aside some time.

One weekend, Qi ran away from home when his mother was staying in his grandfather's place. Ms. Su, Qi's class sponsor, introduced me to the whole process of this event that happened not long ago with intricate details.

*"On a Saturday, I received a call from Qi's mother telling me that her child had ran away. I actually had no responsibility in this event because he ran away from home but not from the school, and it was on the weekend. His mother became agitated, which I could completely understand. His mother, father, and grandfather considered that I should help them to look for the kid, which I thought reasonable; who let me be his class sponsor? But they further argued that I should take full responsibility for this matter and I knew they wanted to pass the buck. They thought I was too strict with Qi, I didn't trust him, and one time I severely criticized him because I had suspected that he copied the vocation homework. I was frustrated since they couldn't tell black from white. There was a lot of evidence to support my argument. I learned this matter from some students, and he personally admitted that. When he made a severe mistake, I, as his class sponsor, should stop it immediately. I understood in that situation, Qi's parents were like cats on a hot tin roof. I then regulated my mood and told them four things. Firstly, I treated all of my students equally without discrimination. I couldn't ignore students' mistakes, which would finally harm them. Secondly, there existed problems in their parenting, which played a part in Qi's negative learning attitudes. Thirdly, it was wrong to put the blame only on teachers and the school. There should have been more parental involvement, such as guidance and supervision. Fourthly, I would work in tandem with them for searching for Qi."*

*"I then called all the persons who might have some clues concerning this escape, but got nothing. On Monday morning, I called Qi's best friend to my office. He also had no idea where Qi was, but told me some of Qi's recent usual behaviors. Qi used the money from selling his bike plus more than three hundred Yuan that he got from his parents for online-game and tobacco consumption. This student then thumped his chest abruptly and said that Now I'm extremely frightened at the deep and detailed thought of his buying a knife and raticide as well! He then talked about that Qi had said that he would then commit suicide by taking the rat poison, with the presence of another two friends. In Tomb-sweeping Day of next year, come and see me at my place of burial.' Qi's friend said that they all took it as a joke and laughed away. None of them expected that Qi should run away from home. I had my heart in my mouth when I get to know this situation! I then told this to school leaders immediately. They all found this event extremely dreadful and urgent and asked me to make a deliberate implementation plan for looking for Qi. I calmed down and worked out a possible sound plan. I invited Qi's best friend again, repeatedly emphasizing the seriousness of this incident, which made him believe that whichever way he looked it, we should make joint efforts on this matter."*

*"Then we began the thrilling search-and-rescue operation. I asked the student to try to chat with Qi through QQ<sup>46</sup> on the computer in my office, telling him always to strictly follow my instructions. I told him that he would not be*

<sup>46</sup> Tencent QQ is a popular instant messaging APP in China.

*allowed to make any mistake, which might lead to Qi's suspicions. Firstly, he did what I told him. He edited these texts, 'Ms. Su is too strict with us. I can't stand anymore. I also want to escape.' There was no response from Qi. I then tried to ask him to take further action by texting Qi that, 'It's really tedious to attend school. Teachers are too strict; parents are annoying. I want to go out to relax. But it's no fun to be alone. I want to join you! Additionally, I can get some money from my parents. I know where my mother puts her pocket money!' We waited, and we were getting increasingly nervous with each passing second. Qi finally made a response, which made us overjoyed for knowing that he was safe. 'Are you really alone? Tell me that you're not under coercive.' Then I told him to have a quick response, 'Of course, definitely!' I'm in a net bar near the West bus station called xx café. 'Ok, wait for me. I'll get some money at home and come to you.' 'Ok, but come alone. Otherwise, you won't see me anymore. 'Ok, of course! See you later!' I then contacted teachers from the moral education office. Two strong young teachers from the moral education office came with Qi's best friend. On the spot this student came to Qi without these teachers' showing up. Then those teachers caught him while he was not on alert. He resisted, expressing that he would not come back, but failed and then was taken away by those teachers."*

- The class sponsor's narratives concerning Qi's escape

## 6.5 Behind the façade of those seemingly fragmentary “misconducts”

“Habitus can be used to focus on the ways in which the socially advantaged and disadvantaged play out attitudes of cultural superiority and inferiority ingrained in their habitus in daily interaction...Reading children's peer group practices through the lens of habitus allows for a conceptualisation of their interaction as both rooted in social location and powered by complex motivations and desires that are generated through the interplay between dispositions and social context.” (Reay, 1995)

As discussed earlier, this work focuses on students' current academic achievements plus their chronological academic trajectory through their own narratives without ignoring the influences of the individual's history upon the status quo. This section starts with an episode of the interaction between Ning and his father in their family for providing a vivid picture of the typical parenting of many working-class families within which Ning's habitus is negotiated. It then moves on to focus on other students' situations. The work has found that all the other students have suggested their problematic behaviors are related to experiences at some stage in their childhood. The section then aims to explain how those aggressive underachieving working-class students with “problematic behaviors” in relation to their prior

experiences for a deeper understanding of what the world is like from these students' viewpoints. Many reports have shown that quite a few lower-class children reported that their parents were often absent while they were studying due to work or entertainment, like cards playing, which discouraged the development of children's self-control, an essential factor predicting academic achievements. But this work has found that this is only one pattern of working-class parenting which is resemble to "accomplishment of natural growth". Another pattern—"destructive enthusiasm" is also common among working-class parents and it is most likely to have something to do with children's "misconducts" at school.

### 6.5.1 An old cliché: "The salt I've eaten is even more than the rice you've had"

Ning, whose parents were divorced, was adopted by his father who was employed as a chef in a small restaurant. I first met Ning's father in the office of Ning's class sponsor, where the teacher was introducing Ning's problematic behaviors such as study manners, smoking and inopportune clothing. After that meeting, we had some small talks. When I asked this father if I could visit them for knowing them better on the weekend, this open and hospitable middle-aged man quickly accepted and said that he would like to show his culinary skill so that I could enjoy some delicious food. I considered it a fantastic opportunity to get to know the daily discourses at the working-class family milieu that had shaped Ning's status quo. Ning's father was attentively on a short leave from work and attentively watching a shootout TV series when I came to their place on a Saturday afternoon. "*Please come in; the meat is still simmering on the stove. If you are hungry now, there are some snacks on the table for you.*" I explained that I was not hungry or thirsty, and there was no need to bother. I also said that I hoped that they did what they wanted, just like as usual, in the most natural state, better treating me as air. "*How can this be?... But now sorry, to be honest, I can't stop because it's processing to the most exciting part. Ning, pour the teacher a cup of lemon water.*" He recognized me firstly as a teacher, and then as a visiting guest. Ning was probably doing his homework in his room and came out slowly responding to his father's order, pouring me a cup of cola rather than lemon water and disdainfully glancing at his father. He was a little embarrassed and did not know what to do next until I told him that he could do anything he wanted; he then went back to

his room. “*Oh, dead!*” The father slapped his lap with a rush when a car was shot and then exploded with a lot of fire and smoke on the screen. The next scene was a crying scene of the dead man’s wife, which stirred emotions. Then there was a sad scene of the dead man’s despairing parents. Ning’s father became a bit impatient, and then could not wait to press the fast-forward. I asked why he skipped that, he replied that he was “a straight man” who hated that the scriptwriter let the story drag without any “actual content”, while highlighting his admiration of masculinities. He was a bit disappointed with the result and stopped watching. He gave me a glance with some regret and then abruptly head to Ning’s room. He was on fire when he found the door was locked again after previous multiple warnings.

*“Why did you lock your door again? I’ve told you many times that you shouldn’t lock your door! You must have done bad things beyond study right? Tell me, were you playing games? Were you reading those comic books? You are such a trifler!”*

Ning’s father continued scolding him of “lacking of courtesy” for not “entertaining the guest”. I hastened to explain that it was totally ok, and this was precisely the right status I wanted. However, this father did not stop criticizing Ning. Ning became very angry and left home. The father could not help shouting, “*The small bird seemed to be strong enough to fly away! Come back, damn kid!*” With the mixed feeling of anger, confusion, and shame, the father could not stop quivering corners of his mouth unconsciously. He managed to get the words out hysterically, “*I’ll definitely fix him after he comes back.*” I noticed that the father’s discourses were obviously filled with restricted codes, just like many other working-class parents, as there existed many informal and decisive, and arbitrary expressions with short phrases. Although the main function of this code is “to define and reinforce the form of the social relationship by restricting the verbal signaling of individual experience” (Bernstein, 1971: 100), the frequent use of it discourages the formation and accumulation of cultural capital, which hinders children’s academic success.

I felt somehow self-condemned in that situation. Although I tried to convince the father that Ning had done nothing wrong and that I wished they would talk and behave in their most natural state, he still insisted that Ning should show his minimum courtesy in front of others. He then switched to the topic about some challenging hardships of raising the child on his own. Being aware of his limitations such as

couldn't help with the study, he was still struggling to be a responsible father who gave his son a lot of advice which sounds somehow "painful". I detected the common point between Ning's father and Feng's mother from their narratives that they wanted to "wake up" their children and believed their children could thrive if they could take their advice which had been repeated over and over again. However, advice such as this, full of "restricted codes", is only regarded by many adolescents as annoying preaching.

*"Life is hard. I previously did a lot of jobs: I worked as a salesman, constructed buildings, set up a stall selling fruits and belts, delivered goods for a snack bar, and I even pedaled the pedicab. Society is cruel, and women are super realistic and mercenary today. After I got fired as a salesman and worked as a construction worker, his mother wanted a divorce, which totally ruined my confidence. Soon I realized that I must be strong enough to support this kid, a poor kid who could no longer have a complete family. I don't care how hard the work is. What I only care about is that he can be a productive person with both culture and wealth in the future. I told him, 'you must listen to me because I have eaten more salt than you have rice'. One day, you'll understand that all the things I've done are only for your good. I hope you can wake up as soon as possible; otherwise, you'll be sorry.' Times are different, and people can't do anything without gaining recognition of society, which I mean a college diploma. Schooling is not what I'm good at, and I know it's challenging. I feel unqualified to speak on this matter in detail. I felt a bit pity that I couldn't help my son with his study directly, but I still believe that he should have done better because my parents were peasants, and they didn't tell me the importance of education while I kept telling him that almost every day! You know, I'm always exhausted from my work. I'm a normal person, and I need some entertainment and social life every now and often. Sometimes, I go out drinking with my friends to relax and release pressure; sometimes, I want to entertain myself by watching TV or playing mini-games on the phone. I was doing these while he's supposed to do his homework because I know I had no ability to help his study. But every time before I left, I never forgot to tell him in advance that 'Ning, work hard! Learning is all about self-awareness.' I believe that I'm a responsible father, and my friends also think so, but my son really let me down." (Ning's father)*

The last decades have observed a nationwide, large influx of rural laborers into cities, where industrialization has begun to take its effect (Jaffrelot & van der Veer, 2008: 123). It is quite likely that many lower-class parents can only place their hopes on their next generation for achieving into the middle-class status. Therefore, it has a long way to go for China to achieve the 'olive' structure as the western world (Jaffrelot & van der Veer, 2008: 124). With the logic of "not to be", Ning's father talked about that he was deprived of good education and that he did not want Ning to suffer the same fate. He was trying hard to be a good father, but he regrettably cannot set an example of the words and deeds of the middle-class taste. The metaphor of salt and rice, as a kind of social representative of the traditional educational philosophy with long-lasting influences on certain social groups, is frequently used by lower-status parents who are with the superstition of the prestige brought by the seniority in the family and with

the belief that life is constructed, layer by layer, through singular, linear, and homogeneous, and repeated life experiences. This father continued talking about the internalized value system that he could not protect his son for life, but the university diploma at least greatly helped him to settle down in this competitive “knowledge society”.

The father was obviously at a loss what to do for improving his son’s academic performances, with the ardent hope to seize every possible straw.

*“I don’t want to push him too hard, and I don’t unburden myself to him. But at least he should have known my hardship and work hard. You are an intellectual. Please help me to persuade him. I don’t think I have an alternative method.”*

In this situation, I realized that it was likely that I should transform my identity as a research observer into an intervenor, a consultant, and an educator. I agreed to have a try only if the father allowed his son to get his own ideas be heard and respected. Waiting with anxiety, this father called his son under my suggestion. Ning answered the call after hanging up a few times. The father tried to maintain his composure and seemed to painstakingly add some level of politeness, saying that *“come back, Ning. We’re about to have dinner. Don’t be a wet blanket! You didn’t make anything wrong. I won’t criticize you anymore.”* Ning finally said that he would do his father a favor for the sake of the outsider, which referred to me, of course. Ning then reluctantly came back with an additional tattoo on his left arm, with a hint of explicit resistance. Ning’s father was a passionate cook, and all the food was super delicious. However, it seemed that none of us could enjoy it. After the previous unpleasant experience, there was not enough time for them to be able to clear the air; thus, we were reticent with jumbled thoughts on the table. We only talked a little just for basic courtesy when necessary.

Ning went back to his room as soon as he finished the meal, leaving us on the table. Being informed of the father’s ardent expectations, I knocked lightly at Ning’s door and asked if I was allowed to come in. Ning opened the door and waved me in out of courtesy, though I could still feel that palpable displeasure greeted me at the door. He had a mild panic when he realized that he forgot to hide a novel which was taken as useless light readings that had nothing to do with study. Perceiving that, I said that I would not

tell his father before he seemingly attempted to remind me of something on this matter. For my interest as a researcher, I would like to cut to the chase as soon as possible. However, in that situation, I would instead devote my time and energy for better knowing and possibly giving him a hand on behalf of him.

*Ning: "My father asked you to come to persuade me, right?"*

*The interviewer: "No, I just followed my will."*

*Ning: "Then you would tell the male primate (referring his father) what I've told you later. It's so mean!" (Showing an ever-increasing distrust)*

*The interviewer: "If the closest person still couldn't persuade you, what makes me think I can?"*

*Ning: "But you are an adult. Adults help each other for dealing with us."*

*The interviewer: "You are half right. Yes, I'm an adult, but I've never forgotten my high school times with dreams and passion, as well as abandonment and decadence."*

*Ning: "No kidding! You are an academic overlord<sup>47</sup>, the envy of others. You can never understand me, and vice versa."*

*The interviewer: "I won't argue if I were an academic overlord or not. If you are willing to believe that I'm an academic overlord, I can tell you honestly that the so-called academic overlord can briefly change into an unsuccessful underachiever because I have had such personal experience. Now I'm in front of you, and you may think I'm strong, but there are unseen tears, self-doubt, non-confidence, and fragility behind the toughness. But one thing is certain, I'm people, an ordinary person, as many people around you. I'll try my best to understand you if you would give me a chance."*

*Ning: "No one once had such a heart-to-heart talk with me for a long time. What you've said is fascinating. That male primate would never say something like that. He often said, 'you should' or 'you shouldn't', 'you must' or 'you can't', 'this is good' or*

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<sup>47</sup> Academic overlord, also known as academic hegemony or curve wrecker, is a buzzword in the Chinese context, which is widely used in popular culture with the spread of the Internet. It refers to academically high-achieving students who easily won even under overwhelmingly tremendous competition in the exam-oriented education system. Unlike bookworm or nerd, it is not necessarily with a negative meaning. It also refers to people, with an academic dream, who are interested, willing to dedicate themselves to academics, and at the same time make achievements on it.

*'this is too bad' and many kinds of stuff like that. Besides, if I said something which he didn't agree, he would immediately point out that it was absolutely wrong. I think you can't be an ordinary person.'*

My expression, in his view, was “fascinating” and superior, but also unfamiliar and innovative in his life-world. He did not hate this communicative means, so he continued telling me more about himself. He perceived himself as a person good for nothing with fewer desires, and he did not want to be a “promising person” that was repeated by his father. He regarded his father as a person with unrealistic ambitions and puny abilities. He told me that his father thought himself a loser, but he did not give up pursuing success by means of making his child “promising”. The father always preached that *“a bark is essential to a tree, so is dignity to a person”*. He told me that his father understood a promising person as a person with notable achievements, like impressing power and wealth, which made others jealous and intimidating. This definition was apparently secular, being interwoven with desire and vanity. Ning also regarded himself as different from those wrong persons with certain ethical codes. For example, he reported that he had never bullied his classmates or cheat in the exams. He got a tattoo or other things indicating a bad child not because he really appreciated them but that he took them as a means to work off his wounded feelings. He believed that a problematic social atmosphere made people greedy and crazy. Given that the majority ends up becoming ordinary persons, too many desires only make people unhappy and flaked. He does not want to become a remarkable figure, and he does not think he possesses corresponding abilities for that, so he just wants to be an ordinary person with mediocre success who enjoys a quiet life. It is evident that Ning and his father have different criteria concerning a meaningful life. Ning’s father defines a responsible father as a person who supervises and even forces his “immature child” to study without giving up the idea of making him a person with great promise. Ning disagrees with it and takes it dominating, vacuous, and meretricious without respecting his own willingness, so they have exchanged harsh and raspy words quite often.

### 6.5.2 The prevalent logic: “Whether get ahead or get eliminated by society!”

Narratives reconstruct experiences, which implies that narratives do not accurately reappear the past events but give a hint in which way those happenings are remembered. Through such reconstruction, we

get a further understanding of what the world looks like from other people's perspective, and which are valued for them. Hence, narratives provide an essential trail for looking into these "problematic cases" from an angle in culture. This work has found that many working-class parents are in a constant state of anxiety and contradiction where they hope their children could keep alert to those sporadic dangers and prepare for war in time of peace, which shapes their "destructive enthusiasm" on children's education to a great extent.

#### 6.5.2.1 Response to campus bullying: "You had it coming for not being strong enough!"

The school is the zone of the formal, while the counter-school culture belongs to the zone of the informal (Willis, 1977: 22). I was curious to learn about the meaning system which underpinned those "problematic" students' distinctive behaviors incurring punishments, which enables these students to have the courage to withstand the overwhelming institutional forces with little care of the calculation about loss. Then I was subsequently told stories of "victims are to blame as well". Actually, considerable Chinese working-class parents do not adhere to "accomplishment of natural growth" philosophically, as described by Lareau; rather, many are expecting their children to achieve class "jump" and perform at the top in society through standing out in the intense competition. However, their parenting strategies do not align with their ambitions. In this line of thought, those parents tend to ascribe children's adversity or troubles to their own "capability failures" with intense anxiety. This also applies to bullying for those families, though being bullied is one of the worst predicaments that children can confront and solve independently.

Bo and Liang, who included stories of being academically excellent at elementary school, had experiences of being bullied at school without their parent's support because those involved adults believed that they should stimulate their children to develop into "strong persons". A teacher told me that Bo was intelligent, and he should have achieved more. But to his disappointment, this student often hangs out with the wrong people and cannot stay focused. But Bo told me his story of being bullied with intense emotions that had not been healed. He talked about that his hair was naturally curly, which made him a bit different from other students in the crowd. One of his classmates from the lower secondary school, often provoked him

by laughing at him as a “feral child”, and judging his mother as being slutty. Bo furiously hit this classmate furiously, and they were both called to the teacher’s office. Bo told me that “The sleek and sophisticated hooligan” confessed his fault immediately, just as what the teacher had expected, while himself, filled with indignation and a sense of injustice, stubbornly refused to acknowledge the mistake. Being not able to convince Bo, that teacher was angry and thus invited Bo’s mother to give him a lesson together.

*“I’ll never forget our meeting that day! I can always retell every word from my mother because I was badly hurt by the dearest person in the world. If the hooligan spoke ill of me, I could stand it anyhow. But I couldn’t accept that someone spoke evil of my mother because I loved her so much. I thought my mother would support me and stand with me in the same trench, just as I did, but I was totally wrong. She was such a spineless and indecisive person who wouldn’t say no to teachers and would yield to key figures’ authority. You know what she said? Why did your classmate only fix you but not other classmates? I wasn’t convinced that you were absolutely innocent! You know how hard I am for bringing you up these years. Have you forgotten?! How evil you are! You don’t study hard, and you even don’t listen to your teacher at school. Your teacher is absolutely right. The behavior of hitting is wrong, in any case! You must apologize to your teacher, and promise that you won’t repeat it again.’ I apologized under their pressure with great grievance and against my will, of course. I didn’t think many people were knightly and upright enough, until I met my big brother who was filled with justice.” (Bo)*

Not coincidentally, Liang reported that he had experienced school bullying without any support from his parents.

*“My parents always reiterate me to work hard and do well at school; at the very beginning, I managed to do so, and that was why I began to wear glasses from an early age. There were two hooligans in my class who thought I was a soft pedant, and they often treated me enigmatically with provocative remarks, like ‘You are going to be blind for working so hard. Even if you work so hard, you can’t be a top student.’, and also kinda stuff like ‘Wow, someone thinks that he knows more than his teachers! Only he can go to Peking University in the future!’” (Liang)*

Liang recalled a torturing episode with his head buried in his hands unconsciously. He talked about that one time, one of those provokers had offended him again on his way back home, trying to hurt his face with an iron wire. He was infuriated on the thought that he was always being bullied, and he got up the courage to resist and hit back by seizing this wire and inserting it into this provoker’s mouth. Liang’s father happened to see this scenario by coincidence, without giving him support. Instead, the father slapped his son in the face with a bunch of bystanders looking them straight. Liang talked about that he would never forget his humiliation and tearful rage that day.

*“You are always making troubles!” My father was yelling at me. He then snatched me up by my collar and continued thundering me in the street like ‘You bit him without learning about his family background previously. If his father had connections with gangsters, you’ll be revenged sooner or later. Yes, you’ll end up being killed one day!” (Liang)*

His situation of being bullied was intensified when his teacher tended to smooth things over for the sake of discipline and order and his parents were not providing adequate support but accusing him for not being “strong enough”. When he managed to align with his brothers, he became to act against those who had repressed him with scorn.

*“Since then, those they had regarded me as a good bully. One time, we fought again at school after my long endurance, and our class sponsor invited my father indiscriminately. What the most annoying was that my father only cared about face and believed that giving their child a heavy slating in front of people would do him good. Every time, when I did something other than what my parents thought, they would vent their emotions and criticize me, without exception. I experienced then verbal abuse without any fault. I didn’t want to mention that my teacher stood by with folded arms. The saddest part of the whole event was my father’s low-grade comment like ‘it takes two to make a quarrel! Why didn’t the guy offend the best student from your class? So you deserve it!’ Indeed, my parents provide me food and clothing; they didn’t hesitate to spend much money to get me enrolled here; they don’t hit me often as I’m growing older. But I won’t forgive them and I’ll stay away from them in the future. I feel that my psychological problems are perhaps getting increasingly worse. Sometimes I would think that it’s not bad to be a bad student as long as I can gain happiness from friendship, and I even get satisfaction when they are invited by teachers who are with a funny face.” (Liang)*

These two cases indicate how parents’ particular child-rearing strategy can be detrimental to children’s growth and development. The schools’ handling of the affair is considered by Bo as “if you can’t fix the problem, just fix the victim who asks for ‘trouble’”. Adults from these families, being aware of the “cruelty from society”, had ardent expectations that their children to become the strong in society one day, they thus adopted a similar strategy when their children were experiencing school bully. Contrary to parents’ expectations, both of these two children identified their parents’ attitudes to the impressive bullying as a vital factor prompting them to involve in the sub-cultural group. They began to muddle along in class and made friends with who had a similar experience for seeking for the missing sense of justice and spiritual consolation and relieving their anxiety for having unreasonable parents.

#### **6.5.2.2 Disavowal as a parenting pattern: “The more you beat iron, the harder it grows.”**

Many working-class children are familiar with adults' cliché that "I just wish iron could develop into steel." Working-class parents' life stress and the inconsistency of their high expectations on the child and the actual result have together contributed to a rigid parent-child relationship dominated by parents' authority. Those interviewed parents have talked about their previously repressive experiences of growing up under parental authority as well as working for their employers who leave them up a tree by abusing their power.

*"Children live a much happier and healthier life nowadays, but they are still unsatisfied. My parents only took care of food, clothing, and shelter, and they hit me hard or kicked me out if I didn't obey them. I've never punished my son in that way, but how should he be full of complaints against me and totally ignores my feelings at all. The one-child policy gives arise to a lot of social problems, among which children's thanklessness is the most conspicuous. Besides, the only child tends to become highly conceited. You must repress their arrogance; otherwise, how can you educate them?" (Ning's father)*

*"You sold yourself to the boss but when your picky boss was unhappy, he wouldn't hesitate to create obstacles to make you tremble; you had no time for your family. The tasks were repetitive, tedious, and can never be finished. You had weighty responsibilities, finding yourself always in a difficult situation. You shouldn't be lazy; otherwise, the boss would punish you in loads of ways, like yelling at you, degrading your dignity, or deducting your wages. You felt you were less worthy than a dog." (Xiang's father's description of his previous experiences as a construction worker)*

Class structures belief systems; Working-class people believe that people are under the control of forces (Kohn, 1989). Working-class parents have formed a set of repertoires defined by their lived experiences. Paradoxically, they anticipate that their children show absolute obedience to parental authority, even though they might feel uncomfortable or a sense of deprivation when they are expected to do that from their parents or employers as they have described their previous experiences.

*"You must make your children understand that society is cruel; worse still, they must count on themselves because their parents can't accompany them forever. For this purpose, you must remind them that they are far from being perfect through harsh words or even exaggerated comments sometimes." (Long's mother)*

Ru recalled her multiple negative experiences at home, emphasizing that her parents often hit her while shouting a stream of obscenities if she "disrespected" parental authority. Tong recalled how her mother berated her when she had explicitly showed her pre-exam panic.

*“She would shout like ‘Only an exam could scare you so much? You are useless and so fragile! How will you fit into society in the future? I’ve known for a long time that you are a jerk. I bore a degenerate!’”*

Tong talked about that she used to cry heartbrokenly, but was increasingly become “numb”. As can be seen, verbal attack and corporal punishment come as no surprise in the family and are frequently adopted when some working-class parents who endorse strict parental authority are triggered at particular moment when they suddenly develop the illusion that their children would be eliminated in the cruel competition for lack of an array of competence, which is also reflected in Cun’s case where his mother should scold him when he got stung by a bee in the street. Their experiences have made these parents believe that this kind of parenting style enables their children better and earlier adapt to the environment, but quite the opposite never failed to happen.

*“No matter how hard you try, things run counter to your desire. I’m an actual example,” (Long’s mother)*

Many parents become confused about why they get the opposite of what they expected. As Mills put that, private troubles are closely related to public issues in a wider social context. They fail to see the link between elite habitus and academic success, in most cases. The relationship between commanding parents who issue orders and submissive children who fulfill a task discourages children’s reasoning skills and their confidence in engaging adults.

#### **6.5.2.3 The principle of “decency”**

Most working-class parents have an ambivalent attitude toward schooling. On the one hand, they are taught by traditional belief and popular educational discourses that credentials are important for securing a high-paid job and decent life; on the other hand, getting little exposure to the high-status culture, it is hard for them to imagine how professional knowledge plays a part in professional jobs. All the interviewed working-class parents talked about that they did not expect their children to repeat their life path; however, on the other hand, they had little knowledge about what the “new world” looked like, and tended to believe that their perceived “rules” in their restricted world were universally applicable.

Comparing two opposite cases with Xiang and Ning as representatives, parents from these two families conveyed that people with profanity wisdom could get things done, while others could not. However, Xiang's father sets clear-cut goals for each stage along the timeline and determines that the cultivation of profanity wisdom is important but should be postponed. As a reflexive working-class parent, he intentionally avoids such topics at home, but instead, nudges the conversation towards his daughter's campus life.

In the interview, working-class parents mention and emphasize "the way of the world", while very few parents from the other two groups point that up. The working-class group thus has a high likelihood of keeping a strong link with the big family and emphasizing "deftly" dealing with relationships involving "pleasing-others strategies" in case of trouble. Quite many of them believe that they have a responsibility to keep well-connected to their extended family and pay careful attention to maintain this bond which deserves much time investment, whether they like it or not. Chao recalled that they often visited their relatives or waited for their relatives to come on the weekend. In the family gathering, they usually had dinner. After the dinner, adults were chatting around the table while children were supposed to do their homework quietly. Peng used to be a day girl and reported that the weekend life for her followed much the same pattern before she managed to live in the school dormitory, which she did not like. Xue talked about that her mother had identified that endurance and disguise as essential means for maintaining a good interpersonal relationship, though it made her uncomfortable at the beginning.

*"I asked my mother, 'If you don't like your brother's wife, why must you try every means to please her?' My mother harshly criticized me, saying that, 'You don't know the ways of the world, no matter how hard I've tried to teach you! I'm worried about how you continue your life in society after I die in the future. It's wrong to explicitly show your pleasure, anger, sorrow, and joy in the face.' 'Are you tired?' 'You jerk, you must listen to me! I know you don't like her too. But remember, your uncle is our important person in the world! Hence, the less you like his wife, the better you must treat her. If you can do this, you'll make achievements after you step into society.' She talked while she was about to give me a hit."* (Xue's recollection of an episode from her conversation with her mother)

Tong identifies a similar experience interview. Furthermore, she reports that her mother expects her to become a sophisticated person who is equipped with skills of making others happy at a crucial time. In

the mother's opinion, a deficiency of that skill makes fail people, making people feel trapped in workplace and relationships.

*"My mother often said, 'Everybody gets tired of you because you are such an annoying kid who knows nothing about the ways of the world. When you grow up, your boss will scold you, and worse still, your husband will hit you and abandon you!'"*

Ran reported that his mother, albeit with a high educational expectation on him, spent plenty of time discussing relatives' household trivialities. Similarly, Ru reported that her parents often gave others' a short assertive judgment based on one thing or another, like:

*"This couple didn't go back to their parents' home. Their parents are poor, and they are really selfish." (From Ru's recall of his father's remarks)*

The same situation can be found in Liang's case where he reports that his parents are interested in knowing and talking over affairs from family and neighborhood.

*"I heard that her husband travels frequently and they live a cat-and-dog life; the theory of human nature makes me suspect that he is likely to have another woman outside. Oh, what about their poor kid? He's an unworthy father.' Then my father reminds her of keeping the talking at library tones in case walls have ears." (From Liang's recall of his mother's analysis of their neighbor's family relationship)*

### 6.5.3 Rebellion: "I also want to make a difference."

This section, following closely the last section, shows how the past victims have cross the boundary and become bullies and attempts to detect a pattern beneath this phenomenon.

#### 6.5.3.1 Waving victims goodbye and becoming bullies

##### **Zhi's story**

I was excited to have Zhi as an informant because that recruitment involved many unexpected twists and turns. Zhi, with a firm uncooperative attitude, simply turned me down with a self-protected stance when I asked if it were possible for him to attend my proposed narrative inquiry. He had a very hostile attitude to educators and people who benefited from the established education system.

*“Forget it! I know how you think of me! I know your purpose is just making use of me and including me as the specimen of problematic students.”*

With the thought of at least this student had said something to me, I did not give up quickly. I sometimes strolled around the school, with the purpose of gaining a deeper understanding of these problematic students' off-campus life, and discovering some “secrets” of them if I had a good fortune. After multiple rejections from Zhi, I determined to work at some selected spots where Zhi was often haunting out. He excelled in and enjoyed skateboarding in some streets with less traffic; with his brothers, he sometimes visited a barbecue house where one time I heard that they were making a deal of “*ghostwriting homework in exchange for CNY 10*”. He would also visit a skating rink where he drank and smoked, struck a conversation with girls, and consciously showed his backward skating with a highly difficult art of rotations. Although I pretended that I just came across them, Zhi warned me, “*Stop following me! No stirring up trouble.*” I was a bit annoyed with myself for without a full understanding of the harm I had caused to him. Reminded by his saying, I became well aware of ethical issues, then I gave up the idea of following him and including him as one of my informants. I then apologized and promised him that I would no longer disturb his life.

It was a long time before I came across Zhi again outside of the school in an afternoon on the weekend while he was heading for somewhere with a cigarette in his mouth. I was considering if I should make an explanation of this casual encounter in response to his possible question like “how convenient?” with an awkward smile when he surprisingly took the initiative to talk to me.

*“Fine. I believe you are basically honest, unlike some hypocritical persons around me. You didn’t trace me as you promised or tell my teachers about what you had seen outside the school. I can tell you something what you want to know in return if you are still interested.”*

It is clear that honesty is an ethical code in his sub-cultural group, which seems to be contrary to the commonsense that those problematic students were taken as “heinous villains”. Zhi talked about his secret—he was a top expertise for cheating in exams.

*“It was scarcely possible, but I really made it. I’m kinda fond of doing things which make your heart rate robustly increases.”*

From some time, the topic turned to his family secret unintentionally. His parents maintain their marital union while both having extra-marital affairs. Zhi was brought up by his grandmother, who attended almost all the “parent-teacher meetings” which were supposed for parents only. He was not so cynical as he consciously showed in front of people, but there was the desire of intimate parent-child relationship deep in his heart. He missed a close parent-child bond, and repeated this expression after a description of an event in the narrative inquiry.

*“I’ve known that I’m done. Since my parents didn’t care about me, I had no idea why they gave birth to me.”*

His parents have low educational expectations on him. He told me that his father only wanted that he could be taken care of at school so that he did not need to worry about him. His father told him that he had a friend working as an official in the army who had promised to recruit Zhi in that bureau after he finished high school. Zhi talked about the fear and confusion when he was unconfidently navigating in the educational setting for the first time. With a strong sense of being abandoned and rejected, he had negative educational experiences, which were strengthened by his bad interpersonal relationship until the presence of a “big brother” who filled the absence of Zhi’s parents in his growing-up experience and transformed his identity as a “victim” toward a “bully”, helping him to gain the feeling of being capable.

*“I had great fear on the first day of school when I was seven because nobody had introduced me to the school life ever before. I clearly remembered that it was a raining morning, and my grandma took me to school. I was so nervous that I held her coat-tail tightly. She said, ‘Be a good boy at school! Work hard!’ and then left. I looked at her back, in a despondent mood. Taking a broad view, I found everyone happier than me. Nobody knew my fear; nobody gave me any comfort. I felt uneasy at school and had terrible performances. My parents still kept seeking happiness from their lovers. I knew how they thought at the beginning. They didn’t want to pay anything for me while hoping that I was a star student who brought them face. Being informed of my situation at school, they looked down upon me and increasingly abandoned me. They had realized that being good at school was an illusion after my teacher’s multiple warnings. Then my father greatly lowered his expectations, only hoping*

*that I could be taken care of by teachers. He showed me what a capable parent he was by mentioning that I had a place to go after I graduate from high school. Everyone knew that I was abandoned by my parents; everyone could bully me if they wanted at school until that day when I met my big brother who took me on this road where I began to live a more meaningful and happier life. I felt a great sense of achievement when the thing was reversed— my classmates could be afraid of me!"*

Zhi further talked about that on the one hand, the “big brother” acted as his protective umbrella while on the other hand punishing him if he violated the code of “brotherhood”. When I told him that we were almost at the end of the interview, with a strong admiration for the image of a tough guy that he was sticking to, he had additional words for me, *“I'm afraid I may act like a fool. I haven't told these experiences to anybody else—I don't want to be taken as a sissy. Damn, I'm a man of iron, by no means a sentimental person in life! Don't let my secret out.”* Then he left chickly while snapping his fingers.

### **Cun's story**

Remaining faithful and generous to friends was a basic code in their friend circle, especially in a context where members believe that “informers are everywhere”. Zhi told his brothers about his interview experience and even encouraged them to join the interview as well. Cun and Dong finally agreed, telling me that they came because of “a bit curiosity” and also because they were convinced that I was a person of my word and did not trade their secrets.

Cun, who failed to reach the admission line with three marks, reported that he got the admission through “the back door” with guanxi practices and monetary donation. He was annoyed when their parents iterated their sacrifice for him “whenever they got the opportunity”. Cun scoffed that he had already tried his best for his studies with cynicism.

*“It's unfair to say that I don't study at all! I go to school, attend lectures, cope with homework, and take exams! My parents would beat me hard if I don't study a little bit.” (Cun talked while shrugging his shoulders)*

He recalled some heartrending events with a phenomenally negative meaning in his childhood, which gave a glimpse of the “disavowal” parenting in his family where his parents have shown detrimental enthusiasm with excessive anxiety.

*“School is no good to me. I’m not stupid, and I could have done much better, but I just have no motives. My life is shit! I get bored and have no sense of happiness at home or school. Now I only want to seek some pleasures from the infuriating life; how could I be wrong? When I got an infrequent high score in an important exam through hard-working when I was in primary school, my parents appeared indifferent and just said ‘don’t be proud’ without any praise or celebration. I remembered when I was young, they often scolded me with harsh words. I have good reasons why I must say that they were insane and violent. Even when I was severely ill, my father’s as-usual practice would be that, firstly scolds me with a whole strand of lunatic remarks like ‘It serves you right. You don’t care about your own health’ at least 15 minutes, and then thank goodness, comes to himself to gets me to the hospital. My mother was also a grumbler, and acts like my father or can be even worse. One time when I was outside with my mother, I was stung by a bee flying in the opposite direction, feeling hurt and a lump swelling. My mother didn’t comfort me, but instead, hitting and scolding like ‘Why not be careful enough?’ She then took me to the hospital, but actually, at that time, I would rather die. They are bad parents, and how should they be confident that they are great? Go to damn parents’ love!”*

Cun looked down upon those “bookworms”, whom he believed without “knowledge of society”. Although he was still confused about his coming-into-being, he was quite sure that persons with such life wisdom can better navigate in society and yield substantial benefits. Therefore, although Cun degraded his parents’ deeds in the family, he was not aware that he was profoundly shaped by his parents’ words and deeds. In the interview, Cun talked about an episode of his father’s working experiences with great pride because in his opinion, his father was a good example of a person with knowledge of society.

*“What I only learned from my father is the life wisdom— Little but useful! I declare that those bookworms are not benefited from society finally, whether you believe or not. I can tell you that my father previously worked at the railway station. Many people there were afraid of him because they knew that he was not a person to be trifled with. When my father was younger, he had a worse temper! You know what? He was entitled to leave with full pay! His boss was not satisfied with him because he easily offended people round in the service, regardless of time and settings. Hence the boss was annoyed with him but dared not to fire him because he knew my father would lay his hands on him sooner or later. You know that the boss said? ‘You don’t need to come to work anymore, but you’ll get your wages on time.’ So you see, providing the shuttle service is actually his sideline.”*

### **Dong’s story**

Dong talked about that his growing environment was no better. Since the previous experience of being laid-off, his father has worked as a deliveryman, and his mother has stayed unemployed at home, being addicted to electronic cards playing and TV watching. This student thought that these activities offered her a sense of the passage of time and meaning for living. Being unsatisfied with the present living conditions, his parents have had a lot of quarrels concerning money. Dong told me that after his grandmother, the only person who cared him, in his view, passed away, he became to indulge himself because he felt that there was no need to please anyone else anymore. In Willis' analysis, hard work, diligence, discipline, and knowledge mean nothing for those working-class kids. Dong's growing environment has not cultivated his closeness to the school culture. He previously attempted to be a responsible person required by the school system for making his grandmother happy but his cooperation with the educational system drifted away with his grandmother's death.

Dong's aversion to schooling was strongly triggered by a Chinese exam. Popular education discourses and school settings work together to employ parents, as certain available resource, reminding students of the critical roles that parents play or the debt they have owed to their parents through exam-taking such as composition and reading comprehension. He talked about that when he was proceeding into the writing section in that exam, he was scratching his ears and cheeks in embarrassment, and finally wrote nothing because he was aggrieved and also because he did not want to be "a vicious and hypocritical person like many people around". Since that exam, he totally lost interest in Chinese, and later almost all the other subjects were on his "hated list".

*"I hate staying at home. I hardly remember any experience in which we have had a meal happily as a family. What came to my mind is that my parents quarreled a lot, and they planned to get divorced after a big fight when I was seven. I felt despondent at first on the thought of barely meeting my father or mother, but after the second thought, I was ok with that because I was a victim of family ways. They didn't get divorced finally because divorce was a shameful thing. Suffering from material scarcity, they were always on the verge of losing their temper. My father got 'a shameful and tiring job', in his view. My mother has never done anything meaningful but stuck in her decadent time— she watched TV at home or played cards with her friends. According to my previous experiences, as soon as teachers learned about my family conditions, they didn't expect me to do well at school. Nobody believed I had some ability except my grandmother, whom, the only person cared about me, but she has already passed away. I've hated writing since an exam where we were required to write a composition praising our parents. I didn't write any word. I felt it was super hypocritical to write anything good about them. I failed the exam, of course."*

When it came to prospect, Dong shared a similar view with Cun. He was well aware of the difference between school smart and street wisdom, attaching importance only to the latter while turning a blind eye to various kinds of capital which brought advantages concerning financial rewards, life quality, well-being such as medical care, children's education, personal pension possessed by the advantageous group. Their admiration of the so-called "life wisdom" and the devaluation of those bookworms has reflected their negative attitudes toward the elite culture, which is contrary to Peng, who, with a moral boundary with her parents, considers her parents' principle of dealing with others nonsense.

*"Nerds do well only in the school. They only know to do the 'right things' led by teachers without personality at all. Is there any difference between such a student and a dog which is walked over by its master? No wonder they become silly as soon as they step out of the school gate. If you want to do well in society, you must know how to manipulate something they don't know. Most importantly, you must engage in the relationship; you must let others know that there will be a cost if they belittled or offended you! For example, a friend of my big brother was caught for drunk driving, but he always had his channels to fix things very quickly. But those nerds will never understand those hidden knowledge and have no idea about how to manipulate skillfully things they will face." (Dong)*

### **Qi's story after the truancy**

I interviewed Qi after he was back to school after the truancy. Qi held negative attitudes toward the knowledge taught at school. With an extreme dissatisfaction with his parents' decision of keeping him there, he had a strong intention to drop out and transfer to a vocational school.

*"It's boring. In a word, I'll not go to school anymore. People should never do what they are not good at because it brings much pain and their closest persons in this world. I've never been good at study. Adults often said that I was a bad kid because I did many bad things—fought with others, smoked, copied homework, broke the class rules, played as a truant. Being a good student makes my parents happy indeed, but have they ever thought about how to make me happy? Don't they remember that I'm a child growing up in foster homes? I really have no obligation to please them. Have they respected me enough when I told them that I'd rather go to a vocational school where I could learn to be a hairdresser? My mother got a school place for me here through guanxi just for satisfying her vanity and—'oh, I'm proud to be a capable person. I'm proud to be a great parent!' She's a narcissist! If they were really great parents, how could they get divorced, ignoring the child's feelings? How could my father totally absent from my previous education when I desperately needed his company and support? Now that I've been shaped (as an academically bad student), I can't gain any sense of achievement from the study, and I hope they could set me free! Let me transfer to a vocational school! It's good for everyone! Otherwise, I'll fool around and cause troubles. Oh, I plan to come to my previous classmate's vocational school in a couple of days. There are quite a few cafés around the school where many young people are enjoying themselves."*

Qi and his parents' opinions were divided concerning whether resisting at this school. The class sponsor breathed a sigh of relief after that truancy. That was definitely a nightmare for her which she would never want again. The school leaders defined that truancy as "a very serious event with very negative effects". For the school, the dropout also meant a decline of the denominator of the school's university acceptance rate. Hence, knowing Qi's idea of transferring, the school positively got the thing moving as he wished.

### **Stories of Chi, Ran, and Ji**

I had a focus-group interview with Chi, Ji, and Ran. At the age of six, when Ji's parents got divorced, he was awarded to his father, who was a locksmith. Ji found schools unfriendly to him because he was not academically good though he tried hard, for which his father had not been able to help him with his homework and it was not uncommon that his father would rant against him for not doing well; also, he was belittled and mocked by his classmates as being "a child without mother". Ran lives with his mother for most of the time. His father, as a serviceman in the military, is often absent from his development. He reported that he was neither emotionally close to his mother for "having no overlapping areas of interest" nor to his father, who was described as a short-tempered person with "little sense of family responsibilities".

Chi was similar to Zhi in that his parents both involved in extramarital affairs. He talked about that he often grabbed a bite somewhere, feeling lonely in his childhood. In the interview, Chi empathetically described his lonely childhood experiences of staying alone at home in the night while his parents were dating outside.

*"Life is so unfair. My childhood was terrible. Their crummy deeds have left an indelible mark on my mind. Like other kids, I was afraid of the dark. I was easily disturbed by light and shadow that were reflected on my curtain as I lived on the ground floor. Then I suspected that ghosts, with villainous faces, were fluttering up in the air; thunder and lightning in summer also frightened me. I was always keeping lights on while sleeping when there was nobody else at home. I remembered that I woke up from my dreams at midnight many times and needed to go to the washroom, but I didn't go because I was afraid that I might disturb or irritate the ghost. They give me nothing, except for living expenses, so that I won't die. They wouldn't prepare a gift for my birthday; they only give me some money, at best." (Chi)*

These students reported that they were belittled by people since they could perceive that people judged them by their parents' conditions. They also had no trust in teachers, from whom they could have got some support for their studies.

*"Good teachers are rare in the current society, and the majority of them only care about money, promotion, and benefits. I've seen how calculating they are. I tell you a universal fact that they receive gifts and red envelops, and they give those affluent students preferential treatments; for example, they arrange their seats in the front rows." (Ji)*

*"Time has changed—the good old days are gone. I mean teachers, in the current time, are getting worse in every respect. They give special care to students whose parents have power or money. They wouldn't really care about us. Especially, my class sponsor at primary school was so unfair. I was apparently wronged by one of my classmates, and she did know the situation! But she just patched up the quarrel. I had no idea why but it turned out that this guy's father was an official of high position." (Chi)*

Ji talked about the meaning of drinking, smoking, and dangerous sports, such as skateboarding, which served the purpose of not only lifting their moods but also promoting the solidarity of the small group, manifesting masculinity, escaping from the grinding reality, and pretending cool in public. He identified it a source of pride for being a real man.

*"I learned to drink and smoke from my big brother. I liked neither cigarettes nor liquor before. Then I was gradually addicted to them somehow. Drinking and smoking together promote brotherhood; besides, they make us look cool. That's to say, they facilitate us to act in public and provide us the feeling of being someone who possess some power. 'Come out if you're a man, but not a coward.' I was incited to learn skateboarding, which, an edge tool for playing cool. I can't count the number of falls I've had, but so what? Now I'm good at it!" (Ji)*

Chi talked about his relationships with the outside world after he had been involved in the sub-cultural group.

*"The simple truth is that a tamed horse is easily ridden; likewise, a weak person is liable to be bullied. I just make them—those who have looked down upon me, those who have bullied me, afraid of me. My brothers have sufficient loyalty to me. They treat me generously; they fixed those guys who had bullied me, which helped to work off my anger and hostility. I gain much support, happiness, and warmth from my brothers. I believe my brothers are the most important persons for me. Your parents may severely punish and torture you; your girlfriend may dump you after she finds a better guy. But your brothers are reliable. I gave my ex-girlfriend a sound slap in her face last time when she talked evil about my brothers, which terminated our relationship." (Chi)*

Ran talked about his negative attitude toward teachers and his “magnificent feat” against the teacher’s authority.

*“When I had more time at primary school, I watched some programs produced by the science and education channel. I’ve been marveling at the invited professors for their knowledge and unyielding characters. I believed that I would have a different result if I could have them as teachers. On the contrary, I found many teachers ill-informed and snobbish. But I learned friendship, courage, and self-confidence from my brothers. I tell you an exciting story about a notorious teacher. One day, I was caught reading a cosmic book while having a geography class. The teacher slapped me in my face with the textbook in his hand. I was so angry, so I raised my chair, attempting to hit him. You know what? This coward got flurried and escaped across the row of homerooms. I kept chasing until he fled in his office and locked himself. I can’t help laughing wildly when I think of this ridiculous scenario. Shame on him! What a ‘people’s teacher’ he is! Although I was punished afterward, I felt proud of myself. However, if they are not too much, we usually don’t contradict them by force, because it causes trouble. We’ve learned how to fight a battle of wits and courage.” (Ran)*

Their class sponsors made it clear that they had no alternatives but to leave them behind after multiple communicational failures.

*“It’s not that I don’t want to help, but there’s no hope. Teacher’s work will not be easy without parents’ cooperation. Parents’ attitude influences students’ achievements more than anything else. I talked with his father many times, but it seemed that he couldn’t understand me. He still didn’t <sup>48</sup>guan<sup>48</sup> him much even I told him his son would be ruined if he continued hanging out with them. If parents don’t care, there’s no way for us to make a difference. I just hope that he’ll manage to graduate without influencing other students too much.” (Ji’s class sponsor)*

While introducing his meeting with Chi’s uncle, Chi’s class sponsor repeated his response three times to show his shock.

*“His parents have never shown up at the parent-teacher conference. Last time, his uncle came, and I told him what Chi had done, and I told him that I expected the cooperation from him so as to correct Chi’s misbehaviors, which lay a foundation of possible academic progress. Can you imagine that? His uncle made no response to me, and turned about to Chi, ‘You are such a gutless coward and good for nothing. I couldn’t believe my ears! Did you extort only CNY 200? In those days, I extorted no less than CNY 300!’” (Chi’s class sponsor)*

### 6.5.3.2 Becoming female bludgers

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<sup>48</sup> Guan, embracing a positive meaning, is an essential parents’ practice in China, which means to care for, to love, and the same time, to train, and to govern. See Chao, Ruth K. "Beyond parental control and authoritarian parenting style: Understanding Chinese parenting through the cultural notion of training." *Child development* 65.4 (1994): 1111-1119.

“Class is a circumscribed way of knowing the world that they did not choose.” (Charlesworth, 2000: 64)

Willis provided us valuable empirical data of twelve lads’ thinking and behaving for our understanding of working-class students’ life-world. It seems that working-class students with problematic behaviors are always related to the male. The ignorance of the female-students group is also mentioned by Gamman (Gamman, 1992). My work has also included female “lads” as informants. Ru, Tong, and Ni are all “a lion among sheep and a sheep among lions”, as narrated by their class sponsors. To put it another way, they select those “weak” students as their targeted attacks, but at the same time, they assume a look of hurtlessness in front of people who possess power in the educational setting. They dare not openly challenge the legitimacy of authority from people with power but privately do what they want for fun. They are contradictory in that they define themselves as “big sisters” or “tough girls” while they are believing they will depend on their husband in the future. They have relatively low academic aspirations—“not too much”, and “feel it would be better if a college or a university accept me”. They sniffed at female master holders or Ph. D. holders, regarding them as unfeminine women who scare men away.

Ru’s parents own a snack bar and a net café which are crowded with “juvenile delinquents”. Her life-world has not cultivated her appreciation for the elite culture. Besides, her experiences of growing up in an environment of entertainment with her parents’ striking indifference to education, has dramatically frustrated Ru’s academic ambition. The parenting strategies in her family seemed to be oversimple. Her parents appraised her good exam performances with a smile and kept her doing housework as a punishment for doing bad.

*“Since I can remember, our apartment was often crowded with more than eight people. My parents later transformed a big room into the cards parlor for money. They were playing cards while smoking and talking loudly. When some guys lost the game, they would crankily throw the cards. So my father kept buying cards— it didn’t take long for him to get another pack of cards! My parents don’t think highly of education but are told by society that ‘The old days are over. The next generation can’t do anything without knowledge these days’. I remembered in primary school, I still wanted to be a good student. But so what? They would only give me a smile when I got a high score. When I screw up an exam, they just let me do some homework as a ‘punishment’. No big deal.”*

Ru also talked about an event that offered a glimpse of how her morality was shaped in her family context. She has great admiration for successful people in business who are doomed to be calculative rather than be honest, from her point of view.

*"I was an honest person when I was young. I remembered one day, I was playing a leather ball with my cousin when he suddenly hit the ball on our neighbor's window. 'Hey, you broke the window!' I cried. When I felt restless for not being sure what to do next, my mother came out immediately from home upon hearing this, holding my skirt furiously and signaling me to keep silent. Then she carefully observed if there were any movement in the house. We left without acknowledging the guilt and compensating them for the loss. In those years, I'm gradually becoming to realize that school education is useless and wrong in many aspects, and a person can never be too honest. Look at those rich people who own successful business! They are alert and flexible rather than being honest."*

Tong's parents do a small-scale business selling stationery. Tong felt aggrieved that being an "unexpected accident", she was not taken seriously in her family. In addition, her parents still upheld the conception of the son preference, giving her much less support. Tong talked about her living experiences in comparison with her brother, conveying that ubiquitous injustice caused anger and pain.

*"My mother had an accidental pregnancy when my elder brother was four years old. So you see, I'm unscheduled and unwelcome. My brother is the absolute priority in my family. My parents bought him many things: clothes, toys, books, etc. I had much fewer clothes. It was no problem that I inherited the second-hand toys and books from my brother. But girls don't like toys for boys, of course. One day, when we passed by a shop, I got up the courage to tell them that I wanted the gorgeous Barbie doll with a wedding gown, which I had thought about for a long time. Not surprisingly, they turned me down with the excuse of having no money. However, they even feed my brother with chopped fruit, gently let him lay down for giving him eye drops. They've never done this to me. Besides, I have to do the housework while my brother only needs to go about his business. Many elder brothers love their younger sisters, but this doesn't apply to my family. On the contrary, my brother is spoiled and unkind to me. If we broke a bowl at the same time, my parents would scold me but would check and see if he was hurt. He's their poppet while I'm the outsider! There's one more thing I can't stand. When they get informed of the news concerning an unfilial daughter, they deliberately condemn her in front of me. I have no more than ten sentences at home on weekends. If my parents don't like me, how should I attach any extravagant hope that my teachers will like me?"*

Ni is from a divorced family whose father sells mobile phone accessories and repairs phones in a small shop. Ni's class sponsor Mr. Jiang complaint that this father almost had no knowledge about secondary education. *"He loves his daughter, but he never knows how to guan his child. Besides, he'd never actively contacted me if I didn't take the initiative. At the last parent-teacher meeting, he even asked, 'what's the differences between the second-tier universities and the third-tier universities?'"*

Ni has little emotional support from her silent father— her closest person in this world. The identity as an “abandoned child” goes deep into her mind.

*“When I was young, I often asked my father, ‘where is Mom?’, he replied, ‘dead’. As I grew older, I found the fact that my mother was not deceased, but she ‘supported’ his younger brother at the cost of all the property of our family in those years. Then they got divorced. Since then, my mother has never come to see me. She has never taken our family as her family, never! My father hasn’t remarried, but I know he has dated with some women these years. My father, the closest person of me in the world...I can’t say he’s bad to me. He buys everything I want in his scope of capacity while having so little to talk to me. There are no people in the world with whom I can share my joys and sorrows in life. I’ve really confirmed that I am an abandoned child since that cold night my father didn’t come back home. I do envy those students with good and responsible parents.”*

Family constitutes the foremost “life-world” of children where Ru has witnessed many indulgent adults; Tong has experienced indifference from her family members; Ni has regarded herself as an abandoned child without a sense of security. When they were asked why they had been hostile to those “victims”, they have similar answers— “*That person is artificial. I must give her a lesson!*”, “*She really rubs me the wrong way. I’ll show that she’s weak without adults’ protection*”, “*The girl is hated by everyone. Why should all good things happen to her?*” They were unable to conceal their jealousy and the sense of inferior complex through their narratives with the awareness of their parents’ astonishing ignorance of education and a lack of support.

## 6.6 Summary and discussions

Bourdieu, Young, Bernstein, Willis, Charlesworth, and Lareau have inspired scholars to further explore working-class phenomenon from the cultural and social perspective with relationalism and constructionism. This chapter has provided a panoramic examination of diversified children for providing a picture of the experiences and performances of them in different situations. It provided an explanation of students with academic failure without ignoring those high-achieving working-class students and those who have achieved magnificent academic progress through transformations in thinking and behaving, which has been a neglected area in secondary education.

“Class, for Bourdieu, is both a Durkheimian category of groups sharing experiences and collective representations, and a Weberian notion of sets of actors attempting to monopolize markets for different goods and services. Marx's influence appears more in the argument's style than in its substance.” (DiMaggio, 1979)

The working-class group in China is becoming increasingly fragmentary with diverse working-class culture. Working-class is orthodoxy introduced in political and historical textbooks as the most advanced class in old China; at that historical period, history books texted them as having the most active revolutionary spirit, being repressed by three forces— western powers, bureaucrat-bourgeoisie, as well as feudal force; besides, it was said that they had a good mass base owning that the impoverished peasants made up the majority of the working class.

“What has clearly changed is the institutional superstructure, the state bureaucracy, that must now manage the ‘fit’ between the laboring population and the economic positions open to them.” (Charlesworth, 2000: 276)

Something similar happened with the economic development and restructuring towards modernization. From Luhmann's perspective, the binary code guiding the communications and operations in the economic system is profitable and non-profitable— “it does not matter if a cat were white or black, as long as it caught mice.” The functional system could not achieve its self-maintenance with the imposed previous socialist mode, and thus “socialist market economy” was introduced. For promoting the economic output, piles of “inefficient” staff were fired. The working-class group was in a constant state of contraction and many of whom experienced intense downward mobility in the 1990s. However, on the other hand, in the midst of chaos, some people were not confined to the “in-the-system” myth, and achieved unwonted “class jump” with knowledge of “the market economy”. Nowadays, many working-class people are floating in the urban space, which praises the fast rhythm brought by the mental work, a space belittling the working-class spirit. On the other hand, what cannot be ignored is that the contraction also means opportunity. There are also non-typical working-class who have achieved upward social

mobility by grasping the good timing for switching to business with arduous struggle and amazing insight at the first stage of the economic reform. They can be wealthy but are short of cultural capital, which profoundly influences their understanding of knowledge and shapes their parenting. Working-class children get the filtered reality from their life-world, a storied world, mainly including the family context and the school field. Those impressive scattered experiences are strung up while they are narrating their life stories.

Previous studies have shown that academic failure is common among working-class students, but this work has also included a handful of successful working-class students as its analysis objects. In the first section, I showed the stories of high-performing students represented by Peng and Xiang. Peng gained academic success by striving toward the ideal image, for which she drew a moral boundary between her parents and revolted against her parents' authority bravely and strategically. She expected to achieve a reconnection with her parents in a different way in the future where she was endowed certain discourse power through overall success. Another successful student, Xiang is desperately trying to reconcile her fake Hongzhi student with a real Hongzhi student. In the tension of these two, Xiang developed her academic interest and achieved upward academic mobility. In these two cases, Peng's parents hardly played any role in her study, while Xiang's father is giving her sufficient support for deciding the class type by disposing of his social capital on the basis of a careful estimation of his daughter.

In the second section, turning-point stories of Ming, Long, Xue, and Di at the upper secondary school stage were presented. They have different identities and perceptions of the relationship with the outside world before and after the vital turning point in their life journey, which plays tremendous influences in their identity and academic achievements. Ming was an underachieving student influenced by his parents, who attached little importance to education. During the joint effort of Ming's class sponsor and the commissary in charge of the study, Ming left the sub-cultural small group through countless struggles and reached his academic potential. The other three students also have a similar change in their perception of their identity. Previous research concerning working-class students' upward academic mobility showed that external support was an important factor for mobility with the school teachers as the most probable

source (Ellis & Lane, 1963). All of these four students achieved upward mobility with their teacher as the “pathfinder”. Their research also found that the impetus for mobility had its roots in the family culture where the mother played a more important role (Ellis & Lane, 1963). Some cases in this study are also consistent with that finding.

Ming and Di had their class sponsor as their pathfinder while Long and Xue had both their mother and class sponsor as the pathfinders. From Bourdieu’s viewpoint, modern culture is a class culture symbolized by distinctions where some cultures are superior to others (Gartman, 2012). Thus, possessing the middle-class culture rather than the non-elite one contributes to academic success. In the sample of working-class children, two mothers have made painstaking efforts for stepping closer to the middle-class culture. Xue’s mother, who appreciated for high culture, attached more importance to her identity as a mother than the identity as a wife. This explained why she got divorced with Xue’s biological father when she identified that he failed to exert a positive influence on their daughter. She also decided that her current husband should keep an agreement with the goal of providing Xue with the best support in her education. Long’s life was doomed to be different from his peers in his hometown, which was a region inhabited by ethnic groups. Although ethnic discourses construct people as industrious and brave persons living a pastoral life free from troubles in their hometown, which was beautiful, pure, and romantic, his mother did not believe this statement but insisted that her children should pursue the middle-class identity through formal education. Long lived through different discourses which made his life strained and paradoxical. The mother’s successful business did not offer herself a sense of achievement; she only took it as a means to provide her children with better educational resources. Long’s mother had the knowledge of turning to teachers when she met difficulties or had confusion about her child’s education. She subsequently modified her parenting after she accepted the advice from the teacher. Long’s mother saw herself as a “boor” where she actually expressed her great admiration for the middle-class status rather than the singular economic advantage. She was hence desperately to instill his son with the value of striving for becoming a productive person with extensive knowledge and skills. After multiple failures of trying to persuading, she made use of her economic capital—money and social capital—a good relationship with the teacher through her painstaking effort through guanxi practices for providing her son the best

educational environment. The other two students, Ming and Di did not get sufficient support from their families in the process of achieving upward mobility. The transformations from their old habitus into the new one, without their parents' involvement, were more struggling and winding with a more extended period of time, compared to Long and Xue. In Long's case, his second tragic turning-point destroyed him as a productive person due to his mother's farewell. These cases have shown the vital role the mother plays for children's education.

Most underachieving working-class children tend to be either silent or rebellious, growing in a relatively repressive environment that discourages negotiations or expressions. The lack of ability of negotiation on behalf of themselves and the reasoning skills undermines their academic performances at school. Most working-class parents are not well-paid, and they believe that money should be spent on where it counts the most. A few working-class parents have reported to have been whole-heartedly supportive of children's education, and many of them had "a feeling of being secured" when they spent most of their salary on children's tuition and educational resources such as extracurricular tutorial materials and private lessons aiming to promote marks which they could not enjoy before. However, parents' complaints or rebukes such as this kind are hardly new for working-class children such as discourse from Long's mother, "*I give you the best what I can offer to keep you from the same way I am on. But bang, all the effort and sacrifice are gone! Why don't you cherish it?*" Contradictory educational expectations were reported between working-class parents and children. For working-class children, the matter of being educated carry less moral implications because making a living at a minimal level is not a severe problem in the family. Some of them, especially those with trauma, tend to pursue a relaxed and cozy life by involving themselves in sub-cultural groups. Another reason accounting for working-class students' low educational expectations is that their family discourses are frequently tied up more with realistic kinds of stuff like myopic street-wise but far less about spiritual abstracts concerning the meaning of education and life etc. There often exists a selective affinity between a student's growth background and his or her selected small circle. Boundaries are often constructed on an imagined sense of shared history and language (Winter, 2000). The peer group is a robust indicator of predicting students' academic achievement (Robertson & Symons, 2003). Interplay within the small group reshapes a certain self-identity. Ming and Long were in

sub-cultural circles where members were disengaged students adopting a detached attitude towards academic work and encouraging the so-called masculinity. They had the subculture with both “heroism” and “deceit” in the core. That is to say, when they got punishment by educators for deviant behaviors they faced the “meddler” with defiance and often indifferently winked at their classmates showing that “I have no fear”; on the other hand, telling lies to teachers was tacit knowledge as they tried to cover up their behavioral problems to avoid trouble. Prior to Ming’s change, he said, *“I thought I had to be friends with them. High-achieving students were known to enjoy their family life, which is an unpleasant topic for us. Our family life was full of quarrels about money and housework.”* This reminds us of the fact that it is worth noting that many working-class students embrace diversified “problematic” families. Some are perceived themselves as invisible and abandoned children in these families—the single-parent family, the re-organized family, or the family with extramarital affairs.

Section three presented two average working-class children’ stories. Chao, in the Hongzhi class, responded very differently compared with Xiang. He was overwhelmed by the repressive and “inhumane” environment with his underclass counterparts’ little tolerance of academic setbacks. Determining that he would do a practical work in the future, his previous ambition of squeezing into a top research university was greatly lowered. Qiao got a place in a higher track class with a lower Zhongkao score, which made her family conditions more difficult. She was suffering from her academic-incapability experiences a lot. She feels that she has been “cursed” without realizing the role of cultural capital and habitus play for academic success.

Section four had a vivid description of the sayings and behaving of “problematic” underachieving working-class students in different situations. I also included a sensational event of “escaping and rescuing” through the medium of oral history from a class sponsor. These working-class students would never refuse to be unique with the admiration of the hero complex as well as the code of brotherhood or sisterhood. Peer group with clear membership and the boundary is pronounced in working-class students, compared to their underclass and middle counterparts. They had subculture with amusement, heroism, and deceit in its core: when they got punishment by educators for deviant behaviors they faced the

“meddler” with defiance and often indifferently winked at their classmates showing that “let it be” or “I have no fear”. On the other hand, telling lies to teachers was tacit knowledge as they tried to cover up their behavioral problems to avoid being punished. Saying and behaving of working-class students and their intimate friends were intensively observed before being interviewed. Some of them have a keen awareness of the moral boundary between themselves and me, thus repeatedly rejecting my interview before I managed to persuade them. Some of them improperly dress in the solemn flag-raising ceremony, some provoke those “mild sheep” and “candy boys” in public. On the other hand, they carefully calculate the cost while seeking fun. They seldom cause trouble to academically good students. They carefully play the cat-and-mouse game without overly challenging the authority from people who possess the power to punish them. They are constantly producing various secrets which constitute the core of sub-culture in the practice of muddling through in the educational setting.

In the last section, beginning with an episode of the interaction of Ning and his father in the family context where I interpreted the hidden meaning of those practices, I related the status quo of these students with problematic behaviors to their previous experiences for unmasking what was hidden behind the curtain. The tension of “self control” and “unconsciousness” is unavoidable, which is a characteristic of the people living in the stage of our civilization (Elias, 2000). From these students’ point of view, “self control” does not yield practical benefits and success, at least based on their parent’s experiences. For example, if Cun’s father were mild-mannered, he could not have got two salaries, but just like many working-class parents who earned less while working hard. If Ru’s parents declined to include those juvenile delinquents as their regular customers with a strong sense of morality, their tiny bar would have gone into liquidation. It is no wonder that Tong would think that if she acted politely with a weak character, she would have been more severely oppressed by her family members. I also presented the data collected from a focus-group interview where Ji, Chi, and Ran were involved. They have told me who they are and how they are related to the outside world. As can be seen, they had been gradually becoming “troubled teens” step by step, for which parents’ ignorance, improper parenting, and children’s experiences of trauma were mainly responsible. For them, although the identity as troubled teens is notorious in the school field, it is positive to them as it brings them a strong sense of presence and belonging. I then trace back to their individual’s

history, exploring why they willingly go against powerful and dominating mainstream culture even they know that they are under tremendous pressure of being repressed and punished. I found that parenting in the family played a great role. Some parents have low educational expectations and do not discipline their children properly; some parents emphasize street wisdom while devaluing schooling; some parents provide minimal support while hoping their children could do well automatically. Besides, there is still another type of parents, who had faith in “whether get ahead in society or get eliminated”. This philosophy leads to their excessive-enthusiasm parenting, with the intention to help their children grow “better”. Being framed by this philosophy, it is no surprise that some parents tell their children, “you deserve it because you are not strong enough” in a cruel way when children encounter adversity. Believing people are repressed by multiple forces, they have a culture of pleasing others, but at the same time, they compete privately with each other by adopting strict parenting with the saying, “the more you beat the iron, the harder it grows”. They get little exposure to middle-class culture; immersing themselves in their own worlds, they believe the “rule” in their worlds is universally applicable to other contexts. Hence, they expect that children are tolerable and docile to power, discouraging their debates and emotional expressions. These experiences have brought about trauma with much pain on those repressed adolescents, and they act out against those power that has been imposed on them in the way that their parents do not expect. Being disconnected to adults who could have helped them live a responsible life, they involve themselves into sub-cultural groups where they begin to internalize the inner ethical codes that underpin their membership, which structures their typical behaviors with moral boundary with the outside world that can be recognized with “people from the same world”.

# CHAPTER 7 - ATTENDING TO MIDDLE-CLASS STUDENTS' STORIES TO LIVE BY

In this chapter, the study results from the data analyses of 25 students from middle-class families are presented. There have long been debates concerning if the middle class really exists in mainland China or is just a “socially-created myth”<sup>49</sup> because of “sociological heterogeneity” and “political ambiguity” (Li, 2010: 55). This was because in the western world, there was a gap of over one century in the western world between the emergence of the old middle class resulting from industrialization and of the new one as a result of the post-industrial society while in developing countries, the two kinds of middle class were forged almost simultaneously after the adoption of the economic reform (Jaffrelot & van der Veer, 2008: 117), leading to the lack of social/political identification and collective conscience. Besides, under the condition that the middle class is on a small scale in China and that “middle class” is misidentified as “middle-class society”, it is easy to come to a false conclusion (Jaffrelot & van der Veer, 2008: 113). Furthermore, “class”, compared with “strata”, is a relatively sensitive, politically-restricted and socially-depressed term in the socialist ideology. In the last decades, with the rapid economic development, which can be measured by assets since the land-privatization policy, and the resulting people’s rising middle-class consciousness, which can be measured by self-evaluation taking educational level and lifestyle into account, the academic community has basically come to a consensus of the existence of the middle class in mainland China with a large body of rich-data research, though “middle incomers” is a safe substitute expression averting political implications. The urban middle class have emerged in China since the late 1970s and early 1980s, being encouraged by the structural economic reform. Danwei system<sup>50</sup>, Hukou

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<sup>49</sup> See Cai, Zhenfeng, 2004, “China’s Middle Class Has Not Taken Form Yet”, Global Times (Beijing), 28<sup>th</sup> January.

<sup>50</sup> See Yu Xie and Xiaogang Wu Danwei (2008), “Profitability and Earnings Inequality in Urban China”, The China Quarterly, No. 195: 558-581., also Tsang E. (2014: 3), The new middle class in China: Consumption, politics and the market economy. Springer. Danwei, legacy of the Chinese socialist economy, still exerts persistent influences in the framing of social class in post-economic reform in China because of its historical importance. Danwei literally means work unit which individuals’ housing, healthcare, education, and membership are greatly bound to, which is

system<sup>51</sup>, as well as guanxi, work together to shape Chinese middle-class (Tsang, 2014: 7). Middle-class group's anxiety about individualism, differences, and unsecured employment mixed with the joy of consumerism (Jaffrelot & van der Veer, 2008: 25). Nowadays, the new middle-class are in great pressure of heavy debts for the overpriced housing in metropolises. The middle-class are the nucleus of the society with a higher-education diploma, the mental work, and normally a broad vision. They can be middle-level managers as well as public servants working in state organizations and institutions. They may have "decent" jobs working as engineers, IT programmers, and technical workers in foreign enterprises and private enterprises. Besides, they may have other identities such as shareholders, property speculators, landlords of a rental house. However, the middle class are fragile "strong performers". Decent jobs cannot provide many of them a sense of security any longer because of the overall competitive context and the overpriced housing in metropolises. When the streets are lightened with the approaching night, offices in the skyscrapers are also sleepless with the lights on where a considerable chunk of engineers and programmers are still working overtime. With the readjustment of the economic structure for realizing the changes in the pattern of economic growth, economy is targeted at scientific and technological innovation rather than traditional manufacturing, which calls for more input of mental workers. High-tech companies have great pressure preventing falling behind in this era of both opportunities and challenges. Thus, considerable high-tech companies adopt 996 working hour system where employees are required to work from 9 am to 9 pm, six days per week. This pattern spreads, causing a driving effect, especially for private enterprises that are facing up the fierce marketing competition. The 996 schedule is becoming an unpublished criterion in many Network Technology Companies as

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corresponding to "paternalism". Work units are hierarchically designed where an individual's SES is greatly determined by the status of Danwei.

<sup>51</sup> See Wu X, Treiman D J. (2007). Inequality and equality under Chinese socialism: The hukou system and intergenerational occupational mobility. *American Journal of sociology*, 113(2): 415-445, and also Feifei Jiang (2007), Lone Migrants: China's Growing Underclass, *Harvard International Review*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (Fall 2007), pp. 9-10. Hukou is the household-registration system in China which classifies the population into the agricultural population and the non-agricultural population with the former being inferior in terms of all the well-being and life chances. Implemented in 1955, the government took this policy as a means for reducing population pressure in the urbanization process. Hukou system greatly hinders educational and life chances of the rural population, causing structural equality.

sweatshops. “Free overtime” is also the common practice in plenty of private enterprises, especially those unlisted ones. It seems that they are trapped in the iron cage of endless cut-throat competition and continual hard work, avoiding being eliminated by the market. They have knowledge and channels to make their voices heard in this we-media society, enriching the metropolitan culture. However, they do not own the means of production but have to provide mental work that is pushed around by the economic market. The rising prices, the elderly at home who need health care, and the offspring who need high-quality education impulse them to work even harder for providing their families with better material conditions.

They have lived through drastic structural reforms which had made “class jump” possible, having a stanza of solemn and stirring struggle history achieving the middle-class status through education or plunging into the commercial sea. Miserable memories about poverty and suffering are also impressive for them, making them stay alert to possible dangers and adversity. The middle-class has little tolerance to any flaw concerning major events— profession, children’s education, elder parents’ medical treatment, housing; the transformation of each may imply the loss of the middle-class status. Anxious middle-class parents are attached to their offspring’s education. Especially, with the trend of class consolidation showing up at present, middle-class parents are anxiously trying to push their children to the last wagon for climbing higher at the social ladder or keeping their same socio-economic status, if they are not better than those of parents themselves. While the lower-class groups have the “not to be” logic, the middle-class has the “not to lose” logic: *“Preventing your children losing at the starting line”*. When middle-class children fall behind in the academic line, their parents are vulnerable to be judged as being incapable and irresponsible. The Chinese middle-class are apolitical, posing little challenge to the government (Li, 2003). The growing intense-competition has much to do with middle-class parents’ anxiety concerning how to maximize their interest in the established political framework and keep their offspring thriving.

Notably, most middle-class parents in this study were born in the 1970s, who can be called the middle-class of the older generation. Although they had little impression of the cultural revolution which ended in 1976, their parents lived through the cultural revolution, with poverty, “the Red Guard movement”,

and “class struggle” wrapping in memories. This means that this generation is growing up in a storied world with their parents’ collective-memory telling such as negative memories about poverty, deprivation, injustice, bitterness, hideousness, and trauma. Besides, they were also growing up with the epoch-marking economic reform where they had witnessed moral disorder and operations in the grey zone with many problems resulting from the Chinese legal system which is still not incompetent enough. In this grey area, through engaging in speculation and profiteering, some people “flying to the high branch” and raising to fame, have successfully leaped at the opportunity to become powerful persons. Most of them had a strong sense of pride when they are referred to as “undergraduates of those years” because university students were much fewer before the university expansion in 1999. I suggest the distinction along the time line should be made when talking about the Chinese middle class because they seem to be “nontypical” if we adopt the definition of the middle-class by many sociologists such as Weber and Bourdieu. The middle class of the older generation tends to be more conventional in every aspect, for example, laying emphasis on saving rather than consumption, conservative views of marriage, a less clear class boundary, and weaker consciousness of lifestyle and the taste. In this work, middle-class children are scattering among all the class types, except for Hongzhi class at Yeyun school. Unlike their underclass counterparts, they are all impressed of the highlight of education in the family, good or bad.

## 7.1 Stories of being successful— debunking the myth of “the born talent”

### Who are those flag raisers and student representatives?

*Numerous phalanxes were formed with the class as a unit on the playground only within a few minutes for the flag-raising ceremony. After all the students were assembled in their fixed places, the music stopped abruptly. Although it was, in fact, a little bit weird that the music suddenly stopped without the movement finishing playing in the middle, no one noticed that, but only concentrated on the following items in the ritual. A hostess solemnly announced the beginning of the ceremony. Then the flag-raiser team that was composed of three high-achieving students was coming on stage guarding the flag carefully at an orderly pace. The first and the most important item began: the main flag-raiser carefully hung the flag over the rope of the flagpole; the two flag-bearers immediately saluted to the flag as the national anthem began, then the main flag-raiser unfurled the flag in the air exactly on time when the first stress of the melody was playing; all the people were standing in attention, saluting to the rising flag and singing the anthem; after raising the flag, the team stepped down with the soldier’s trot after the action of lifting their arms.*

*Then “the speech under the flag” given by a student representative began. The spectrum of topics is quite selective, being imposed on the entire students. A male student called Xin started his speech with vivid description and modulated voice, though the topic was quite stylized, being filled with empty conventional expressions and reflecting the mainstream educational discourses and the country discourse. “The theme of my speech under our flag today is ‘Lei Feng<sup>52</sup> spirit remains eternal on campus’. With spring approaching, the spirit of Lei Feng is always slipping into our lives, bringing our spiritual world holiness and warmth. His spirit also has inspired generations of Chinese people to make extraordinary achievements in their ordinary positions. His spirit, as a precious spark which can start a prairie fire, subtly influences our thinking and behaving, making us understand the hard-working spirit and the good quality of helping others.” During the speech, there was a little restlessness in the crowd. A class sponsor attempted to refresh their students with a gesture “Sh, keep quiet” with a look of a leprechaun. At a short distance, another class sponsor became very serious against some students’ agitation, with a solemn expression. “Youth is the best part of a person’s life.” The theme was silently changed into “youth and dream” with a steadfast rhythm. At this time, the student-affairs coordinator began to patrol between classes to grade the whole performances of a class according to attendance and discipline of the class. Xin quoted president Xi for the argument of the struggling youth. He also took an example of a disabled, successful celebrity to inspire the audience. The speech ended up with “Lei feng’s spirit is worth carrying forward forever. Our battlefield is the land under our feet. If we all, with lofty ideals, integrate our aspirations with the fate of our motherland, the Chinese nation will definitely achieve rejuvenation. We will, for sure, accomplish this glorious and sacred mission. The whole year’s work depends on a good start in spring. My dearest classmates, let’s forge ahead! Let’s conquer all the difficulties hand in hand, make more splendid achievements with our wisdom and courage, for composing a brilliant song of youth with our blood and sweat” with an excessively passionate tone.*

*The next item can be possibly called “honor under the flag”. Firstly, the hostess announced the classes that had won the “mobile red banner”<sup>53</sup>, and then the class representative of each of the named classes ran onto the stage to get it as a pride for a class*

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<sup>52</sup> Lei Feng (1940-1962), a Chinese cultural icon, was a soldier in China's People's Liberation Army and an activist for Socialist Construction. He is a cultural symbol and role model produced in the time after the founding of the new China when everything is waiting to be taken up, and many generations are called for the socialist construction and national rejuvenation. The nation stressed the importance of carrying forward the spirit of patriotism and dedication for the realization of prosperity and strength of the country. His name and deeds are well-known to Chinese people by moral education, which, as an essential part of primary and secondary education, is launched in the early stage of people's life. Lei Feng, with moral significance, is mythologized as a person, with the spirit of service and utter devotion, fighting for other's interests without any thought of personal interest by the official propaganda, so as to cultivate people's sense of morality, solidarity, dedication, and sacrifice as well as the spirit of arduous spirit. Songs were written for praising Lei Feng; students are encouraged to become the “living Lei Feng” and activities are launched for praising students who are estimated to think and act with “Lei Feng Spirit”.

<sup>53</sup> Passed-around red banner is designed to reward homerooms once a week in the flag-raising ceremony where items such as attendance, discipline, courtesy, morale, hygiene status, etc., are examined for rating the whole conduct of a class collectivity, which is designed to discipline students’ conducts comprehensively by creating the oneness phantom and irritating their sense of honor as a collective.

*with a piece of lively music. This music is only played on the occasion of prize-giving, reminding people that happiness and vivacity are always related to praises and rewards from school. Then, students who are with decent grades and those who have made remarkable progress in the final exam of last semester were named and awarded. The director of the studies gave the prizes with the joyful music and handshaking, which only “good students” could enjoy. The selection of the class with the red banner, based on the daily observation and grading, holds once a week. The school has adopted a deducting-mark system for estimating the performances of the homerooms by various items such as students’ discipline conducts, appearances, postures, hygiene of the responsible areas, performances of the regular assembly and exercise between classes, with each being measured by a scale. “Troubled teens” could be named for criticism, but there was no for today. Then the last item was the leader’s speech, where vice principal stepped on the platform emphasizing the importance of discipline, hygiene status, and inspiring teachers and students to work harder with a gleam of humor.*

- Fieldnotes, taken on 26th February 2018

This is the highly routinized flag-raising ceremony, a mixture of sacredness, collectivism, patriotism, heroism, and invisible exclusion. It is like a show, with ideological rhetoric with the actors’ deliberately passionate intonation, and trained reflex applauses from the audiences. It is also a kind of governmentality where ideological inculcation and body discipline were combined through this sacred rite. Xin, San, Fu, Rong, Chun, and Miao are academically successful who are expected to be admitted to an elite university. They all have been selected as the flag raiser or the student representative speaking under the flag, which, an honor for a student. Despite their varied experiences, they get full support from adults—parents or teachers, without exception.

Bourdieu’s work reminds us of the affinity and conspiracy of the cultural capital inherited from the high-status family and formal education in the school field, which helps to unlock the myth concerning why and how most middle-class students become academically successful. This work has found the fact that transmission and inheritance of the cultural capital in the middle-class family is generally a bidirectional, nonlinear, and unconstrained process; children’s capacity of such inheritance increased not equally or linearly as time goes by. This section shows what are the practices that middle-class parents transmit their owned cultural capital to their offspring, and how high-achieving middle-class children react in the process of the inheritance.

The sample of high-performing middle-class students in this work has demonstrated to have more complicated expressions, richer vocabulary, better reasoning, and greater empathy in their narratives. The best of those high-achieving students attaches paramount importance to more abstract items such as linguistic sense, spirit, interests and curiosity, while the less high-achieving students overshadowed by those “genius” place emphasis on more concrete items such as reasoning skill, the habit of seeking help, and self-discipline.

### 7.1.1 Cultivating linguistic intuition— “Refined wording makes a graceful person.”

#### **Xin’s story**

Xin is the representative of the Chinese subject in his class. Born in a family where the father is president of a non-government college, and the mother is a high-school geography teacher, Xin reported that his life had been highly scheduled under his parents’ supervision since he was young. He inherited cultural capital not only from his parents but also from his grandmother, who had previously been a Chinese teacher. He talked about that many people in his family are (were) teachers and the teaching profession runs in the family. Being the best student in the Chinese subject in his grade, Xin attached special importance to comprehensive competence in the interview, regarding it as the most fundamental capability making for every academic subject; based on such consideration, he talked about how his sincere enthusiasm for Chinese with a soothing tone, one of the most important subjects which required a high level of reading ability and expressive competence, was nurtured and strengthened.

*“At a young age, my leisure time was structured. I attended the calligraphy class, and my parents taught me academic knowledge, like history, math, and geography. However, my most memorable experience is my time on vacation with my grandparents. Without being immersed in various cram classes on the market, I had time to fully appreciate the natural beauty by living with my grandparents in winter and summer vacations, which contributed to my happy childhood, which was rare for many children. My grandparents lived in the countryside, and I spent most of my vacation time there when I was in primary school, quite romantically. My grandma used to be a Chinese teacher in a rural lower secondary school. Being informed that spring was my favorite season, my grandma introduced me to a poet written in the Eastern Han Dynasty, ‘the brook is babbling across the bleak, wrecked bridge. How pleasant it is to walk on the winding path with vast greenery. In the sunlight, rain and dew look like columns of blue smoke, while a sea of flowers over the hills and plains look as if they are fairy-scattered.’ When I was so impressed with how magnificent our nature was, my grandma began to guide me for an appreciation by relating the natural*

*landscape to the classical literature again. They had a tile-roofed house surrounded by a lawn dotted by some plum trees where flowers blew in the midwinter. My grandma introduced me to 'Little Plums of a Mountain Garden', a poem written by a great poet in the Northern Song Dynasty. She gave a thrilling account, 'The hazy, dappled shadows of plum blossoms hang aslant over limpid, shallow water; the secret, the elegant fragrance is floating in the moonlight at dusk.' In the summer vacation, living with my grandparents, I was surrounded by various wonderful things—the fragrant gardenia, the gorgeous pomegranate flowers, the holy lotus flowers, the singing cicadas, the dancing butterflies, the waves of frog croaks, etc. My grandma then introduced me to a poem written by Shi Su, from Tang Dynasty. 'After the rain, small lotus flowers are dancing with the wind. Pomegranate flowers are looking even more delicate, charming, dazzling with the color of red like fire against green leaves...' In early autumn every year before a new semester, we climbed the hill for collecting those lovely orange-red persimmons. I was impressed about the day before I packed my things for the new semester for grade 6 in primary school by the sun when it was sinking lower and lower in a brilliant twilight of blue and gold when we finished collecting persimmons and sat on the hill. My grandma began to recite a beautiful poem written by Wei Wang, a famous poet in Tang Dynasty, 'The air becomes cold and fresh after the valley has been bathed in the rain, which reminds people of the coming of autumn. The clear and bright moon casts its light on the pine woods, while creeks flow above the stones.' Actually, it was a poem collected in the Chinese textbook for students of grade 2 in upper secondary school! That meant that I was introduced to it five years ahead of schedule. This marvelous, romantic experience has cultivated my keen interest in Chinese classical literature, which makes me one of the best students in the subject of Chinese in my grade."*

His presentation competence makes him “feel good” and confident in the school filed where formal language use is encouraged. His poetic narration reflected his great enthusiasm in Chinese and that his life and study in vacations were also planned, though in a relaxing, harmonious, and somewhat romantic way. Xin thought highly of his grandparents who attached great importance to her mother’s education, which was “rare in those years”. Xin was also benefited a lot from the culture of a literary family where reading was something like a tradition—the family heirloom, in his opinion. He told me that he only got a temporary satisfaction but soon aloneness when he was slacking time or talking about the gossip because his parents showed no interest but insisted on reading. Seeing that scenario, Xin “had to” pick up a couple of books again to avoid boredom. With the lapse of time, he started increasingly to aware that he enjoyed soaking himself in reading. He constructed hanging around as boring, and at the same time, the ignited passion and enthusiasm for study made him “a fish in water” at school.

### **Ruo’s story**

I was impressed by Ruo’s graceful handwriting, sincere feelings, and profound ideas conveyed in her composition when her Chinese teacher showed me one piece of her work. Ruo, from a family where her

father is a lawyer, and her mother works as a secretary, has also talked about that her feeling for the Chinese subject was enlightened by her parents' poems reading. Later, they have moved to an upscale community where she acutely detected the differences between people in their previous living community and the current one in terms of talking and behaving. Ruo spontaneously chose to imitate the latter which embodied the middle-class taste and wanted to go higher towards the upper middle-class status.

*"I dare not say I'm good at Chinese; there are many transcendent talents who are better than I. But Chinese remains my favorite subject. Teachers can't teach you everything. They have strenuous teaching tasks, and they have so many students to teach. Teachers would tell you that having a good grasp of the textbook is of paramount significance for doing an exam. They would also teach you in accordance with the teaching syllabus, explain the important points, and tell you some tricks or exam techniques. However, they are not for everyone; especially, Chinese is such a subject calling for inspiration. The inspiration can only be acquired through long-term accumulations. For example, there are widening differences in the topic composition where some students achieve above 55 (out of 60), while some can only get 40 or lower. High-score compositions usually embrace a rich content, meaningful and profound ideas, fluent expressions, and unique artistic conceptions, which reflects a student's thinking level and overall quality. My parents began to guide me to read and recite some ancient poems when I was four years old. I was also asked to retell some plots after reading China's four greatest masterpieces. The time for watching TV was strictly limited. Most of the time, we watched the science and education channel, including what I was most intrigued—documentaries about animals and cultural geography; sometimes, we also watched entertainment programs as a regulator. I wasn't addicted to them at all! Living in the prior community with many busy adults and playful children, I didn't fully realize the importance of language competence. However, after we moved to another community with more courteous persons, things were different. I began to understand that people appreciated a person with language competence, such as polite expressions and clear descriptions because people got the first impression of you from your behaviors and expressions. You can't pretend to be a refined person without much reading and thinking."*

### 7.1.2 Training reasoning skill— “You convince others only through reasoning.”

#### Shan's story

Shan is a well-mannered and vivacious girl with a silvery voice. She talked about how to learn language subjects well, which demonstrated the importance of cultural capital for negotiating academic achievements.

*"When some friends asked me, 'What's your secret of learning Chinese and English well?' I unthinkingly answered, 'linguistic intuition'. They suddenly got all balled up. Actually, I didn't mean to hide or mystify my successful experiences, but I found it difficult to elaborate on my points. From my point of view, linguistic disciplines such as Chinese and English require years of accumulation. Perhaps I'm a bit pessimistic. But I don't think people can achieve a quick improvement in languages during a*

*year or two. Developing an intuitive feel for the language is an arduous process, which requires uninterrupted reading and writing day after day, year after year. I must thank my parents at this point. When I was young, I was asked by my parents to read an article and write a review every day, except for festival. I found it difficult, and I thought about giving up at the beginning, especially when I felt that I was an unlucky kid being imposed to do the additional work besides homework. My parents were strong-minded persons who wouldn't give any ground to my laziness; at the same time, they worked out their strategies. 'From now on, your father or I do the same task together with you.' Then we had "30-minutes family salon" where it became the norm that either my father or mother read and wrote beside me with the other person listening and making a summary after we finished. The seemingly dull work suddenly became an exciting game, or a ritual, I'd rather call. I even thought it was the best part of the whole day, even better than the moment when I was asked to read my high-grade composition in front of the class."*

Although her classmates regard her as having more feelings for study, she does not agree with that but owns her accomplishments to his parents' cultivation. Shan mentions lightly that her family once hired a teacher for giving her private English lessons when she was in primary school but she emphasizes the democratic atmosphere of her family where she is encouraged to talk expressively and logically and to think independently, which she believes has a large role in getting her where she is.

*"My family environment has never been tedious. I remember my parents have encouraged me to keep talking at home. 'What's new at school?' Then I would tell them what happened—whether happy or sad. My father always encourages me to describe an event clearly, accurately, and logically and my mother inspires me to narrate vividly, in more detail. During my description, they often adequately ask smaller questions to guide my description, and after I finish, they won't forget to give their own opinions without forcing me to accept. For example, 'Why did you come to the skeptical of the conclusion of this article?', 'Why do you think the teacher should bend the rule in this case?' I think a similar relaxing and democratic family atmosphere actually helps to cultivate independent thinking and communicating skills. For instance, Now I have strong confidence in my abilities. I feel confident when I'm interacting with other people; I have no fear of public speaking; people don't hate me while I'm speaking; I have a good relationship with other people... Learning abilities and good interpersonal relationships, from my point of view, work together in a synergistic manner. When I know I'm popular among teachers and classmates, and I have more incentive to work even harder."*

As a technical researcher in the chemical industry, Shan's father often "popularizes" chemistry through subtly weaving the subject into their daily life, through which Shan also develops her interest in chemistry besides language subjects. Shan talked about that what she appreciated most was that her parents had never quarreled with each other, but rather, they tried to convince the other side by reasoning, which most parents could not stick to. Shan talked about that at the beginning, she was always the "loser" when she was arguing with her parents, but she believed that she deserved it because of her perceived weaker

arguments, less adequate evidence, and less tenable logic in the debate. She benefits a lot from this process and she has the intense desire for becoming a person who employs strict logic to convince others, even if the opposite side is an adult in the position of power.

### 7.1.3 Sparking curiosity by virtue of things around— “What else? I want to know more.”

#### San’s story

San, wearing a confident smile, is a star student in science-related subjects and is also good at other academic subjects. In the interview, he showed an extra layer of formality, but at the same time he would not hesitate to help me correct any of my misunderstandings of what he intended to express in a polite way. San wants to be a scientist in the future for exploring more about the universe. He talked about that his intense interest and passion in the academic subjects were closely related to his parents’ “daily education”. San’s father, a department manager in a chemical company, and his mother, a physician, have been cultivating his curiosity by virtue of the most common things in daily life. San had recalled several episodes showing how his curiosity was sparked by his parents. For example, seeing the dew on the grass, his father asked him, which conditions encouraged the formation of the dew. When his father was about to steam dumplings, he would ask his son, “*What is better for steaming the wheaten food, cold or boiled water?*” Such kind of questions triggered San to think deeply and logically before formulating an answer. Seeing airplane models in the window, his father asked him something like, “*Do you know the type of this plane and what’s used for?*” The father would then introduce him to various types of airplanes and the engine operating principles. When they were visiting the forbidden city in a summer vacation, San was much attracted by the mythical creatures on the roof of those palaces. “*Mummy, these dogs on the roof look cute but formidable.*” His mother laughed and replied, “*They are not the common animals we see in daily life, but are auspicious mythical beasts.*” The mother then introduced him to the various auspicious mythical beasts, explaining their symbolic meanings relating to the cultural implications and the social rank. Before he fully understood what had been taught, he soon found the topic was switching to the material of these beasts— the colored gaze. His parents were then having heated discussions concerning the very difference of craftsman between modern and Chinese ancient colored gaze. San was

growing up in such a family environment with various scholastic discussions. This student expressed that he could talk about this topic for hours, among which he found that bringing some relevant books with him for study when he was in real-life situations like historical sites and museum was most interesting and rewarding.

#### **7.1.4 Seeking to turn the bane into a boon— “My least favorite subject could be so fascinating!”**

Middle-class parents possess cultural- and economic capital for cultivating children’s interests and activating their potential. They are not only aware of the importance of parental involvement but can also effectively communicate with the teachers for better training their children. For example, they try to break the normal instrumental practices and effectively express their concerns to teachers when they find the current practices are not the best ones for their children. Children’s lives, in most cases, are structurally organized; however, there can be unstructuralized moments occasionally as a seasoning or something that brings a sense of ritual and delivers happiness. Notably, those unorganized activities are selective rather than random. For example, middle-class parents are willing to spend their money on buying the entrance ticket for high art, which reflects their endeavors for transforming their owned economic capital and taste into children’s cultural capital.

#### **Shun’s story**

Shun, a tall and sunny boy with a resolute character, seems quite sophisticated and strong-minded. He takes an active part in homeroom public service, such as preparing a manuscript for a class meeting. Shun’s father, a marketing manager for a foreign enterprise, travels a lot. Thus his mother, who is a kindergarten teacher, holds more responsibility for his education. Shun’s mother, a slim woman in her mid-forties who preferred simple clothes with subtle colors, looked much younger than her actual age. She had a non-stop stream of comments on the topic of education. In the interview, she started with a sad story of her aunt in the extended family, where she concluded that her aunt committed suicide triggered by her son, whom was regarded as their failed education product.

*“My aunt was a nurse, and her husband worked as a lawyer. They were both career-oriented, which imposed restrictions on their son’s education. Many years later, after they both got retired, their spoiled grown-up son was still addicted to computer games, and couldn’t earn a living. Then his father found a part-time job working periodically so as to leave as much property as possible to their son. It seemed that a cloud of gloom was always hovering in their family, but no one was able to break it. My aunt was often undesignedly complained by her husband like, ‘You shouldn’t have worked so hard in the hospital in those years. I’m a man who should focus on the career for making money for the family, while as a woman, you should have more to do with the child’s education.’ My aunt also believed that it was herself to be blamed for their son’s education. Later, my poor aunt suffered from depression. One day, she committed suicide by pesticide.” (Shun’s mother)*

As mentioned above, the discourse of women’s liberation has been related to the nation’s original intention of economic development, and such purpose hindered women’s liberation movement from accomplishing its mission. Women are called for working hard for the collective interests. According to the Chinese population census data, China has one of the highest female labor participation rates worldwide, with the amount of 60.6 percent in 2019. However, women have been under considerable moral pressure of taking care of the family while men barely have such compulsion. A woman’s identity as the homemaker— as a thoughtful wife and a loving mother in traditional society, are persistently expected in the current society, which can be reflected in a sea of advertisements where the woman takes care of her husband and children by offering them hot milk, cooking in the kitchen with the advertised kitchenware, washing clothes for her family with the publicized liquid detergent, just to name a few. Those advertisements work for exacerbating the collective unconsciousness of the stereotype of women’s traditional roles.

Children’s education has been on the mother’s lips. She talked about that she treated her child’s education as a calling— the top priority in her life, for which she was willing to devote as much time as possible for her child’s sake. She talked about what made a good mother, in her opinion, which might entail great tensions among her role as a mother, a daughter, and a teacher.

*“How I wish I possess superhuman powers so that I can take care of everything! I often regret not taking good care of my mother when she was living in the last chapter of her life. Now I often feel that I’m not good enough as a teacher. I feel overwhelmed because of my family condition... well, you know, his father is not often at home. I have an in-the-system job so I have more time for children’s education and I want to be a good mother. I’ve got so much to learn, and there’s no time to relax. I work harder now, with a much busier schedule, compared to my school-days. However, it’s all worthwhile when seeing the kid’s progress.” (Shun’s mother)*

The mother's child-rearing strategy, from Shun's point of view, is flexible and wise. Shun feels comfortable and confident when he is interacting with people when he steps out of the domestic domain, which can be seen from his consistent and assertive expressions. He has demonstrated habitus of the middle-class children, for instance, when he encounters difficulties in study, which he could not solve by himself, he turns to his teachers promptly without feeling tense.

*"I have marvelous parents and teachers. My mother and my class sponsor at primary school have been good friends, so my mother was always informed of my performances at school in time. However, she gave me a certain degree of trust and freedom. She knew well about how to achieve the balance between 'letting go' and 'disciplining'. One time, I blew up a history exam; it was not casual because I tended to go overboard with my favorite subjects. However, my parents pretended not to know that but tried their best to help me. They knew that the legal teaching materials were not so interesting for children, so they went through the textbooks and consulted other materials, and then retold history in a more interesting way with exciting episodes of historical figures. The atmosphere that is full of culture and care is so fascinating! I wanted to read more and think more. Once I learned more, I had more confidence to ask questions. Every teacher sincerely hopes that their students have a keen interest in the subject which he or she teaches, right? I have a good relationship with my teachers, and we even talk about something other than study out of class, just like friends." (Shun)*

### **Miao's story**

As a daughter whose father is general manager of a Sino-Foreign joint venture and the mother works as a training specialist in a Make-up Tech company, Miao is admired as "other people's child". She is not only an academic achiever but also a shining star at school-wide extracurricular activities like theatrical performances for festivals. She had three performances on the last New Year Party, where there were sixteen performances in total. She is also a sensible child for parents. She makes time to prepare a fruit platter for comforting her parents who come home from work from time to time. Her mother showed me her birthday greeting card with unconcealed delight, which read, *"You are the greatest mother, and you are the most beautiful lady in the world. I want to be a good daughter who makes you pride. I love you forever, mama."*

In Miao's opinion, she was not smarter than others, but she had the luck to have her parents as trailblazers. She further stated that most parents understood the importance of education, but not everyone was willing to take time to wisely work together with their children. Miao had a packed schedule attending various

courses on the weekend as a primary student, and she finally gave some courses and chose to learn piano, drawing, and dancing, and got some relevant certificates. Miao's mother is a graceful lady with short hair. She pays extremely close attention to her weight. Although she looked quite slim, she was still not satisfied with her abdomen. She lamented that she had put on weight since she hardly found some time for doing sports. She prefers simple but high-quality textured clothes. In the summer, she often wears a dress with the textures of silk and chiffon, and in the winter, she prefers cashmere overcoats with a scarf of the same texture. During the spring and autumn season, she favors thin, shape-flaunting handstitched knitwear with the materials of high-class cotton and linen as a blouse and jeans as lowering clothing, going with an exquisite silk scarf. She takes good care of her clothing by applying softener after washing. She goes for beauty and hair salon once a week. The mother told me that she used to be a workaholic and she even tried to compress her maternity leave as much as possible. But soon after her child came to the world, she switched to another job which gave her more freedom and flexibility.

*"I thank my daughter, who has helped me to better understand how a mother should be like. Maternal love was amazing! My maternal love was quickly aroused after the moment when the child was born, which I had never thought of. The company functions well without me, but I'm the whole world for my child." (Miao's mother)*

Miao's parents told her that the elementary-school stage was the golden period for detecting a kid's passion. Her parents also said to her that children learned things quickly; it made much difference if people learned something as a child or as an adult. Miao's parents hence tried to enroll her in various courses so that she would not miss anything that might interest her. Miao told me that at the beginning, she hated playing the piano, finding it boring and difficult. She thought of giving up many times, especially when she finished practicing with sore fingers. Her parents carefully considered the proposal, but after the second thought, they tried to persuade the kid to hang in there a bit longer while making some adjustments. Miao talked about that her parents presented three reasons. Firstly, finger dexterity was positively correlated with intelligence development, so instrument playing was conducive to academic success; secondly, high achievers must go through many difficulties that ordinary people usually could not overcome; thirdly, there were perhaps better methods which made the piano lessons more interesting. Then her parents told her that they would work together with her, accompanying her

when she was practicing. They learned relevant knowledge from the internet and patiently told her some anecdotes about the composer, the background of the composition, and discussed with her about what was expressed and delivered in those melodies. Her parents also talked about their concerns to the piano teacher, requesting him if the method of instruction might be adjusted by gearing the lessons toward things their daughter is interested. Besides, when they are available on the weekend, they took Miao to instrument concerts to appreciate high art. It has made a big difference since then.

*“I had never thought that I could play the piano well and that I passed the highest level for amateurs within only less than six years. I’m not the ‘other people’s child’. I believe many children can achieve my level with such great parents. I know better than anyone else about our joint effort—the unspeakable sweat, struggles, and hard work. I think people are becoming increasingly anxious to achieve quick success and get instant benefits. For example, many parents care more about how their children get the best result within the shortest time without respecting or cultivating their children’s interests. This situation happens in all walks of life. For instance, music teachers tend to only teach you the prescriptive melodies for the grading test with the so-called ‘techniques’. They won’t tell you any background knowledge about the music, because it’s useless. However, interest is the best teacher. If a child has no interest, how could you expect he or she has high achievements? The basic knowledge of music historiography and aesthetics is of vital importance for understanding the relationship between the melody and social reality, the composers’ spiritual world, rhythmic of their mind, as well as their inner emotion. After you gain enough background knowledge, you’ll spontaneously exclaim how great the potential that humankind possesses! You’ll stand in awe of those great and brilliant composers who have composed those masterpieces in the turbulent days! When you sit at the keyboard again, you have an entirely different feeling. So you see, it’s not because I possess superb surgical skills, but I play with all my soul and passion. And I can’t make it without my parents’ concentrated attention to my education.” (Miao)*

As is shown in the above analysis, middle-class parents fully realize that a lack of interest can be closely bound up to inappropriate methods, scarce experiences, narrow focuses, and limited minds. They thus take the mission of expanding children’s horizons as parents’ responsibility. They try every means to cultivate children’s interests, change their initial negative experiences, unlock their potentials, maximize their chances of standing out, and prevent them from being excluded from possible opportunities. Besides, these pieces of training are carried out in a structural, routinized, and fascinating way with much time devotion, which contributes to children’s formation of the privileged habitus.

### 7.1.5 Rejecting blind faith in “scores”— “I often got a reward by surprise!”

#### Rong’s story

Rong also identified that her father had cultivated her interest according to the preference of a particular subject by talking about his father's strategy of integrating poems into historical knowledge.

*"I couldn't appreciate poems at the beginning. Our Chinese teacher at primary school just repeated what the book said. Reciting poems was the task that everyone needed to accomplish, which, a headache for me. I began to give up, 'Ok, I can't keep a balance of my study. I have no feeling for Chinese learning.' My father knew that I had a keen interest in history, so he determined to help me by integrating poem leaning with historical knowledge. For example, the poem was written during the author's specific life stage, right? He talked about what the author had experienced on that stage, how he fulfilled or failed to achieve his aspirations in the situation which was embedded in the broader social context. He insisted on doing that for a whole semester, and I gradually developed an interest in poems. Later, I was so addicted to reading poems that I couldn't go to sleep without reading a poem before."*

Rong often talked about the distinctive feature of her parents' parenting by mentioning that her parents did not have blind faith in "exam scores" just like many other parents. She had no experience of being rewarded by her parents based on her exam scores, though the school usually did that. Rather, she was given incentives for showing certain qualities that her parents thought appropriate while doing something. For instance, she told me that with the belief that she could work out a problem, she was sticking to solve a difficult math problem wholeheartedly and independently in the whole afternoon. She failed, but she was rewarded for "exploring spirit", which made her positively surprised. She was impressed by this experience, which made her know the limitation of judging a person with the sole measuring stick—exam scores. When she was too pride for winning the first place, her parents invariably and peacefully said like, "*I was just expecting that.*"

She also introduced me to another experience that impressed her. One day, she finished making a fashionable dress for her Barbie doll with two of her mother's clothes when her mother was coming back with her aunt. She hid the Barbie with the new dress behind her back. Seeing these wrecked clothes, her aunt then shouted loudly, "Oh my god, your clothes were destroyed. What nice dresses! Rong is naughty and spoiled." The mother did not blame her child immediately but asked why she did so. Rong could not help showing the elaborately-designed long gown, decorated by ginkgo leaves and dried small roses which she had prepared in advance. "Surprise?!" she asked, and the mother replied, "Wow, what an amazing dress with wonderful imaginations!" Her aunt was stunned at her mother's response because in

her opinion, children should be kept at home studying rather than doing “crazy things”. However, Rong’s mother believed that certain freedom should be given to children for encouraging them to explore and experience the world in their distinctive way with curiosity, which negotiated a colorful and meaningful life. Rong added that she observed a long time that her mother seldom wore those clothes, so she decided to cut them for making new clothing for her doll. The mother told her that she would later give her an award for that marvelous dress and would also punish her for taking whatever she wanted without asking. Rong learned from this experience that her parents would support her for making various attempts no matter how the result might be, but she should also respect others with the boundary consciousness.

#### 7.1.6 Deferred gratification— “Bitter first and sweet later.”

People’s strategies of actions are guided by culture, which plays the role of the “tool kit”; people in different social positions may have their “preferred strategies of action (Swidler, 1986). Min’s father has attached paramount importance to self-control. He has instilled Min self-control consciousness in a non-forced way. He had the idea that children tended to inherit good habits through being influenced by what they constantly see and hear. He also endorsed the idea that if parents’ experiences proved to be effective, children would be sincerely convinced.

*“While the aspiration works as a driving force, self-control helps to cultivate a good habit, which is especially important for a kid’s study. I told my child good habits for study basically includes planning, preview, the concentration in class, review, homework doing with a reflexive attitude, and experience summarization underpinned by regular life. Min was naturally playful, like most children. He couldn’t constrain himself sometimes, especially when he was attracted by animated cartoons at a young age. But we determined not to treat him like other animals, like giving him candies if he lived up to the adult’s expectations, while severely punishing him if he didn’t do well. Such superficial strategies work only temporarily. As parents, we should reasonably guide the child, but it is the child who makes his own choices regarding what he’s going to do, and who he’s going to be. One time, he failed a math exam, and he told me how sad he was, feeling shamed. I remembered I drew a somehow impertinent analogy then, ‘Parents are like doctors who help to detect your diseases; it’s up to you whether you adopt the prescription or not, after all, it matters your health.’ I also told him having a reflexive attitude was important because everyone made mistakes. I was trying to persuade him, ‘Father also likes playing. For example, playing computer games makes me happy because I gain positive feedback easily. But after temporal happiness, I feel sad and regretful. Playing games steals time, which I should have done many meaningful things. I’m worried about losing pay when I fail to finish the assigned tasks with high standards. But what paralyzes me the most is the feeling of the lack of expertise, because I have a burning desire to have a successful career.’ This method proves to be effective because Min is ambitious and always wants to be better.” (Mins’ father)*

The father's effort was paid off. Min has successfully internalized the value which his father has tried to instill him, regarding self-discipline as a means to build up his confidence in clinging to the identity of a good student. He even asked his father to help him to set an agenda for him. His life was then highly structured interwoven with "a set of operations".

*"I can't be counted as an excellent student; I just stay at the better end of the schoolwide academic performances. I think a good student must say no to the ubiquitous temptations. I felt the same way in which my father described. The importance of education is rooted in my heart since I was a child. My parents love me, and teachers care about me, and I hate to let them down. I cared about teachers' comments and evaluations so much. I remembered that I failed to solve a math problem on the platform in a math class, and I was feeling sad in the following weeks, though my math teacher didn't say anything about that. I think I'm doomed to be an underachiever without self-control, and self-discipline reinforces my sense of who I am. My father has shown me many good habits, for example, he keeps everything in order; he tries to handle things in an efficient manner, but he wouldn't sleep if things were not properly handled. I try to learn from him, and it turns to be like everything is going well. I think bittersweet is the right status for a high school student who wishes to be successful—first comes the bitter, followed by sweet." (Min)*

Ping talked about those necessary qualities if students want to thrive at school, among which self-discipline was given the highest weight. She classified herself as a different category of persons with people with grand plans but punky skills, as well as those who did not finish their homework on time.

*"Being a good student...well...I guess many qualities contribute to this identity, like great ambitions, correct attitudes, self-discipline, hard work, and positive thinking, among which self-control is the most important. People with grand plans but punky skills are not uncommon, and I don't want to be one of them. If you want to stand out, you must make clear what your top priority is, and you have to endure for that. For me, I can screen out all the temptations when I'm imagining being a fascinating person with brilliant achievements in the future. High achievers do trivial things every day that bring them a couple of steps closer to their dreams. When I was at junior high school, I was surprised to find that some classmates couldn't finish their vacation homework and hence, were criticized by teachers at the beginning of a new semester. I can't imagine being a student without doing the assigned work! On the contrary, I would try to finish all the tasks within the first few weeks of vacation. I'd never thought it difficult or boring because my parents were available if problems emerged; the most exciting thing was that we traveled as a family for celebrating my completion of the vacation homework. So you see, my parents have helped me to form the habit of self-discipline, which brings me advantages at school. For example, I have time to experience more on vacations; I have no pressure of failing to finish tasks on time, and I've made progress on learning. When you are good, you get the teacher's trust. And when teachers think I'm good, I increasingly can't let them down." (Ping)*

As is shown, the underclass and middle-class group have demonstrated the propensity of deferred gratification, with the former laying more emphasis on their family commitment and the latter on their

individual aspirations and dreams. Notably, people have further estimations about their successful possibilities through the previous perceived experiences, from which they keep relocating themselves in a specific field. Experiences of success or failure is never random but is greatly influenced by parenting, which is a cultural construction of different social groups. For example, all parents might have realized the importance of children's hard work and self-control, but they tend to choose different strategies for guiding their children.

### 7.1.7 The squeaky wheel gets the grease— “Just talk to teachers when the problem crops up!”

Fu, Chun, and Mo all talked about the importance of seeking help from teachers. Fu's father works as a teacher at a lower secondary school, and his mother is a clerk in the local Tax Bureau. Fu's academic success, in his opinion, has much to do with his identity as a teacher's child.

*“Both extrinsic and intrinsic factors drive me. The person who plays the most important role and has the most profound influence in my life must be my father. As a teacher's child, I'm also a teacher's educational product shown in public, from which people judge the teacher whether as being good or bad. So teachers' children symbolize those teachers' career cards which can never be thrown off. I was forcibly kept at home by my father, doing math problems and reading the classics on vacations. My father also assisted me, making me realize the importance of ‘spirit’ for a particular subject; I developed an intense desire for academic success. Then efforts were rewarded, I became a good student as expected, and this identity made me feel good. You see, this is a positive circle. More importantly, my dream of becoming a doctor in the future also works as a strong driving force.” (Fu)*

Growing up in a teacher's family, Fu talked about his affinity for teachers:

*“I've known many teachers, who are my father's colleagues. I did my homework in my father's office sometimes; those teachers were so friendly to me, and often gave me some snacks and fruit. Being a good student, I had no fear when my father's colleagues sometimes tested me by asking me a bunch of academic questions with a semi-serious attitude. Hence I've never thought teachers scary, as some students might feel. I've had witnessed the hard work my father has done, and I realize being teachers is not easy. During class, they keep standing while we're sitting; they are concerned about all students, while we only care about ourselves; they teach, give private assistance, do the ideological, contact parents, prepare lessons, and take care of their own children, so they have hectic days, and usually sleep late at night. Compared with them, students have much easier tasks.”*

He continued talking about the importance of seeking help from teachers, which, in his opinion, played a big role in a student's academic success.

*"I'm lucky to have early recognition of the importance of seeking help from teachers. At primary school, my father could teach me everything; things are not like that since I've attended upper secondary school. But it doesn't matter; I can ask my subject teachers who know better about my situation. In the long learning process, teachers can't always identify where you're stuck in time. It's detrimental to your studies if problems are not promptly solved because the rhythm of teaching is extremely fast in the Gifted Class."*

With an assertive character, Chun shared the same opinion concerning engaging teachers. He emphasized the importance of getting help from teachers with the argument that knowledge points were structurally interconnected for which teachers had more experiences.

*"Although independent thinking is quite important, you should definitely consult your teacher if you can't solve the problem after deep thinking. This is the most important thing for the study. In the high-track classes, teachers tacitly thought that students had learned some in-depth knowledge independently, and they wouldn't explain those 'common sense' in detail if no one asked. Our classmates perhaps can help sometimes, but teachers, with abundant teaching experiences, can better solve your problem. For example, they can draw inferences about other cases from one instance; you'll see how knowledge points are connected after their detailed explanations." (Chun)*

As the assistant of the math teacher, Chun is a frequent visitor of his math teacher. Other teachers in the same office know him well in the long-term contacting, and play jokes on him on occasions. Chun is confident while interacting with teachers; he often politely asks if there are things he can help, such as delivering test papers, filling the cup with water. But being polite, in his opinion, does not necessarily mean being self-reliant; rather, he would make his situations understood by teachers and overtly declare his needs. He did less well in English, compared with math. He thus often stops his English teacher after class for asking questions concerning what has been taught; sometimes, holding a mistake correction book in hand, he says like, "I've collected five categories of problems on which I often make a mistake. Would you please help me to look at them?" Sometimes, he rewrites his composition that is rated with an unsatisfactory score and reach out to the teacher, saying something such as "I feel that I urgently need to promote my composition ability for a higher score. I've re-written the composition from our last assignment. Would you please have a look and grade it? I need your comments!" Besides, he has a strong

sense of playing the role of the math representative while defending his own interests. One day, he went to the math teacher's office and asked for some modulations with a practice book in hand, with a specific request—“Could you explain this problem to us again in the next class? Perhaps most students would like to learn it again because it's a bit difficult. A few classmates have asked me during the break time. I'm actually a bit distracted by them!”

Mo also talked about the importance of resorting to teachers, and she also introduced me that she made it a point to make her teachers notice her and establish her presence in consideration of teachers' limited time and energy, which she was inspired by her parents. Mo believes that herself is one of the favorite students of her class sponsor. She told me that before she entered this school, they had a family meeting with definite agendas about important things she would probably face soon. Then her parents guided her through about how to leave a good first-impression and how to interact with people in the educational setting, which she thought was supremely helpful for starting her high-school life. In Mo's opinion, the most rewarding advice was that it was normal that there must be many high-achieving students there, she should be calm for experiencing ups and downs, but at the same time, she should not lose aspirations in studies and try to make teachers notice her so that she could get sufficient help.

She once witnessed how her parents had successfully negotiated with her teacher, which served for her good. Mo reported that she not only knew well about her class sponsor as a teacher, but also other identities outside the school. Mo has enabled her class sponsor to give her special attention strategically, like enthusiastically taking part in the class activities and asking good questions. She talked about how she had benefited from a good relationship with her class sponsor.

*“My parents told me that going to school was a process of acquiring knowledge through people's equal communication with a keen interest in knowledge. They also made me believe that teachers were not scary at all, and we should go to teachers if there were any need. I noticed that my parents were getting very well along with my teachers. When problems or contradictions emerged, they would make their concerns known by teachers in time. For example, they have reasonably discussed with my teacher about my seating adjustment, which impressed me a lot. Now I have a good relationship with teachers, especially with my class sponsor. I tried to impress her through hard work; I asked some good questions, and I also actively participated in class activities and tried to make some contributions so that my teacher could notice me and recognize my efforts. When knocking into teachers, some students would look at the inverse direction and pretend not to see them, which I think is not*

*wise. I would say hello and observe if I have some opportunities for some small talks. Last time, when I was buying two tutorial textbooks, my class sponsor showed up and paid for me! Besides study, I would turn to her for coping with mental-related problems. The conversation with her relieves my confusions and pressure every time, which enables me to continue with a fresh and positive mind. Last semester, she offered to set some goals for my weakest subject—physics, and supervised me to finish the homework by myself. Guess what? What a magic! My ranking in this subject improved 20 places!"*

These students, as a teacher's child, a subject representative, and a student whose parents have shown her how to negotiate with the teacher, respectively, have shown the importance of engaging teachers when they need support and teachers, in turn, give them more attention and opportunities. They tend to suspend authority, which the teacher's identity endows. And they treat teachers as a helper on the way to academic success. Rather than waiting for help passively, they spend effort to make their situations understood by teachers, and feel unconstraint when seeking for help and negotiating for their interests effectively.

#### **7.1.8 A silent transforming influence through charisma— “I want to become you.”**

The class sponsor thinks highly of Lan, regarding her as being “ambitious, studious, strong-minded, and self-disciplined”. Lan's life and study are scheduled guided by an assortment of rules, but those rules have been approved by all of the family members. Reasoning is encouraged, and being obedient is not much highlighted by her parents, which is different from the situation of the typical underclass and working-class families. Lan likes the resilient relationship among the family members, where she is greatly inspired by her parents' various “outstanding qualities” and thus has few sad stories to tell. With high self-esteem, Lan said she was increasingly getting close to the idealized self. Lan talked about several episodes of her life, highlighting that her parents rub off on her positively in time sequence.

*“My parents have done so much for me, and I always wish to make them proud of me. However, the older I'm growing, the more I realize how amazing they are with so many good qualities, and I finally find that they are my pride. They are responsible employees who have done a good job in their workplaces. They are also wonderful parents with an open mind, who set good examples concerning how to be parents.”*

Lan recalled an episode together with her mother where her mother helped her overcome carsickness, praising her mother's devout attitudes toward knowledge.

*Lan:* "Mother, I feel like throwing up. Why am I feeling so bad?"

*Lan's mother (patted Lan's back):* "You got carsick, baby."

*Lan:* "Why only me? I mean, other people are all ok."

*Lan's mother:* "That's perhaps because the vestibule of your ears—a little device inside the ear keeping the balance, is too sensitive. Poor ventilation, the smell of petrol, accelerated movement, thrashing, and a sharp turn can make it worse. Now don't think much about that. Try to think about the smell of orange, lemon, grapefruit, or ginger. Don't be afraid. I have a plastic bag for you in case you're not feeling well. If you can hold on, we'll get off for the fresh air in the next stop anyway."

*Lan:* "Ok, but why does father always say that he sometimes gets carsick when he is taking a car while is totally ok when driving?"

*Lan's mother:* "I don't know. We seek answers together later, ok?"

Under such an environment, Lan finds study nothing difficult, and she can figure out many problems through reading and thinking. She also talked about that she was inspired by her father's morality, responsibility, versatility, and scholarly attainments, and that she wanted to grow up to be someone like her father.

*"I admire my father, who is a generalist. First of all, he is a righteous and virtuous person. He has never bowed obsequiously to power, and he has been merciful to the poor and the weak. I remembered when I was a child, I wanted a beautiful bird who was perching on our protective barrier. What a beautiful bird! Father, last time, you showed me that you were able to catch a fly. Now try to catch this bird!" I cried. No, we can't do that. No one should deny the bird's freedom.' I was disappointed and about to cry. 'Alright, for only once.' He caught the bird gently and carefully for me. 'Now what are you going to do with the bird?', I said, 'I'll be nice to her. But we need to keep her in the kitchen with the window closed so that she won't fly away.' My father did so and said, 'Now, you are responsible for her interests and happiness.' I couldn't wait to feed the bird with water, rice, a plum, and a piece of apple, but she, with sad and resentful eyes, refused to eat anything, which made my heartbroken. My excitement thoroughly disappeared within an hour since the capture. Even though it was hard to say goodbye, I thought I must set the bird free and admitted that I was wrong. Then my father gave me a lesson in time, 'Now do you become to understand what respect is? You had already harmed her, though you tried to amend for the past. Now you must sincerely apologize for your mistake. This also shows that your ideas are not always reliable. So as to reduce mistakes, it's critical to do more reading and reflections, and take others' advice, right?' Moreover, my father is versatile. He is good at singing and ball sports. His speech has been full of insights, which has been related to much reading. He has a strong manipulative ability. He would repair household appliances for the family. I like the time when we are travelling as a family.*

*My father often introduces me to the history of a place where we are travelling. He is also keen to introduce many principles concerning math, physics, and economics to me. I hope I can also achieve a lot one day, like my father.”*

She talked about going to cram classes in her childhood where she was asked to make decisions for herself with good reasons, just like an adult.

*“My parents treated me like an adult since I was very young, and I began to learn how to make decisions. Before I was in the third grade in primary school, my parents sent me to kinds of cram classes for identifying my interests rather than making the so-called ‘omnipotent child’. As I got into the higher grade, it was unrealistic to spend loads of time on those hobbies. My parents then asked me to choose my favorite two classes and gave reasons. This experience made me happy because, as far as I knew, many parents simply decided everything for their children. I then chose to continue taking the violin class because music allowed me to express my feelings in a marvelously beautiful way. At that time, I was well aware of the heavy responsibility for making an important decision for myself, just like adults. After the second thought, I chose the sketching class because I admired my sketching teacher. He was a pure artist living a life he had envisioned; that was pretty cool! Besides, his class was so interesting! He didn’t confine his energy to teach you how to draw a beautiful picture, but more importantly, he enlightened you to describe the world in a brand new way, abstract and charming, from which I learned that ‘perfect things’ were valuable, indeed, but ‘imperfect realities behind the sun’ deserved more serious pondering.”*

Lan also talked about how she was inspired by her mother’s experiences of doing an on-the-job master, from which she realized the vision from her earlier years. Lan’s mother once took care of her grandmother who suffered from an anxiety disorder in the hospital where she got to know a nineteen-year-old girl, who was a patient in the nest ward, jumped off the building to end her life. Even one day before, the girl’s mother told Lan’s mother that her daughter was getting much better. Lan’s mother was shocked by this abrupt tragedy and had been devastated for a long time. It turned out that during this period, she read some psychological books and checked related data, finding that depression, as an illness, was much despised in Chinese society due to cultural and social factors. The majority of those patients—who were “not feeling well”, tended to mislocate themselves and believed that tomorrow would be better and in turn, got rid of the idea of seeing the doctor just because of turbulent emotions. Still, many of them might even suspect that a psychologist or psychological counselor was just a fraud, but “not the real doctor with expertise”. Lan’s mother learned that the ignorance of this illness was exacerbated by popular social discourses and prejudice. Many people took those of the depressed as impenetrable, pretentious, and shameful “lunatics” who were just acting or making a fuss. Some held the idea that these people would recover soon without medical help, and they usually comforted the patients that “your situations are better

than mine, and look, I'm fine." or suggested them forgetting the work and "just abandoning" themselves such as shopping and going to a movie. The current society seemed to have low sympathy and tolerance of the marginalized, incapable, and "fragile" persons. Then Lan's mother taught herself psychology and decided to do a master's degree on that topic. She worked hard by Lan's side every night. Later, when Lan's mother successfully got the degree, she told her daughter that aside from worldly success, she also wished to do some meaningful things for which she did not need any reward. She thanked Lan to give her this chance because she trusted Lan could handle her things well. The mother's experience has inspired Lan to pursue a responsible life she wants with much autonomy and courage.

#### **7.1.9 Inheriting silently with reservations— "I want to be an intellectual, not the kind they expect."**

Not all high-achieving middle-class students overwhelmingly praise their parents; in spite the divergence and certain psychical distance, Chong managed to be a high-achieving student. Chong seemed a bit ambivalent and entangled when he was talking about his parents. Growing in a family with scholarliness, Chong found it quite natural to be a high-performing student. For example, he is used to asking what, how, and why in a structural way. He recalled several episodes when his parents were discussing with each other with draft papers. A great many books were displayed on the bookshelf in their house; still, some were piled up in a corner on the ground. The number of books was still growing since his parents bought books regularly, and they would like to buy additional books for Chong if he showed some interests. On the weekends, Chong's parents always needed to take a dive into research. Chong has never considered the study a difficult thing, and gained a good grasp of those required subjects. He could solve almost all the problems in the exam papers, and if not, he would consult his parents or teachers. Chong talked about that he was keeping growing and developing these years. He felt a sense of inferior, albeit being a top student in the class during primary school and the first half of lower secondary school until he began to know a group of like-minded people who were from "happy and harmonious families".

*“If you interviewed me several years ago, you would have got totally different information. I meant I was also a good student before, but I hated my parents, and I couldn’t even accept myself psychologically. Then the information you’ve acquired from me must be very little, and with much bias at that time.”*

He thought that his parents were entrenched, conservative, opinionated, sensitive, and impatient before. And he developed his sense of himself as “an academically excellent student without EQ”. But thereafter, he has experienced important transformations. He does not hate his parents anymore, attributing those “character flaws” to the limitation of their poor-peasant growing environment. More importantly, he was promoting towards “an academically and emotionally excellent student” who he wished to be.

*“My parents had good interpersonal relationships for being seemingly knowledgeable, helpful, and considerate. I thought many things that they’d shown outside were unreal. For example, they pretended to be an affectionate couple outside with some intentional words, but I knew they were not actually. My mother wouldn’t easily forgive my father if she was annoyed by him. Then the normal situation would be that my father stayed late smoking in the living room in the night after being kicked out of their sleeping room; the cold war continued the next day. Sometimes, I was confused about how they could be so childish; they are technical talents, after all. Maybe they could be themselves without the mask only in the family. They told me many dark sides of things, making me believe that society was insidious without warn. They adopted double standards, i.e., they had extremely high demands on me, but not on themselves. To make matters worse, they sometimes criticized me without a good reason. They even satirized me if I encountered setbacks. I didn’t know how to deal with my emotions now and then. Paradoxically, children tend to be like their parents, even if they don’t want to. The environment made me increasingly sensitive. As a child with a fragile heart, I wasn’t accepted by many classmates before. However, I was transformed when I was in the lower secondary school, where I met some academically and emotionally excellent students. Some enjoyed discussing study problems with me, which was the starting point of our friendship; the friendship was strengthened by many subsequent discussions. I also met a girl who made me feel my blood pulsating. She was confident, smart, and well-mannered; most importantly, she was genuine—not hypocritical at all! She was like a streak of white moonlight for me, making me always pursuit to be better. So I’ve learned much from those excellent friends, which I couldn’t learn at home. I like the identity as a student with studious passion and at the same time, a person with goodness, justice, and love.”*

## 7.2 Stories of staying mediocre: “I get fed up with working terribly hard.”

Jing is an average student in a Gifted Class. He has developed a sense of his identity as a quick learner who plays hard while working efficiently. He is generally satisfied with his identity as an average student in a Gifted Class with the metaphor of “a small fish in a big pond”.

*“I actually had the psychology anticipation of being an ordinary student in the Gifted Class. The reason is simple. There is always someone who is better than you. I can be a star student in an ordinary class, but I must accept the fact of being an average student in the best class. There is no need to be shameful.”*

He logically talked about that, if everything went on well, he would be admitted to a 211-Project university in the future according to his current ranking. He observed that as a middle-ranking student in the elite class, he had limited room for improvement and each step forward was becoming increasingly difficult. He talked about that teachers' attention was always paid on those top 3 students who bore the school's expectations of squeezing into “the top 2”. But he enjoyed the status of being a bit ignored by teachers.

He sought to relieve his parents' anxiety by trying to persuade them with “the tenth phenomenon”— the lucky dog who did the best in Gaokao, with less psychical stress, was often not the top student in the class but a student with a tenth-place in normal times. He has different educational expectations from his parents— while he thought a bachelor degree from a 211-Project University was totally ok, his parents ardently hoped that he could get a master's degree from a C9 League university. Realizing that he could not be a “rare bird” in the elite class by a long-lasting observation of what was going on, he became to value his identity as “the terrific singer in the class” defined by others, even it might invite unfriendly remarks criticizing him as a trifler. He is struggling to have a balance between a disciplined “good student” and a person with a certain degree of autonomy, but such ambition is impeded by his parents who have benefited from the on-the-job diploma in the workplace with the knowledge that the on-the-job diploma also works as a face-saving project not only for themselves but also for the institutions where they are working for. Inspired by her husband, Jing's mother was also promoted as head nurse with the diploma's contribution. Realizing the significance of the academic diploma and the devaluation of it with the expansion of higher education, Jing's parents had extremely high educational expectations on him. In Jing's opinion, his parents often instill him with ambition by means of “fortune cookie comments”, and he has his own strategy— telling the myth of “the 10<sup>th</sup> myth”.

Qian's parents were both senior managers in their companies. They had a busy schedule, but they would make some time for Qian where they read and discuss. Four years ago, this couple started their own business. Then Qian lodged with her aunt— her father's elder sister. Her parents managed to see her at least twice a month. She had an affectionate description of this experience, which she thought was one of the most beautiful experiences in her life. Her aunt kept a cat at home. Although her parents told her aunt to try not to let Qian touch the cat too much so as not to “sap her will by seeking pleasure”, the aunt failed to prevent them from becoming good friends. Qian was given special treatment as a top student before she started her high-school life. However, surrounded by genius, she became increasingly demotivated, feeling that she could no longer rest on the past laurels. She feels unhappy for losing the advantageous position in the academic line, which has multiple important implications for her. This experience creates confusion about her identity, making her to relocate herself, in a negative way. She thus greatly lowered her expectations, resetting attending a university of the 211 level as the goal, instead of the prior goal of attending a C9 League University. She was not a fan of the so-called “teachers’ equal treatment”, which was proved repeatedly by her previous experiences. Studying in the Gifted Class, she was keenly noticed how students were unequally treated by teachers according to their perceived academic performances. She talked about that when she was whispering with her classmates who outperformed her in class, teachers paid attention only to her, without exception, taking it for granted that she must have negatively influenced the other side. At this time, the teacher would stop them by calling her name or deliberately ask her to answer a question. Her unhappy experiences also lay in that she had observed that when she asked her classmates a “simple question”, a hint of a surprised look was clearly detected, conveying that she was not qualified to be a member that was incorporated in this high-track class.

*“They get over 140 (the maximum score is 150) easily and dimensionally excel us, making me feel that my IQ melts and doubt my life. I think I’m far less than the level even if I worked 16 hours every day. It was a funny feeling that I should think I was a curve wrecker.”*

Qian gradually gives up investing much time in two subjects that overwhelm her concerning a “low input-output ratio”. Complaining that she is the poster student for her wasted talent, she believes that she is warped by her shortages on some required subjects, and is a victim of the education system where students

are not allowed to autonomously decide their interesting subjects for learning and testing. Showing me her exam report, she talked about that if she were allowed to make an option, she would have chosen a packet of Chinese, English, history, biology, and geography—a combination of liberal art and natural science, though it is impossible at present.

Xia's case shows that the incompetence of realizing self-expectations finally brings about a lowering of academic aspiration. She thought it would be a natural thing to be a high-performing student at primary school partly because she received “special treatment” from her class sponsor, who was her father's friend. Besides, she confessed that she was strongly driven by educational by-products such as honor and vanity because a high grade served as symbolic capital in the school field. But things have become different since she is in this high school where “there's always someone who's more intelligent”, “there's always someone whose parents earn more”, “there's always someone who possesses more powerful guanxi”, and “there's someone who always works harder”. She talked about that she felt enormous stress for staying out of the identity as a lower-performing student in the scenario where her parents both attended university, which was rare in those years. Her experiences of being a mediocre student were earlier compared to Qian's experiences, which happened in the junior high school stage. She worked hard with “full of beans” until she experienced intense declines when the subject of physics was added as the required subject in grade 2. She identified that her situation was shaped by the fact that she was externally stimulated for fulfilling others' expectations without a real inner interest.

*“My catastrophic performance has easily ruined my reputation as ‘a consistently good student’. You can imagine how sad I was. Then I started to analyze my situation, finding that I wasn't competitive enough actually, but was blinded by my ‘high scores’. I had to admit that motivating factors make a difference. I was different from those real curve wreckers because I was externally stimulated while they were internally self-driven. I meant that in the past, I was driven by those by-products of education, such as ‘face’, ‘a sense of presence’, and ‘vanity’, to an extent, which lasted not for long.”*

Xia's parents tried to help her by taking her to cram classes for her weak subjects, but few improvements were detected. Her parents did not put much pressure on her because they had a back-up plan for her. This couple reckoned that it was good to keep options open because nobody knew what was going to happen

in the future. They sent Xia to take Pipa<sup>54</sup> lessons and supervised the progress until she passed the highest level for amateurs. Her parents would help her to get admitted to a music school if she could not stand out in academic studies, which they do not take as being inferior or negative.

Yao is a below-average student in the expensive International Experimental class. Her parents both work in the government department. Their working experiences and daily discourses concerning local officialdom have made the daughter to believe that “human connection is everything”. They regard an excellent ability of making human connection as something from which they gain respect and status and avoid being bullied by other people. Yao expressed that she was a carefree kid growing up in a happy family with affectionate parents. Although her parents had a high educational expectation on her, they did not push her too much. The girl believed that there were always a plan B available to her, especially, when she failed with a few marks in the exam, she had the knowledge that her father could “fix it up”.

*“My father is a responsible and reliable man. He loves me very much. Unlike many other children who are often beaten by their parents, I remember I was beaten only once when my father found that I had involved in puppy love from reading a letter which I carelessly put on the table. He had no tolerance and would do anything for me if he believed I was bullied. Last time, one of my classmates said that I was a person who was always finding fault with others and that I even spoke ill of my best friend. I was so angry that I had a big fight with him. After that, I still felt angry about being wronged. I told my father the whole thing. My father comforted me. He then came to my school and educated this classmate, telling him that if similar event happened again, he should do him a mischief. I was aware that his confidence enabled him to negotiate forcefully. And I knew my class sponsor was on my side, which I supposed had something to do with the situation that my father was in the government sector.”*

### 7.3 Stories of turning-point: Restoration that reverses the course

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<sup>54</sup> Pipa is a popular Chinese classical instrument, which is also known as a four-stringed Chinese lute.

Two middle-class families take children's steepest dive in the test results as a wake-up call for the reconstruction of a culturally-nurtured family environment, for which parents have demonstrated to be competent and experienced.

### **Yu's story**

Like many middle-class parents, Yu's parents had high educational expectations on him with an emphasis on "looking ahead". Yu attended private art lessons when he was young. He was known as a versatile child developing in the fields of violin, calligraphy, drawing, and Wei qi (Chinese Chess) in their living community.

*"A Drawback is like an anchor to which you are attached and prevents you from going higher. We insisted that Yu should learn something that might yield an invincible position, thus winning advantages in the cut-throat competition in the future."*  
*(Yu's father)*

Although Yu had his hands full for attending various extracurricular activities, he was good at academic subjects before he started his high school life. Before Yu got completely comfortable with high school life with a plethora of tests, he had experienced several disappointments. Yu's parents had panic that if this situation were not properly handled, their best-laid plans would go down the drain. The father made reflections and found that their life was colonized— he devoted so much time to network with an extensive circle of friends and got himself involved in the "political battles in the office" which he could not get rid of in such a bureaucracy. After multiple discussions, Yu's parents decided to intervene by restoring their previous scholarly family atmosphere.

*"I'd never forgotten that amazing day when I stepped into my house. What surprised me the most was that all the certificates and badges implying my achievements were removed from the wall, which once incurred many of our guests' unnecessary compliments. I knew that many guests told my parents fake flattering things. I was happy to see that they were replaced by two landscape paintings and a calligraphy work with beautiful seal-script characters. I was so moving because I was aware that my parents had expended much care and thought on my study. All the stories of power struggles and human connections suddenly disappeared from our dining table as well, giving way to my favorite topics like literacy appreciation and celebrity legends. I was pleasantly surprised at the transformation of my family life and immediately understood parents, which actually demonstrated their deep love and unwavering support. I gave my amazing parents a very tight and emotional hug." (Yu)*

Yu's struggle enthusiasm was ignited by this turning point, and after that, he had a self-disciplined routine with unremitting hard work.

### **Lu's story**

Lu, from a double college-educated and white-collared family with a caring and harmonious atmosphere, entered this school with her outstanding exam marks. Lu lived on campus because her parents, as workaholics, were busy with their work and they believed in her independence. Her parents were becoming increasingly busy as they got promoted in their workplaces. Lu's parents paid attention to cultivate her interest in study in her childhood. Lu easily shined in all the subjects. However, she was gradually falling behind in an environment without much supervision. Lu's parents had quarrels the day when they got her final exam results, which greatly astonished Lu because she had no memory of parents' quarrel before. Lu admitted that she was obsessed with Manga introduced by her roommates. Lu's mother was suddenly aware of the dorm climate's impact and made a significant and astonishing decision of a temporary departure from her job, assisting her daughter until Gaokao. For reducing commuting time, they rented an apartment near the school.

The mother carefully established separate targeted files for every subject in her computer systematically where she and her daughter together devised up to the whole plan and stage goals. She also kept exact accounts of her daughter's mental states, a summary of learning content, exam techniques, study methods, difficult points for a type of problems, pitfalls to avoid, and learning efficiency. The mother also insisted on carefully collecting and categorizing problems that Lu had done wrong, which cost her about two hours each day. Lu felt comfortable at home with a tolerant but restrained family atmosphere where they could equally discuss many topics besides the study. What she especially valued was her mother's emotional support for her psychological construction.

*"Confronting the great pressure of Gaokao, I was sometimes irritable and easily lost temper. Mom would never become mad for being 'unfairly treated' but she had a good knowledge of communicative art for encouraging people by telling thought-provoking tales in an ironic way, which I believe was closely related to her literacy accomplishment and personal taste. Besides, she adequately conveyed something like 'I know exactly how you feel.' (Lu)*

The mother's tolerance, strong mind, and perseverance greatly inspired her, which promised Lu a glorious prospect by enabling her to believe that she could overcome all the difficulties ahead and return to become a good student which she valued.

The section of middle-class children's turning-point stories shows what middle-class parents do when their children encounter adversity in their study. These parents tend to actively and strategically help their children out without offering them mental tortures or sharp critiques, compared with the working-class group. Those middle-class parents have a high likelihood of creating a harmonious family atmosphere with resilient relationships, which fosters emotion express and reasoning. They have relatively affluent economic capital for resisting risks and emergencies. Yu's identity as a high-performing student was regained in a relatively easy and pleasant way when his family strategically restored the privileged cultural atmosphere. In Lu's example, her mother temporarily quitted the job for wholeheartedly assisting Lu's study without entangled economic concerns.

## **7.4 Stories of mismatch— Every family has a skeleton in the cupboard**

Complexity implies various possibilities and combinations. Middle-class children's academic failure is nothing new. However, the discontinuity or failure of the cultural inheritance among the middle-class group has been underexplored. This section aims to give an explanation regarding how middle-class students fall short of expectations with a biographical study of the remaining students in the sample of the middle-class group— Huan, Hao, Xiong, Qun, and Ting. I learned from cases of Huan and Hao that remaining underachieving should make sense for them; Xiang attended a lower-track class where he had no sense of belonging because of his “disorder play” on the senior high school entrance examination and his parents' ignorance, which greatly demotivated him; Qun and Ting had high motives to be a higher-achieving student, but some uncontrollable factors have posed them a great challenge.

### **7.4.1 “I won't change if mom doesn't challenge him!”**

Huan told me a story about how his identity as an underachiever brought him a sense of achievement in some way. He showed low academic motivations and refused to finish Chinese homework from time to time. The class sponsor thus invited Huan's parents to discuss his homework problem. The teacher said that he had communicated with his father, as the focal parent who was mainly responsible for Huan's study multiple times by telephone, but it did not work. He thus invited this couple together for a meeting in a formal place—his office, for raising a high awareness of parents' attitude for slamming on the child's attitudinal and behavioral problems.

*After finishing the teaching tasks, Huan's class sponsor bolted down instant food that he had brought before a meeting with Huan's parents, which was scheduled at 5:40 pm. Huan's parents arrived five minutes late, and the father explained that there was a traffic jam. Huan's father, who was specialized in gas engineering, acted assertively, while the mother, as a housewife, seemed to behave a bit constrainedly in front of the teacher. After the simple warm-up, the teacher then came to the point, suspecting that problems existed in the couple's parenting. The environment was soon getting increasingly stressful since this couple held opposite views about child-rearing practices with each other, for which they had a quarrel. It would be easy to figure out they had had considerable conflicts concerning this issue from their talking. The mother, although a little reserved, could not manage to repress her feelings. The teacher tried to mediate the atmosphere, but soon he found himself turned out to be the object of the attack. The father recalled his own childhood, stating that he was learning well in an unstrict environment of "learning while playing". He further asserted that his child was as clever as him for winning a prize in the Mathematical Olympiad at primary school, suspecting his child was somehow misguided at school. The teacher explained that times had changed, and the competition was becoming increasingly intense. He then attached importance to parents' unified cooperation for children's academic progress.*

*Huan's teacher: "Since you've worked for many years, you are possibly not familiar with what happened in the educational setting."*

*Huan's mother: "Yes, we should respect teachers' expertise in the educational field."*

*Huan's father: "Shut up! You have no say in this matter with only a high school degree."*

*Huan's father: "Teaching is not only about education, but also management technology. I lead a team in the company, and I manage to keep our team a high spirit."*

*Huan's teacher: "You are perhaps an expert in your domain, but differences in professions are amazing. For your child's sake, you'd better follow the teacher's advice. I have over fifteen years' teaching experience. I know which kinds of children are more likely to be academically successful."*

Huna's mother: "Teachers are also for the child's good. You don't listen to others, never! It's ok if you don't agree with me, but you must trust teachers. Get over yourself!"

Huan's father: "You know what? You have no knowledge about society. Last time, when other people forcibly occupied your seat on the train, you dared not to say anything. You dared not to defend your rights."

Huan's mother: "I've never cared about such trivial things. You've gotta know, the child's education matters a lot!"

Huan's teacher: "Would you please discuss those stuff later? I want to make sure we have time to get through our agenda. I sometimes took the initiative to talk to your child, but he had no much to say, except 'I don't think I can learn it well.' or 'It's difficult.' For this, I discussed with their Chinese teacher for seeking for possible adjustments, like um... to make the burden of homework lighter; the teacher expressed that those assigned practices were helpful for doing exams; I was persuaded by investigating some students as well. Besides, their physics teacher reflected the phenomenon of his plagiarizing homework. There must be underlying causes, which I need your cooperation for working out the problem."

Huan's father: "The underlying cause must be the education system. Let's set it aside. Now let's talk about the social division of labor you've mentioned. Teachers must try their best to teach every student well. If there exist a problem, teachers possibly can't get away from it. Likewise, our boss only asks me if there's any problem because I, as the group leader, am responsible for all problems derived from my department."

Huan's teacher: "Now, I must make clear about your educational expectations on your child. If you tell me, 'ok, I just want my child to graduate from high school.', I give up my vain effort. However, as far as I've observed, things are not like that. Last time, he failed the Chinese exam, and the next day, I saw his swelling face and inflamed eyes."

Huan's father: "I'm with the master's degree; I hope he'll reach this level, or better exceed it. Yes, I hit him on the spur of the moment, and he deserved it. Low scores mean career failures. My father would even hit me when I broke tableware when I was young. Nowadays, some popular comments from those so-called educators or experts are untenable and misleading. It's obvious that proper corporal punishment contributes to healthy growth."

Huan's teacher: "Corporal punishment, as a frenetically coercive means, doesn't help to solve fundamental problems, like the mental problems. As parents, you know better about the child's living experiences; as his class sponsor, I know better about his learning situation and class performance. We should make a joint effort to solve the problem, and this is exactly the intention of this meeting."

Huan's father: "Isn't that clear enough? I'm afraid it's difficult to push this process unilaterally... I mean we can't do that by ourselves. We should perhaps ascribe the child's lack of motives or bad performances partly to those irresponsible subject teachers. I'll definitely guide my child later but perhaps you'd better pass on some messages to those subject teachers. If those teachers can make their courses interesting enough, the child would have a passion for learning. When conditions are ripe, success is

*anticipated without extra effort. Because there's no problem with my IQ, and I don't think my child's IQ should be too low to learn the knowledge of the high-school stage."*

*Huan's mother: "If you are a capable parent, then just prove it! Can you send the child to the best school where the best teachers can teach him? You are not capable, and you don't listen to the teacher. How incurable! Yes, perhaps there's no problem with your IQ, but there must be severe problems with your EQ; perhaps I don't have a high IQ, but I understand things much better than you. It's too embarrassing to come with you today. Stop making a fool of yourself! Let's go home to discuss when and how we get a divorce."*

- Field note taken on 4<sup>th</sup> July, 2017

As can be seen, the point of view from the father diverges sharply from the mother's narratives. That meeting, as a failed attempt to help Huan, being totally unexpected and extremely awkward, ended up with Huan's parents' angry departure. Shaking his head in dismay, the teacher felt self-defeating after tried the best of his ability and said that he would stay out of everything concerning his student, Huan. The perennial tense family atmosphere with parents' frequent quarrels paralyzed Huan. This student mentioned that he was "a person be beaten from childhood to adolescence". The family is not a warm harbor for him, but a place of insecurity, a battlefield filled with thick smoke. Huan finds his parents a strange combination, and has developed his identity as "a child living in a morbid family". He understood study as a bitter thing, and he deserved some happy time in the crevice of intense stress of the family and the school. More importantly, in his opinion, his identity as an underachiever should serve the means whereby he could help his mother a little bit by stimulating her to stand up against his father's authority.

*"My father is the hurricane in the family; I don't think other women can endure him like my mother. My mother, like other victims of feudalism, was deprived of the opportunity of tertiary education. She's clever, hardworking and kind-hearted, but is cowardly as well. She has a low level of self-esteem and expects that I can achieve her unfinished dreams. When she has some different ideas, she normally keeps quiet because she hardly has the courage to challenge my father's authority. My father made harsh remarks from time to time, like, when I made some achievements, he said it was because I inherited his good genes, and if I made mistakes, then it was my mother's inferior gene to be blamed. My mother has experienced some transformations these years because of my study status. In fact, I'm happy to witness her changes even it's related to my unsatisfactory academic performances, though the fundamental status of my family hasn't been changed. You see, I feel painful and suffocated, and I'm fed up! Last time, they had a quarrel. I ran out to calm down, biding somewhere in an adjacent residential community. I didn't know when and where my father came out abruptly. He took me back and gave me a hit with a belt. It was in the summertime, and I had to wear pants to cover up my wound in front of people. I'm also disappointed with my mother because she can't read my mind. Last time, I wanted to please her by writing her a birthday card. But she just picked it up and then put it aside, 'oh,*

*'you remember my birthday. But you should lose no time to study.' And she turned into the kitchen and prepared supper. I stood still, feeling upset that words failed to describe.'*

#### 7.4.2 "I laze away for not having a meaningful life."

Hao told me that he was often tortured by the imagination of the loss of his parents in his early childhood. Every time when he had his birthday, he would make a wish that his parents could live a hundred years. As one of the top students and an adroit child, Hao often got a small sum of money as incentives, for which he bought books and small gifts for his parents. He was very connected to his parents, especially his father who he regarded as his emotional anchor and the pillar of support. However, "the more you fear, it's more likely that you'll experience". He talked about that he had fallen to an underachiever from the height since the death of his father, who once exerted the most important influences on him and helped him to live a meaningful life. He considered his father's death as something which totally changed his life trajectory forever, in many ways. He recalled how his father had instilled him with some noble values:

*"My father had strong ethical views. When he saw beggars, he always gave them some pocket money, despite some were suspected to be beggars in disguise. At that time, he would educate me to be a productive person who could help them with the quotation from Mencius that 'preserve your dignity and make yourself better as a nobody, endeavors to help others out and benefit the world as somebody'. The attitude it conveyed, from my view, was cool without arrogance but aiming for genuineness, benevolence and beauty."*

He also clung to their previous harmonious family atmosphere while he was previously motivated:

*"I didn't have confidence in my capability to succeed at the very start concerning my relatively weak subject—math. My math teacher even told my parents that I hadn't a shred of math knowledge straightforwardly. I thought they would be angry and then severely scolded me, just like many parents who valued 'face' a lot. But surprisingly, my father touched my head softly, 'I know you've tried your best.' While I was feeling relieved and about to give up, he continued, 'I firmly believe that you can learn math well, just like you've done a good job in other subjects.' I said fretfully, 'I think math, a subject requiring much talent, boring with the lack of talent. I know I'll never appreciate the so-called beauty of math.' He said, 'No one is born a genius. Don't give up before a second try. Nothing is really over until the moment you stop trying. Did you forget the amazing experience when we reached the mountain top and held all the mountains in the distance in a single glance? As you keep moving, you'll probably reach a certain height to enjoy the beautiful scenery; if you give up, your father feels sorry for you. Cheer up; you'll succeed. We are always your strong backing!' He held out his hand, my mother beckoned me to put my hand on his hand, and finally, she put her hand on. I appreciated this warm family atmosphere, which inspired and energized me. When I thought that we were together through thick and thin, I was feeling positively refreshed. I got over the hard times and became*

*among the top. However, destiny played such a cruel game that my father went to another world after being tortured by cancer. I felt the deep malice from destiny.”*

Hao talked about that he was depressed until he realized that he must stand up to make his father's spirit alive. He knew life would return to normal finally, though he would no longer be happy with much satisfaction. His efforts have been unproductive in reality, however. He said that when he entered the junior high, his class sponsor had few expectations on him since he was a child from a single-parent family. He also suffered from a bad interpersonal relationship because some classmates treated him as “a wreck from a fragmentary family”. His peers regarded his growing experiences odd, constructing him as being different from them. Hao said that he chose to swallow all the grievance alone because of teachers' indifference, peers' exclusion, as well as ignorance of his mother, who recently “had a more important person in life”. Hao was gradually lazing away because he managed not to live on meaningfully without his father's support. And more critically, he valued the stuff of being underachieving as a means to punish and revenge her mother for forgetting his father.

#### **7.4.3 “I'm misplaced.”**

Xiong told me that he had “a totally different status of presence”, compared with his past glory, stating that all the factors—the internal ones, as well as the external ones, led to his status quo. During his elementary school stage, Xiong developed a sense of himself as “one of the three best students”; in the junior high school, he was remaining the top ten. However, the senior high school entrance examination was a turning point for him because he unluckily blew the exam, failing to perform to the best of his abilities. He said that he let down his Chinese teacher, who made him feel warm when he had his period of stagnation. He was always thinking that one day, he could make his Chinese teacher proud with an outstanding performance in the senior high school entrance examination. However, he failed, he would never meet her out of a strong sense of shame. He was always bearing his cousin's advice that “it's important to attend a high-track school plus a high-track class, because you'll get to know and learn from many excellent peers, including those talents”. He has an intense sense of disconnection from his parents and his old friends from junior high school. With low self-esteem, he felt powerless and ashamed of being

allocated into a lower-track class, saying that “my old friends are all in better homerooms”, and that “everyone supposes that I’m not clever for studying there”. He has no recognition of this identity and the homeroom he belongs to; he draws a moral boundary between himself and his classmates. But at the same time, he said that he must hide the thoughts so as not to make his teachers disappointing. He was struggling to live through the label imposed by others where he was taken as a “freak”, being “one of the most unsociable” by his classmates. During recess time, he sits still in a corner and goes to the toilet alone, usually two minutes before the next class. Some classmates guessed that “because there are no many people using the toilet then”, and mocked him as a “physiologically abnormal gay”. Xiong talked about his feeling of being rejected by his parents and his current situation of being loosely connected with his old friends and current classmates. Those entangled emotions and struggling minds have silently acted out through much pain, making him gloomy.

*“I’m not good. Many factors are responsible for that, including myself. I simply wanted to ruin myself when I was informed that I had to study in this class. I won’t have chosen it if I were allowed to make the decision. I’d rather study in a better class at a lower-track school. You know, the atmosphere here is not good, and you don’t have much pressure at all. Many students don’t want to learn; they seize the chance to smoke and make fun, but I don’t think I’ll let astray by them because I have a strong sense of justice. The senior high school entrance examination was a huge shock for me. At that time, my father was on a business trip, and my mother didn’t take good care of me because she needed to engage in some dinner parties for her job promotion. But couldn’t she turn down those unnecessary parties for me when I was facing one of the most important events of my life? I was sad, and I couldn’t sleep lying in bed the night before the senior high school entrance examination. She came back very late even knew I was still in fever. I later talked about my feelings with my mother, but she turned to be very angry, stating something like, ‘It’s your problem! You need to get over yourself! The senior high school entrance examination just served you for helping you recognize reality. You were just swelled with overweening pride, and you were not as excellent as you’ve imagined! If you are, the best school in the province would have won you over. How can you blame others for your own problems? If I don’t go out to earn money, how can you attend school?’ I’m place in an awkward position. My parents don’t understand me; my previous good friends are not together with me, and actually, I feel embarrassed to meet them accidentally and feel ashamed if they ask me, ‘how’s going?’; and I don’t think my current classmates as people of the same kind.”*

#### 7.4.4 “I wake up from trauma experiences, but a bit late.”

*“I saw many inconsistencies on her. It’s bizarre that she shows great writing talent, but her performance in the Chinese exam tends to be dissatisfactory. I seldom meet such kind of student during my twenty years’ teaching experiences.” (Qun’s Chinese teacher)*

Qun's Chinese performance was ordinary in her class; she did even worse in other subjects. Writing a composition, for Qun, served as a means of self-disclosure and emotion expression, which spiritually supported herself to go on for a long time. The girl confessed that with a strong sense of useless and worthless, she felt like "a dead-alive person" before. But she also had an episode of glory before—she once negotiated a sense of herself as "a lively child from a happy family" and "teachers' pet" in the first half of the primary school stage before a family disruption—her parents' divorce when she was nearly ten years old. Since then, she had been "sliding downhill". She lives with her father, who works as a doctor in a major hospital; her mother, as her non-custodial parent, visits her less than six times a year. She has experienced declines in studies since her parents' divorce, which brought her trauma. She was afraid of living through the long and silent night when her father was called for emergency surgery at any time. Qun also talked about her negative experiences of the adolescent awkward in grade 6 at primary school. She was molested by some male classmates for wearing an inappropriate underskirt. Coincidentally, she was subsequently be mocked by three female classmates for the menstruation stain on her pants. No one led her in the suffering journey; she could not tell those embarrassing moments to her father. Since then, she has become silent and has been bullied on occasions. One time, she found her stationery case was deformed, lying on the ground with her pen missing. Sitting on the ground, she cried a long time on the thought of her stationery case, which was bought by her mother. She was terribly heartbroken because the stationery carried important symbolism for her; its broken state seemed to imply that she was abandoned by her mother forever. The school turned into a place where she needed to pay attention to tremblingly guard herself against others' abuses. She ascribed all her miserable experiences to her mother's absence. She then developed the habit of keeping a diary where she could pour out her mind. Here are some excerpts from her diary:

*"They gather in crowds and connect others with the same interest after stepping out of the school gate. They (those female "bludgers") judge your backgrounds, your behaviors, and your 'morality' which might be 'problematic'. They just resemble vipers—would maliciously bite you if you annoy them with the slightest mistake."*

*"I met a boy I liked. He's handsome, clever, and popular. I envy him a lot because he gives people a warm feeling. But I could never do it because I was born with a wary and sensitive mind; I'm not as good as him... I know I don't deserve him; Just forget it, he'll never know me."*

*“I failed the math exam again. The exam paper needed to be signed by parents. I felt ashamed, and I dared not to see my father’s eyes. He said softly, ‘Oh, you’ve made the same mistake again. Your father will be happy if you don’t make the same mistake next time. Now let me tell you how to avoid the trap...’ I knew he had explained this problem for me at least three times. I know he was really disappointed but was just constrained not to express it in case it depressed me.”*

*“I tried to embrace this world with great passion; now, the passion was wearing off. My memory about my experiences remains only a few trifling remnants. I often sweep in the corner—sullen despair roots and sprouts in the heart. I’m surrounded by hopelessness. Maybe staying alive is a mistake, a punishment. I sometimes imagine my dying for an accident or something else. But how would my father not be sad about the loss?”*

Qun said that those negative experiences led to her unintended declines in academic studies. She tried to catch up, but after the second thought, she determined to make the best use of her “miserable school experiences”. Inspired by some popular legends such as children are parents’ top priority, she wanted to make her mother know that she was not well, expecting that worked as a means to call her mother’s attention and agreed to make a compromise. Her purpose was “simple and silly”— changing her mother’s mind so that she could return to the family. She, far from reversing the tide, ended up with attending a lower-track junior high school where she met a wrong person who brought her another piece of trauma by making her have an abortion. In the traditional discourse, underage abortion was culturally denied, which implied an ignominious thing targeting mainly at the girl, who was labeled as lewd, conscienceless, and unenlightened. She said that she was aware that she really acted out, doing the wrong thing and “eating her own bitter fruit alone”. After entering high school, as she evolved, she became to re-understand her parents’ divorce, considering it as an affair concerning only her father and mother. She gradually stopped hating her mother and determined to “turn over a new leaf”, but only found great deficiencies existed in her foundation of knowledge, and the school climate was “crazy”. She became to be ashamed of the identity of the combination of “an underachiever” and “a doctor’s daughter”, often laughing at herself of being the “rare event”. But the most important transformation is that she stops abandoning herself and trying to “collect the fragmentary light of hope” in the face of intense competition. She expressed that *“I hope one day, I can talk to her that I’m well, and still live a responsible life after experiencing multiple sufferings with much pride.”*

#### 7.4.5 “You don’t know how much time I need to manage my intense feelings after she

**aired out her negative emotions.”**

Ting told me that she could agree to be a research participant only when she got consent from her mother. Ting is an introverted girl with consistent somber expressions and talks very little. While she is talking, she seems to be constraint with low self-confidence: she unconsciously looks at the ground, trying to avoid eye contact now and then. Her teacher does not think highly of her, because “it’s a pity that her mother cares her study so much and she works hard with a strong will, but her exam result proves that she has no talent for study.” Although her teacher had located her as a student who was going to be admitted to an ordinary university, her family did not give up the hope of an admission to a university of the first echelon.

Ting’s father, with high ambitions, has been going through numerous hardships for three years after he established a small electric company in a far coastal city. The father must focus on his business so as not to let his company wither in the context where there exists the popular myth of “3-year law” of a small enterprise in China, meaning that the majority of private companies cannot last for 3 years in the cut-throat market competition. Her mother, Ms. Lin, as a math teacher working at a lower secondary school, mainly takes the burden of the child’s education and maintains an uncompromising focus on her daughter’s academic excellence. Ms. Lin can be briefly described as a “tiger mother”, a dedicated teacher; besides, she is an easy-going, accommodating, and tolerant person out of the school and the family. However, such a description covers up hidden erupting conflicts and tensions that exist in the mother and daughter relationship.

Ms. Lin is popular in the circle of her friends. She is highly praised by her friends:

*“She’ a tough woman who is strict with only herself, while is lenient toward others. And she’s generous and happy to help people in need.”*

*“She’s generous and hospitable. When we are eating out, she is always offering to pay the bill for us.”*

*“Oh definitely the kindest person I’ve ever met and an absolutely reliable friend... She treats others with a sincere heart, even if that means she would suffer the loss.”*

When she knew my intention of having her as one of my informants, she initially rejected because she was keenly aware that her daughter was “an instance of failure” in my work, feeling it “a shame” as a mother of an unsuccessful child. However, after two encounters, she gave me enthusiastic support, perhaps because of her keen passion for education with the identity as a teacher.

Ms. Lin, with a slightly chubby figure, is always soberly dressed. She looks quite neat and professional at work and handles things swiftly and dexterously. The style for her blouse is quite traditional, like with a generally wide-cut sleeves, a slightly high collar, a generously sized waist with little ornament. She wears only pants or A-line skirts below the knees for lower clothing. Her clothes are normally single-colored with black, grey, brown, and dark green. She also wears one-piece floral dresses with black as the background color, and a black dress with spots or stripes sometimes. Her medium-length hair is always tucked up, being fixed up with a spring clamp. She cares about her two identities the most: the identity as a mother, and the identity as a teacher. It seems that she has countless concerns in terms of education—her students’ as well as her daughter’s, which makes for her anxiety-ridden life. Ms. Lin would describe her life as a battle.

*“I set the alarm at 6:00 am every weekday, but I seem don’t need that. I always wake up before the alarm rings because those important tasks that I need to take care of are always in my mind, and my mind can’t sleep restfully. After getting up, I boil the kettle and prepare breakfast before going to the toilet, which saves time and helps me to keep up with the clock.”*

The cooked hot milk with oatmeal and the steamed eggs are indispensable items for their breakfast because they offer the necessary nutrition for a day, from Ms. Lin’s perspective. Besides, she also prepares the staple food, which are noodles, Baozi (steamed stuffed bun), dumplings, or porridge supplemented by pickled vegetables. Ms. Lin was scheduled to leave home at seven o’clock for work. It is not easy to prepare a substantial breakfast during such a short time. Ting has to eat them up so as not to make her mother angry, though she often has complained like, “I’m tired of milk and egg.”, “I don’t want to eat

*too much.*”, or “*doesn’t she know too much food makes me fat?*” Ting has tried to persuade her mother that breakfast can be more straightforward many times, but it does not work.

Ms. Lin, who is estimated by her colleagues as “a marvellous teacher who sacrifices for her students”, is an experienced teacher with fruitful teaching achievements. She gets consistently high praise from her leaders, colleagues, and students’ parents. She is quite strict with her students; the majority of students like her, while some are extremely afraid of her.

*“She’s a model worker for all teaching staff.” (A colleague of Ms. Lin who quoted the original words from Principal of the school where they were working)*

*“She has a good reputation for being dedicated to working. She would not have come to school so early and left so late.” (A colleague of Ms. Lin)*

*“She’s overqualified! I was anxious about my daughter’s math. But now, she can get around 130 (out of 150) stably. I can’t believe my eyes! It’s said that no matter which level of class she takes over, the mathematical performances of her class are far ahead.” (A parent from Ms. Lin’s class)*

*“She’s a breath of fresh air in current society. She’s such an upright and virtuous person. Last time, we visited her with two bottles of expensive wine, and a red envelope for expressing our gratitude for enabling our child to make impressive progress on the study. She kept back with her polite smile and said directly, ‘You’d better come with a bouquet.’ She refused to keep those expensive stuff.” (A parent from Ms. Lin’s class)*

*“She has a big name. Many parents with guanxi or much money have successfully applied for a place in her class by persuading principal because they feel much relieved when their children are definitely taken good care there. Unluckily, we are not as powerful as those people and didn’t manage to get a place; now we still have some illusions about this matter. How nice if we can achieve the class transfer if possible!” (A parent from another class)*

*“She’s a great teacher who has left a profound influence on me in many ways.” (A high-achieving student from Ms. Lin’s class)*

*“Oh, a devil! a ferocious and combustible woman not to be trifled! I’ve no idea how a man should marry her! Don’t provoke her!” (An underachiever from Ms. Lin’s class)*

However, with extremely high expectations on her daughter and authoritarian child-rearing beliefs, Ms. Lin is a typical helicopter parent whose overparenting causes many tensions and pains to Ting. In so doing, she fails to make things unfold for her child in the way she expects. Although Ting loves her mother, she feels always under enormous pressure, saying that the atmosphere in the family often makes her have a feeling of suffocation. *“A perfectionist often means a disaster for a family.”* Ting feels painful, mentioning that her mother, “the old softie”, or “the moral model in other people’s eyes”, is capricious and irritable at home.

*“She’s the absolute power center in the family. If there exists discordance, then she is indubitably right, and you are always wrong. Worse still, you need to pay for your ‘follies’.”*

Ms. Lin was very nice to me, treating me as a friend gradually. I visited them multiple times on the weekend and witnessed the continuous tensions and struggles between the mother and the daughter. It seemed that Ting’s autonomy was greatly repressed, causing her lack of self-esteem and self-confidence. For example, when Ting asked her mother to make some adjustments by putting less salt to the nearly prepared food because she found this dish was too salty last time, Ms. Lin suddenly became very impatient, shouting with deterrence, “Too salty? I don’t think so. You’re picky. This time, you do that! But don’t make others think it’s tasteless!” Then Ting did not have the confidence to make others satisfied, and she got rid of the idea of doing it.

Ms. Lin and her daughter slept in the same room, leaving another two sleeping rooms vacant. Ms. Lin explained that, “her father comes back not many times a year”, looking a little embarrassed. We were chatting in the living room, and Ting was doing her homework in the sleeping room. Ms. Lin was always anxious about Ting; she came into the room for feeding her or checking her homework without knocking at the door now and then. Ting ate the sliced apple with reluctance. The mother said, “work hard, I’ll check your homework later.” Then half an hour later, Ms. Lin mother opened the door again, with a glass of hot milk.

*Ting’s mother: “Have you finished your physics homework?”*

*Ting: "You don't know the half of it. It's difficult to finish it in an hour."*

*Ting's mother: "I'll talk about that later. Now drink the milk."*

*Ting: "I feel over-fed. I'll have it later."*

*Ting's mother: "Hurry up! Drink it immediately while it's warm. I'm also waiting to wash the glass. You don't do any housework."*

*Ting: "I told you no! I feel bloated! Can you stop forcing me? Now I suspect my bad stomach has something to do with your strict control on me!"*

*Ting's mother: "Why are you such an ungrateful child? Your father doesn't care about you; only I'm doing everything for your own good, but I'm always wronged by you."*

*Ting: "You only know moral kidnapping." (dampening her voice)*

*Ting's mother: "You get along well with nobody! You have zero tolerance for other people. You're cold-blooded and selfish. I noticed that you were out of contact with your previous good friends."*

*Ting: "It was you who told me to focus only on study. How could you blame me for that now? Furthermore, we don't study together, and I don't see them often."*

*Ting's mother: "How can you confront me? I provide you food, clothing, and shelter. I help your studies. I sacrifice everything for you. All children treat their mother good except you. All the people praise me except you. All the students listen to me except you. All my colleagues' children do well in exams except you! My colleagues have their children as positive models for educating their students while I have no face in front of people. You must apologize to me; otherwise, I won't spare your feelings or preserve your face in front of people."*

At the beginning, Ting was apparently at a loss about whether to express her feelings and situations or hide them since she was warmed by her mother that she should show "positive energy" and she was not allowed to talk anything which was negative. But with our links continued to grow, she gradually opened her heart to me with certain hope that I could do something for her sake because she was so unsupported and lonely. In the later interview, Ting said that similar torturous scenes were repeated over and over

again, and she often felt the need for emotional processing, which wasted too much time, preventing her from concentrating on her studies.

*‘I’m neither a good student nor a good child. My parents often introduce me to others as ‘a child growing up in a happy environment’. I was convinced though with confusion because I was told that parents, as adults who had lived through many events and transformations, were right, even though I felt not happy at all. I increasingly found it nonsense. How could a child who is often hit and scolded be happy? Nobody knows the situation that she’s nice to anyone else outside, except for her family members. She commands a powerful presence who easily makes people happy or sad. She often complains that she is a poor woman whose husband shows no consideration, and the child is good for nothing. She doesn’t know how to resolve her negative mood and let it go in an abnormal way, but she is used to going on the rampage in the room. She’s morbidly sensitive! When the atmosphere sounds wrong somehow or other, if you don’t ask her what’s up in time, she would be angry, scolding you that you don’t care her feelings; if you ask her ‘what happened’, the result wouldn’t be better: she wouldn’t tell the things that really made her feel down, but cast her negative mood to me, telling me that I was a hateful and heinous child. If she’s angry, she’ll keep exporting hurtful words like chanting Buddhist scripts for two hours, during which, you must say something to defuse her anger, even when you are so sad for being spiritually harmed. She almost has had no positive comments on me since I can remember. She makes me understand that life can be so miserable and dull. I suspect that I hardly can do anything in the future.’*

Ms. Lin believed that a well-cultivated person was just like an elaborately-carved diamond, and for this purpose, parents should be strict with their children adopting extremely high standards. Ms. Lin’s niece, who was a girl with 4-years younger than Ting, came over with her parents every Saturday so that Ms. Lin could help her with her math. Every time, Ms. Lin would prepare luxurious meals plus various snacks, drinks, and fruits for them. Ms. Lin took good care after Ting’s cousin on the table, asking about how she was doing recently and putting her bowl the best part of the fish, the chicken, or the duck. Although it happened frequently, Ting still showed a hint of despondence on her face. However, she tried to suppress her emotions so that others would not notice it. One time, after the dinner, Mr. Lin was providing her niece private lessons, and Ting was doing her homework alone. During the break, when Ting’s cousin was solving a problem, Ms. Lin went to see Ting in another room. Feeling unhappy, Ting talked little. Being a short-tempered person with “the nobility of intellectuals”, Ms. Lin was high-hearted and could not dampen her emotion and imposed Ting that it was her problem. She insisted that *“I’ve taught you many times, and you’ve been almost an adult, and it’s shameful that you’re not aware that you should give the best to others instead of being selfish.”* Seeing no response from Ting, the mother lost temper, accusing her in a low voice that *“Are those food as valuable as gold? You are a selfish and petty person.”*

The mother felt that she often needed to stimulate Ting to do something by means of criticizing her “inabilities”, like “*you’re so narrow-minded, and if so, you’ll achieve nothing in the future*” in this situation. Ting did not say anything except “sorry, I’m wrong”, and “stop talking, I got it” because she was socialized as a submissive child who dared not to challenge parents’ authority through many repressions and punishments. For this situation, she reported that she was ready to freak out at any time.

In Ting’s family, corporal punishment and verbal attack are included in the normalized parenting framing Ting’s mind and behaviors, which brings much harm. Ting regards her living experiences relating to her mother as so unique that few people can understand since her mother has ever-present “bizarre” anger and anxiety but she ends up mostly forgiving her mother as a general rule because she has been told many times that her mother is a good person—a moral model. Negative emotions such as self-doubt, confusion, anger, rage, disappointment, fear, pain, and burnout are intense, amorphous and indescribable, which are entangled and subjectively experienced. Meanwhile, insomnia and hallucinations are also reported by Ting. The mother, as the outsider of those entangled emotions, cannot fully understand their implications for Ting, but tends to take them as a means of training enabling the target of punishment to become stronger, courageous, and more powerful, which facilitates the ultimate success and happiness. The psychological torment it had caused might be massive and hard to heal.

*“I don’t believe there’s another person who resembles my mother a bit in the world. To be honest, she’s a great and altruistic person outside, and everyone would like to be her friend. Perhaps she is too perfect in front of people, which makes her fatigued. Then, she can only be herself in the family, and acts as the absolute authority. I know she’s for my own good, but no one can accept this kind of goodness. She knows those general principles, and often educates her students’ parents like ‘don’t scold your child without a good reason, but try to know his/her thinking and gives him/her proper support’, but as a mother, she has never had such attitude toward me. The flood of intense emotions is surging in my heart when I have to endure her abusive expressions for seventeen years! It’s such a shame that I feel difficult to describe, and no one in the world can understand. She’s a hard-working and tough woman, a dedicated teacher, and she wishes her daughter to be perfect. But I was born not as a quiz kid with unique skills. When she snatches a little time from her hectic life, only finding that I’m far from being perfect and far from meeting her requirements, she can’t help losing her temper. I get no achievement either from home or from school. I’m just trying to hang on because I can’t be reconciled with my wrecked life at such a young age. I don’t know if I’ll choose to abruptly end my life one day with longlasting pain and frustration.”*

## 7.5 Summary and discussions

Education remains important for underpinning individuals' employment and social position in the future. The Chinese middle-class demonstrates little aspiration to interfere with politics but seeks to reproduce their capital and interest in the established political framework. For preventing the "downward social mobility" which they are often discussing with intense anxiety, they have to urge their children to squeeze into key universities or even C9 league universities in the current situation where diplomas are swiftly inflated. They have developed parenting which they think appropriate on the foundation of their individualized identity with certain middle-class taste.

### 7.5.1 Those "born talents"

The first section of this chapter presented experiences of fourteen consistently high-achieving students whose names were frequently appeared on the honor roll; Some of them have been selected as the flag raisers for the sacred ceremony or the student representatives speaking under the flag, which, a rarer honor for a high-school student. The sample of high-achieving middle-class students in this work has demonstrated to have more complicated expressions, richer vocabulary, better reasoning, superior abstract ability, and greater empathy in their narratives. These fourteen successful stories have demonstrated how parents' class-based habitus and cultural capital are transformed into children's academic advantages. More importantly, their narratives, which reconstruct their experiences, shed light on the critical moments of parents' transmitting and children's inheriting cultural capital in some middle-class families, and debunk myths like "born talents". Despite these middle-class children's varied experiences, there is at least one hero— parents, or peers "in the same camp" in Chong's case, who helps them to thrive along their life paths.

The best of those high-achieving students seems to attach paramount importance to more abstract items such as linguistic sense, spirit, interests, and curiosity, while the less high-performing students overshadowed by those "genius" place emphasis on concrete items such as reasoning skill, the habit of seeking help, and self-discipline. This phenomenon seems to have a correspondence to knowledge

adopted by the educational setting, which is more general, universal, with more abstract and formal discourses that are different from daily expressions.

Bourdieu's thinking tool— habitus, emphasizes individuals' unconscious scheme, natural taken-for-granted tendency, "feel for the game", or the fuzzy framework deciding the boundary of the "comfort zone". This concept helps to understand class-based self and the moral boundary between the person and "others" which he or she refers to. A good language sense and charming expressions make Xin and Ruo feel good, which gives them a sense of self as both a good student and a graceful person. Bernstein's work shows discourses with different codes are hierarchical, which bears a list of social implications and intermingling with social class. Notably, these two students' word selection such as "graceful", "elegant", "learned and refined" several times in the interview, which are triggered by their distinctive experiences in life. Xin regards the family tradition of reading books, as the family heirloom. When Ruo moved into the new residential quarter, she keenly observed that people seemed to be more "elegant with decent conduct", and she spontaneously chose to be a "graceful person" guided by her prior educational experiences.

Shan's parents successfully create a mini educational situation in the family that resembles the school in that it encourages formal language, clear expressions, and logical reasoning. Shan learned from the repeated debates in the family that it made sense that people could only persuade others through reasoning. Becoming a reasonable person was gradually negotiated in the family, which encouraged the privileged habitus encouraged by the school field. San's parents are good at employing familiar things in daily life to arouse his curiosity in science. Studying is something filled with excitement for exploration and knowing more for him.

The cases of Shun and Miao offer a picture of what middle-class parents tend to act when they encounter obstacles in the process of transmitting cultural capital. These parents have worked out strategies to cultivate children's academic interests. For example, they adopt another method- a more interesting one- which is shown in Shun's parents' practice of "re-telling history" and Miao's parents' employment of

“providing additional background knowledge”, to irritate children’s curiosity and help them learn effectively. They have done an excellent job to blend children’s least favorite subject with their strong points, which has encouraged children’s opposite attitude toward a particular subject that parents are expecting. Middle-class parents, being more familiar with modern organizations, communicate effectively with the key figures in the education field—children’s teachers, showing their concerns, making their situations better understood, which enables the teacher to make necessary adjustments lined up with the children’s traits.

Rong’s parents reject the score superstition and believe every inch of experiences would leave a mark in the kid’s life path. Her parents thus have offered their daughter a plethora of impressive surprise rewards, which works to guide her toward thinking and behaving what parents think appropriate. In the current social context where innumerable middle-class children’s life is excessively planned and time is overscheduled, Rong is still given some precious freedom to enjoy her childhood a little bit. Her parents’ attitude of keeping a strict rule for rewards and punishments encourages her to keep trying things that interest her, no matter what the result she gets while following basic principles and respecting the boundary between people at the same time.

The cases of Min and Ping shows how parents’ strategies are guided by the class-based culture, enabling their children to internalize an important habitus of the middle-class—self-discipline, in a non-forced way. Although the underclass and the middle class both attach importance to the propensity of deferred gratification, the former lay more emphasis on their family commitment and the latter on their individual aspirations and dreams. In these two cases, parents’ efforts have been paid off. Min clings to pursuing the good-student identity, for which he believes that the bittersweet feeling is the right status for legitimating it. He demands initiatively to live a highly structured life interwoven with “a set of operations”. He takes his routine life natural, which helps to drive spiritual void away. Like Min, Ping also draws a moral boundary between herself and “bad students” who fail to finish their homework on time, then she adopts the principle of “bitter first, and sweet later” to prevent herself from corruption. Notably, during the

process, they have experienced a sense of achievement of being successful, which is not random but is guided by their parents, who are shaped by the class-based culture.

Fu, Chun, and Mo demonstrate sophistication and confidence while they are engaging the key figures in the educational setting— their teachers. With an awareness of being the “career card” of his father, who is a teacher, Fun studied hard, preventing himself from “falling from the odds”. As time passes, the external driving force has been transformed into the internal restraint mechanism. Growing up in a teacher’s family, he is familiar with teachers’ routine life and develops an affinity for teachers. He talked about approaching teachers, the importance of which lay in that knowledge points were interconnected, and that only the teacher who knew a particular student’s situation could better help him of her to string various points together. Chun, being a subject representative, regularly visits his teacher’s office and behaves politely. But this politeness does not mean that he has no request for his own sake. Rather, he would ask his teachers to make a response to his various questions, to re-estimate his re-written composition, and to offer a proposal to adjust some of the content of the courses for the next class. Chun was also aware that teachers in the high-track classes regard some knowledge as “common sense”, so they often skip elaborating on it. Given this factor, Chun believes that students should ask their teacher to clear up his uncertain problems without hesitation. Before Mo started her high-school life, her parents had a serious conversation with her, which included the mindset of studying with a group of high-performing students, and their understanding of the importance of getting adequate help from teachers. In doing so, Mo made full preparation for starting the new chapter of her life. Mo got exposure to how her parents had negotiated for her interests before, when it was her turn to do it, she behaved sophisticatedly and strategically to catch her teachers’ attention and express her needs. The good relationship with her class sponsor helped her in every respect for her studies, thus kept her thriving.

Lan has talked at length about her parents’ excellent qualities, such as the respect for knowledge, morality, responsibility, independence, and courage, which Lan has been inspired and trying to imitate. Lan admires her parents, taking them as admirable examples from whom Lan could learn a lot for thriving. Chong’s situation is different from that of Lan in that he is strongly opposed to some of his parents’ “character

flaws”, such as being “childish” and “hypocritical”. Being exposed to various episodes where his parents were doing research and discussing with each other with draft papers, Chong found study easy. In most cases, he could independently solve problems through reading, thinking, and consulting, and very few issues which had appeared in the exam paper baffled him. But he was not satisfied with himself because he was only academically excellent. He even had a sense of inferiority with the identity as a geek who only excelled at studies. As he keeps growing, he had embraced opportunities for his important transformations where some academically and emotionally excellent classmates guided him outside study where he believed his parents could not be his teachers. Since then, he felt that he was free from being overburdened with his parents’ logic framing his thinking and behaviors, such as their discussions of “the ugly fact of life” in a much negative tone. He has gained much satisfaction and peace for being “a student with studious passion and at the same time, a person with goodness, justice, and love”.

### 7.5.2 Unimpressive mediocrity

These middle-class children reported some factors preventing themselves from thriving, which triggers a rethink of the educational system. In Jing’s case, he had a family whose culture advocated academic excellence. Notably, his parents, who benefited themselves from the on-the-job bachelor’s degree, also had their own turning-point stories. Jing logically inferred that he at least could enter a key university if he could maintain his current ranking. He knows, statistically, it is expected that someone is academically better than himself. In the context where education is increasingly alienated as a means of social differentiation, he seems to enjoy the state of not being one of the best students who are always living in stress and expectations from parents, teachers, and the school. He had limited ambitions of going higher to attain a place at the most prestigious universities. His goal was not quite in line with the expectation from his parents, who regarded that attending the most prestigious universities could promise the brightest future for their son. Jing’s study motivation was not so intense and consistent but was wiggly with his pondering between the identity as a good child or a person possessing some autonomy.

Qian felt uneasy in the Gifted Class, suspecting the senior high school entrance examination failed to detect students' real academic ability. In the class, she observed attentively how she and other high-performing students were treated differently by her teachers. She then found her relative position in the homeroom—she was no longer the shining star liked by her teachers and admired by her peers. On the contrary, she was named every time when she was found whispering with her peers who outperformed her in the class; also, her “qualification” as a student in a Gifted Class was often questioned by her peers, which could be judged from the hint of their facial expressions when she was asking them some questions which they deemed as being “oversimple”. She excels at some subjects while feeling defeated by others, but it is not possible to select subjects for examination as she wishes. Her inability to keep a balance on each academic subject made her believe that she was a victim of the educational system, which gave students no autonomy for choosing subjects for learning and examining. With her self-consciousness awakening, she becomes to suspect the legitimization of the educational system that stipulates the subjects and thwarts creativity.

Xia found immediately that she was dwarfed after she entered this higher-track school. She confessed that looking back on her past educational experiences, she was driven less by interest, but more by vanity—a by-product of education and ranking. She failed to achieve her own expectations, and she had another choice—“taking the artistic path” that required lower grades in Gaokao, which together brought about a lowering of academic aspiration. Experiences of Yao who has an awareness of her parents' power and social capital, make her believe that there is always an alternative plan for her with a few scores gap in Gaokao, which impairs her study motivation.

### 7.5.3 Getting “feel for the game” back

In the section of turning-point stories, I showed how two middle-class parents intervened when their children had experienced academic declines and reversed the trend. Middle-class children's turning-point stories are about their return to their previous “status”, unlike the underclass and working-class

counterparts who must gain new habitus and leave behind old habitus so as to achieve the academic process.

Yu's father, as a promoted official on the civil service establishment<sup>55</sup>, increasingly shows much unnecessary bureaucracy in the family life and discourse. He carefully studied what was happened when his son showed slipping grades, and hence decided to restore the previous scholarly family atmosphere as the first attempt. It did work for Yu; he came back home, noticing that his awards were removed from the wall, and two landscape paintings and a calligraphy work with beautiful seal characters were put back. He understood this rearrangement as a symbol conveying important implications, among which his parents' determination, love, and support were most important for him. Lu's mother, who took her child's education as the top priority, made up her mind to hand in her resignation as a temporary stay-at-home mom to take her daughter out of the school dormitory. When her daughter gets stuck in her way, the mother always knows when to leave her alone and also when to offer adequate mental support and academic guidance. Parents in these two middle-class families strategically succeeded in helping their child out without imposing them sharp critiques or mental tortures which some working-class parents usually employed.

#### 7.5.4 Those “rare events”

Middle-class students' unsuccessful stories showed the failure of their parents' transmission of cultural capital and the cultivation of the privileged, institutional habitus or their inability to provide appropriate support emotionally and spiritually. Middle-class students are expected to do better at school, but “a good

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<sup>55</sup> Jobs in China can be classified as those within or outside “The System”. People in the system usually have a stable position in the state organs, state-owned institutions like universities, elementary and secondary schools, and also state enterprises. They enjoy considerable benefits such as medical treatment, opportunities for retraining and advanced studies, and children's education opportunities, etc. Besides, some people have an ambition for getting “official's caps” outside of their work and duties, which is known as “official career”. China is well-known to have the tradition of Bureaucratism worship.

student” is a relative concept because Gaokao is a zero-sum game with quite limited students managing to squeeze into elite universities. The places for winners are not only limited but also hierarchical with rank, and some are doomed to be expelled in the field. In the current context where tertiary education is expanding, middle-class children seem to have to attend a key or an elite university so as to avoid “class decline”. Only a harmonious interaction of many factors such as hard work with the privileged habitus at ordinary times, a stable emotion, and a positive mindset in front of significant events such as adversity and important exams can legitimate such success. Middle-class students’ “corruption” and “small probability” were often taken for granted in previous research. However, this situation showed from the opposite side that society had less “tolerance” of academic failure of the middle-class children. This kind of socially-constructed myth exacerbates some middle-class students’ situations, lowering their self-esteem, and bringing them trauma. For better understanding how they fail, a different lens should be adopted for examining the social processes negotiating such failures.

Among the five unsuccessful middle-class children, three of them have included their story of “the past glory”, and two out of the three have experienced a reorganization of the family. Hao’s father guided him to live a responsible and meaningful life, but the sense of meaning fell like a sandcastle when the father passed away at an early age. When Hao determined to stand up, attempting to immortalize his father’s spirit with great passion, he was thwarted, feeling that he was not be treated gently by the world, but was restrained by socially-structural factors. The loss of father had many implications concerning the identity transformations for Hao. He perceived that he was seen as “a wreck from a fragmentary family” by his peers and “a child from a single-parent family” by his teachers. Most importantly, Hao found a glimmer of sense in life— punishing his mother, who was dating another man. Hao became to laze away at school, taking it as a means of acting out against and revenging his mother who “had forgotten” his father.

Qun has experienced the reorganization of her family in another way. After her parents broke their marriage, she had her father as her custodial parent. She soon experienced embarrassing situations at puberty, which she believed could be avoided if she could get help from her mother. She always had the illusion that her mother could return to the family someday. When she found her stationery case, which

was bought by her mother, was wrecked lying on the ground, she could not stop crying because this stationery case served as a symbol that continuously gave her a sense of her mother's connection with her family. School turned to be a place of insecurity where she must keep alert, and she believed that she must get some feelings of "certainty" to offset those negative experiences of being laughed at and bullied, for which she must cheer herself up to go back to her previous identity as a good student. But after the second thought, she determined to make use of her encounters, and to punish herself, expecting it to arouse her mother's attention so that she could return. But far from being able to reverse the tide, she had to go to a lower-track junior high school where she met "a wrong person" who brought her new trauma by getting her pregnant and aborted. This wound went deep in her heart, and she kept this secret because social discourses were harsh at young girls, which usually labeled them as flirtatious, lewd, conscienceless, and unenlightened. As she evolved, she became to re-understand her parents' divorce, endowing it a different meaning and feeling relieved. Although it was a bit late, she tried to "collect the fragmentary light of hope" for sprinting for a key university, and she got a sense of meaning by immersing herself in learning and the feeling of catching up.

Xiong had negative experiences brought about by tracking where he was allocated to a lower track class, which was perceived by him as a mismatch of his academic capability. He did not think his parents were responsible when he was facing his significant life event, but her mother refused his feeling and criticized him, which greatly harmed the parenthood. He had the feeling that his old friends ran away from him and despised him as "a loser". He was also disconnected from his current classmates, categorizing them as different from himself. Those entangled emotions in isolation and his troubled identity acted out through much pain, making him frenzied.

Huan and Ting have not talked about any positive experience in their lives. Huan defined his family as a place of insecurity and struggle composed of his powerful father, flabby mother, and him, as a much repressed son. He demonstrated low academic aspiration and motivation, but for him, his identity as an underachiever should bring him a sense of achievement in some ways because it served as a means to stimulate his mother to act against his father's authority. Peng, from the working-class group, chose to

fight against her parents' authority because she defined it as the obstacle preventing her from thriving and getting close to her ideal image. She realized that she had to keep a proper distance from her parents, so she "broke up" with them strategically by living at school. On the contrary, although feeling depressed, Huan failed to do so. As is discussed above, middle-class children's negative school experiences are always socially constructed as being "unique", which gives Huan more pressure, puts him in a more disadvantageous place and makes him more speechless. Worse still, his parents fail to understand his intention and meaning of becoming an underachiever, and in turn, are not capable of solve the deep-seated problem and reverse the tide in time.

Ting's mother, as an overparenting mother, failed to make things develop in the direction she expects. In the sample of underachieving middle-class children, Ting was not a "traitorous" child, and being academically unsuccessful was not her voluntary choice. Her emotions, focus, and energy were much attached to her mother, a person who assembled many contradictory and incompatible factors that seemed hard to stick together. The mother drew a parallel between a well-cultivated person and an elaborately-carved diamond, with the expectation that her daughter could be carved into an "exquisitely-crafted jade with the top quality"<sup>56</sup>. For this purpose, the mother believes that she must adopt extremely strict parenting, which involves harsh criticism, cynical remarks, and even corporal punishment. She understood these strategies as stimulations and necessary pieces of training, making her daughter grow stronger, courageous, and more powerful, which would legitimate her ultimate success and happiness. With this mindset, the mother imposed a much repressed life on Ting where she almost had no room for autonomy. Ting has negotiated various negative emotions, such as intense anger, rage, fear, as well as indescribable disappointment, and amorphous self-doubt, confusion, pain, and burnout. These negative emotions are subjectively experienced and hard to describe with proper expressions to audiences. Ting believed she was not born as a talent but was just an average child who could never meet her mother's standards. This psychological injury might be massive and hard to heal. Ting often felt the need for emotional processing

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<sup>56</sup> Jade has rich cultural, political, religious, moral, spiritual, and psychic implications in Chinese culture. In ancient time, it was taken as a kind of magic stone that communicated heaven and earth. Imperial jade seal legitimates an emperor's supreme power. Almost all Chinese characters with a radical of the jade are given positive meanings.

and psychological construction, which consumed much time and energy while other children were concentrating on learning. Thus, the imposed label seemed to act as a self-fulfilling prophecy, which contributed to her “inability” in every aspect.

## CHAPTER 8 - CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSIONS

This work has an upper secondary school in a radically changing area under the policy of “wasting counties and setting up urban districts” as a social disclosure for understanding the within-school academic disparity. To fully understand such disparity in the education process, this work adopts a dynamical approach, with a focus on those ongoing school practices and people in sequence and their social implications, tracing the construction of the institutional habitus and individual habitus and the involved tensions. I have presented an ethnographical account of the school field through its ethos, governmentality, space transformations and various practices with social implications; I have also studied the interaction between students’ sense-making of their experiences and their observed behaviors, which I believe as a unique lens to understand academic disparity and inequality that happened in secondary schools that locate in areas with great transitions towards modernization.

With qualitative techniques such as oral-history interviews and on-the-spot observations, I trace the spatial transformations on campus, delineate happenings in the school field and reveal their social and symbol significance. I offer a picture of how the school is shaped by the wider social context, and how the school constructs educational myths and makes them circulating in its on campus. Another focus is to present young students’ behaviors and their sense-making about how they flourish or flounder by string up important happenings in their life, especially those irritating pondering over their own identity. They have witnessed the tremendous, lightning social transformation; hence temporality should be taken into serious consideration, which implies that students’ previous experiences may bear little resemblance to the current ones, especially for those who just get started to enter the moral field of the urban. I have a biographical study of 68 students from diverse social origins and homeroom categories with the employment of narrative-inquiry technique. Students’ narrative description of their overall experiences, the previous and the current ones, is the “thick data” telling us who they are and what they value, which sheds light on their growing and evolving and the scope of their future possibilities. The world of everyday life demonstrates the tension of natural attitude, consciousness, the vivid present, and a common intersubjective world (Rafky, 1971). I have shown the consistency or tension between the individual

habitus and institutional habitus. I also focus on the interaction between students' perceived behaviors and sense-making of their own experiences that trigger their reflections on their identity. The task of phenomenology is to study the details of an intersubjective world already in place (Costelloe, 1996). Although phenomenological ideas are drawn to cast light on the "trivial things" for annihilating the "prejudices" and "misconceptions" and make present what is hidden and taken-for-granted in the pre-existing world, the purpose of this work is sociological. In so doing, I actually describe "how are the experiences of being the children of the underclass, the working-class, and the middle-class, as a child and a high school student in a typical tier-2 city, have experienced", focusing on their perceptions, feelings, meanings, cognitive frameworks governing their behaviors in their individualized subjective "worlds" and showing how self-conception is negotiated from various in different contexts, and how individuals' history is interwoven with happenings at school. I thus offer an interpretation of the relationship between students' socially-constructed experiences and their unequal academic-achievements puzzle in a specific kind of educational setting from the social-cultural perspectives.

People are living in collectively storied spaces where they are unfolding their personal stories on the basis of their own individual history. These spaces are never independent but are embedded in the broader historical and social contexts. Specifically, how Yeyun school located itself in different historical contexts with the time going, how it displayed itself to the public through various spatial arrangements, how it marketed itself through impression management, how it recruited, coordinated, controlled, and praised or repressed people through elaborative governmentality were critically explored in this work. At the present stage, Yeyun school is under multiple pressures for competing with those most prestigious high schools throughout the province. For this purpose, it pays continual attention to omni-directional reforms by going with the tide and grasping every possible opportunity. Besides, school leaders have a good knowledge of how to exploit policy loophole and resort to some under-table dealings so as to maintain the school's advantage, causing inequality in educational opportunities. The school is currently on the path of becoming a super high school with the trend of militarized management with a large number of students with different family backgrounds from various areas throughout the province. The school, with the identity as a key-point state school, brings these students with their different previous experiences and

understandings of being a child and a student together, offering them an imposed, uniform life. At the same time, despite the increasing refinement of governmentality, the school organization fails to “tame” all the students and produce homogeneous “good students”. Instead, Yeyun school has witnessed students’ endless pains and struggles brought about by the concatenation of the great social transitions, people’s previous experiences, and the institutional regulations and practices. A theoretical framework influenced by a series of reflective theories concerning habitus, capital, field, experiences, social class, and power is employed, which serves to disentangle the operation of knowledge configuration existed in students’ experiences in both the family and the school field.

Husserl introduced the concept of the life-world (*Lebenswelt*) in the “Crisis of European Sciences” (1936). He later gave a more precise definition of life-world as a pre-given social, historical, and cultural world with various interpretations, which is universally problematic (Husserl, 1970). Life-world, where people possess a natural attitude, provides people with paramount reality in which people have an intense trust (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973). My “here and now” is the center coordinate of my life-world, making the self a unique phenomenon (Schutz, 1967). Identity becomes a problem in this fragmented world where people experience their lives as “a succession of ill-connected episodes”. Self-identity never stops negotiating with the outside world as a person continues to experience the world, causing tremendous anxiety (Bauman, 2013). Narrative inquiry has its strengths especially for studying people’s identities as time passes by. Humans are leading storied lives whose life is a matter of growth toward an imagined future and involves retelling and attempts at reliving stories, which makes narratives as both phenomena and method possible (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Narrative inquiry was highlighted during the data collection process so as to fully understand important moments, events, and episodes in students’ life journeys and their meanings for them from the ideological and emotional level. Extracting the linguistic and cultural elements of social significance in students’ identity construction, I have converted students’ stories to less problematic knowledge about inequality and mobility in the Chinese secondary education system from the bottom-up perspective. Specifically, this study not only makes people’s reflexive narratives about their self and experiences heard but also documents the on-going activities in various sub-spaces at school such as tracking practices, including hierarchical division of

classes and classroom-seats arrangement; class practices; school rituals such as flag-raising ceremony and sports meet; and also routinized practices, including the class meeting and faculty meeting filled with different cultural codes, communicative modes, strategies and tensions. This work captures those important episodes, which are essential in students' identity construction and transformations in the given social environment; it then goes on to offer an analysis of the way they are related to educational inequality. Taken together, this work studies the school field and involved people with the trajectory approach in a tailored way, taking both temporality and contexts seriously. Findings of this work give insight into intricate interplay of social class, experiences, sense-making, practices, and the involved power relations and their combined influence in educational inequality.

## 8.1 The school field and its institutional habitus

### 8.1.1 School as a field where education happened

With the changes in administrative divisions, the modernization process of the area where the school is located is accelerated. The school adopts multiple practices such as the trendy requirements of teachers' professional knowledge proved by the Teacher certification<sup>57</sup>, mandarin proficiency, and also management and communication skills for its self-maintenance as a response to the ever-changing external environment such as the urban anonymity and its division of labor. The function of education has greatly changed in history. For a long period of time, formal education was only available to a small set of males in China and the function of the education was restricted to decide which persons could have the official career in the political system that served the feudalism through the Imperial Civil Examination. But society has witnessed differentiations in professional domains since the industrial revolution and for China with the reform and opening-up policies as the start of modernization. The nine-year compulsory

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<sup>57</sup> In China, the first issue of the Teacher Certificate was in 1995. But only in recent years is it becoming increasingly mandatory for people who pursue this profession. Besides, the knowledge is becoming structured, and the difficulty is increased.

education is mandatory for all people, which serves the function of socialization, thus making people's behaviors expectable and controllable in the complicated modern society.

Space where the education happens- the school-, through long-lasting observations of happenings inside and outside the education system, legitimates its existence while keeping defining the outside world, judging it whether as a “friendly” resource or an “unfriendly” threat. Thus the operation in education is structured with limited marking but would embrace adaptive changes for the purpose of self-maintenance. Curriculum knowledge of secondary education, with symbolic meanings when people are communicating with each other, is highly selected in that it extracts “appropriate knowledge” from the existing storage in an attempt to achieve a positive relationship with social expectations of those students— the future labor force, in the “functionally differentiated society”. Facing the increasingly overwhelmed social complexity, education bases itself on self-reasoning, i.e., to legitimates its existence guided by the binary code which differentiates academically high-achieving students with privileged habitus and underachievers with unprivileged habitus.

Being guided by such binary code, the school defines success in a singular aspect, thus seeks to build its competitive edges in various means and operations, such as displaying its possession of good students through recruiting and even purchasing high-performing students, squeezing teachers' life outside educational activities through shifting their residential community away and at the same time obscuring their working hours and private time, strictly disciplining its people in the coordinate of time and space with increasingly complex governmentality, classifying and re-classifying and allocating different educational resources to students in the tracking practices of homeroom classifications and seat arrangements. Elements of communications inside the system are producing and reproducing themselves in the academically relevant events, making those communications quite routinized. The closure of the education system and the boundary with other social systems such as policies, opinions from the media, and economy can be provable with other examples from the opposite view. For example, although the policy prohibits teachers' tutorial classes for economic return outside their duty as a teacher in the class, with the threat of removing their honors and degrading titles, “shadow education” can never be banned

only if the binary code programming the education domain does not change—a good number of frenetic parents are resorting to shadow education for maintaining children's academic advantages in the educational field. Another convincing example is the juxtaposition of the repeated occurrence of "reforms" in various social domains and people's prevalent negative estimation concerning its consequences. For instance, back then, Chinese students were often stereotyped as with limited creativity internationally, and people kept complaining about the heavy burden with the increasingly intense competition. In this situation, a reform was launched in response. But chances are that such reforms could serve the purpose of promoting people's faith in problem-solving as well as social solidarity at the most. "Educational reform" and "quality-oriented education" were put on the agenda in response to those public complaints. But chances are that, with "enthusiastic" governmental interference and supervision, the burden is paradoxically becoming heavier—those ever-exhausting parents have to put increasingly energy to seek educational resources so as to promote their children's scores in exams and thus preserve their academic advantage in the educational system.

Education is highly autonomous and only selectively interacts with the environment via the structural coupling. For example, the political system makes use of education for an interpenetration of patriotism education and political ideas justifying its political legitimization; still, because of the different functions they serve respectively, morally good or bureaucratic good students are not given an advantageous position in education, but only academically good students are. Political lectures do not select good students out of bad students, but tests and examinations do. However, education, with its academic-relevance operations, defines the external environment and changes messages with it selectively. Patriotism education, which the politic system considers to be important to be incorporated in academic education, is always bundled with academically high-performing students in the school field. The education system deems that high-performing students' identity as good students can never be emphasized and intensified in various situations and events. Their talent and "spirit" should necessarily be deified in sacred rituals such as the flag-raising ceremony. The purpose is always making them seen in public and their importance being strengthened, constructing them as good examples to whip up the student group

and making them act as resources for them, for the purpose of producing more academically high-achieving students.

### 8.1.2 On-campus spacing

As the area where the school is located is gearing up to modernization, this school is following suit. The alterations of the school gate and square in front of the gate, the shifted teacher housing, and the reopened cultural park were employed as examples showing the meaning and implication of architectural transformations and spatial practices.

Architecture can be taken as a certain metaphor conveying certain meanings, symbols, identities, scenarios, and complex. The gate was relocated to a more eye-catching main road and the brick and cement, and marble as the building materials were replaced by glass, which maximized light reflection and visual continuity, giving a feeling of modernity. This design gave rise to a series of changes, for example, redesign of the space behind the gate, as “the front stage”, which could be seen from the glass curtain. The previous calligraphy beside the gate was replaced by various awards legitimating the school’s competence. The school’s name was written in both Chinese and English, conveying a sense of international vision. The banners give way to screens on which people can display desired content flexibly, repeatedly, and circularly. The square in front of the gate has been made more spacious, conveying a sense of solemnity. After the university entrance examination, Honor Roll in front of the gate displays those school-produced “satisfactory products”, but the names on it are much less than before because only “the best of the best” is worth putting there. Other information, such as the university acceptance rate and the acceptance rate of the 211-project universities can be displayed on the websites and screens installed in the taxies. These pieces of news fly across the sky with cabs traveling around, which propagandas the school’s great achievements in the consumer-driven “liquid modernity”. Accompanies by these changes are access control systems with cameras that avoid interference from the outside world, the disappeared river, and peddlers besides the gate, which demonstrates the urban flavor, professionalism, and moral superiority under the power of “country discourse” and “development discourse”. The school, with the

ethical power for prospering the country, gained top priority of development upon the sacrifice of the “rustic landscape”. These transformations in spatial design seem to be reconciled with the urban space, a metaphorical world composed of a myriad of huge video screens that display things representing constant changes, modernity, and consumption. This practice also shows that people’s needs must make place for organizational function which entails the meaning of the profitable, the advanced, the modern, and the collective.

My examination of the shifted teacher housing focuses on the individual’s memory because institutional memory has been woven into texts of school history, which neglects the sense-making, interests, struggles, and pains of ordinary people who possess an episode of their life journey in this space. Thus I had a non-official description of the “abandoned” teacher housing by means of oral history from teachers who have lived through this transformation. I showed how bureaucratic stuff such as “Eminent Teacher Project” and “Extraordinary Principal Project” thrust themselves into the campus and offered teachers an imposed lifestyle that they were reluctant to accept. Teachers have adopted different strategies, hoping to change or adjust the school’s decision through various discourses that were produced in a creative way. Those discourse practices had not changed the “inhumane” result that people were fighting against. This practice brought many teachers’ sense of alienation and expulsion, causing emotional trauma. However, educational discourses concerning teachers are almost all about “candle spirit” and “devotion without return”, making teachers’ voices that are for their own sake vanish. Schools are created by the media as places for promoting “strengthening the country through talents” with ethic power. This practice shows that school, as state machinery, is increasingly becoming a powerful repressive panopticon constructed by concrete and steel where people are imposed to become “docile bodies” that can be disciplined, observed, controlled, and examined at any time. The school is not only the sum of buildings and people but a modern bureaucratic organization and state machinery.

An organization’s “memory” also contributes to its spirit and ethos, and such memory is officially constructed. In the consumer society, people consume not only goods but also signs and symbols. The re-openness of the cultural park shows the school field is embedded with both state power and market

economy. It is no surprise that this cultural park is endowed with great value and vitality, and significance over the recent years. The state power is parallel with the market economy because the increasingly stronger state by making use of the market economy possesses more cultural influences and moral power conviction.

### 8.1.3 The meaning conveyed in various school practices

My examination of school practices includes a study of its recruiting practices, tracking practices, the running of the school, the operation of the homeroom, rhythm of schooling, teachers' practices of collective preparing lessons, the homeroom etiquette, governmentality on the backstage, class management on the front stage, and creation of certain myth in the educational setting.

Corruption happened at institutional level and individual level, in which involved people know how to get the ball rolling on behalf of themselves. Guanxi practices played a great role in gaining a school place and a homeroom place where a certain percentage of students were recruited through the back door, causing inequality in educational opportunities. Tracking happened at different levels— between homerooms and within a homeroom. Students are grouped into different homerooms according to their perceived academic ability— scores in senior high school entrance examination. A small set of students enters a higher track homeroom with their lower scores through guanxi practices. Tracking also happened within a homeroom where student leaders were created who were endowed a position close to teachers, and seats were arranged and fixed by the class sponsor in this sub-bureaucratic organization. Tracking delimits people around which students can know well. Nowadays, teachers' burden is becoming increasingly heavy, and coupled with this is ubiquitous supervision by various means. Punishment in modern society is based on the loss of rights and wealth (Foucault, 1975: 15), which is embodied, and also immaterial things such as reputation. Teachers are required to show their professionalism and proficiency through various challenges such as demonstration classes, racecourses, and multiple acceptance inspections. In the homeroom, the spatial arrangement of seats and tables serves teacher-centered approach and “teaching to the test”. The arrangement of “special seats” entails that the symbolic

meaning that students should be tamed to be docile under the joint pressures of the nation, the clock, the teacher, and peers. During the class, students can be randomly named to ask a question by the teacher. Who are called to answer questions in public might entail different implications. Sometimes, it serves the purpose of better coordinating with the teachers' performances, and sometimes it might imply that the teacher gives the student a hint or challenge when the student is absent-minded. Without offering a "correct" answer is normally considered embarrassing or even shameful. There are almost no student-driven debates in the study, and teacher-driven ones are quite limited in the context of "teaching to the test".

Through the observation of the faculty meeting, I found that educational discourses created by the state, such as teachers' "candle spirit" and "dedication without requiring returns", and their identity as engineers for the human soul and moral models had been repeatedly appraised and tailored for various situations when needed, shaping and preserving teacher's morality. Except for moral discourses, there were learning discourses which required teachers to keep recharging and "packing" themselves with more knowledge, offering people a strong sense of expertise and profession. In the last section of the meeting where was attended only by the principle and class sponsors who share "a sense of conspiracy", the principal attached great importance to the establishment of teachers' authority through moral power and "very complicated techniques". He showed them possible means that was "difficult to ascend the hall of elegance", like creating a feeling of "proper" mystery by their modus operandi— keeping an appropriate distance from parents and avoiding making teachers themselves fully understood by consumers— parents and students.

The classroom meeting with a specific theme is designed to cultivate students' "correct" ideology such as patriotism, respect, appreciation, solidarity, courtesy, modesty, sacrifice, cooperation, self-restraint, punctuality, endurance, integrity, confidence, optimism, diligence, enterprise, and perseverance, etc. The authority of the class sponsor is endowed both by the education system and moral power. A portion of teachers' authority is transferred to student leaders, making them superior in discourse power and morality, which lays a foundation of the power structure within the sub-bureaucratic organization. Besides "comparing mechanism" which determines who is "more successful" with a higher rank, "contrasting

mechanism” is also used in the school field where a moral boundary is drawn between “good students” and “bad students”.

At this school, I witnessed a wide variety of activities emphasizing uniform values despite the fact that school leaders declare “respect for individuality”, which was shaped by national educational discourses required by the educational reform calling for the so-called quality-oriented education. Extracurricular activities at school are by no means random but highly selective. Those events, in most cases, convey symbolic meanings of patriotism, collectivism, discipline, uniformity, solidarity, perseverance, or obedience. The Winter Sports meet is not designed for students’ relaxation, but a large-scale performance that asks for students’ consciousness of collectivism, perseverance, discipline, competition, “morality”, and “enthusiasm”. A series of practices, such as composing and reading the manuscript in the sports meet, also contribute to creating a false myth of “oneness” and fake enthusiasm, and they seem to become perceivable reality through multiple acting and watching that entail certain mental hints.

#### **8.1.4 Education myths that keep shaping teachers and students**

Being a teacher is a profession with strong moral implications in China. The state policy of “rejuvenating the nation by science and education” in the 1990s when China was in prevalent material discomfort, keep shaping the educational discourses concerning society’s expectations on teachers and educators with strong moral connotations. A poem written by a well-known poet in Tang dynasty, from which a sentence reads “Till the end of life a silk worm keeps weaving silk, till burning itself out with continuous tear dropping a candle goes on lighting people.”, as well as a poem written by a poet in Qing dynasty which reads “the falling petals are not ruthless, but would transform into soil so as to nourish flowers in spring”, has been repeatedly re-interpreted and re-applied in the educational domain as the powerful code for shaping teachers’ standard identity as red candles, encouraging teachers’ utmost efforts and their selfless sacrifice for the younger generation. Younger teachers were prevalently regarded as being more utilitarian, nowadays. However, those interviewed young teachers admit that although perhaps they are not that “selfless” compared to teachers from the older generation, they equally treat education as a calling without

much weighing gains and losses when they step into the moral field of the school. With the ideal, they play not only the role of teachers but also caregivers, friends, and parents with both authority and caritas, with both necessary psychological knowledge and emotional crafts in the right conditions to varying degree, putting a strain on their family and social life.

It seems that the educational myth concerning “the born talent”, “the trained talent”, and “being not cut out for study” are becoming ever more confusing. Undoubtedly, students who have gained the institutional habitus at a young age is likely to be recognized as “born talents”. Under the context of tremendous enrollment pressure and parents’ private discussions of “whether being cut out for study”, teachers are always emphasizing the existence of the “trained talent” other than the “born talent”. They try to sell the idea that mediocre students can develop into talents only if they obey the school rules, teacher’s instructions, and wholeheartedly devote themselves to academic studies. On the other hand, teachers show respect for probability; they meticulously maintain the blazing and fragile “renown school dream” of students with a less favorable position. They carefully mark and categorize their students and calculate who might be the most possible “trained talent” in the process of symbol identification through various means such as examining their personal traits and parents’ conditions. Thus, they are likely to give additional support to students who might be the promising “trained talents”, causing confusions, inferiority, pain or even hatred from some underachieving students for teachers’ unequal treatments, and their perception of themselves as “being not cut out for study”.

### **8.1.5 School’s operations for legitimating itself**

Although corruption exists, the school is well aware that its core capital is the enrollment rate to key universities. It mainly resorts to four operations for achieving this goal. Firstly, the school establishes new sub-systems in a recursive way. For example, diversified homeroom types were created and the international experimental class was designed to cope with the situation that the recent booming private schools were competing for student resources. The second strategy is impression management. There are many relevant practices, like putting the school’s proudest achievements of the college entrance

examination on the facade of buses and tubs as silent sales pitch, which has been high-profile with those vehicles running circularly and constantly. Another relevant operation is tricky. Teachers are repeatedly reminded by principal that for maintaining the experts' images, teachers should avoid making themselves fully understood by parents—the school's consumers. Education is a self-evident system, this secret that principal expects teachers to memorize and practice also discloses how school sustains its cultural arbitrary through conscious operations. The third strategy can be called militarized management, which is manifested in those ever-increasing surveillance cameras, and the access control system. In this mode, placing themselves students can be traced in every minute in the place where they are supposed to be. The school had a stream of practices to reduce flexibility and uncertainty besides student management, like separating teachers' residential community from the teaching area and at the same time, creating a bunch of projects evaluating whether teachers are qualifies or not on a regular basis. Under militarized management, compare and comparison are constantly used.

The fourth mechanism is myth creation. The importance of myth lies in that it balances out the school's survival crisis and serves for the durability of the school institution. There is cascade of created myths circulating at school such as the "tradition myth", the "oneness myth", the "delayed-effect myth", the "candle spirit myth", the "trained talent myth. For example, the school re-defines the meaning of the previously abandoned school garden, highlights its cultural importance by crafting a connection between influential historical scholars who once spent an episode of their lives there and current personnel, and then converts it into "the school's tradition". Such tradition is broadcasted through preaches and fixated in publications, becoming an accomplished fact.

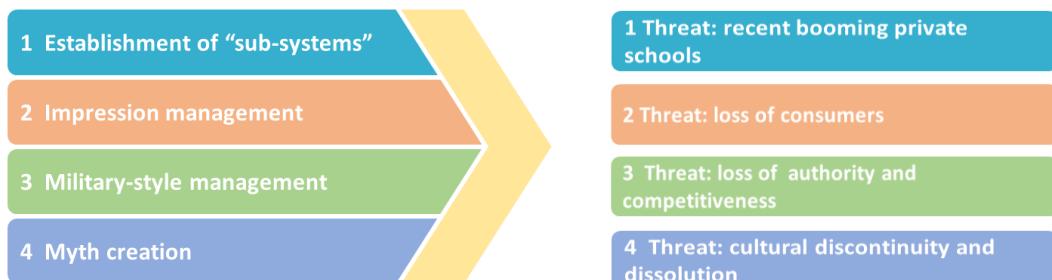


Figure 8.1 The school's institutional habitus (Habiti)

## 8.2 A brief description of “the older generation”

This fieldwork is conducted under the time background that in the process of the deepening social transformations since the implementation of the Chinese economic reform in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the disparity in terms of people's income, consumption ability, lifestyle, values, educational input, and parenting among different social layers are becoming increasingly striking. In Maoist era after the Chinese Land Reform Movement (1953-1976), China was universally acknowledged as a classless society until the economic reform which encouraged a class-formation society. Growing up with the economic reform and experiencing stratification, parents in this work have to become to relocate themselves according to their family backgrounds, educational status, and lifestyle in the current time where discourses about class are thriving and soaring. The pace of social transformation in China is astonishing, which brings the co-existence of multiple social issues that seem to take place at different stages in a long stretch of time.

Since the economic reform which was introduced the market economy to the socialist ideology in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the previous class-society is transforming step by step towards class-formation society. Hence, when social class in China is discussed, we should not ignore to fix it with a marked time period. As such, it is perhaps more accurate to take of the interviewed adolescents in this work as the second generation of the underclass, of the working-class, and of the middle class. Because of the turbulent happenings and multiple reforms in a short amount of time, the current status of China's social class is different from that of the western world in terms of political appeals and ideology. It is understandable that although differentiated structural traits of certain social class are taking shape, “mixed tastes” is not that uncommon that is embraced by different groups of people. For example, China's economic system before the adoption of the economic reform could not achieve its self-maintenance with the previous imposed socialist mode whose binary code was not “making money” and “not making money”, and thus “socialist market economy” and “state-owned-enterprises reform” were introduced. In

that critical period, interests were shuffled and wealth were redistributed, which witnessed unwonted social class “jump” and “plunge”. Because of this chaotic situation that made people’s world upside down, plus the Confucianism that attached importance to education, some lower-status parents would not give up the hope of having their children to finish their unfulfilled dreams, and some, especially those with abundant economic capital but meager cultural capital, would purposefully promote their parenting skills by observing and imitating. On the contrary, the older middle-class parents, growing in story-tellings of scarce sources and intimidating, frenetic political factional struggles, do not display the middle-class traits and tastes. The above discussions imply that parenting approaches and class tastes in the western world is perhaps not fit into the Chinese context.

## 8.2 The reproduction puzzle

Educational inequality stays awake through multiple social arrangements, like policies, parents’ capital practices for wining a place, guanxi operations, various educational myths that might treat stereotype as “common sense”, public discourses including prejudices and discriminations; tracking process; parents’ different abilities to transmit their various capital including the cultural, the social, the emotional, and the spiritual; teachers’ possible different treatments; the labelling effect; interpersonal relationship with teachers and peers, family conditions, stressful family environment, arrangement of leisure time, and the traditional preference for sons. Inequality is root in society which is stratified, being anchored by various institutions, structures, and practices. Class matters a lot in inequality through a high likelihood of reproduction between generations, but a combination of various ingredients also plays a role in different degrees. The academic result is never random but is closely related to class. In general, parents have the emphasis on children’s academic success, and regard attending a key university as being unquestioned, but the results differ a lot. Mostly, underclass and working-class parents get little exposure to and know little about the advocated mainstream culture contributing to academic achievements, which they wish their children are getting familiar with. However, unlike many middle-class parents who provide their children with a nurturing family environment encouraging privileged habitus, lower-status parents’ socially-constructed parenting and child-rearing practices might be counterproductive to their purposes

of preventing their children from going through the same. Lower-status students, in turn, are hemmed in a growing environment that lacks cultural capital which is of vital importance to academic success. The achievement gap among children with different family backgrounds reflects the disparity in class-based life chances available to them. The “natural thing” for a particular group of people is something difficult to acquire for other groups of people, for which they need to leave behind unprivileged habitus and interweave those newly-acquired into the current practice. Middle-class families are enthusiastic about standardizing their children’s time by sending them to various cram courses. The underclass families, with the juxtaposition of capital shortage and desire of destiny transformation, tend to adopt relaxation parenting imposing the traditional morality on their children. The working-class families are with either free-range parenting or a kind of parenting involving destructive enthusiasm. The former has something to do with children’s long-term academic performances that predict a growing slimmer chance of getting into a good university.

Class type	The underclass	The working class	The middle class
Parents’ educational expectations	High expectations	Both high and low expectations	High expectations
Parents’ amount of capital	Less capital	Less capital	More capital
Parenting strategy	Relaxation parenting moderated by an emphasis on morality and responsibility	free-range parenting or destructive enthusiasm	Concerted cultivation
Parents’ expected children’s qualities	Docility, morality, Self-reliance, and family responsibility	Docility in the family but invincible strong in the “Strong World”; the street wisdom	Independence, reflection, self-responsibility, and a broad outlook
Children’s awareness of self-discipline	A higher degree of self-discipline	A lower degree of self-discipline	A higher degree of self-discipline
Motivation	Motivated by changing destiny	Motivated by becoming the strong	Motivated by self-fulfillment
School experiences	Being labeled and expelled; feeling constraint to seek help	Involving in the sub-cultural group; becoming school bullies; playing the cat-and-mouse game with teachers	Like fish in water

Propensities and emotions	Inferiority, confusion, a sense of shame, a sense of abandonment, a sense of alienation and exclusion, powerlessness, self-doubt	Anger, disappointment, confusion, powerlessness	A sense of being capable, high self-esteem
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**Table 8.2 General cultural conditions of students of different family origins**

People are different, and they develop and transform as they are growing and experiencing. The table displays the general cultural conditions of students with three types of family status, which excludes “special cases” with a different combination of these items. What the table shows helps to frame different types of the most likely experiences led by class-based culture, which shapes students’ dynamic perception of their identity, their entangled experiences, and academic disparity. It also gives a hint to students’ intertwined emotions, which is discussed in detail in the following.

### 8.2.1 Family context and academic disparity

Family, as a primary group, is an essential locale for negotiating an individual’s initial identity, instilling the belief, constructing the aspirations and the taste by means of training necessary skills, telling stories, defining a situation, giving particular behaviors meanings through adults’ language use. The family context can be the most important ingredient constructing a person’s academic achievement in Eastern Asian community, because society has the tradition to take the family, rather than the individual, as more important. People’s identity, their understanding of the relationship between themselves and the outside world are mainly shaped in the family institution. In the social context where ordinary people are fighting for the middle-class status but at the same time, the upward mobility is becoming increasingly difficult, a student’s imposed status as a poor student, an average student, or an affluent student is increasingly arousing attention, which causes teachers’ unequal expectations and treatments and possible exclusions from peers in the school field embracing students with different family origins. Underclass and working-

class parents lack the privileged habitus and kinds of capital; their children thus have to make a great effort to learn something that is “natural” for middle-class children, which, a process of gaining institutional habitus beyond the family, to offset what is lacking in the family education.

“Class is a phenomenon of the flesh, of coming to inhabit the world in a certain way through powerfully internalizing senses based in an objective hierarchy of relations within which individual sensibilities take shape. It concerns processes of desire and aversion, through which individuals come to be located within certain social fields.” (Charlesworth, 2000: 65)

For exploring the unequal academic-achievement myth, people’s life-world cannot be taken for granted because the differences among life-worlds are amazing. People initiatively make sense of what happened to them and come up with a set of cognitive systems, which might differ a lot from those of other people. This cognitive schema helps them to clarify who they are and what is taken as important, which renders different stories to tell. Children are living in a storied world where socially-constructed myths are told and retold by their parents. The individual, as a student and a child, is framed within these interconnected discourses. Children from different family backgrounds get to know stories of different versions from their parents, from which they gain the “reality”. Most underclass parents might be deprived of educational opportunities when they were young for various reasons, such as lacking the “tradition” in their family, making them difficult to assist their children at high-school stage. Many working-class parents, who might have suffered from academic incapability, constructs study as something bitter, for which people need perseverance to “overcome”. On the contrary, most middle-class parents, who have experienced academic success, construct study as a process of acquiring knowledge to fulfill the curiosity and thus they effectively help their children academically and spiritually. Although they have created the reality that study is an interesting thing, they deal with their children’s adversity strategically where perseverance and interests can be both highlighted while they are trying other possible means to inspire their children. People adopt a natural attitude toward “reality”; thus, the natural thing considered by a particular person is difficult to acquire for others who have not been living with such a kind of story. For many working-class and underclass students, the acquisition of privileged habitus often means to debunk

the reality, wipe out the life-world where they have a natural attitude, and reconstruct the cognitive framework. Clarifying what the realities there are for different social groups contributes to a sophisticated understanding of people's experiences, encounters, and sense-making.

### **8.2.1.1 The reproduction puzzle for the underclass children**

The customary underclass students' stories are told with the protagonist's personal needs and interests missing, highlighting their instrumental role for the family. Their successful stories, with heroic rhetoric, are socially constructed as the savior's touching stories for the family commitment interwoven with heroism narratives while ignoring that the protagonist should be understood as an integrated person. On the contrary, underclass students' academic-failure experiences are narrated where they are constructed as irresponsible or thankless persons who are not cut out for study, ignoring their life-world where a feel for high-status culture is not adequately cultivated in the family with little exposure to high culture.

For most underclass students, the study is an inevitable moral endeavor, an expectation of upward social mobility, a gate to the middle-class status, a sign of wealth, which works as an essential part of their sense of self-worth. Being successful through hard work carries significant moral implications for them, like "failing to live up to parental sacrifice". Considerable underclass students have their childhood spent in the silent country area with potholed pathways or the deserted corner of the unmerciful urban fabric doing something unrelated to the so-called life prospect. However, the day when they stepped the school gate had marked an essential transition—they were not only the child, the student, but also the "little adult" who took on the family commitment. Underclass students are overburdened with the hope of the family as well as parents' deep-rooted idea of making their family members to feel proud and elated and also bringing glory on their ancestors through their multiple endeavors and academic success. This implies that many underclass parents understand being educated as something utilitarian that brings wealth and a professional position without necessarily appreciating the high culture and the elite taste. Moreover, underclass parents, usually with low academic qualifications and a kind of parenting that fail to build cultural capital and foster academic success, fail to provide adequate support in children's studies. For

example, they cannot help with the homework; they pervasively have an indifferent attitude toward children's setbacks beyond study at school, regarding them unimportant and thus cannot effectively help their children to address them; their concerns are only confined to the basic material needs, conversations concerning which fail to transmit into the academic advantages. Furthermore, many underclass parents have trust in parental authority encouraged by the traditional family structure; their parenting remains to be somehow rigescent and traditional denying a non-resilient relationship. Without an understanding of intricacies in parenthood in modernity, they tend to instruct their children with parental authority, which is interwoven with narratives entailing morality and obligation for the sake of "family prosperity".

Underclass children are less likely to inherit cultural capital contributing to academic success from the family institution. However, family commitment and the strong motivation for changing destiny can be seen as another kind of capital— spiritual capital, which serves to offsets the lack of capital and fosters academic progress to some extent. Notably, this variable is not stable, and can be modified by many other factors. Meanwhile, for the most part, underclass children have to seek the cultural capital outside the family for the academic success, which means to develop the institutional habitus—the privileged habitus or a better feel for the educational game. For this purpose, multiple painful detours with struggles and perseverance for every step towards upward mobility are required. This major transformation, usually, cannot be achieved without the intense self-doubt and the resistance for reconciling the family habitus and the privileged habitus.

#### **8.2.1.2 The reproduction puzzle for the working-class children**

Although Chinese parents generally attach importance to education and believe children should achieve upward mobility, many working-class parents' saying and behaving might yield results against their expectations. As stated in chapter six, the working-class group in China is a confusing term, which has something to do with the wave of going into business in the 1990s. The disorder of the flows of wealth is of common occurrence in the intense transitional period. There are parents with abundant economic capital but with "no culture". Normally, they are busy taking care of their small business for years and

have little time for accompanying their children, which greatly weakening the emotional bond between the parents and the children. This type of family might discourage children's academic aspirations, and children tend to suspect both the intrinsic values and instrumental values of knowledge. Many working-class parents' discourses are frequently tied up more with realistic kinds of stuff, the instantaneous benefits, from which children learn to appreciate "street wisdom" rather than high culture.

There are also typical working-class parents, with a relatively low level of education, a low-paid job with limited skills. Most of them feel powerless in competition and are not reconciled to their unsatisfactory life, but they have witnessed "class jump" of their "lucky" peers, so they tend to bet on their children to fulfill what they cannot achieve. With this mindset, they believe the creed that "whether get ahead or get eliminated by society". In terms of parenting, they tend to ding their children that "I scold you or hit you because I just wish iron could develop into steel". When their children encounter adversity, they are a bit clumsy to take assertive response, but with the logic of "victims are to blame as well", they are likely to tell their children that "you ask for it since you are not powerful enough". The social reality is a self-created myth. These parents did not expect their children to repeat their life, but they had ill-informed opinions about how the "new world" looked like, and tended to take their perceived reality as the only reality, and take their "rules" as being universal. With the feeling that their life is enslaved by power holders with the high-profile title, they develop a set of cultural repertoires and cognitive frameworks defining their experiences and guiding their actions. These practices greatly discourage children's reasoning skills and their confidence in engaging adults, hence preventing them from thriving in the school. Parents' inadequate support and the restricted codes presented in the language use construct the reality for them, which makes them believe that self-control does not bring the tangible benefits. Still, there are also some parents who gradually lose the high educational expectations on their children since they witnessed their children's academic incompetence over time. In this light, they resort to street wisdom with the hope that their children can be preserved from penury and unemployment.

#### 8.2.1.3 The reproduction puzzle for the middle-class children

Middle-class children are more likely to be nurtured to appreciate the school culture and develop the habitus encouraged by the moral field of the school. A higher proportion of middle-class parents have higher educational expectations on their children and have better knowledge to assist their children with their studies. Firstly, middle-class parents, who have experienced tertiary education through the selective examinations, know better about the game in the educational field and possess certain cultural capital to cultivate children's necessary skills contributing to academic success, such as language competence and independent thinking, reasoning ability, and so on. Secondly, middle-class parents' elite habitus such as aspiration, diligence, persistence, morality, punctuality, self-discipline, rules awareness is aligned with school's institutional habitus, and endow those parents personal charisma, which facilitates their children's construction of the privileged habitus that is conducive to academic success. Thirdly, the data shows that middle-class children have a high likelihood to feel well-connected to their parents, which allows for more in-depth communications. Most middle-class parents have more sense of equality in the family and encourage children to talk logically and clearly. They normally do not emphasize their regressive role as parents but encourage a resilient relationship in the family. Besides, middle-class parents possess economic capital, which can be converted into children's cultural capital. For example, they purchase cultural goods, enroll their children in various training courses, and take them to participate in cultural activities. Finally, some middle-class parents have demonstrated a reflexive attitude when they face the obstacle or inefficiency during their cultural-capital transmission and ensure their children's effective capital inheritance. Hence it is clear that middle-class children are more likely to get much exposure to high-status cultural activities, unlock their potentials, and cultivate an affinity for the school environment.

Middle-class parents have good knowledge about how to create a mini educational-context in the family where they transmit their cultural capital reflexively and strategically. As is shown in the first section of chapter seven, middle-class parents demonstrate "concerted cultivation" parenting (Lareau, 2003), encouraging children's language sense, reasoning skills, cultivating curiosity and interests in knowledge. This work shows the critical moments of parents' transmission and children's response of the cultural capital. In the family, children are encouraged to talk, no matter ask a question or provide a solution, but

not “just mind your business, but don’t think about unimportant things”, which is popular in non-middle-class families. Parents make children believe the importance of self-discipline through their own achievements underpinned self-discipline. They set examples of how to calmly and effectively engaging high-profile persons for their own interests, from which children are aware of the importance of negotiation and help-seeking strategies. Some parents refuse blind faith in score but appraise children for doing something beyond study that shows certain expected qualities, which encourages children’s exploring spirit despite the uncertain result. They help to arrange children’s time structurally and intersperse their daily routines with a ceremonious gesture, turning it into a special occasion sometimes. They comprehend that a lack of interest might have something to do with scarce experiences and limited minds, so when their children show little interest, they seek to turn bane into a boon through various reflexive practices, which is powerful to change children’s first impression, unlock their potentials, and prevent them from being excluded from opportunities towards promotion. Notably, the underclass group and middle-class group both demonstrate the propensity of self-discipline, but the former is usually motivated by their family commitment, and the latter is normally driven by individual interests and dreams. The experiences of success or failure is closely related to the cultural construction of different groups, from which the aspirations of the underclass group might be decline in the long-lasting recursion process. Middle-class students with mediocre and poor performances indicate that families with less cultural capital or emotional capital fail to spark students’ keen interests in the study and may give rise to children’s emotional troubles.

### **8.2.2 The school field and academic disparity**

Bourdieu suggested that school was the field where students, with different amounts of cultural capital, struggling to get a better position with their recognized academic advantages, which implied that some were doomed to be expelled. Schools continue to negotiate students’ identity on the basis of their individual history, making students further confirm whether they can be academically successful by gathering the clues of the interactions at school and their exam performances. It is not easy to answer whether the school encourages or relieves educational inequality, but it can be safely concluded that the

school shapes educational inequality unevenly and dynamically. It may exacerbate inequality, which is mostly reflected in the underclass group, especially when they realize that their identity as an economically difficult student incurs unequal treatments at different levels. On the other hand, the school also possesses a certain degree of potential to relieve inequality by imposing students with a unified life and teachers' multiple efforts to "rescue" their students by playing roles other than being a teacher, which provides students great opportunities for their formation and accumulation of institutional habitus.

People can be empowered by a particular kind of telling, and they may also feel the sense of being rejected while hearing another story. The first thing they encounter after stepping into the high school is that they are reminded over and over again about their conditions by discourses about tracking and the corresponding educational expectations from the outside world. In doing so, self-fulfilling prophecy can be encouraged when students continue thinking about how others define themselves and how their identities are talked about from the outside world. In this school, middle-class students make up around half of the student number in higher-status homerooms like the Gifted Classes and International Experimental Classes. Although a few high-achieving working-class and underclass students are allocated to the Gifted Classes and even Hongzhi Class, the majority of them are assigned into lower-status homerooms, like Key Classes and Parallel Classes. As such, students are grouped not only along the academic line but also the social class line, which might exacerbate lower-status students' chance of success without sufficient exposure to the "advanced" peer culture. It can be anticipated that the influence of class tracking, together with within-class tracking such as the seating arrangement, and the differentiation of student leaders and ordinary students, is long-lasting and far-reaching because it is related to "label" and identity, imposing people a pattern of way about how they should behave and encouraging a sense of superiority or inferiority about how they should think. Xiong, having reported of being mislocated, is an example of a victim of the tracking practice. Dominant knowledge at school is always related to inequality, which favors the higher-status group's experiences and tastes. People from "a different world" with devalued rules, lower tastes, minus skills, are thus vulnerable to inferiority and failure.

#### 8.2.2.1 Underclass children run into the cliché of low achievements?

When some underclass children successfully seize the educational opportunity for studying in this urban key-point school, they regrettably find this educational setting a new moral world which paralyzes them, making them stressed, uneasy, and confused with a sense of alienation and exclusion. This city, with baffling neon lights, streets with rush traffic day and night, architectures conveying strong modern implications, a dazzling array of hotels, shops, and stores, cafes with the petty bourgeoisie taste, silently expresses the paramount status of money and rationality, which brings this group endless confusions and uneasiness. Before they could realize what urbanism means, they are disciplined by overwhelming urbanism in a wholly new way.

Schools advertise themselves not through sales pitch but through “products” they have produced in college entrance examination, aiming to persuade people that they offer the best chance to nurture children to the pinnacle of life. However, the school, like many other educational settings, fails to keep its promise without properly dealing with dilemmas that exist in lower-class students’ lives. Most underclass students have conveyed their burning aspirations at the very beginning. Such blazing aspirations stem from their intense desire of changing their destiny, especially when they have proved their competence to get enrolled here, a higher-track school better than what they have previously thought in senior high school entrance examination. On the other hand, we should not equate their identity as a key high school student with privileged habitus, concerning that most of them are externally driven by the logic of “have to”, just as Yan has described that she does not have a real interest in reading, but has to force herself, and also Wei’s remark of “every inch of success adds a glimmer hope”. Underclass parents tends to foster kids’ conservative attitude toward new things, which is a kind of non-elite habitus. Feeling inferior, lower-class students are less likely to actively seek help from teachers. Many cases in this study show that unprivileged family status have encouraged spiritual capital through students’ penetration and reflection, which plays a positive role in academic performances only temperately and temporarily. It has little to do with privileged institutional habitus which plays a decisive role in academic achievements.

As many underclass students enter the moral field of the urban school, they have experienced discontinuity and transformation, during which they have to relocate themselves. In this economically and culturally diverse school, the moments of reflections of the rural identity problem are surging through comparison by looking at the school mirror. For the majority, with neither academic advantages in this competitive school nor a good taste which is betrayed by their accent when speaking and the dressing style, they cannot occupy a prime position in the field but are becoming increasingly uneasy in daily interactions. Afterward, they must weight and consider the appropriate dressing, expressions, and table manners; and they must exercise how to speak in public without showing much nervousness privately multiple times.

Identity can be also taken as a result of comparison and contraction, which gives a sense of superiority or inferiority. As time passes, they develop a sense of themselves as the remarkably different, the inferior, and the less important. Their conveyed perception and emotion interwoven with haze, confusion, pain, embarrassment, and being harmed have proved the overwhelming symbolic capital power of the mainstream middle-class culture. Anyhow, they have to struggle to go on in the urban moral field, burdening with the picture of parents' hard work, massive expectations, and devout hope. They feel the unprecedented tension between their ambitions of entering a good university for assuming the family commitments and cruel reality of unsatisfactory academic results. It turned out things that happened were still not in their control. They have to pay a high price for their "mistakes" in their saying and behaving which do not conform to the middle-class taste. Their aspirations are gradually wearing away through events bound up with negative meanings for them. What cannot be ignored as well is that when they are struggling to figure out what is appropriate in the field—the ordinary and natural things for middle-class students, they suffer from academic declines and even failures. Those stuff does not come naturally to them. However, their situations are not fully understood by society, the school, and even their parents. The school, embedded in the existed educational system, has gone to great lengths to differentiate "good students" between "bad students"—taking other factors as the "messy codes" and ignoring lower-class students' psychological costs resulting from their personal history in the liminality. The educational

discourses remain silent about their experiences and responses of being marginalized, discriminated, and stigmatized as well as little family support, which fails to assist them through the liminality.

#### 8.2.2.2 Working-class children's two-tier experiences

In the sample, four working-class students who have no problematic behaviors have experienced academic declines for different reasons. Jing believed he would still be admitted to a good university if he could remain the current ranking. Chao has relocated himself as someone who is suitable to do practical work in the future, which refrains his aspirations of attending a research university. Yao has plan B, which weakens her academic ambition. Among the four, Qiao is the only one who is not satisfied with the current situation because, with her parents' expectations and her own ambitions at one end of the scale and her academic performances at the other end, she feels much pain. Despite their different specific reasons to slide downhill, one thing is the same—there is little evidence of privileged habitus demonstrated upon them. As is shown in chapter six, working-class parents, with less cultural capital and class-based knowledge, are less likely to arouse children's genuine interests in learning.

A quite many underachieving working-class students are not able to be affiliated to the school mainstream culture, but are involved in the sub-cultural group which the school field discredits. These students are often labeled as morally bad students. However, we should not ignore the cultural conditions which shape who they are. Just as Ming's remarks that he thought he "had to" make friends with his brothers because they were the same kind of people— they all had to live on with trauma brought by their family. Many working-class parents tell their children that the eternal truth is that the strong rule the weak while in many cases, they reveal their sense of inability, powerlessness, and anger towards "injustice" in their life, feeling stuck. With a strong sense that they are in the dominated position and ruled by external forces, they emphasize the so-called decency which serves the purpose of pleasing important persons in case of possible troubles.

These parents are somehow empowered by their children because they put their unfulfilled dreams on them and imposed them a pattern of lifestyle that children are reluctant to accept. They believe the “truth” which is shaped by their own firsthand experiences, taking it as the only reality. They regard reality cruel, and it is why they repeatedly tell their children, “whether get ahead in the world or get eliminated by society”. They try to keep their children out of detours by expounding mechanically that “the salt I’ve eaten is even more than the rice you’ve had”. They believe stick parenting is effective in turning “iron” into “steel”; thus, they help to prepare their children in advance for the cruel society that is waiting ahead of them.

These parents tend to resort to repudiation, condemn, and even corporal punishment when their children fall short of their expectations, which creates the illusion that their children would be eliminated in the cruel competition for a lack of an array of competence. They are ruled by a kind of social reality which is shaped by what happened to them, which explains why they insist on this parenting even when it is questioned by teachers, who are the transmitters of the middle-class culture. Cun’s mother condemned him when he was unluckily stung by a bee on the way, which seemed to be unwise, unreasonable and incomprehensible. However, if we traced the hidden cultural conditions, we found that she understood that event as something which reflected her son’s low awareness of self-protection, preventing him to “fit into society”. Her uncontrolled temper can be interpreted as her anxiety and doubt of whether her child can better and earlier adapt to society and her inability to provide her son with the best. However, being circumscribed to the restricted codes adopted in their daily discourses, in most cases, working-class parents cannot properly and clearly express their feelings, which is abstract, or clear up those things involved in their emotions. When their children are bullied at school, some working-class parents should resort to violence as a response, while there are still others who believe “victim is also to blame”, condemn their children for their “inability” to become the strong, which has caused children’s trauma. On the other hand, the school tends to patch up a quarrel and reconcile the parties concerned, suspending to make a clear distinction between the right and wrong, refusing to use the “right or wrong” model to reinterpret this event, because such events, as messy codes of the educational output, is not worth putting “necessary” time and energy, and also, a “fair operation” might heal the wounds of the bullied student, but it causes

risky unintended consequences such as making this event more noticeable and harming the school's reputation. As a result, those being bullied have a great sense of injustice, frustration, and pain, which persons at an advantageous position tend to ignore.

The identity as troubled teens is belittled in the moral field of the school. Even so, those children with trauma have been gradually becoming the so-called troubled teens who resist the mainstream school culture step by step, for which parents' improper parenting and the school's ambiguous attitudes play a part. Being estranged to the family, with unspoken troubled identity and intertwined intense emotions, they hang around with "wrong persons" and form a sub-cultural group, which provides them with a sense of existence and belonging. They have to exercise themselves in this group where they acquire an array of new things such as drinking, smoking, flirting, dangerous sports, thrill-packed actions so as to affirm their membership in this group. In so doing, they have internalized the label of "bad children", adding a footnote to it by acting more "frenetically" that is not aligned with school culture.

#### **8.2.2.3 Middle-class children's "Holy Grail"**

The work found that students' elite habitus and parents' positive involvement played a significant part in academic achievements, which is shown in detail in the first section of chapter seven. In the educational context which adopts "teaching to the tests", teachers are expected to promote the overall performance of the whole class according to the assessment standards. Even if a teacher declares that he or she is fair who treats students equally, prejudice and the resulting different treatment cannot be avoided in the educational context where students are playing a zero-sum game for the college entrance examination. All the interviewed teachers expressed their appreciation for a higher anticipation for middle-class students. It is likely that teachers have got an initial impression of a particular student by virtue of their teaching experiences, taking his or her senior high school entrance examination scores and family conditions into account, and also through observations of their expressions and behaviors, which reflects their habitus. This kind of judgment and observation run through the whole educational process where teachers are identifying the amounts of cultural capital students own and predict their possible transformation and

outcome, which can be reflected by Ming's case where his class sponsor has facilitated his study by relocating his seat. The first section of chapter seven has shown the critical moments and practices for middle-class parents' cultural-capital transmission, from which children gain the language sense, strengthen the reasoning and negotiating skills, detect the interests, make a point to make teachers to notice them, and build the confidence, ultimately leading to privileged institutional habitus. Teachers can recognize high-achieving students and potential good students by observing their behaviors which convey symbolic meanings reflecting the middle-class habitus. This gives a clue to teachers for whom they should invest more attention, time, and energy for polish, making them shining. These high-performing students, on the other hand, strengthen their self-esteem and a sense of capability through this interaction. As time passes, students at an advantageous position are more easily to continue accumulating cultural capital, which can be transformed into academic advantages being manifested on the repeated exam performances. In so doing, they achieve self-fulfilling prophecy of academic success.

Middle-class parents also play a role in shifting teachers' attention to their children. Teachers at school report that middle-class parents' initiative meetings far outnumber those of their underclass and working-class counterparts. This work found that a positive connection between teachers and parents contributed to children's academic achievements in at least three ways. Firstly, it gives students a sense of the anticipated middle-class membership when they realize that their parents have the ability to engage authoritative figures, which helps to build their confidence in their academic ability. Secondly, their parents make their conditions better understood by teachers and work with them to figure out the most appropriate teaching methods for their children, which helps those students to develop their interests in study and stop the inappropriate behaviors that hinder them from thriving. Lastly, children have witnessed how their parents negotiate with teachers for their sake, which nurtures their negotiation skills as well as their awareness of seeking help. Mo's case shows that the engaging-teacher strategy is not the result of parents' preach; but the parents set examples for doing that. Inspired by her parents' knowledge and practices of engaging teachers, Mo has taken engaging teachers as a comfortable thing and successfully makes the teacher to notice her. Positive parents' involvements make children believe that they can also

have such a relationship with their teachers. They suspend teacher's authority, which the arms of the state endows, but treat them as helpers lifting their academic ability and unlocking their potential.

## 8.3 The mobility puzzle

Middle-class children are believed to successfully inherit the cultural capital and privileged habitus in the family, and thus have greater odds to gain academic success; on the contrary, the working-class and underclass group are expected to have a higher likelihood of experiencing academic failure. However, against all the odds, some middle-class children can “corrupt”, while their counterparts are thriving. Those cases of “small probability” provide some clues about how upward and downward mobility are possible. In this work, sixteen stories, including seven turning-point stories of the underclass and working-class group and nine “mismatch” stories, as cases of “small probability”, open the veil of the educational-mobility myth to some extent. Notably, the middle-class students with a turning-point story might not be appropriate to be included here because their turning-point story is about parents’ reconstruction of their family life, returning to the preexisting middle-class lifestyle in the past. The social process encouraging the uptrend or downtrend was far more complicated than I initially expected. Students’ seemingly occasional academic outcome of a particular exam might trigger their thoughts where they relate different factors resulting from their “reality” to the exam result, during which they are activating previous memory and endowing sense. This process is both structural and individual, making the next step unpredictable and thus leaving room for possible transformations.

### 8.3.1 Turning points that render upward mobility

In the sample, seven lower-status students, as the rare cases or “small probability”, have detected the turning point in their experiences of educational upward mobility at this school where the process of habitus struggling and transformation are shown with a detail of the crucial source—the involved key figures, their discourses and strategies, and also circulating myths.

### 8.3.1.1 Turning-point stories of children with the underclass origin

Most underclass parents adopt a relaxation parenting that is moderated by morality, in which children's family commitment and obligation are emphasized. They have a sense of superiority through comparison with their neighbors when they have their children studying in an urban higher track school; they overwhelmingly believe that teacher's management plus children's hard work can legitimate academic success, failing to see the struggles their children's are experiencing through the liminality as they step into another moral field and ascribing children's academic failure to their "laziness".

In the cases of Mei, Jie, and Lian who are with a turning-point story at the high school stage, none of their parents have involved in their stories of academic progress. These students have experienced identity confusion in this urban school, but have to internalize these negative feelings without telling their parents because they feel guilty for "failing to live up to" their expectations. These students had a hard-earned opportunity to achieve academic upward mobility with the help of their teachers, as the "trailblazer" who offered them a sense of belonging, emotional resonance, and spiritual support, during which they have gained a certain pattern of thinking and behaving which made a high-achieving student. Mei is empowered by her math teacher who is also with the working-class family background. The teacher's story helps her to get rid of inferiority and realize the importance of seeking help from teachers; Jie began to have a feeling for the middle-class taste of the language flow; Lian learned to make her situations understood by her teacher. These cases have shown that underclass children's "spiritual capital" of changing the destiny is not enough for educational upward mobility, but only when this "spiritual capital" could be transformed into institutional habitus, academic success is possible. For gaining the institutional habitus, they should make good use of teacher resources outside of the family, "overcome" difficulties, and discard the established individual habitus, which implies a redefinition of multiple items in their lives that brings pains. In this self-relocation process, they have gained new knowledge, which is different from what they have learned from their previous life-world, and makes a certain pattern of thinking and behaving part of them, and thus changes the way they perceive and think, as well as choices they make.

### 8.3.1.2 Turning point of the working-class children

In the turning-point stories, all the working-class students had previously involved in the sub-cultural group. Ming and Di had their teachers as trailblazers, while Long and Xue had both their mother and class sponsor as the key figures to change their academic trajectory. Although Ming demonstrated problematic behaviors, his class sponsor, as his trailblazer, detected his potential gift for natural science and offered him an opportunity to evolve by changing his seat, which limited the conditions within which his interaction with those “bad kids” took place. He was positively influenced by his new neighbour but was also affected by his brothers, reporting that he behaved like a pendulum between “two different worlds”, which reflected his old habitus was struggling with the newly situated habitus. The teacher kept him sitting there long enough until he felt enough warmth from the teacher and his neighbour and then he began to live a responsible life. Di is from a family that undervalue education and show no interest in his intellectual curiosity in his childhood. His turning-point was not clear with a memorable event but was with a long and tortuous journey of much introspection through trailing after the dribs and drabs of what his class sponsor had done. He was empowered academically and morally by this teacher, who always gave him an opportunity to change and evolve while suffering from self-doubt. Xue’s mother, as a daughter from a teacher’s family, was aware of the importance of engaging teachers for help. She valued her identity as a mother the most and consulted teachers in time when she detected a problem on her daughter. The joint effort of Xue’ mother and the class sponsor has made Xue’s transformation possible. Long’s experiences were different from many other classmates with the identity as an ethnic minority student. He observed that teachers had low expectations on ethnic minority students. This identity and his hometown where people are living a free-spirited ranch life exerted a profound impact on Long, which negotiated his low academic aspirations. However, he was doomed to be different from his peers in his hometown with a “too special” mother who had imposed him a totally different lifestyle. Long’s mother was not competitive to be admitted to a university in those years, which was always her knot in her heart because she admired those intellectuals. Although Long’s mother had done business successful and gained wealth, she did not find her life meaningful. She understood her career business not as her achievement but as a means to provide better soil to nurture her children towards the intellectual image and middle-

class culture. She realized her inability to help her son academically, so she actively engaged Long's previous class sponsor, whom she believed knew better how to achieve her goal with much love and dedication on students she had taught. The trusting relationship with care, patience, and tolerance remains the stanchion of their upward-mobility experiences. Whether having the teacher as the trailblazer, or both mother and teacher as pathfinders, those working-class students achieved academic upward mobility by leaving behind a portion of old habitus and gaining the privileged habitus which helped them to decode the educational system. There trailblazers showed much patience to witness their transformations because it is a long process in which transient and situated habitus can be turned into a stable one.

#### 8.3.1.3 Framing the upward mobility— emotional tie as the hidden channel

The self possesses the character of being institutionally imposed as well as the individually open when the experiences continue unfolding, which brings transformations and possible mobility. In the formal social organization, including the school where students are treated as “non-trivial machines”, the expression of socially appropriate thoughts rather than emotion, as a non-standardized variate, is encouraged, making emotion in a suppression state. For example, educators might be aware of the existence of personal troubles such as economic difficulties, adversity, trauma, frustration, dilemma, their identity as a teacher reminds them that they should dilute those visible troubles and get students on the “right track” with discourses concerning the relationship between hard work and the reward of the input, but such relationship is invisible and unpredictable without a thorough estimation of personal situations anyhow.

Students' turning-point stories bridge the gap between cultural capital transmission and academic alternations by providing a picture in which the emotional experience and the emotional tie come into play. The power of emotion can never be overrated. Elias put that emotion, such as “shame” and “embarrassment”, works to promote the civilization process. Through a differentiation between “guilt” and “shame”. Lyon suggested that since emotion was always interwoven with social phenomena, more efforts should be put to look into the semantics it entailed (Lyon, 1995). Lynd explained how shame was

closely related to identity (Lynd, 2013). Scheff further stated that the emotion of shame was of social origin because the generation of it was a threat to the bond (Scheff, 2000). This work found that family bonds or emotion ties between teachers and students, which could be transformed into crucial impetus, played an important role in students' motivational dynamics, engagement, self-concept, which in turn, served to change the trajectory of cultural capital and habitus development. By documenting students' turning-point stories, this work has proved that students' cultural capital and habitus could be changed through close interactions, among which pathfinders' establishment and maintenance of the emotional tie was the bedrock. Secondly, this work found that cultural capital acquisition and new habitus formation processes were easily thwarted by outside distractions, and they needed repeatedly reconfirming and cementing the established emotional tie. This reminds educators of the importance of historical-situated problems. Furthermore, turning-point stories show how close teacher-student relationship is developed through effort, charisma, and craft of teachers who have adequate emotional knowledge in guiding and reshaping their students. China is a society of human relationship networks. The interpersonal boundaries are fuzzy: a good teacher in the Chinese context is not only a teacher, but contemporarily plays other roles as well. Those teachers were highly aware of the goal of purposive cultural capital transmission and adopted private and affectionate persuading methods, which involved superb emotional craft. Social pressure on the rate to university admission has a durable effect on the educational practices in secondary schools, which asks for teachers' much time and devotion. Thus, teachers spend plenty of time on educational activities and are less exposed to the outside world. In an era where students easily get access to information, traditional teachers' authority and holiness are deconstructed. In this situation, teachers' charisma such as strong morality, emotional empathy, and abilities to make classes interesting, which is rare, serves as an important factor in setting the teacher-student emotional bond.

Emotional and psychological status, cultural capital transmission, habitus formation, and peer networks jointly influence academic achievement. While these components appeared in the literature in various combinations, they have not previously been woven together. The section of turning-point stories delineated the complexities of being academically successful in the light of Bourdieuan theoretical framework. It disclosed how different knowledge was intertwined with academic accomplishments by

respectively discussing three groups of students' turning points. Pathfinders' emotional craft for establishing and maintaining the emotional tie is crucial for the transmission and inheritance of cultural capital. Just like what Ming has put that, *"The most important factor for becoming good from the bad is you know there's always one standing firmly behind you, who believe you're just stuck temporarily, which is rare. He treats you without tinted spectacles, and he'd like to help you out whilst spurring when you run into self-doubt as well as patience until the miracle takes place."*

The transformation from cultural capital into academic achievement, which has many facets, is far from an automatic thing but rather a complicated process. Multiple non-academic factors such as positive self-identity, ontological security, and emotional needs contribute to legitimate academic success. Students' ability of cultural capital acquisition can be transformed during the educational practices where the emotional tie with pathfinders plays a vital role. Pathfinders' emotional craft for establishing the emotional bond is the first step for cultural capital transmission. Going into the inner space of a student with love and care is arousal of emotion and plays an indispensable role in persuading. Habitus is fluid, evolving, and changeable. Students' every inch of success like gaining a good grasp of particular knowledge fuels passion and action. Situated habitus can be stimulated in the highly emotional context, but how it changes relies much on trailblazers' continuous positive feedbacks and necessary help afterwards when students begin to burst through the comfort zone, push the boundary, and buffet with the old habitus that sometimes takes over, which needs close observation and much time devotion; only the positive situated habitus is transformed into positive internal ones, the new habitus and self-motivational dynamics are formed. Without taking emotional ties into account, cultural capital acquisition and habitus formation are in the uncertain status, and upward mobility could not be predicted.

### **8.3.2 The “mismatch” between family origin and academic achievement**

“Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.” (Marx, 1852)

#### **8.3.2.1 Marvelous accomplishments of the underclass children**

This work has shown that people are living in their life-world with different stories and encounters. People take the cultural box unquestioningly and justify their actions by examples of what they have seen, heard, and experienced. Underclass students' success or failure has much to do with the recursion process between their identity and reality. Underclass parents repeatedly talk about their experiences of poverty, suffering, powerlessness, and frustration. They believe people are empowered by higher education, which serves as a means to escape bitterness and build wealth. It is under this pressure of achieving upward mobility that children's aspirations are stimulated. Notably, the aspiration at this stage is far from being stable because it can be modified by schooling experiences. Students gain entrance to the school field with their capital and habitus, which has been negotiated by their previous experiences. We should notice that students' exam scores cannot be simply equated with elite habitus or abundant cultural capital, especially in primary school and junior school. Many students are convinced that hard work is enough to legitimate success before, but it is not the case in high school. Most underclass children reported that they were driven by the impulsion of changing destiny but not real interests in the study, which hindered them from thriving in high school. In most cases, they cannot get a good place in a competitive school with unprivileged habitus negotiated in their previous experiences. In the moral field of the city, they are marginalized and expelled because of being not academically competitive enough, and also non-academic factors such as without showing the middle-class taste in symbolic interactions. These experiences render them a sense of overwhelming marginalization, confusion, pain, and abandon, leading to speechlessness, lack of confidence, and lower aspirations.

It can be safely concluded that, what makes Yun and Fa different is that they are motivated not only by the impulsion of changing the "family status", but are also empowered by school life which provides them a sense of achievement and security as they keep growing and transforming there. The stability of aspiration work as a critical factor contributing to underclass students' academic success. For ensuring such stability, students must make a reflexive penetration and a profound analysis of their situations, and also achieve periodical success which continues to ignite their passion and strengthen their confidence in their ability. Yun and Fa gain respect by staying at the top of the schoolwide academic line and thus have fewer difficulties for integrating themselves into the urban school life. In the repeated recursion process

of reflection on the identity, interactions with teachers and classmates, and exam results, they develop high self-esteem and institutional habitus, which legitimates their academic success.

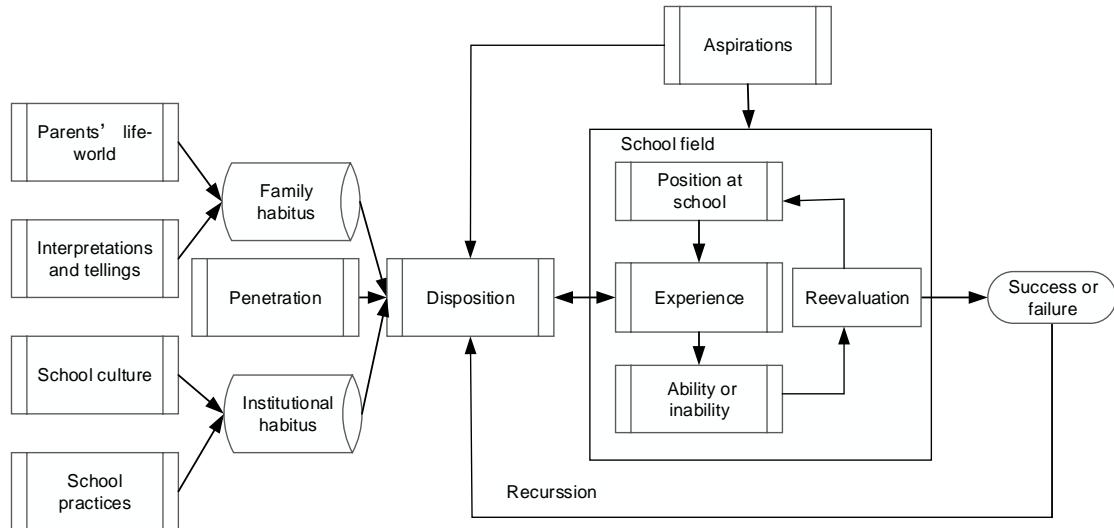


Figure 8.3 Underclass students' chances of academic success

#### 8.3.2.2 Refreshing achievements of the working-class children

Peng and Xiang constitute the sample of revolters against the working-class myth. Peng's story shows that without the spiritual capital which most underclass children possess, making a differentiation between "my world" and "their world" is crucial for developing privileged habitus. Peng was accidentally exposed and influenced by her cousin, who was a person of "a different world". She chose to set aside her parents' constant nagging and quarrels and throw herself into a sea of books, which offers her an ideal world where she can escape from the disappointing reality. Her life story is filled with episodes of pains with every step forward because it means to say no to the "life-world" which her parents have imposed her, and it also implied she has to stand up to go against her parents' authority bravely and strategically, which is immensely difficult without strong conviction. On the contrary, Xiang's successful experiences do not necessarily mean that she had to "break up" with her parents because she had open-minded parents who enjoyed knowing her better and participating in her growing. Her father was adept at employing guanxi for gaining a place for her in the Hongzhi class after he analyzed his daughter's conditions based

on his past careful observations. In the Hongzhi class, Xiang was impressed by her classmates' fighting spirit in adversity; besides, the strong cognitive dissonance of two identities—a Hongzhi student and a back-door student, serves as her motivation for going higher along the academic line.

### 8.3.2.3 Black sheep in the middle-class group?

Compared with the underclass and working-class children's inspiring stories of upward mobility, middle-class children's stories of academic failure seem to be dull. However, the twists and turns in their varied experiences of "corruption" are much more complicated than I initially imagined. Their encounters reminded me how little I knew about those struggling middle-class children whose parents were negotiated and unhinged by both the middle-class culture and their unique experiences that are far apart from the so-called middle-class mindset and lifestyle. Their stories are perhaps hard to be interpreted by others since they fall behind compared with other middle-class peers and have to give a meaning to their unsuccessful life so as to move on. All of them have reported the "interpersonal disorder", which is seemingly related to their perception of their identity as "a unique middle-class child" as well as their moral boundary with defeated school failures of the underclass and working-class children. Their status quo is much influenced by a wide range of childhood negative experiences, such as parents' divorce, loss of significant others, abandonment, emotional isolation, stigmatization, imposed pressure, and even going astray.

Stories of being voluntary underachievers remind me how tragic outcomes can be shaped by their active choices that are based on their biographical situation involving private confusions and troubles. As "a person be beaten from childhood to adulthood" overshadowed by his father's authority, Huan defines his family as a place of insecurity filled with battles. Immersed himself in the culture condition of the family which imposes him a pattern of life that he is reluctant to accept, Huan gets lost. His teacher, having detected something wrong in response to his "learning attitude", was sympathetic but powerless to render assistance under his father's misrecognition of what happens in education nowadays. Overthrowing his father's rule and removing his authority makes sense for Huan because it implies the termination of his

troubled identity and life. Growing up in such a cultural box, he denies the possibility to handle it independently but relies on his mother. For him, if there are no happenings in life, there is no chance to remove his father's authority, so he creates "happenings" by adopting an irresponsible attitude on studies as a stimulant, which serves as a means to irritate his mother's defiance.

Qun's Chinese teacher found her "too special" with the juxtaposition of her perceived composition ability and her overall Chinese performances according to her years of teaching experience, which can be understood by her biographical situations, anyhow. For Qun, writing served as a means of making sense of what she had experienced and expressing emotion, which spiritually supported herself to go on despite depression and adversity. The current marriage system, as only a possibility of how men and women should be combined, is interwoven in people's discourses entailing morality. Qun defined a normal family as a family with a man and a woman combined by marriage. She understood her parents' divorce as "a clap of thunder from the clear sky", causing much pain, which turned her to an abnormal child and caused her academic declines and adolescent awkwardness. She cried hard when she found her stationary case was damaged, lying on the ground because she understood the stationary case as a symbol of her mother's close connection with her and the possibility of return. She was absolutely not a slatternly child, but she determined to resist the situation in her way through "corruption" and her encounters entailing negative meanings, aiming to call her mother back so that she could go back to the identity as a child from a normal family.

The father's death made Hao felt like the whole world collapsed because he was guided by his father how to live meaningfully. After he gathered all his energy and courage to rebuild his world with his father's spirit, he encountered an unfriendly environment where he noticed people's reluctance to approach his story with "negative energy". He was taken by his peers as "a wreck" and was "a child from a single-parent family" who was less likely to succeed by his teachers with such a stereotype. Worse still, he was deflated by his mother, who was dating "a more important person". He chose to resist against her mother and punish her for her "ruthlessness" through his academic failure.

Xiong was at a loss through tracking practice that had allocated him to a lower-track homeroom, which he believed did not deserve his academic ability. Xiong traced this “misallocation” back to his parents’ irresponsibility when he was facing one of the most important events of his life—the senior high school entrance examination. Given the status of the fact of the power asymmetry in the family, Xiong failed again, just as expected, when he attempted to make her mother recognize her lack of concern in the senior high school entrance examination and get her to understand his frustrations in front of this major setback. He felt disconnected from his current classmates, whom he believed were “not from the same world” and was given negative labels by his peers, which exacerbated his situation with a troubled identity.

Ting’s entangled and devastating emotions reminded me that there is still an array of high-performing persons—especially women, were suffering from “impostor syndrome” for historical reasons, a product of their childhood grieving experience overshadowed by the father’s authority from the family of origin, which they are not aware of anyhow. Ting’s mother often employs the metaphor of an elaborately-carved diamond to describe a well-cultivated person, from which she finds the proof to justify her extremely high standards that she uses to discipline her daughter. However, this demanding mother fails to make her daughter unfold in the way she has expected.

To understand people’s behaving, we must understand the hidden meaning systems they adhere to. Ting’s mother talked about that she was raised up with harsh parents who believed “nothing comes into shape until it is knocked by a hammer”. She believed that she was benefited from this strict parenting though it previously tortured her in that assisted her to get on the path towards becoming a teacher—her ideal career. On the other hand, paradoxically, she demonstrated low confidence in many ways. For example, she had similar expression multiple times, *“I know I’m cruel to myself, but I can’t help punishing myself for being incapable or imperfect—if I can’t respond to students’ questions or fail in my child’s education.”* Even when she was regarded as “an overqualified teacher”, she could not help becoming anxious because she related her excellent work recognized by her colleagues not with her expertise or capability but rather a far greater amount of “mechanical time investment”, “excessive preparation”, and her parents’ long-lasting influences which made her keeping spurring herself. What has been often expressed as well is that,

*“It’s problematic and dangerous if you feel good and happy. Pain does not necessarily mean suffering but is a sign of progress. So feeling pain is the right state, especially for a Chinese woman.”*

Ting’s mother has accumulated abundant moral capital recognized by her colleagues and friends, which constructs her identity as a moral model. This identity equipped her with symbolic power which she could employ to discipline her child on the high moral ground free from reproach from the outside world. In this “suffocative” world with absolute power, Ting, as the repressed, needs an immense amount of time to deal with her various intense negative emotions which are subjectively experienced and difficult to express, which greatly hinders her from thriving. Ting revealed her confusion and pain by saying that when she was trying to talk about her experiences of being repressed, she felt guilty immediately, and the audience suspected and denied her emotions concerning her mother’s high morality and her identity as a well-respected teacher. These intertwined emotions cannot be adequately understood by people, including her mother, of course. The mother saw what Ting had been suffering as a means of training and exercises making a person stronger, courageous, and more powerful, which facilitated the ultimate success and happiness. The image created in Ting’s mother’s harsh remarks seems to be repeatedly proved in reality. Those harsh condemn dwarfs Ting, who should not necessarily have to be a victim of the self-fulfilling prophecy of incapability.

These unsuccessful middle-class children’s stories reflect the limitation of understanding people’s status quo through the lens of social class without a consideration of their concrete experiences. It is also worth noting that there is little evidence that the Chinese middle-class, especially the older generation, have shared a common cultural identity. A changing society with an astounding speed demonstrates a pronounced cultural-lag phenomenon. As is discussed in the beginning of chapter seven, remarkable differences are detected between the Chinese middle-class of the older generation and of the younger generation. The younger middle-class are becoming to draw a moral boundary between other groups by releasing subtle messages as taste, lifestyle, dressing, expression, and self-presentation in both real space and cyberspace. The older middle-class are growing up with stories of factional struggles, political persecution, economic difficulties, and life repression. Their experiences and child-rearing strategies are

unavoidably branded with traces of history. Thus it is perhaps more accurate to take the middle-class of the older generation as people who are struggling between two contrast cultures or people living in the crevice of two cultural boxes. They can be very different since their actions can be modified by other variables, among which the professional career is critical. For example, Miao's mother seems to be more "modern", which is reflected by her fitness consciousness for keeping slim—a middle-class aesthetic taste, her equality concept without emphasizing authority and obedience in the parent-child relationship, her exquisite dressing style and so on. In the interview, Miao's mother reported that she had good knowledge about different people in society and mentioned several times that she was benefited from her job-hopping experiences, which provided her precious opportunities to learn about the bigger picture—society. On the contrary, Ting's mother seems to lie close to the traditional end of the continuum. She pays little attention to her herself; her emotions are always bound up with the performances of her daughter and students; she highlights parents' authority and children's obedience, just like many underclass and working-class parents. Here I quoted what Ting's mother had said, "*I can't look away from my students and child, and they occupy all my time and energy, so my emotions are always around them. I have bad knowledge about other things beyond school, but I'm not sorry about that because I have no interest in the outside world. Compared to face those farfetched, shambolic, and immoral things in society, I'd rather devote myself in the pure land to correct those children and seek to grow cohorts of students.*" As can be seen, "correction" and "authority relations" serve as moral codes guiding how she is navigating in her career life, and her existed propensity is strengthened by multiple practices in her professional career.

## 8.4 A packing summary and explanation for the within-school educational reproduction and mobility puzzle

In general, research findings boil down to these structural explanation for the educational myth through the dynamical interaction between the institutional habitus and individual habitus. The school is located in an area that has witnessed an ocean of dramatic transformations. In social life, every item has its symbolic meaning, and is given a particular value according to its observed performances in terms of

modernity, civilization, and bureaucratization. With this logic, it is undoubtedly natural that people in less-developed areas should follow their counterparts who reside in more-developed areas. As such, this is an area where people are struggling in the crevice of two cultures, which is reflected by the social representation that people speak a “weird” dialect between the local and the urban as they are paying impressive efforts to imitate the urban dialects. China’s tradition of respecting intellectuals, people’s awareness of knowledge society, the dislocation of social classes and increasingly scarce mobility, together ignites the increasingly involved education landscape with students clustering on the over-packed academic race track.

With the urbanization process, the school is facing tremendous challenges embracing children hailing from different areas with the social origin of the underclass, the working-class, and the middle-class, and at the same time its reforms are sensitively in tune with the bigger environment. While inequality happens in the educational opportunity when the school is hiring its students where *guanxi*— an established part of the culture, is not uncommon, the school has been making adaptive adjustments to the ever-changing social context and trying to grasp every opportunity to solidify its reputation, ensuring its self-maintenance and having recycled its important factors by carefully balancing survival crises and durability.

Through a careful examination of those architecture and their spatial relationship as the materialization of public institutions as well as those on-going practices and events, four mechanisms of the school’s self-reasoning are detected, namely, the proliferation and subdivision of the sub-systems, impression management, military-style governance, and myths creation. On-campus practices are guided by the binary code which differentiates academically high-achieving students with privileged habitus and underachievers with unprivileged habitus. Knowledge inside the school is quite routinized and the school only selectively interacts with the environment via the structural coupling. The clumsy high wall which segregates teacher residential community and blends obtrusively with the environment, and the campus broadcast where the background melody gives to particular practices and comes to an abrupt end can be taken as footnotes of overwhelmingly powerful bureaucracy. The juxtaposition of rigid spatial segregation

and working-hours' colonization of the spare time has kidnapped teachers' life. In this scenario, teachers spend a grinding number of hours trying to correct students' minds and behaviors, keep them on the "right" track and promote their overall performances. Teachers' personal integrity is crushed, the space that allows for reflections is severely compressed, their education ideal is severely shattered, and the sense of pride for being meaningful "people's teacher" is fading away. The sense of achievement cannot be ignited through hollow educational metaphors deliberately shaping teachers or discourses defining teachers, but only through solid practices where there is a room for reflections of the relationship between teach and learn as well as means and objects and through certain freedom to nurture other kinds of good students who are productive for society in the long run. But under the current model, teachers' free time is severely squeezed and a high proportion of their free time is even tailored around those endlessly emerging problems that might undermine students' exam results, from which they somehow feel less meaningful compared with the older cohort of teachers. Their life-world is increasingly colonized by the imposed bureaucratic system.

Those "notorious problems"— problems people hate and want to cancel such as overload or involution<sup>58</sup> finally become unresolvable. When reforms are about to be introduced, having a bigger scenario out of

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<sup>58</sup> At present, involution (inward roll) steps outside of the academic community and suddenly becomes a buzzword that hovers on people's lips in China. Involution was an academic term coined in 1936 by Alexander Coldenweise to describe the phenomenon that once a cultural mode has formed a certain pattern, it fails to stabilize itself or change itself into a superior form but instead, it increasingly complicates itself, causing weak ROI. Inspired by this concept, Clifford Geertz detected agricultural involution in 1963, which brought repetitive farming life, pushing for no progress in Indonesia's Java Island. Prasenjit Duara put forward "state involution" which is represented by China in 1987, which implies that state institutions do not seek to improve effectiveness, but only copy or expand their administrative functions and established relationship. Chinese historian Zongzhi Huang also observed the phenomenon of involution when he studied the agrarian society of old China in 1992. He found that when the land stays unchanged, increasingly overcrowded people only led to ineffectual intensive farming without actual value, causing "hidden unemployment". Involution, as a term opposite to evolution, is something that simply spirals in itself, pursuing meaningless perfect which inevitably causes tremendous resource waste. Nowadays, this word is increasingly used when people find that the society is "going crazy" and themselves are always in a disadvantageous place with mountains of competitors for a position, high or low, and with tons of pressure for keeping this position, feeling uneasy, angry, hopeless, meaningless, and desperate, but regrettably, they are imprisoned in this fast-spinning rotating system and cannot retreat from this cut-throat game since retreat can be criticized as a kind of moral failure in this social context.

the target domain is of vital importance because the targeted system only interacts with the environment via structural coupling. Without a careful study of the system and its outside environment and the means of communication, and strategies of situating the problems into the larger picture, chances are that the so-called reforms only could serve the purpose of counteracting people's complaints, promoting people's faith in problem-solving— though superficial, as well as enhancing short-term social solidarity at the most. With that binary code where students are treated as trivial machines which only outputs scores and ranks, "illegal" shadow education outside school hots up. As a response to counteract rote learning and students' "high marks, but low qualities", the so-called quality education exacerbates the academic performances of lower-class children, and paradoxically makes the academic burden increasingly heavier. Patriotic education, which the political system deems to be important, is always bundled with academically high-performing students, treating them as vehicles for spreading political thoughts in the school field. High-performing students' identity as good students can never be emphasized and intensified in various situations and events at school. The purpose is obvious— so as to make them high-profile in various moments, especially those sacred ones that temporarily suspend academically relevant operations, and to construct them as resources for those substandard performers for the purpose of making as many academically high-achieving students as possible. We can get a glimpse of the school's institutional habitus through a series of conventional operations for transforming bad students and producing good students— who are called "the trained talents", with students who are "not cut out for study" being increasingly marginalized.

After an ethnographical study of the school field with the aim of a firm grasp on detecting its institutional habitus, my focus shifts to student's individual habitus through observations and interviews with students' behaviors and narratives as focuses, looking into how tensions arise when students navigate in the school field with those multipoint expected or unexpected encounters. In a nutshell, I detected different types of parenting in these three social groups, resulting in children's different categories of habitus. Unlike those of the western world, parenting strategies of different social groups can overlap, rendering a much more complicated parenting landscape, which offers a scenario where teachers' influences come into play. Those predominant parenting strategies for each class are mainly responsible for educational inequality,

but on the other hand, the cross-links between different parts may in part explain—not as the sole explanation for the upward or downward mobility, as is found in the sample of the underclass- and working-class children who have achieved an academic breakthrough with a turning-point story. Especially, some ambivalent or inconsistent elements in parenting which mirrors the milieu of dramatic social transformations, being synchronized with teachers as the trailblazers, could paradoxically facilitate a transformation of children's established habitus.

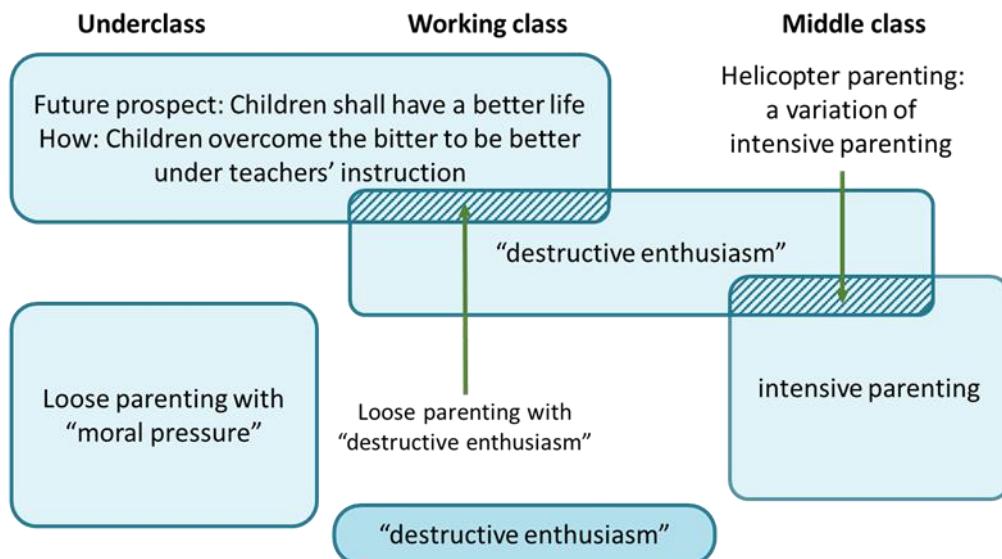


Figure 8.4.1 Parenting patterns of these three groups

For underclass and working-class parents, with a relatively strong pragmatic taste, although they consider study is something bitter rather than interesting, it helps to fulfill the upward-mobility aspiration. They believe for gaining success, children only need to endure such bitterness and mechanically follow teachers' instruction. Loose parenting is similar to "accomplishment of natural growth", but is not exactly the same, which usually includes parents' higher educational expectations on children with the logic of not repeating their life journey because of the juxtaposition of those observed upward mobility or even "leaping" opportunities and scarce cultural competence. Those two groups of parents are common in that they have a loose parenting pattern—they usually do not structure their children's daily activities. For example, a bunch of students recalled their "happy childhood" where they often visited relatives and played on the

weekend. But parenting of these two groups differs a lot in that, underclass parents put moral pressure on children, expecting them to economically support the family and shift the destiny of the whole family in the future, while many working-class parents embody much “destructive enthusiasm” as they have long felt compulsive inequality, grudge and chagrin for living under the forces of “the strong”, especially after they have been shaped by what they saw and heard during rounds of reform of state-owned enterprises.

As was discussed in chapter five, children with the underclass origin in this study were categorized as students who were cut out for study in their observed academic ability in the previous record. Their parents thus believe that their children could overcome the bitter to be better under teachers’ guidance at school while at the same time highlighting children’s moral dedication to the family as a community of shared future. Except for Jiao, underclass parents generally demonstrate loose parenting with certain moral pressure. So as to be well-integrated into the family, children are expected to become “little adults” who are able to shoulder the responsibility which inevitably involves self-sacrifice to some extent. Such responsibility tends to fuel children’s academic ambitions but not necessarily a real interest in knowledge, but it anyhow serves as the spiritual capital that makes up for the lack of the meager cultural capital possessed by the family. The spiritual capital is something that resembles the phototaxis of plants, which keeps whipping those children so as to climb higher and higher like morning glories. Some underclass children— those potential class travelers who are immensely empowered by spiritual capital that is sparked by deep-rooted spells of poverty have achieved academic excellence indeed, but the cost of emotions and subjectivity is immense but is usually ignored, lost in those “soul-stirring” stories with strong moral implications. Besides, although feeling the pinch, there are still considerable underclass-children who are drifting off the path towards their ambitions, which reflects the vulnerability of the spiritual capital and makes the mobility slim. Despite the strength of spiritual capital within children with the underclass origin, spiritual capital is not stable but can be modified by other factors such as adversities and challenges, in response to which those children usually have “I am to be blamed” mindset, especially in this context where failures usually get them ridiculed and those existed cliches or sweeping generalizations of inspiring stories of successful underclass children with the hard-working spirit. Challenges are almost bound to be inevitable as they step into the moral field of the urban key-point

school, which is mirrored by an underclass students' self-deprecating question by asking if his climbing up a tree can be counted as a specialty. The lack of cultural capital and interpersonal relationships makes them gradually get bored and lonely respectively and makes their high-school stage their "watershed moment" towards decadence, especially in the context where their parents have little knowledge about the nitty-gritty of the problem. Underclass children are generally navigating through and shaped by a stream of codes including morality, family commitment, inferiority, little margin for error, and hard-working spirit. In this light, underclass prevailing moral endeavor that is embodied in studies is a double-edged sword, which can be underclass children's immense impulse and also something that devours subjectivity and the source of stress, agony, and shame when children feel that they fail to live up to their parents. The data shows that without the establishment of privileged habitus, those adversities those children silently and subjectively experienced gradually wear away their academic ambition through time.

Working-class parents could adopt "accomplishment of natural growth" when their faith in children's academic excellence has been increasingly wearing off with the increasing negative signs suggested by the exam results as time collapse. But a sizeable number of them still embrace a glimmer of hope. Compared with the other two social groups, working-class students reported a higher incidence of the break-up of their parents' marriage and educational involvement of the extended family, especially the grandmother. In this situation, they also resort to loose parenting— but a type that is moderated by "destructive enthusiasm". Those parents, with the awareness that they are living under others' forces, believe that society is cruel with various "zero-sum games" but children cannot benefit from their social-economic status. Therefore, their parenting is guided by something like "whether get ahead in society or get eliminated", and a "the more you beat the iron, the harder it grows". They expect children to prepare for the cruel society that is waiting ahead of them in advance. The key problem lies in that, those working-class parents fail to clear something which is abstract, like emotion in daily life; besides, they have little knowledge about how it is like to engage in professional jobs, but assume that the "rules" they comprehend and follow are universally applicable, and hence they have confidence in throwing out commands under the belief that the salt they have had is more than the rice their children have had. Verbal attack and corporal punishment are adopted now and then. They expect that their children can live through

a flood of tests and frustrations and become “the strong”. They are similar to underclass parents in that parents and children share no integrated moral space that allows for deep and meaningful cross-generational conversations. When some unpleasant things happened, such as campus violence with their children as victims, they are intensely disappointed with their “unbearably poor-spirited” children. With this mindset, they behave clumsily in front of children’s adversity—they do not adequately support their children and solve the problem, but with the philosophy of “victims are to be blamed as well” should blame their children or even resort to corporal-punishment events, causing the secondary damage on their young children. There is actually a similar structure between parents’ binary code of “the strong” or “the victim” and the school’s code of “good students” and “bad students”, which points to a morbid fascination with (false) science of success, repressing young students’ minds. Those children feel disappointed with the way their parents and teachers have handled their case and some children begin to align themselves with their brothers, with whom they share a meaning system together. They are enthusiastically involved in the sub-cultural group, and even cross the boundary, turning themselves into high-profile bullies, which has become the “unsolvable puzzle” nagging teachers and parents.

Middle-class parents, with a better “feel for game” and knowledge about assisting their children spiritually and academically, instill some guiding principles into their children and inspire them by setting examples. They generally demonstrate active involvements in children’s study, and take the initiative to engage teachers for their children’s sake. In the family, a relatively resilient relationship between parents and children renders a stronger emotional bond which facilitates children’s expressions of feelings and convincing arguments, which are elaborated codes contributing to academic excellence. Besides, many middle-class parents offer children cultural immersion experiences, purchase private lessons for them, unlock their potential, help them to weather the storm, and seek to turn bane into a boon. Especially, attending private lessons, museums, and concerts are parents’ experiences purchase, which, compared to material purchase, has more to do with children’s identity-making. All those practices, in general, cultivate children’s affinity for the school context and help them to gain a clear advantage at school. Privileged habitus and cultural capital possessed by the family can be transformed into children’s academic achievements, which is also proved by two families where when parents take children’s steepest

dive in the test results as a wake-up call and restore the previous family environment, children achieve positive transformations in quick succession while their counterparts can ill afford. However, a variation of concerted cultivation—the helicopter parenting is also found in the data when intensive parenting is blended with “destructive enthusiasm”—the typical culture of the working-class. When this happens, it may cause even more devastating consequences to children compared with the working-class children as middle-class parents are intensively involved in children’s packed schedule, thus repressing their subjectivity and minds to a greater extent, making them traumatized children. Their anguish also derives from the huge gap between prevalent higher educational expectations on them and their perception of themselves as “rare events”.

Although habitus transformation and meaningful academic breakthroughs are difficult in a short amount of time, it did happen. Given the unpredictability of “discipline and management” and the significance of “emotional craft” for students’ academic-performance positive transformations, teaching staff is confronted with challenges which encourage teachers’ identity of a combination of the gardener—the traditional teacher with the “candle spirit” and the sheepherder—the neoteric teacher with egoism and high overall efficiency. The habitus-formation process is a self-relocation process. Throughout this journey, students have gained new perspectives and different kinds of knowledge for better decoding the system and equipping themselves with a feel for game. The newly-acquired pattern of thinking gradually becomes part of them, and changes the way they perceive and behave, as well as choices they make, giving rise to academic breakthroughs and making them potential class travelers. I reveal a pattern which I call a successful pattern with teachers as trailblazers. It is with these following procedures.

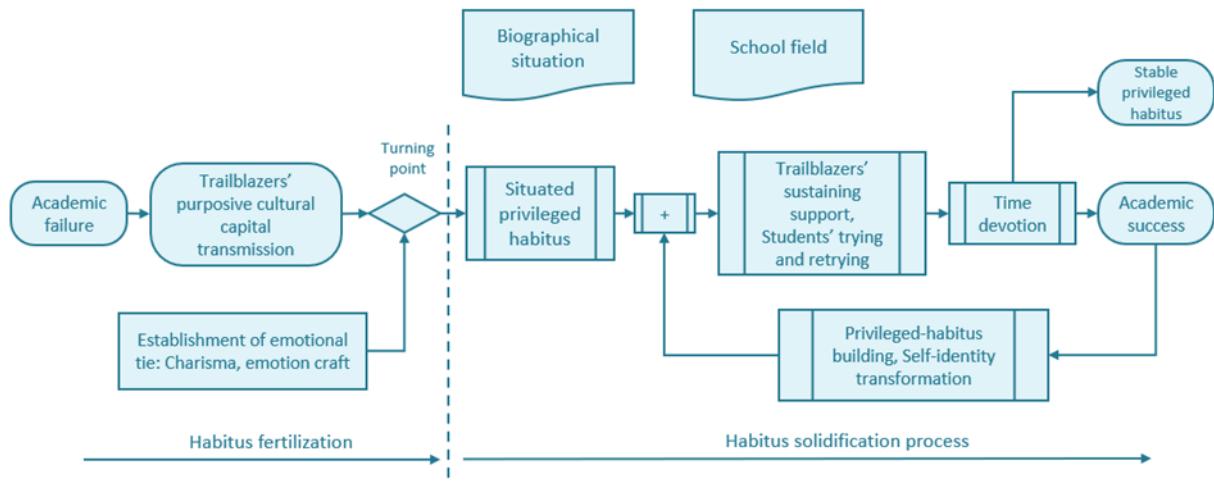


Figure 8.4.2 One successful pattern of habitus transformation with teachers as trailblazers

Habitus transformation is a systematic project with elements being linked with one another. The first and perhaps the most important step is to establish an emotional tie with those targeted children. Teachers show different competence for doing that. I found no evidence showing the stereotype that female teachers are more emotionally capable. Rather, charisma is important and is the foundation for a successful establishment. Besides, the complex emotion craft is also important. Storytelling is the most common method. Storytelling should be synchronized with good timing and occasion, which makes the story convincing and can arouse resonance and greatly empower students. This highly emotional context has the possibility to spark students' thoughts and reflections, and helps them gain new perspectives and form situated privileged habitus which is somehow struggling with the old habitus. At this stage, teachers usually need cooperation from parents or class leaders. Especially, for working-class students, teachers usually need to pull them out of the sub-cultural group physically and offer them a micro-environment before the establishment of such emotional connection. With teachers' sustaining support, students' trying and retrying, time devotion, especially, when minor progress is achieved and recognized, it is likely to lead to better performances. Better performances, in turn, change identity perception, positively enhance the effect of the situated privileged habitus, and then consolidate it, solidify it and encourage a stable privileged habitus. Anyhow, it is an arduous and winding process where those potential class travelers

bravely discard a high portion of the self and grow uniquely for better decoding the system, which involves a stream of sufferings.

Students' academic performances are necessarily of the class-specific origin to a large extent. School shapes educational inequality unevenly and dynamically. On the one hand, school as an inequality reliever that is found in turning-point stories is tremendously inspiring. However, "lucky" class travelers with positive habitus transformation and academic breakthroughs are pitifully few. For example, after close scrutiny, I found that trailblazers of the underclass group were either with a rural background or at an older age. In the former situation, the teacher's rural origin contributes to bringing closer the distance between the teacher himself and the student with a similar family status when the teacher was narrating his life story for inspiring the student. As was stated, it was universally accepted that China's modernity originated in 1978. Since then, modernity has been unevenly distributed between areas and the overall level has been growing through time. Hence for the latter situation, older teachers have longer and deeper immersion experience of the community culture in the environment with no or very little modernity, which probably renders them more human touch. When poverty-stricken children find themselves different in an urban school, they try hard to be included and be treated morally. Academically-relevant interactions between the teacher and the student are insufficient to drive students' feeling of unfriendly environment and their grim school days away, where some intangible things like human touch and community sentiments come into play, bringing sacredness and strong impetus for not letting their trailblazers down.

Even though, we should not neglect that inequality stays wide awake schoolwide and family origin has a part in underachieving students' "misfortune". In most cases, teachers would firstly handpick potential "would-be talents" with "academically savvy" before they decide to give special treatments with their packed schedule and limited energy. When teachers commence to select those would-be trained talents according to their perceived potential in a non-random way, inequality inevitably takes place. Inequality is also related to gender when some teachers actually devalue female students when they unconsciously declare that have a higher educational expectation on male students at the high-school stage when "the

difficulty of the knowledge increases". The school always suggests its moral superiority by declaring its differences from other social systems, especially those benefit-oriented institutions by offering students a unified responsible life and treating them equally without discrimination. But inevitably, it falls into the myth of the larger social landscape. When teachers are looking for those potential "would-be trained talents", they have little awareness that they favor the culture of a certain class, and they unconsciously maintain the unequal system whose legitimacy is achieved through invisible cultural capital. Students are navigating through myriads of myths. It is not until they begin to know them that they have already finished an important journey in the school theatre without rehearsal. What I am trying in this study, is to document those scenes for others' reference, to interpret the myths as I could, and to analyze the inequality behind those myths.

## 8.5 Limitations of this research

It is quite normal in scientific research that different methods may lead to different results, which is known as observation effects or path effects. This phenomenon can also be explained by Luhmann's concept of "operation"— what items we mark matters. The study is explorative, which attempts to understand the nexus of intangible stuff like culture, power, experiences, meaning-making, emotion. However, it goes without saying that the study has limitations. Firstly, perhaps most importantly, it may lack objectivity to some degree. The first factor would be the neutrality of those self-reported data—the subjective reality, which poses a question about what is reality when I talk about reality on earth. Stories can be coined and reconstructed in different contexts with different audiences and are also shaped by recent happenings, which makes narrators unreliable and stories misleading. As such, the second one would be the researcher bias, which was related to the fact that I was part of this study, and it was I who did the interpretation work. Chances are that there is a strand of unrecognized prejudice obdurately residing in my mental map that undermines objectivity. The second problem would be in what extent my informants have unveiled their life story to me, especially for underclass children who harbor complex emotions and are usually leery of showing their emotions and pains. The third one would be the challenge between involvement and detachment. I found the fieldwork emotionally exhausting. I am aware that I am an empathetic person

in general and perhaps not an excellent story weaver. It was a challenge for me to deal with the relationship between immersion and detachment, which meant that I needed to keep a proper distance from those stories and involved emotions that allows for a systematic observation and dispassionate story-weaving, and to consider my multiple roles in the field, as a researcher, and a person who has gone through this process. Sometimes, as a person who has experienced that period of life's journey, I did feel an intensely strong urge to help and transform some students who got stuck with the sentimental wish that they could have a vision of life prospects. The result was that sometimes I was trapped in some entangled stuff, and I resorted to painstaking reflections so as to make continuous distinctions between what I had observed and interviewed and my feelings and deductions. Another main problem of this research involves data distortion because I was an intruder who does not belong to the ecosystem of values and customs which people must follow, and my presence might— perhaps is bound to change people's behaviors, though I told my informants that I should be treated as nothing when I was having those on-the-spot observations. Lastly, generalization is another impressive problem. I touch only the tip of the iceberg of the education myth. The case I investigated is a school with a relatively high-performing student group in a transforming city that is neither super modern nor backward. The generalization is also undermined by the sample with particular features that are shaped by the level of modernity and cohort as China is with strong heterogeneous and fast social transformations. This conclusion cannot be easily generalized to other situations. This problem seems to be inevitable because of the mission and purposes of this research which seeks to understand the world of meaning as well as the cultural production process, and is also due to the non-probability research methods.

I paid great attention to making sure that threats that harm objectivity should be reduced to the barest minimum. For example, I studied those spatial arrangements and transformations. Narratives of architecture possess a higher level of neutrality, being free from participant bias. Likewise, I also compared people's narratives and behaviors and paid attention to those ambivalences. Besides, I considered multiple voices as my informants also covered some teachers and parents for studying students' overall experiences. Furthermore, when I found inconsistencies in narrators' expressing, I revisited those questions, and requested narrators to rethink about them. And I examined the recorded data. If there were

anything I was not sure about, I contacted my informants and asked them to further clarify those items. Despite my multiple endeavors such as triangulation, I am well aware that I still cannot transcend those inherent limitations and it is impossible to get rid of biases.

## 8.6 Theoretical contributions and practical significance

This work offers an answer to the reproduction puzzle and mobility puzzle respectively in secondary education by examining the tension between the school's institutional habitus and students' individual habitus. This work is unique in that it has examined both educational reproduction and room for possible mobility through the combination of the lens of the moral field of the school as well as students' overall experiences and their sense-making from a non-adult and non-elite perspective in the framework of time and space in Chinese secondary education. Paying attention to complicated reality in China where guanxi and informal "accommodation" play a great role, I found how private operations in the admission process where school officials and parents deliberately estimate the grey space and privately exploit an advantage undermines some students' educational opportunities, causing inequality in educational opportunities. I then have a detailed examination of inequality in the educational process.

In this study, the school is not only taken as a shared space that imposes students a certain pattern of lifestyle and encourages privileged habitus but also the space that witnessed exclusions, bullies, and the soil nurturing particular sub-culture. The school institution is put as equally centralized in this work for better understanding its ethos that exerts long-lasting influences, from which light can be shed on what the desired institutional habitus there is, which is the foundation for further analysis concerning how family habitus integrate or struggle with institutional habitus. I examine the school by placing it in its wider social and historical context, for which I study the interaction between educational policies and the school, the interaction between society and the school, and its various internal practices as well as those minor details of changes in its space arrangement along with oral-history interviews with people who have lived through these transformations. Especially, although spaces are paid much attention in the academic community, study on the social process and the involved discourses behind the spatial

transformation is rare. The employment of transverse scanning, the longitudinal scrutiny through oral-history interviews, as well as the unofficial inspection, are believed to help to meet the commitment of being critical that has described at the beginning of this work by making the absent present. In so doing, a better understanding of the moral field of the school institution where people's stories are unfolding along different lines is achieved.

Young students are treated as dynamical individuals who keep evolving and composing the new chapters of their life in a given social context which enables and limits a certain pattern of behaviors—the current space and the previous one, which might differ a lot due to dramatic social changes. In the narrative interview, students were asked to reconstruct their memories by picking up clues of memorable episodes and events that have shaped their identities. Students' narratives about their previous encounters help to understand what the value system they stick to, what life there is that they are facing, and is supposed to be. Only by explicating what the desired institutional habitus and students' individual habitus shaped by their previous experiences there are, and also the complicated interaction between these two, a better understanding of what the confusions, tensions, plights, and troubles those disadvantaged students are facing, and the academic disparity among peers can be reached. With a clear picture of these dynamical interactions, a better understanding of how some students resist the power that has been imposed on them, how transformations in academic performances are possible, and how the on-going practices moderate their perception of identity can be achieved.

In the exam-oriented context of secondary education in China, teachers and parents are authorized with absolute dominance in educational discourses and activities, which brings biased knowledge of the educational landscape. By placing disempowered young students on the center of the stage and enabling their voices to be heard and their stories to be documented, and their emotions and sense-making to be taken into account, this work sheds light on the relationship between young students' experiences and academic achievements from their own narratives with the bottom-up perspective, which is taken for granted. Besides, the commitment of studying students' twists and turns involving embarrassment, frustrations, struggles, transformations, and pain enables a full consideration that has been given to emotions, as "psychic landscape of social class" (Reay, 2005). This approach enables me to understand

how individuals' ups and downs are intertwined with the wider social context, and further clarify how those experiences shape advantages and disadvantages in students' academic performances, thus converting "students' stories" to less problematic and reflexive "stories of students".

In sum, I offered a picture of the moral field of the school institution and the institutional habitus that the school encourages. I studied high school students' experiences adopting the framework of "time and space", which is the "basic categories of human existence" (Harvey, 1989a: 201). I showed not only the on-going practices, but also individuals' history through their storytelling. Trajectory brings chronological condensed fluid slides with multipoint measurements, behind each of which are people's ups and downs and vivid life stories. Lengthwise scrutiny of their academic achievements facilitates me to examine the way in which people's current situations, as continuity or discontinuity of their prior experiences, has been negotiated and possible prospects for individuals. In so doing, the complicated nexus of sense-making, experiences, discourses, meaning, and power is clarified for achieving a deeper understanding of educational inequality and mobility in the domain of Chinese secondary education.

It should be noted that many conclusions are only applicable to education status in some key-point schools in cities with mediocre modernity since the educational landscape is quite different among different areas. In this ever-changing context, more investigations should be carried out in other areas simultaneously for getting a bigger picture of the landscape and the cultural dynamics in secondary education in a particular historical period. Nowadays, the younger middle-class parents in tier-1 cities are going further on the track of "concerted cultivation" and "intensive parenting".<sup>59</sup> Especially, well-educated women returning to the family as professional agents for children's upbringing and education is over the horizon, which challenges the popular dual-earner family mode since the 1950s. It paradoxically goes against the so-called "quality-oriented education" that "lightens the burden of parents and students"— the important agendas of "China's education reforms". These family's project for establishing and preserving their children's academic advantage is a huge, systematic project, including choosing and trading school estate,

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<sup>59</sup> See K Yang, "Motherhood as Educational Agent: Changes in Motherhood in the Context of Market-Oriented Education". *Journal of Chinese Women's Studies*, Mar. 2018, No. 2 Ser. No.146.

academically guiding the child, emotionally supporting the child, enlarging the child's envision and tapping the potential, following up the educational market that offers high-quality shadow education, allying with other experienced middle-class parents in the new media for an establishment of the supporting educational system, integrating resources and making it serve the child's needs better, formulating the individualized programs, promoting child's competitiveness and socially-recognized capacities, and marketing the child to a top-notched school. Women's returning the family is taken as a solution against the risks that children face in education, and also a scheme facing the fiercely competitive "tournaments" that happens in education when its operations are strictly guided by the binary code of "academically good students" and "academically bad students", the dazzling market of shadow education with sharply uneven resources, and little experiences that could be borrowed from the older generation. On the other hand, social expectations on teachers for offering professional knowledge as well as other overall service seem to be increasingly unrealistic in the structurally differentiated society. This is why in the current time, parents are definitely required to participate in children's education, to be always available in the instant message APPs for learning and communicating, to help supervise and grade children's homework, to manage their emotions when they are facing the competitive and risky environment which might degrade them as a "threat", and even to establish the "parent committee"<sup>60</sup> for sharing those overall non-academic services and communicating teachers and parents better as a "bridge". This causes risks in many aspects like duties and responsibilities in the professional job and family life. With the increasing complexity in education, further changes and sub-differentiation will definitely happen not only in the domain of education, but also in the family and the workplace.

My work has a conversation with many sociologists. Generally speaking, it is safely concluded that

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<sup>60</sup> It is becoming a popular practice that homeroom teachers ask for the establishment of the "parent committee" where one in ten parents serves as committee members who bridge the teachers and other parents, assume duties such as the construction of the homeroom culture by designing and offering a diversity of programs, other non-academic stuff such as raising money and purchasing goods for different extra-curricular activities, measuring school uniform sizes, etc. Nowadays, younger middle-class parents feel that their private time is stolen by overtime and children's education involvement. Despite the hectic and packed schedule, considerable parents are willing to act as members of the "parent committee" because it signifies more opportunities for them to engage teachers.

Bourdieu's critical theory is compelling when applied to a society with few turbulences and a relatively high level of inequality. Hence it enjoys more theoretical strengths to the 21st century China compared to the last historical period of China. Firstly, I examine Bourdieu's "capital-habitus-field" theory with a new population in the Chinese social context. China and France differ a lot in terms of political system and cultures, but the education system is both designed with a sharp hierarchy, with very few schools monopolizing the apex of the pyramid. I found the autonomous correspondence between middle-class culture and requirements of the education system proves not to be very concise in Chinese society. On the one hand, in the exam-oriented education system, the influence of cultural capital can be moderated by hard work and shadow education. On the other hand, taking study as a moral endeavor make underclass children believe that they cannot afford to lose the game, which is a kind of spiritual capital that makes up for the lack of cultural capital possessed by their family. Secondly, so far, middle-class culture, especially of the older generation, is not so uniform. Because of the short amount of time of modernization, cultural lag is necessarily obvious. Child-rearing practices are not only class-based but also historically specific. After the founding of the Republic of China, high-profile persons gained political capital through a series of events, and it takes time for them to grasp the economic and cultural capital in the subsequent socialist reform. In this light, it is not difficult to conclude that social distinction in China was shaped by political power and market forces. Thirdly, contemporary middle-class culture is immensely influenced by professions "in the System" or "out of the System", since parents with an "in the System" job have relatively more time to involve in children's education and are likely to put more emphasis on academic excellence which is exactly the prerequisite of landing an "in the System" job.

My work also has a conversation with Lareau. In "Unequal Childhoods", Lareau found that most working-class parenting has something to do with "accomplishment of natural growth". With a new population, I observed some situations when "natural growth" is moderated by other forces, resulting in different outcomes. I found that underclass parents' "natural growth" is moderated by moral pressure highlighting the transformation of the destiny of the whole family, while working-class parents' "natural growth" is moderated by destructive enthusiasm which emphasizes "becoming the strong". These two situations lead to two strikingly varied consequences in terms of children's thinking and behaviors at school, rendering different outcomes. When those students initially enter the school, realizing the difference, they once

worked very hard on belonging, but many efforts were not paid off at all. In front of frustrations, underclass children have “I am to be blamed” on their lips. On the contrary, many working-class students have “others are to be blamed” discourse. Frustrations make underclass students blame or even harm themselves corporally like cutting their fingers while not giving up trying but such endeavors are not in a continuous state, which greatly harms their academic performances. Working-class students are more likely to engage in the sub-cultural group because of trauma caused by destructive enthusiasm. When they completely internalize the “bad child” label, they become school bullies. Their rebellious behaviors are not like what Willis has described those “foot soldiers of modernity” in his work in at least two ways: they show symbolic respect and compliance to teachers; while they are seeking fun, they calculate the cost and play the “cat-catches-mice” game; their hit targets are selective—those high-performing students are usually not their victims. Underclass children usually do not have such behavioral patterns because their families have pain economically and mentally, which suppresses the intention, and they feel guilty because parents sacrifice to get them at school.

Class type	Underclass children	Working-class children
Discourses in front of frustrations	“I am to be blamed”	“Others are to be blamed”
Behaviors in front of frustrations	(1) Blame or even harm themselves corporally while not giving up trying; (2) Such endeavors can be easily modified and in an intermittent state.	Are more likely to step into sub-cultural groups and become school bullies
Rebel or not rebel?	The inhibitory factor is related to the fact that families have pain economically and mentally	Rebellious pattern: (1) Show symbolic compliance and respect to teachers and only exploit management loopholes; (2) Have selective hit targets: High-performing students are not their victims

**Table 8.6 Underclass and working-class children’s reactions in front of frustrations**

Lareau found concerted cultivation is adopted by most middle-class parents. My finding partially confirms her finding. While many middle-class parents adopt concerted cultivation, lower-status parents are usually not limited to “accomplishment of natural growth” but with the strong “not to be” logic. They demonstrate anxiety that pervades their children’s education at different levels. Besides, I found something else with a set of population. Firstly, I have included those potential class travelers—lower-class students who have gradually formed a privileged habitus at school and achieved academic excellence in my data, and found one successful pattern resulting in this transformation. Furthermore, I further analyze how some middle-class students fail, and found that this happens when parents are unable to activate their possessed capital. In most cases, this situation has something to do with less time investment, especially for those parents with an “out of the System” job and time famine. This situation is also related to the fact that some parents’ intensive parenting is married with working-class culture—destructive enthusiasm, which has something to do with the “cultural lag”; this situation actually implies the fragility and capriciousness of the current middle-class membership in China where the anxious middle-class feels threatened by the possibility of class downgrading. A cascade of those moments involving destructive emotions makes children navigate a lot like a pendulum between “aspirations” and “trauma”, which results in schizophrenic situations and thus compromises and undermines children’s academic performances in the long run. Another finding would be that, if I sub-categorized high-performing middle-class children and found that the top children among them show strong interests in language subjects, which has something to do with the situation that language subjects require the highest level of long-standing capital input of the family.

Class type	Lareau’s work	My work
Common points	Lower-class parenting is with loose parenting— similar to “accomplishment of natural growth” but with a higher educational expectation in most cases, and middle-class parenting is with “concerted cultivation” in general.	
In which aspects I enrich the theory with a new	Did not further discuss situations when “accomplishment of natural growth” is moderated by other forces.	“Accomplishment of natural growth” can be moderated by “destructive enthusiasm”, resulting in children’s different patterns of thinking and behaviors.

population?	Did not include those potential “class travelers” who have experienced sharp transformations in academic performances as the research sample.	This work has included a broader spectrum of children: (1) High-performing lower-class children: Challenges and opportunities of habitus transformation; (2) Middle-class children as “rare events”: Parents fail to activate their possessed capital, which is related to parents’ less time investment or helicopter parenting (3) The best of the good: Language subjects serve as the touchstone indicating the amount of capital possessed by a family is high
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**Table 8.6.2 Similarities and differences between “*Unequal Childhood*” and this work**

My work has a conversation with Reay as well. Reay suggested that the habitus concept can be understood at the institutional level as well. I explore the school’s institutional habitus not only by examining the on-going practices but also those finished spatial practices. In doing so, I offer another kind of narrative that reflects the complexity and also arrive at a deeper understanding of how institutional habitus evolves and deposits. Reay studied the influence of mothers’ emotional capital on children’s academic achievement and found that emotional capital is related to social class not in the same way like other kinds of capital, and it functions in a complicated way. I found a successful pattern that happened outside the family context with teachers as trailblazers, and I found that teachers’ charisma and emotional-based knowledge are important in this situation.

The practical significance would be that my study offers insights that educators can benefit. My study creates a caring space for disempowering individuals and honors the value of their voice. Many teachers try to make sense of students’ behaviors with a persistent pursuit of teachers’ calling, but their knowledge is practice-based without enough theoretical reflection. Also, the paradox lies in that with some parents’ knowledge about children’s education, there usually emerges a stronger control on children, but not a balance between discipline and “selected ignorance”. School leaders, with a top-down perspective, do not always serve the students well. In the study, I also point out some problematic popular discourses that are

unconsciously employed by educators, which enduringly produce different categories of inequalities. It will be very meaningful to academically, spiritually, and systematically support those students with rural backgrounds because they experience unpleasant discontinuity, and the cost of attaining familiarity with the urban key-point school is high.

## 8.7 Suggestions for future research

I have some suggestions for future study. Firstly, to continue to qualitatively investigate more schools to see how findings conform or collide with mine; also, to character the differences of educational inequality that happens at different educational stages. This is meaningful because nowadays in urban China, there is a growing sense of the cumulative advantage of academic achievements. Hence middle-class parents of the younger generation have a packet of plans for each schooling stage. Secondly, a multi-sited ethnographic study will be immensely valuable. It is rewarding to compare different institutional habitus and their impacts on young students. Further study of a particular school field is also important. Schools are embedded in different educational landscapes and have certain ethos and dispositions that differ from others. People are fighting for education opportunities; but what is easily ignored is that, unless the very few top schools which have been at the top of the pyramid for a long time and can continuously attract resources because of the Mathew Effect, a huge number of schools of different ranks and city types have multiple ways of doing school and schools have fierce battles and are trying to establish themselves through multiple strategies and reforms that follow the tide. For example, a new style of competitions among primary schools has appeared in recent years. Some key-point primary schools in developed metropolises begin to impress society and win financial support with its cultural capital displaying where they mobilize parents, with their social capital, to invite the most prestigious professors— those national academicians, to give a talk at the school where their children enrolled. When the competition is upgraded, that is not enough— schools are involved in another cut-throat game by counting how many times they manage to invite those big names. It will also be academically fulfilling to study how long privileged habitus that lower-class students have gained will last and what structural challenges they face as they move to the next stage by tracing them in tertiary education and subsequent marriage and job opportunities. Last but not least, since the study has found that parents' career reshapes the family culture,

further examination of how a certain occupation systematically distort the class culture and class habitus remains important, especially in a digitalization context where new career choices are emerging and complicated guanxi culture where the rule of games has a fair amount of “flexibility”.

Doing research is something like identifying something hidden in the fog. There is no way to know the entire truth. What scholars do is to make solid research and find a part of the truth. When other scholars touch other parts of truth with different designs and approaches, there will be excitement because findings complement each other, thus offering a bigger picture together. The knowledge of human civilization is accumulated in this manner. For educational inequality, if we had more knowledge about those above-mentioned topics, since the educational landscape is different between areas, it will be beneficial if researchers' findings could impress policy-makers and make them aware that there is perhaps another possibility in addition to the current pattern— those less-developed areas could and should have their own unique patterns, and those areas will not end up humbly copying everything from those most advanced areas under the socially-constructed development discourses, which renders more opportunities for people in a disadvantageous position.

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# Appendix

## Part 1. Preparatory work

### Appendix A. Some reflections before immersion

The pivotal goal of this study is to explore how young students, with their different family backgrounds and unique experiences, are navigating in the educational setting of a particular high school. The school is taken as a social field which witnesses how students' individual habitus is interacting with the institutional habitus. Hence, the school field which is embedded in the broader social context, and students' behaviors and their narratives which reconstruct and string their experiences and perceptions together should be carefully examined.

This work aims to achieve a critically deeper understanding of the taken-for-granted, implicit, unspoken, and hidden meanings that happened in the school setting where people's stories are unfolding by examining trivial stuff. On-the-spot observations of what is happening plus semi-structured interviews concerning background knowledge of the school were conducted. Then I will move to the interview phase for collecting students' life stories. The average length for a separate interview should neither be too long nor too short; a time span of one and a half hours is perhaps appropriate.

The main goal of the narrative inquiry of students' of life-stories is to create a relatively relaxing, comfortable, trusting atmosphere allowing for respondents to talk about their experiences without feeling constraint, including getting to know what constitutes their daily life, for example, what have their important others experienced, how these experienced were told and retold, how were their lives like before they came to the school, and how do they perceive themselves and their relations with the outside world with the passage of time.

For understanding students' prior educational and living experiences, I will interview them about their impressive peak and ebb experiences, plus how they are remembered, the meanings of their sense of their own beings and perception. After the initial material collection, I shall write down what happened without judgment for further analysis and go over again the collected materials when necessary. First of all, I must be aware of the impact of my existence on people in the field. My identity as a Ph.D. candidate at a university in a developed western country will definitely shape their direct impression of me. This situation, in turn, will influence how I am observed and treated by them. In this educational setting where the prestigious-university complex is permeating in the air, I will probably be categorized as "elite" by them, which influences the quality of the collected data. For this concern, I should strategically make efforts to make my informants concentrate on the interview questions, at least bit by bit with the inquiry moving forward, so that they do not need to hide or "correct" something in front of me but can freely tell their stories, entanglements, and even secrets, treating me as an intimate and "unthreatening" friend or nobody.

## **Appendix B. Setting the scene— introducing myself as a researcher and explaining my purpose**

Before I request for the narrative inquiry, I need to introduce myself as a doctoral student who is conducting non-profit research concerning secondary school students' overall living and educational experiences that is undergoing a great transition toward modernity for fulfilling for part of my doctorate in sociology.

Then, I will make a more detailed explanation about my focus, stating that I plan to know them about their previous and current educational experiences which have aroused their self-concept under the framework of the established educational system, school practices and family beliefs, and meanings of those events for them. I should take into account the fact that students are under mounting pressure for Gaokao through the culmination of years of hard work. Also, with the fact that their time is severely structured and squeezed, the majority of high school students have little knowledge about scientific

research at university; my presence will perhaps make them confused. Hence, there might be events that I need to explain something in painstaking detail, which I must recognize ahead of time. I perhaps will patiently tell them that for studying high school students' experiences, I cannot only rely on literature for coming to a conclusion; Instead, I need to be taught by them through their own personal experiences and sense-making of these experiences. I will clarify that I experienced secondary education so many years ago, so I do not have much knowledge about new stuff that young students were experiencing in this very era of rapid changes.

Perhaps I will make some examples to show them some direct impressions that rapid social changes inevitably bring changes on social cliché without showing my opinions or supplying a standard answer. Something floats into my mind suddenly and effortlessly, such as a previous popular myth of "girls with below-average faces outperform good-looking girls in academic studies". I was impressed that several male friends exclaimed that it was a pity that the majority of good-looking girls failed to get admitted to a topnotch university at that time when we entered university when social inequality was less apparent before we witnessed the scrambled commercial housing in metropolises. I had no answer to that myth as a freshman at the university, but many people introduced me to their opinions, among which "a physically attractive girl finds it difficult to concentrate on her studies but is easily distracted by male students who are attracted" was generally accepted. However, now such discourse seems to disappear, or rather, we might get an opposite viewpoint. A female student with an attractive look might be more likely to be socially conceived as a girl with elegant temperate as society is moving towards a higher level of inequality. So that's it! There is always something, telling us that elegant temperate is related to elite habitus, which is most likely to be nurtured in an abundant family, and class is regarded as an important variable to academic achievement. There are other examples of verifying changes in minds. For example, engaging in art is no longer regarded as an unwilling choice for an underachiever uniformly. People tend to think that children from abundant and high-resource families without economic concerns are more likely to pursue art if they have real interests. Also, the only child is not simply labeled as the spoiled "little emperor" like before; an increasing number of people become much more reflexive about information and knowledge available to them. I will explain that I am there to study the possibly changed

patterns in school and the hidden tensions on the edge of different cultures, which have made their experiences possible. I will tell them that during the inquiry, I will play the main role as a reliable and “unthreatening” friend getting to know their stories.

## **Part 2. Syllabus for semi-structured interviews**

### **Appendix C. Knowing about some of the school's behind-the-scenes operations— an interview outline for school official**

In the first section, I asked about basic information about the school, how it works, which also served as warm-up moments.

-I would like to know something about the general situation of the school, including its history, current situations, and future plans.

-How does the school work? Who is involved in major decisions, and how has a decision been reached? For example, classes are grouped into different categories hierarchically, then how are teachers are allocated into different homerooms?

-This school has gone through many social reforms and transformations. Do you think if there exists a particular culture or spirit supporting the school countless times through history in time and space? If so, what kind of culture or ideology is there?

The inconsistency between educational policies and real operational practices might result in educational inequality. Thus a series of questions concerning the concrete hire practices, school regulations, self-identity, plans, and aims of the school were asked like:

-In which way are students recruited?

-Despite the educational policies, I know that there is an elastic operational space for students who use the “back door” in many secondary schools. Would you please tell me more about that?

-When facing multiple backgrounds of the recruited students, in which aspects of the difficulties in the management are increased for the school?

-Do students with inferior backgrounds have any common prevalent problems? Is there any program available to them for helping them to adapt to the new environment?

-What are teachers and students expected to do? Would you introduce to me something about the rewards/penalties system? What do you think of these rules?

-What kind of campus activities are there besides teaching? What is your attitude towards them?

#### **Appendix D. Getting to know more background knowledge through the lens of teachers' experiences— an interview outline for teachers**

I would like to know more about the school by reading literature and interviewing appropriate informants. Thus I worked with some teachers who had worked there for more than twenty years— who are the best qualifiers for telling something that happened in the school in the past which perhaps stays only as internal knowledge. In the section of the spatial changes in the schoolyard, texts were written according to relevant people's memories about the discussions, contradictions, and struggles in those events.

-Why did you choose to work here?

-Do you like the teaching profession and why?

-Can you tell me something concerning significant spatial changes in the schoolyard and how did they happen?

-Please describe past practices which were very different from the current ones, if there are. You can describe any of your past experiences; it can be any events that impressed you. And I would also like to know your opinions about present students, compared to those in the past. How did you cope with these changes over time?

-Can you tell me your prior experiences of being a teacher years ago? What makes a good teacher/marvelous educator from your perspective? Compared to the past, do you increasingly like your profession?

-Do you have anything else that you want to tell me?

#### **Appendix E. Knowing about class sponsors' life creed, professional attitudes, and daily life**

-What is your routinized day look like?

-Would you please tell me your experiences of managing a large class with more than 40 students?

-How do you motivate your students with different levels of academic achievements?

-Do you judge or have prejudice on students from their dressing and manners? Do you have a picture in mind about what a good student looks like? Like many teachers often exchange ideas in their offices. Have you ever considered that such kind of discussion may cause the danger of stereotypes on a particular group of students?

-Have you ever changed your impression of a particular student who surprised you? Have you got any ideas about why some students have pronounced changes in academic performance?

-What do you think is the leading cause of students' academic disparity?

-As a homeroom teacher, what kinds of events impress you a lot?

-What kind of campus activities are there besides teaching? What is your attitude towards them?

-What makes a good teacher/marvelous educator from your perspective?

-How does the identity as a teacher shape you as a person?

-How does the school respond to the media society where smartphones are intruding into students' daily life?

-Do you have anything else that you want to tell me?

#### **Appendix F. Knowing about students' inheritance of cultural capital**

Cultural capital has something to do with all the knowledge which serves to academic success in the framework of the current evaluation system. Besides the estimation of their possessed cultural goods and credentials, students were asked questions in a tailored way like:

-Do your parents like reading? Have they introduced you to some interesting books? What kind of books impressed you?

- How many books do you have at home? Do you have a study at home?

-Are you interested in reading? What type of books attracts you most?

-Are you interested in cultural activities such as art exhibitions such as for painting and calligraphy, visiting libraries and museums, and going to the opera?

-Is there any family member who has a positive impact on your schooling? In which way does he or she influence you?

-Did you get yourself well prepared for high school education? For example, your parents taught you some detailed knowledge which helped you to better navigate at school.

-Do you have high educational expectations? Do you think you have to attend a good university?

-Are you a star student of a particular subject?

-Have you ever owed certificates of art or discipline competitions?

#### **Appendix G. Getting to know students' propensity**

Habitus is all mental habits, tendencies, and disposition, which is difficult to measure. For facilitating to get to know students' attitudes and propensity, I asked questions like:

-Do you study automatically and actively? Do you have different performances when you are not supervised?

-Do you have a strong mind for solving challenging problems? When you encounter difficult issues in study or tough affairs in life, would you like to work out an idea or easily give up?

-Do you think good habits are conducive to academic success? I would like you to give some examples of how you have formed your present habit. Which practices do you think are good habits? Do you think you have these habits? If so, how did you acquire it? If not, what factors prevent you from it according to your opinion?

-How about your relationship with your teachers? Do you politely greet your teachers on the way, or do you try to avoid the direct encounter? Do you have such informal/private relationships with your teachers that you can talk to others besides study?

-Do you actively discuss your problems and study plans with your teachers, parents, or classmates?

-Do you have a regular self-disciplined routine? How do you schedule your time? What do you think of the school schedule? Do you sometimes grasp some opportunities to loaf on your work?

-How do you like going to a bookstore, a concert, a library, or a museum? Do you think you are told that you have to like this kind of stuff or do you have a real interest?

-If you had ten days free time without tasks assigned by your teachers, how would you spend this time. For instance, shopping, gathering with friends, doing sports, surfing the internet, watching movies, playing games, reading books, reviewing the lessons, traveling, which do you feel like to do?

-Do you have a positive emotional state (pride, confidence, interest, enjoyment, relief) or negative ones (regret, boredom, anxiety, restlessness, guilt, hopelessness) when preparing for an important presentation/exam?

### Part 3. Narrative inquiries

Self-identity is not private and autonomous but is embedded in and shaped by the social structure at the macroscopic level. Students possess different academic trajectories and make sense of their identities in a variety of ways. The inquiry aims to attend to students' life stories to live by, getting to know their lived experiences which have shaped and reshaped who they are at different times. Respondents were encouraged in a tailored way to reflexively tell their living and educational experiences that had impressed themselves the most without being feeling overwhelmed. I put data together chronologically in a framework of time and space and carefully examined and compared students' self-identity and academic performances during a specific time.

#### **Appendix H. Self-identity construction: Family and upbringing background**

This portion of the inquiry was designed mainly to know "what". Respondents' growing backgrounds are carefully examined by synthesizing their background data attained from their homeroom teachers and their own descriptions. Students were asked to answer these semi-structured questions while they are encouraged to narrate their own life stories with their plotlines strung by impressive episodes in a relatively long time span.

-Do your parents work? If so, what kind of job do they do? Do you also want this kind of job in the future?

-Where does your family live? How do people interact in that residential community? Have your family ever moved? If so, why did your family choose to move?

-Do your parents have a good relationship? Please use some keywords to describe your family atmosphere.

-How do your parents consider education? Are your parents strict about your study?

-How do they get involved in your study? How would they react when you get a good/bad exam result?

-How do you relate to your family? Do you usually have meals sitting around the table with talking or do you have conflicts from time to time?

-In your spare time, what activities do you do as a family?

-Please recall some of the happiest and worst times in your family.

#### **Appendix I. Self-identity construction: present and future pointing**

This portion of the inquiry was designed mainly to know “what”. Students were asked concerning their identity as well as their perception of their images in the social mirror and individual’s effort for meeting social expectations.

-I am interested to know your true self. How do you make yourself known to people in a stress-free environment when you know for sure that they would not judge you?

-If you were to introduce yourself to different people, for example, to your new teacher and classmates or someone you’d like to know or you have to introduce yourself, how do you describe yourself? What information did you aim to express to make yourself known to your current teachers and classmates in your first meeting? Does it make a difference facing different people?

-People around you— Your parents, teachers, classmates, and friends are essential persons who comprise your world of reality. Do you know how they would describe you in their viewpoints?

-It’s normal that people have multiple identities because of multiple social realities. What identity/role comes to your mind first if you were asked which role is the most important?

-How do you see yourself compared to the past, is it consistent or inconsistent? If it were inconsistent, I'd like to know the turning-points that are important in your like journey.

Future imaginations can greatly reflect people's self-identity. Thus relevant questions were asked such as:

-Your vision of future role-playing as a parent and an employee. Is that ideal for you? If this is not what you want, what changes do you need to make in order to achieve the ideal result?

#### **Appendix J. Self-identity construction: key figures in their narratives**

-Who has influenced you the most and why? In which way he or she has changed you?

-Have you even had pressure, difficulties, or burnout? Have you had people that you can talk to, and turn to for some support? If so, do you receive adequate support from your school when you need help? Do you know any other who also has difficulties? How did they cope with it?

-Is there a turning point in your life journey? If so, who played an important role in those changes? How have had the turning point(s) influenced you?

-Who are your best friends? Why did you choose them to be your best friends? Have you formed a small group with relatively fixed membership and boundaries? If so, what kind of culture do you share besides the campus mainstream culture? What happened, and how are you related to each other in your circle?

-Do you still keep in contact with your best friends from your previous schools? Do you still keep in contact with any of your previous teachers?

-Do you have any acquaintances or relatives whom you can turn to for help?

## **Appendix K. Self-identity construction: Events that stimulate the perception of “who I am”**

Respondents were encouraged to describe special events/episodes with details about when and where they took place, who were the participants, how people thought and communicated in those episodes, and respondents' emotional process, which impressed them the most for irritating the question about “who I am” as a son/ daughter, a male/ female student and other identities which they thought as being important. Attention was paid to those two most important places—the family and the school, two pivotal contexts that negotiate their identities. They were also encouraged to reflect on how personal history influences their current self-image.

“Please tell me more about the event and the involved people”, I tried to construct a better and more trustworthy conversation in an environment allowing for informants' free expression so as to gain a deeper understanding of their life experience. On the other hand, In the process of students' narrating, I paid special attention to places where discourses are becoming attenuated and also the inconsistency, contradiction, conflicts, and possible distortion. I was highly aware that there must be something in these places involving complex emotions—normally negative, of spiritual suffering and trauma that were reminded from the previous experiences, which discouraged certain expressions. I found how to appropriately bring my respondents into the situation which encouraged more reflective talking about the truth, always a challenging task through the whole interview. For example, I told them that people were under pressure of social expectation whose criteria as well as taboo were set by society. I continued encouraging them with examples by telling them that “abnormality”, which causes anxiety is not necessarily a real abnormality sometimes, and it is not uncommon that people put something into the “black box” to pretend that they are on the right track and avoid negative judgments.

## **Appendix L. Self-identity construction: Family myths that are told and retold**

Knowledge is not equally available to each individual. Parents, who are limited to their biographical situations, are children's initial teachers who have helped to shape their understandings of the outside

world, basic values and their perception of the relationship to the outside, which makes an important part of self-identity.

Family myths, which are told and retold by people with different roles in different situations with varied reasons and highlights, reflect the core value systems of a specific family. Parents may employ different strategies for organizing those selected elements to make family myths convincing. The first kind of question was asked for understanding what family myths might likely affect children's sense-making; the second question was designed to enable respondents to recall some scenes which touched parents' expectations and also taboo; the third question explored respondents' imagination of "being parents". Through answers from these set of questions, I can better understand in which way and to what extent these family myths construct respondents' reality and self-identity. Questions were asked like:

-I would like you to tell me stories in your family with your parents' beliefs expressing. It can be your parent's memory about anything, which constructs a particular kind of belief he or she would like to instill in your mind. How do you think about these stories compared to the past? Do you have contradictory attitudes?

-I would like to hear some stories about which behaviors from you have made your parents extremely happy and angry.

-I would like to know your ideas about what makes a good parent.

#### **Appendix M. Self-identity construction: Navigating in the school field**

-How do you think of your previous educational experiences in your previous schools? In which way do you think they affect you?

-I would like you to describe both of your peak and ebb experiences at school.

-Why and how did you choose to study here? Is it difficult to get a position? In which way did your parents support you?

-Are you used to campus life in this school? Do you like the campus culture? Although consistency has both positive and negative parts, inconsistency brought spiritual suffering and dangerous liminality problems. How are these previous educational experiences consistent or contradictory with your previous experience?

-Are you inspired by a particular teacher? In which way does he or she influence you?

-What is the most important for being a student/a child?

#### **Appendix N. School myths/tradition accumulated from the school's history by people's telling and retelling**

-What types of the main school culture/cliches exist here? For example, does it tell you what makes a good student, and who is admired in the school? Is success only measured by grades with punishment and praise? Does it tell you that bad parenting leads to failure or the background of a poor or divorced family is negatively related to academic success?

-What are you expected to know/do here?

-How's your school life? How do you like people around you? Do you have pleasant and successful experiences at this school? Why?

-I'd like you to tell me stories in your school with your teachers' beliefs expressing and the way of doing it.

## Appendix O. Focal students in this study

Students' academic achievements are roughly classified into five hierarchical types in this study: 1) Star students are operationalized as those who remain top 5% of the peer group and normally have a usual talent in a particular subject; 2) straight-A students are defined as the top 20% students; 3) above-average students are those who rank between 21% and 40%; 4) Average students normally rank between 41% and 59%; 4) below-average students are those with academic performances between 60% to 80%; 5) Underachievers are represented by students who are the bottom 20%.

### (1) A sample of underclass students

Focal students	Rough academic trajectories since primary school	Family members and backgrounds
Yun, a male student in a Gifted Class	Remains a star student	Father: a temporary helper in a vehicle repair garage; Mother: deceased
Fa, a male student in the Hongzhi Class	Remains a straight-A student	Father: a temporary helper in a snack bar; Mother: unemployed
Qing, a female student in a Gifted Class	From a straight-A student to an above average student	Father: unemployed due to disablement; Mother: sets up a stall setting small items
Dan, a female student in the Hongzhi Class	From a straight-A student to an average student	Parents: set up a stall selling breakfast near a factory together
Hua, a female student in the Hongzhi Class	From a straight-A student to an average student	Father: a doorkeeper; Mother: works only periodically; A younger sister who attends lower secondary school
Juan, a female student in the Hongzhi Class	From a straight-A student to an average student	Parents: farmers; A grown-up brother who is a university student
Jiao, a female student in an Experimental Class	From a straight-A student to an above-average student	Father: a traditional craftsman; Mother: unemployed; A grown-up sister who is a university student
Ying, a female student in an Experimental Class	From a straight-A student to an above-average student	A divorced family; Mother: a temporary helper in a restaurant; A

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		younger brother who attends lower secondary school
Mei, a female student in a Key Class	From an average student to an underachiever, then an above-average student through a turning point	Parents: farmers
Jie, a male student in an Experimental Class	From an above-average student to an underachiever, then an above-average student through a turning point	Father: works temporarily as a deliveryman; Mother: unemployed
Lian, a female student in an Experimental Class	From an above-average student to an underachiever, then an above-average student through a turning point	Parents: farmers
Sheng, a male student in the Hongzhi Class	From an above-average student to a below-average student	Father: works only periodically; Mother: a temporary cleanser
Yan, a female student in the Hongzhi Class	From an above-average student to a below-average student	Parents: farmers
Chang, a male student in an Experimental Class	From an above-average student to a below-average student	Father: a helper in his brother's cake kiosk; Mother: works only periodically
Kang, a male student in an Experimental Class	From an above-average student to a below-average student	Parents: farmers
Guo, a male student in an Experimental Class	From an above-average student to an underachiever	Parents: farmers
Gui, a male student in a Key Class	From an above-average student to a below-average student	Father: collects and sells scrap; Mother: unemployed; A grown-up elder brother who does a low-paid job
Qiang, a male student in a Key Class	From an average student to an underachiever	Parents: farmers
Can, a female student in a Key Class	From an above-average student to an underachiever	Father: a peddler in a vegetable market; Mother: a temporary helper in a stationary shop
Wei, a female student in a Key Class	From a straight-A student to a below-average student	Parents: casual laborers

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Jun, a male student in a Parallel Class	From an average student to an underachiever	Father: temporarily works as a construction worker; Mother: a casual laborer;
Feng, a female student in a Parallel Class	From an average student to an underachiever	Parents: farmers; A grown-up sister who attends a vocational school

## (2) A sample of working-class students

Focal students	Rough academic trajectories since primary school	Family members and backgrounds
Peng, a female student in a Gifted Class	Remains a straight-A student	Father: a couch driver; Mother: a cashier in a supermarket
Xiang, a female student in the Hongzhi Class	From an average student to a straight-A student	Parents: peddlers selling household appliances
Ming, a male student in a Key Class	From an above-average student to an underachiever, then a straight-A student after a turning point	Father: a worker for an urban construction bureau; Mother: unemployed
Long, a male student in a Parallel Class	From a below-average student, to an underachiever, then an above-average student after a turning point	Parents: owners of a small retail shop; A younger sister who attends another high school
Xue, a female student in a Key Class	From an average student to an underachiever, then an above-average student	A reconstituted family: Step-father: a taxi driver; Mother: kindergartener
Di, a male student in a Parallel Class	From a below-average student, to an underachiever, then an above-average student	Father: a clerk in a steel plant; Mother: unemployed
Chao, a male student in the Hongzhi Class	From a straight-A student to an above-average student	Father: a driving instructor; Mother: a sanitation worker
Qiao, a female student in an Experimental Class	From an above-average student to a below-average student	Father: a dispatcher; Mother: a helper working in a clothing shop
Bo, a male student in an International Experimental Class	From an average student to a below-average student	A divorced family; Mother: a tailor making advanced women's clothing

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Liang, a male student in an International Experimental Class	From an above-average student to a below-average student	Father: runs a furniture business; Mother: an accountant periodically
Ji, a male student in an Experimental Class	From a below-average student to an underachiever	A divorced family; Father: a locksmith
Chi, a male student in a Key Class	From a below-average student to an underachiever	Father: a clerk in a transportation company; Mother: a receptionist for a hotel
Ran, a male student in a Key Class	From a below-average student to an underachiever	Father: a soldier in the army; Mother: a helper in a fruit store
Zhi, a male student in a Key Class	From a below-average student to an underachiever	Father: a railway worker; Mother: a helper in a laundry
Cun, a male student in a Parallel Class	Remains an underachiever with a downtrend	Father: a railroad work while doing a part-time job as a driver who provides shuttle services; Mother: a kitchen helper
Dong, a male student in a Key Class	From a below-average student to an underachiever	Father: a deliveryman; Mother: unemployed
Ning, a male student in a Parallel Class	From a below-average student to an underachiever	A divorced family; Father: a chef in a small restaurant
Qi, a male student in a Parallel Class	From a below-average student to an underachiever	A divorced family; Mother: a worker in a clothing mall
Ni, a female student in a Key Class	From an average student to an underachiever	A divorced family; Father: a clerk in a mobile phone store
Ru, a female student in a Parallel Class	From a below-average student to an underachiever	Parents: owners of a snack bar and a net café
Tong, a female student in a Parallel Class	From a below-average student to an underachiever	Parents: owners of a stationary store; An elder brother who studies at a vocational college

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### (3) A sample of middle-class students

Focal students	Rough academic trajectories since primary school	Family members and backgrounds
Xin, a male student in a Gifted Class	Remains a star student	Father: president of a non-governmental college; Mother: a high-school teacher
Ruo, a female student in a Gifted Class	Remains a straight-A student	Father: a lawyer; Mother: a secretary in a primary school
Shan, a female student in a Gifted Class	From an above-average student to a straight-A student	Father: a technical researcher in a chemical company; Mother: a clerk in a national bank
San, a male student in a Gifted Class.	Remains a star student	Father: a sales manager; Mother: a physician at a public hospital
Shun, a male student in a Gifted Class	Remains a straight-A student	Father: a marketing manager; Mother: a kindergarten teacher
Miao, a female student in an International Experimental Class	From an above-average student to a straight-A student	Father: general manager of a company; Mother: a training specialist
Rong, a female student in a Gifted Class	From an average student to a straight-A student	Father: a chief engineer in a state-owned company; Mother: a project leader in a foreign company
Min, a male student in an Experimental Class	From an average student to an above-average student	Father: a financial controller in a household electric appliance company; Mother: a clerk in China Post
Ping, a female student in an Experimental Class	Remains to be an above-average student with the uptrend	Father: a mid-level manager in an automobile parts company; Mother: a manager in an insurance company
Fu, a male student in a Gifted Class	Remains a straight-A student	Father: a junior-school teacher; Mother: a clerk in the Tax Bureau
Chun, a male student in an International Experimental Class	From an above-average student to a straight-A student	Father: owner of a small agricultural company; Mother: a clerk in the Education Bureau
Mo, a female student in an Experimental Class	From an above-average student to a straight-A student	Father: a researcher in a state-owned institution; Mother: a senior clerk in an electric power company
Lan, a female student in an International Experimental Class	From an above-average student to a straight-A student	Father: a technical director in an electrical device company; Mother: a secretary in a government agency

Chong, a male student in an International Experimental Class	Remains a straight-A student	Father: a senior rail engineer; Mother: a manager in the research and development department in a foreign-invested company
Jing, a male student in a Gifted Class	Generally a straight-A student with a slight dip	Father: a department head in a small private enterprise; Mother: a nurse in a disease control center
Qian, a female student in a Gifted Class	From a straight-A student to an above-average student	Parents: owners of a small company
Xia, a female student in a Key Class	From a straight-A student to an average student	Father: deputy general manager of a building material company; Mother: a website editor
Yao, a female student in an International Experimental Class	From an above-average student to a below-average student	Parents: clerks in the government departments
Yu, a male student in an International Experimental Class	A straight-A student, then a below-average student, an above-average student after the turning point	Father: a senior official for the government; mother: an administrative assistant in a kindergarten
Lu, a female student in an International Experimental Class	An above-average student, a below-average student, a straight-A student after the turning point	Father: a technical director in a biopharmaceutical company; Mother: a previous department manager and at present a stay-at-home mother
Huan, a male student in a Parallel Class	From a below-average student to an underachiever	Father: an engineer; Mother: a housewife
Hao, a male student in an Experimental Class	From a straight-A student to an underachiever	Father: director of a bureau before he departed; Mother: a secretary in the education bureau
Xiong, a male student in a Key Class	From a straight-A student to an underachiever	Father: a marketing manager in a lithium battery company; Mother: a sales executive in a house property company
Qun, a female student in a Parallel Class	From a straight-A student to an underachiever	A divorced family; Father: a surgeon at a state hospital
Ting, a female student in a Key Class	From an above-average student to an underachiever	Father: owner of a small electric company; Mother: a teacher at a junior high school