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Habitus, campus experience, and graduate employment: personal advancement of middle-class students in China

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ABSTRACT

In the harsh Chinese graduate labor market, urban, middle-class students continue to outpace those from rural, underprivileged backgrounds in job access and occupational attainment. Literature attributes this graduate employment gap to varied accumulation of social capital embedded in their social network, leading to advantages of middle-class. This social network-capital approach, however, rarely revealed the influences of a gradually established market system and ignored the agency of the individual job seekers. To gain a more comprehensive understanding towards this graduate employment discrepancy, this article examines the behaviors of the graduates not only in their job search processes, but also during campus experiences. Inspired by the concept *habitus*, this study aims to understand the cultural processes that underlie individual advancement throughout higher education, and consequently, the transition from higher education to the labor market. Drawn upon the interview data, this article found that middle-class students, compared with their underprivileged counterparts, have more sophisticated understanding towards a competitive labor market, higher level of confidence in mobilizing their agency, and apply more strategic plans towards future. This article argues that these delicately constructed middle-class disposition and behaviors guided by such disposition jointly contribute to the better performances of middle-class during job search.

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The expansion of higher education and an unequal graduate labour market

The grand expansion of Chinese higher education since 1999 together with gradually employed market mechanisms in the Chinese graduate labour market, have had pronounced effects on university students during their transition from higher education to the labour market (Yan, Mao, and Zha 2016). Students are facing fierce competition with each other during their job search, especially in urban regions. This has been expressed in the annually rising number of graduates since 2003, with a new peak of 8.73 million in 2019, as well as the concerns regarding graduate unemployment from media and scientific reports (Renmin University & Zhilian Recruitment 2020). Government sectors, such as the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security and Ministry of Education, have emphasised the severity of graduate unemployment, and called for joint societal efforts to ease the issue.

While university graduates in general report difficulty in finding jobs, students from urban, middle-class origins continue to outpace their counterparts from rural, underprivileged origins. That is, middle-class students are more likely to be called to job interviews and be recruited to high-

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paying jobs. According to survey data, students with urban origins have higher employment rates, and family socio-economic factors play significant roles in determining students' job opportunities. Students whose parents were unemployed had the lowest employment rate, even though those students might have achieved better grades in the college entrance exam. Moreover, students whose parents were farmers or unemployed had the lowest monthly salary in their entry jobs (China Social Science Academy 2013; Mok 2016; Yue 2012; MyCOS 2019). Rural students with underprivileged backgrounds, additionally, were less represented in high-status occupations. Using a national survey involving 30 Chinese universities, Wang and Wen (2015) found that grass-roots employment was more likely to be taken by those who earned poorer grades on campus, and those from socioeconomically disadvantaged families.

Researchers have shown that in a *guanxi* society (Zhai 2014), social capital, representing both tangible and intangible resources embedded in one's social network, is the most influential factor in predicting the employment status of university graduates. Thus urban, middle-class students would have access to more and higher social status job information due to their higher social class contacts embedded in their social networks, and this contributes to the better performance of the middle class and therefore the inequality in the graduate labour market (Yan and Mao 2015). However, as valid as this analysis might be, the social network-capital approach does not account for the gradual establishment of a market system in Chinese society, as well as the agency of the individual job seekers. Additionally, studies that expose positive associations between family socio-economic background and labour market achievement, suggest that the advantages of middle-class students came from earlier stages prior to graduation. For example, parental involvement in early-stage hobby cultivation or behaviour corrections led to the better performance of middle-class students during their job search (Liu 2015). However, little focus is given to the socialisation and differentiation during four-year campus life – a key period where middle-class students can, as adults, individually mobilise their agency with consistent but decreased direct influence from their families. By doing so, the student group distinguishes itself from its underprivileged counterpart and maintains social advantages in the graduate labour market.

In order to understand the perpetuation of such social inequality in Chinese higher education, with social class as the analytical lens, this article examines the formation of middle class advantages at a unique moment – during the higher education process – and from a special angle – the self-recognition and awareness of middle-class students as opposed to the advantage transfer of middle-class families. The key concept underlying this article is the notion of *habitus* by Bourdieu. *Habitus* is analysed at two levels, namely, the accumulation of cognitive disposition and the actions guided by the disposition, as described in the following text. This article first illustrates how habitus has been interpreted and how it influenced the data analysis. It then presents the four characteristics that emerged from middle class students' narratives and how these narratives constitute a middle-class disposition. A major part of this article presents the different campus experiences of the two student groups in which the urban middle-class students act more instrumentally, with an orientation towards control and success to meet the needs of the competitive labour market, while the rural and underprivileged students often fail to do so. The article argues that the class-based dispositions gradually accumulated by urban middle-class students contribute to the better performance of the group during their job search, forming yet another important social factor leading to the advantages of the middle class in contemporary China.

Habitus and the new middle class

Habitus in Bourdieu's framework (Bourdieu 1990) refers to the class-based disposition that individuals are socialised into, and it serves as unconscious guides for personal action. *Habitus* accounts for how agents can spontaneously act in their social practices without thinking (Sayer 2005, 2010). Accordingly, social agents' disposition is primarily inhibited in their social and cultural surroundings, and then constrictively assembled through their family, educational and social experiences. Because

of *habitus*, social groups 'play out attitudes of cultural superiority and inferiority' ingrained in their repeated and conditioned social interactions (Reay 2004, 436). In his later work, Bourdieu included the cognitive aspects of *habitus*, claiming that *habitus* is 'divided against itself, in constant negotiation with itself and its ambivalences, and therefore doomed to a kind of duplication, to a double perception of the self, to successive allegiances and multiple identities' (Bourdieu 1999, 511).

The cognitive aspects of *habitus* align the accumulation of social agents' dispositions with scholarship on identity under the modern circumstances, resulting in 'a puzzling diversity of options and possibilities' (Giddens 1991, 117). In a modern risky culture with more foreseeable uncertainties and competition, individuals need to continuously assess and remind themselves of risks in order to 'colonize the future for themselves as an intrinsic part of their life-planning' (p. 125). In other words, *habitus* suggests that individuals keep sustained dialogue and negotiation with themselves, making space for self-control and commitment, and intertwining with a conscious deliberation and cogitation of the process wherein one's disposition is developed (Demerath 2009).

The conceptualisation of *habitus*, which integrates ideas of social changes and the individual negotiation and construction of dispositions, is relevant to the analysis of social practices concerning determined social groups in contemporary China. The socio-cultural context of contemporary China is also underlined by continual reforms and changes. On one hand, a neo-liberal modernisation project is introduced through the establishment of a market economy and a gradually opened society since the Reform and Opening Up in 1978. With regard to graduate employment, since the 1990s a mutual-selection mechanism between employers and job seekers replaced the centralised job assignment policy. University graduates were no longer receiving jobs through central assignment, but faced the free competition in the labour market. Such competition today is undoubtedly intensified alongside the grand expansion of Chinese higher education (Liu 2014a).

However, the neo-liberal free market logic is not readily expressed in an authoritarian political system, leading to a creative blending of 'neoliberal rationalities and revitalized forms of socialist rationalities' (Sigley 2006, 504) in contemporary China. The neo-liberal rationalities promote the advancement of the Chinese middle-class who share certain similar identity components with their western counterparts, such as acknowledging the competitive labour market. It is also expected that the Chinese middle-class would strategically prepare themselves for future risks and competition, just as their western counterparts. A rising number of scholarly works described the middle-class strategies and practices in China. For example, Wu (2012) analysed the involvement of choice fees and awards in gaining school admission for the Chinese middle class. However, most works have focused on middle-class advantages in school settings, such as school admission and academic performance, instead of the education-work-transition. In addition, the blending of the neo-liberal free market mechanism with strong governance also differentiates the Chinese middle class from their western counterparts. The specified characteristics of the Chinese middle-class is, nevertheless, limited in the investigations of current literature.

This article, inspired by the *habitus* framework, examines the construction of middle-class advantages during the education-work-transition. *Habitus* guided the analysis at two levels. First, the construction of class-based disposition was interpreted and described as characteristic of Chinese middle-class students. Second, how disposition functions as an unconscious guide for personal action was interpreted as the advantageous strategies and practices of the middle-class students, with the purpose of outpacing themselves in the competitive graduate labour market.

Data and method

The data were collected during an 8-month ethnographic fieldwork at two 211 universities in central China in 2012, involving a group of 60 last-year students from both STEM and humanity majors. Half of the participants were from an urban, middle-class background, while the other half had rural, underprivileged backgrounds. Middle class in this study follows Lu Xueyi's classification, which combined the ownership-concept of neo-Marxism, the idea of authority from Weber, and

Bourdieu's concept of expertise, and adapted them into the social-cultural context of contemporary China (Lu 2004). The social class classification of Lu Xueyi was based on the classification of occupations, taking into consideration the specific features of labour division, dominance hierarchy, relations of production, and institutional segmentation of the Chinese society. In this study, for the ease of investigation, students whose parents were employed in middle-class occupations in urban areas were regarded as middle-class students. Rural, underprivileged students were introduced through student affair officers who annually organise financially underprivileged-student selection at the two universities. The purpose of the selection on campus is to grant such students financial assistance.

This article is based on part of analysis of an unpublished dissertation that examines the cultural advancement of university graduates in job searches (Liu 2014b). Ethics approval was obtained, in align with the ethics regulations at the institution where the dissertation was completed. Ethical rules were followed in participant access, communication, data preservation and data use. In the fieldwork, each student was invited to individual interviews which last for 45–60 minutes. Questions were asked about their campus experience, job search, and communication with family and teachers. Due to the focus on the formation of middle-class advantages during campus life, this article only presents interview data from the fieldwork, which focuses on middle-class students' campus behaviour and experiences. To protect the privacy of the students, all informants in this article are given pseudonyms.

Constructing a new Chinese middle class

Preparedness for competition

The ethnographic fieldwork began at the same time as the autumn career-fair on campus. Therefore, narratives such as 'job search', 'career fair', and 'graduate unemployment' were expressed in all major university documents, campus websites, and campus video/TV channels throughout campus. Most fourth-year students, since coursework was already completed, focused on three tasks: internship, the graduation thesis and job search. The university tutors (a position set in all public universities in each grade according to major, with the responsibility of students' general welfare through frequent communication with students, equivalent to student affair officer) also communicated regularly with students regarding recent graduation policies and job information.

Urban middle-class students tended to pay close attention to the latest events occurring in the labour market and were acutely aware of the fierce competition, both in and beyond school. During the interviews, they expressed precisely, with accurate numbers, their relation to the job search.

'The city has now 77 institutions, and outputs over a quarter of a million graduates ... 50% will find jobs here according to a new report, not to mention those who do not study here but wanna work here'

'around 6.80 million students (in the fieldwork year) will graduate soon. I have automatically thousands of competitors from the same major. I must have something very special. Well, I need to remind myself from time to time that I am not competing only with my classmates, but also with hundreds and thousands of graduates from other universities, and maybe from other majors, given that more employers now recruit their employees without limiting their majors.'" (Lee)

This does not mean that underprivileged students did not recognise the harshness of the labour market, as during graduation season, employment is such a hot topic all over campus. However, the rural, underprivileged students barely referred to how appropriate actions are needed in the face of high levels of graduate unemployment. In contrast, middle class students' answers were highly framed by competitive concerns.

'I did quite a lot. Just during last semester, I had 8 courses for my own major (Computer Science), and another 6 for my minor study (Journalism). Some of my classmates quit the minor because the workload was too heavy. But I want to graduate with a double degree. It [earning a double degree] means something, no? I mean, at least

it sends a message to the employer that I can do things together quite well at the same time. And my educational background is more diverse. It absolutely helps when I compete with others' (Wong)

'I was running two student associations at the same time as board members . . ., meetings, discussions every week, it was fun of course, I enjoyed that very much, but most importantly I know this would add so much value not only to my CV, but me. I grow into a more competitive person because of the experience' (Chan)

The preparedness for a competitive graduate labour market and pragmatic approach is quite representative amongst middle-class students. And the source of such a pragmatic approach, according to the student group, comes from the everlasting, spontaneous influence of family culture/parents. For example, one informant shared the story of her father, a businessman, who always used lessons of failures from his previous partners' heedlessness and urged the family to be vigilant and always better prepared. The informant had obviously followed his advice.

Empowerment and confidence

During the fieldwork, it was surprising to observe how confident middle-class students appeared. They were inclined to stress the validity of the information by saying 'am quite sure about that', 'it is certain that', 'this can't be wrong', and 'absolutely'. As described in above section, they frequently quoted precise numbers or statistics in their interviews, such as hours they spent on diverse social activities. They also presented competence in daily communications in a very natural manner. An example was that I had two students who helped me schedule the interview timetable and campus visit (including visiting university administrative staff) at the beginning of the fieldwork. Both two universities involved in the study have very geographically wide-spread campuses, and student interviewees and the administrative staff offices were in different areas of campuses with a long distance between them. Therefore, we needed to discover a good solution for the interview timetable. One middle-class student helped me with the schedule and confirmed, 'Oh, there is no need to change it any more, this is the best plan, trust me.'

This confidence and empowerment were also demonstrated when they answered interview questions. One question was about students' self-reported achievement both academically and socially. Middle-class students, after describing their achievements, always unconsciously commented with self-praise such as 'that is quite a job' or 'I do not regret, that is good'. They appeared satisfied with what they had done. The following narratives in their description of job search also showed this confidence and empowerment.

"I think I am quite confident and even though the job search is not that smooth in the beginning, I believe it will go alright. I believe that it is just a matter of time before I find a satisfactory job." (Wu)

"I know I will make it [passing the national civil servant exam] from the very beginning, even though so many people said it is a dead-end path. Well, sometimes it does not matter what other people say, the most important thing is to believe in ourselves. Sometimes confidence means everything." (Li)

Part of the data also illustrates students' understanding of building this confidence:

"That is the spirit (to be self-confident) and the right attitude. This is the weapon to help us getting over the difficulties and competition. If you do not trust yourself, how to convince the others that they can make it, isn't it?" (Zhao)

"I would say I gradually developed it, with the encouragement and support of my family and friends, really . . . You make a goal (to be number one in the annual assessment), you believe that you can make it, then you do whatever you can to achieve it, as simple as that" (Qian)

While middle-class students were busy climbing academic or social ladders, underprivileged students, on the other hand, seemed to be busy in a totally different direction – conquering the inferiority on campus and adapting to the urban life. Almost all underprivileged students reported psychological disappointment after joining university. Before university, obtaining high remarks in

exams was enough to build confidence. However, since becoming university students, academic achievement was not that important. Even in annual student assessments, academic achievement was only 60% of the final assessment. Student leadership, awards in competitions, and exchange experiences seem to determine more in defining an excellent university student, and such activities and experiences are more easily accessed by middle-class students. The inferiority of the underprivileged students is found also in literature on underprivileged students' experiences in Chinese higher education, and how college is not as readily accessible to working class/rural students in China. These students with the rural, underprivileged backgrounds, after enrolling in higher education, suffer significantly both from finance shortages and urban life adaptation. Some also report communication problems with their peers (Li 2013; Liao and Wong 2019; Reay, Crozier, and Clayton 2010; Sun 2012:). The campus culture, which emphasises social and cultural experiences and, both explicitly and implicitly, promotes students with the above experiences, has worsened this inferiority. This also jointly contributes to the differentiation between the middle and underprivileged students on campus, leading to varied performance during the search for jobs.

Circumscribed aspirations

Another characteristic displayed by the middle-class students was their clear and strong opinions about future plans after graduation.

"My plan is to become a successful businessperson in cultural communication. I will apply the latest internet technology in my business, I have expressed this idea with some teachers in my major (Computer Science) and see to what extent they can help me. Internet technology is the future trend, look at the development of Ali and Tencent, I want to catch the trend" (Zheng).

"I will first seek to be an employee in a leading law firm, and try to be associate within three years. But my goal is to have my own law firm in the long term. In order to achieve that I need to gain experience and most importantly network from big firms at the beginning" (Tian).

Surprisingly, these highly achievement-oriented career aspirations had been in their thoughts since an early stage. They favoured an attitude of setting a goal at the beginning instead of trying it out prior to making a decision. As explained by the students, 'you have to make up your mind at the very beginning. I know there are some people who think that they will gradually get to know what they want to do by working some entry-level jobs, but come on, this is a waste of time and energy. Why not reach for the right stars directly instead of wandering around aimlessly?' (Xiao). This female student had made up her mind to become a civil servant in her freshman year and began the preparation since then.

An opposite attitude was adopted by many underprivileged students. They called it 'to try and check out'. Underprivileged students did not generally offer a concrete career plan in terms of job positions or occupational categories. They joined career fairs, sent resumes and waited for the job opportunities that came to them. Comparatively, underprivileged students seemed to be more realistic in their job search and expected a final career direction in alignment with the opportunities to which they could gain access. On the other hand, the highly specific aspirations expressed by middle class students reflect their strong compulsion to 'colonize the future' (Giddens 1991). Their aspirations were 'subconscious attempts to allay uncertainties and anxieties about their future lives' (Demerath 2009, 97).

It is also reasonable to visit the role of middle-class parents in reinforcing this compulsion for precise occupational aspirations. During the fieldwork, most middle-class students confirmed that they were in frequent communication with their parents for advice and suggestions through all kinds of channels including Facetime, QQ messages, telephone calls, and home visits. This is another difference between the two student groups, given that underprivileged students rarely called their families, and very seldom travel back home. A few middle-class students expressed their closeness with their parents, stating that they sometimes chat for hours. During the job search, a common

topic of the middle-class conversation was plans for future careers or future lives, where middle-class parents informed their offspring about the fierceness of competition, offering facilitation as needed, and correcting the behaviour to assure their offspring follow the right 'middle-class career path' (Liu 2015).

Strong attachment to the nation state

The strong attachment to the nation state formed yet another characteristic of the middle-class disposition. Throughout the fieldwork, middle-class students aligned their career aspirations, plans and behaviour to a considerable extent with local or national government initiatives. At the time of the fieldwork, the development of hi-tech technology parks initialised by local governments was a hot topic in town, and this initiation was repeatedly mentioned by middle-class students in their concrete career plan.

'I am very optimistic in this initiation. I believe the government can gather together resources and facilitate the development of such (hi-tech) zones. I see that as opportunity. Companies reside in those zones will benefit from current policies. It is for sure positive to work in such teams with government support. Additionally, there will be many hi-tech firms in the same area, to compete and support at the same time. Employees can only benefit from this competition-supporting model, you know ... if it does not work out fine in firm A, just join firm B which offers better opportunities'. (Ouyang)

It was relevant to talk about the harsh graduate employment situation, employment policies, and higher education expansion during the fieldwork. While underprivileged students stated more about their concerns about finding a job, middle-class students were optimistic about their future career, and were happy to show their support for governmental initiations. For example, when talking about the expansion of higher education, middle-class students thought it brought more university seats and increased the knowledge base of the society. The whole society and economy would benefit from this expansion, according to the middle-class group. Underprivileged students, however, worried that the expansion would degrade their university credentials, given that so many could acquire access to higher education more easily than before. When discussing that university graduates were previously assigned jobs under the central plan, middle-class students appreciated that the double-choice mechanism between employer and graduates granted free choice for all in a market economy. When discussing governmental efforts to decrease graduate unemployment, middle-class students used the examples of the government-supported campus career fairs, closer alignment between industry and universities, and students' career service to confirm that the government had done a great job given the huge graduate population in China. Underprivileged students, in contrast, would expect more effort to solve the graduate unemployment issue. The strong support for the government of the middle class has been observed in other studies (Chen 2013; Chen and Lu 2011). It suggests that that Chinese middle class has related their benefits closely with the government, making the social and political reforms suggested in western literature very unappealing to the social stratum.

Advantageous strategies and practices: voices from the middle-class students

Middle-class students' social practices on campus, guided by the four components of dispositions, are rather 'instrumental' and an example of 'impression management', reflecting the 'cultural ideal' of the social group (Foley 1990, 134). They expanded their networks, developed friendly relations with their tutors/teachers, and in addition, sought student leadership positions and communism party membership, understanding that these efforts would bring potential exchange values in the labour market. In this regard, such social practices are interpreted as strategies and practices for advancement among the middle class.

Expanding selective networks

While the social capital approach emphasised the role of social contacts embedded in family-related social networks that benefit the job search of the middle-class students, this study reveals the importance of social contacts developed by the middle-class students themselves. One notable feature of the middle-class group was their efforts to build connections with people of higher socio-economic status, so called 'VIPs'-valuable and important persons in their job search. However, the student group attached more characteristics to the VIPs, namely, their being socially and culturally elite and more importantly, having good taste or attitudes towards life. One male middle-class student (Zhu) distinguished a VIP in his mind from other normal 'boring' wealthy people: 'There are so many upstarts now, attaining sudden wealth but with no taste. They dress rather improperly when attending events, and they talk without much thought. These people, I call them rich people, but they are not important to me. It never occurs to me that I will build connections with these people,' he gave some names, 'but people like Pan Shiyi [a real estate businessman] and Li Yanhong [owner of a famous search engine], they are valuable people to me. You see, Li received his higher education in the US, knows the Western world, and always leads a simple life. Pan cares about environmental protection a lot, and his new buildings are designed and built to be environmentally friendly ... I want to work with these people and learn from them.'

Both universities had various departments which periodically arranged activities to facilitate the communication of students and so-called societal elites. A dozen such activities/communications of this nature were recorded monthly during the fieldwork. Therefore, it was not rare for students to meet the VIPs. Middle-class students also described the process of building networks with the VIPs, 'First and most important, step up and give a self-introduction. Second, remember to remind the VIPs that you are still there. There are a lot of ways to remind them, such as sending messages or emails during holidays, and calling them directly. Occasional visits work as well. Just bear in mind that there is no need to worry about losing face. It is quite natural that a VIP does not give any feedback, and it is totally reasonable. You can always try another time or try with someone else' (Zhuge).

Underprivileged students were generally more hesitant in terms of expanding their networks, partly because of their shyness, according to their own reflection, which stopped them from actively presenting themselves in front of these VIPs. This shyness and self-inferiority had led to their silence on most public occasions, including classroom discussions and campus activities. Additionally, these students regard this social-relation expansion as 'improper or embarrassing', as stated by a female underprivileged student (Jiang), 'I can't allow myself to do that'.

Developing friendly relations with teachers

Varies views were observed regarding developing relationships with course teachers or tutors. The general attitude of the underprivileged students was to hold 'professional relationships only'. They contacted teachers only for coursework consultancy or information checking, and no private connections with teachers were mentioned. They appreciated the transparency of the information on campus very much, such as scholarship/allowance application criteria and process or campus career fair information. Therefore, they regarded private and extra contact with teachers as unnecessary. Nevertheless, middle-class students valued close relationships with their teachers very highly.

"Well, you know grading in higher education is different from that in high schools. In high school we just need to work hard, while in university giving a good impression to lecturers can give better scores. It can do no harm to contact the teachers from time to time privately ... Some professors in our faculty [the English Department] are very nice and soft-hearted. You know, in courses like American Literature, we need to memorize so many writers' works. So when preparing for exams, I sometimes will try persuading them to give me some hints, or to simply tell me which articles are more important ... I once even negotiated the exam result with a professor, that was a 6-credit course and I found immediately after the exam that I had misunderstood two questions. Most likely I would have failed the course and would not be able to attend the annual assessment that year. I was rather

worried and talked to the professor directly. She was so nice and said she understood my situation, and she would let me pass.” (Qi).

Political tutors/student affair officers were more frequently in contact with middle-class students. Many of the middle class students were involved in student organisations such as student unions, where the tutors/student affair officers guided the daily work in the union. They work closely with the tutors on activity planning and organisation. In this sense, they regarded tutors as ‘co-workers, or bosses, to some extent. Friendships with tutors will smooth the operations of the projects (in the union)’ (Zhou).

Pursuing student leadership

Both universities held rich co-curricular activities in the form of cultural programmes and social activities as a way to train ‘all round integrated development’ talents in Chinese education (in perspectives including moral, intellectual, physical and aesthetics training). These activities are part of university life. Universities, aiming to build a cultural campus, also made efforts to encourage students to fully involve themselves in such co-curricular activities and apply for membership in a variety of student organisations. Instead of joining student organisations and holding memberships, middle-class students were more interested in the leadership positions of such organisations. The student leadership attracted middle-class students for two reasons: first, the person skills trained during the leadership, together with the leadership experience, were directly transformed into employability of the students during job search. And second, the leadership experience could be quantified in credits to be included in the calculation of the annual student assessment. Therefore, the student leadership increased the odds of higher scores in the annual assessment, leading to a scholarship upon assessment results. Being a scholarship awardee was an absolute advantage during their job search.

Middle-class students also developed their own ranking of the diverse student organisations on campus.

“Only student leadership positions in promising organisations are valuable and useful in the labour market. Of course you can get to know more valuable people as a student leader, you have better opportunities to practice your personal skills, and you get the chance to be involved in better activities through these promising organisations ... The student organizations are in a very hierarchical system. For example, student unions either at the faculty level or university level have higher status than common associations. Student unions are comparatively more officially constructed, with closer relations with university administrative staff. Among other associations, there are also higher status associations such as the drama club and the arts troupe. These associations have won lots of prizes for the university, and their members have more chances to perform on behalf of the school.” (Wei)

The narratives of middle-class students on selected activities echo what Bourdieu described as ‘high culture’ (Bourdieu 1984). This high culture is carefully guarded by the middle class, who maintains a considerable distance from the lower social classes. Middle-class students asserted that these high-culture activities accredited them with various forms of capital. Accordingly, social capital was acquired in the form of social contacts encountered through activities and social connections accumulated. Cultural capital included awards and certifications of attending the activities.

Applying for communism party membership

The number of university students interested in and applying for Chinese Communist Party (CCP) membership has increased rapidly in the past several years. By 2018, the number of student CCP members increased to 1.8 million, accounting for 2% of the total CCP members in China (Xinhua Net 2019). However, obtaining CCP membership as a university student is still quite time-consuming and selective. The process was described as follows:

"You have to hand in an application as early as possible, passing the first round of selection and meeting the criteria for entering the university party school. At this stage you are an active party membership applicant. Then you will need to pass exams and complete assignments required by the university party school. Do not forget to hand in related documents such as the monthly moral reports and personal statements, oh, and you will need to offer certified testimonials from your parents' employers stating that they were never involved in illegal behaviours. If you have completed all the steps mentioned above, in 12 months, you will become a probationary party member. You will become a full member in another 12 months" (Gongsun).

This complicated procedure prevented many underprivileged students from applying. In most faculties' practice, the first-round selection required a public presentation of the applicant in front of a big group, and this was followed by democratic voting. Those who gained most votes would become an *active party membership applicant*. For many underprivileged students, they were either hesitant towards the public presentation, or failed the selection after presentation. Middle class students, in contrast, showed great enthusiasm in pursuing CCP membership, and in many cases, their applications started as early as during high school study. By the time they entered university, such students (who applied in high school) were already *probationary party members*; they only needed to wait another year to become full members.

The early-stage CCP membership application in high school was due to two reasons. First, middle-class students who won national prizes in competitions (such as a speech competition, singing competition, or piano competition) or held student leadership positions in high school (always the schools in the top rankings at the provincial or national level), were suggested by high school authorities to start an application. And second, the middle-class parents who were familiar with the alignment between career advancement and party patronage (Li and Walder 2001) also helped their children in this pursuit.

"My mom sent me to a party school organised by local governmental departments. I had no idea what that meant at the time, I just went to the school and obtained my course-completion certificate. But it really meant something when I entered university. It meant that I automatically became active in the university system" (Nangong).

Conclusion

This article offers a piece of analysis regarding the formation of the middle-class during campus life – a key period with limited investigation in the literature. With its empirical data, it illustrates the cultural processes that underlie individual advancement throughout higher education, and consequently, the transition from higher education to the labour market. It first identifies the characteristics and dispositions of middle-class youth, which can be primarily described as an accelerated competitive individualism within the group. These characteristics serve to maximise their appeal on the job market and remain their middle-class advantages. The construction of middle-class dispositions is jointly affected by the 'concerted cultivation' of middle-class parents (Lareau 2002), the intended and conscious correction towards a typical middle-class career path by their parents (Liu 2015), as well as by values emphasised in the university teaching and learning surroundings.

This article also highlights the important differences in social practices on campus between the two student groups. Urban, middle-class students managed to develop a whole set of middle-class dispositions oriented towards confidence and empowerment. Justified by their astute consciousness of market force and constant rationalisation, middle-class students acted as 'strategic manipulators' (Gergen 1991, 147) to keep preparing and upgrading themselves in a risky culture of modernity. In contrast, the rural, underprivileged students' campus experiences were aligned with inferiority, self-alienation, challenges in adapting to the urban life, and financial limitations. While middle-class students were actively involved in social and cultural activities, their classmates with underprivileged backgrounds suffered from trying to adapt to a new life. Such differences ultimately led to the

advancement of the middle-class students, both on campus and during their job search. The differentiation suggests the perpetual inequality pattern within and beyond Chinese higher education. This calls for an inclusive educational system to prepare for the learning and socialisation of underprivileged students, in addition to enhanced societal and policy efforts to support the needs of this student group.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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