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**Two trajectories, one destination: Exploring Chinese urban  
and rural students' access to Chinese elite universities**

**Yanru Xu**

**School of Education, Durham University**



**Thesis submitted to Durham University for the degree of**

**Doctor of Philosophy**

**April 2020**

*This thesis is dedicated to*

*my beloved families and friends.*

献给爱我和我爱的家人朋友。

*my jiujiu for his endless support and encouragement.*

感谢舅舅无尽的支持和鼓励。

## Abstract

This study explores Chinese urban and rural students' access to Chinese elite universities. Chinese urban and rural division is decided by the *hukou* system (household registration system, 户口). It has largely advantaged urban communities and discriminates against rural communities across a range of opportunities, including children's education. When explaining educational disparities between the privileged and the less privileged in and outside China, much research has adopted the capital approach based on Bourdieu's social reproduction theory. It limits our understanding of how the less privileged students achieve academic success. Closely related, the sorts of roles less privileged parents play in their children's academic success have been investigated less.

This study adopted a qualitative research design. It investigated 26 Chinese students (15 urban and 11 rural) who were first-year undergraduates in four Chinese elite universities alongside the testaments from 20 Chinese parents (11 urban and 9 rural). It explores students' pre-university life stories through a total of 46 semi-structured interviews and small-scale background questionnaires.

The findings suggest that Chinese urban and rural students experience two differentiated trajectories before their entry to one destination: Chinese elite universities. The findings partly echo the capital approach to show the relationship between parents' capitals and their children's education. However, the findings illustrate Sharon Hays' proposal regarding two types of dialectical relationships between social structure and human agency: structurally reproductive agency and

structurally transformative agency. Specifically, Chinese urban and rural parents play differentiated roles in their children's schooling processes up until their access to Chinese elite universities within and outside families. Three main contributors to Chinese rural students' academic success against the odds are rural parents, rural students and rural teachers. Chinese urban students accumulate various advantages while rural students accumulate various disadvantages on their pathways to Chinese elite universities within and outside school time.

This study firstly enriches the understanding of urban and rural students' access to elite universities in the Chinese context with implications for a wider global sphere. Additionally, partly through the data showing the power of Chinese rural parents' language in making positive contributions to their children's access to Chinese elite universities, this study contributes to a shifting of the deficit view of less privileged parents' roles in their children's education.

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## **List of Abbreviations**

HE: Higher Education

HEIs: Higher Educational Institutions

IRE: The Independent Recruitment Examination

GER: Gross Enrolment Rate

MoE: Ministry of Education

MRQ: Main Research Question

RMB: Chinese Dollar

SRQ: Sub-Research Questions

WCUs: World Class Universities

## Glossary of Terms

Terms in Chinese	Translation in English
<i>gaokao</i> (高考)	The National College Entrance Examination
<i>guanxi</i> (关系)	Interpersonal relationship
<i>hukou</i> (户口)	The household registration system
<i>hukou ben</i> (户口本)	Household register book
<i>jiujin ruxue</i> (就近入学)	Nearby enrolment policy
<i>keju</i> (科举)	Civil service examination
<i>shushu</i> (叔叔)	Father's brother
<i>xuequ</i> (学区)	School districts
<i>zhongzhao</i> (中招)	High school entrance examination

## **Declaration**

I declare that this thesis is the result of my own work and no part of the material contained in the thesis has previously been submitted for any other degree or qualification in this or any other institution.

## **Statement of Copyright**

*The copyright of this thesis rests with the author. No quotation from it should be published without the author's prior written consent and information derived from it should be acknowledged.*

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## Chapter 1 Introduction

This study contributes to the understanding of how both privileged and less privileged students access elite universities with a specific Chinese focus. There has been global evidence to show that students with privileged parents are more likely to gain access to elite universities (Ayalon & Shavit, 2004; Boliver, 2013, 2016, 2017; Cahalan & Perna, 2015; Chetty et al., 2017; Clancy & Goastellec, 2007; Crawford et al., 2016; Gerber, 2000; Jerrim, 2013; Taylor & Cantwell, 2018), including in China (Liang et al., 2017; Liu & Gao, 2015; Wu, 2016; Zhang & Huang, 2017). One explanation of students' educational disparities adopts the capital approach, which is mainly based on Bourdieu's social reproduction theory (Bourdieu, 1977a; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). The capital approach demonstrates how parents with different social status play differentiated roles in their children's education. Specifically, it indicates the ways in which privileged parents transmit their capital advantages to their children's academic advantage and, conversely, how children with less privileged parents are less likely to succeed academically due to their parents' shortage of certain capital. It is, however, unclear how students with less privileged parents achieve academic success. On a related note, there has been less investigation into the role that less privileged parents play in their children's educational success.

Although not extensive in number, there has been an increasing number of studies revealing how students with less privileged parents have - against the odds - achieved access to higher education (HE) (Gofen, 2009; Lin, 2019; Siraj & Mayo, 2014; Siraj-Blatchford, 2010), including Chinese rural students' access to Chinese

elite universities (Cheng & Kang, 2018; Dong, 2015). This study argues that merely adopting the capital approach limits our understanding of how less privileged students (rural students in this study) achieve academic success. Closely related, it leads to a view that less privileged parents' roles (rural parents in this study) in their children's education is in deficit. This partly stems from the fact that Bourdieu's social reproduction stance (Bourdieu, 1977a; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) in the educational field weakens his own efforts to end the impasse between structure and agency. He limits the role of human agency in making possible social changes (Joas & Knöb, 2011; Yang, 2014), in spite of his own efforts to mediate the dichotomy of structure and agency through his theory of practice (Bourdieu, 1977b, 1984).

In China specifically, urban and rural dis/advantages are distinctive under the *hukou* system (household registration system, 户口); the Chinese HE system is unique, as it adheres to the 'Post-Confucian Model' (Marginson, 2013). Although rural students studying in Chinese elite universities are in the minority, some achieve the access against the odds. In order to examine such complexity in a Chinese context, I draw on Sharon Hays' (1994) proposal of the dialectical relationships between social structure and human agency. I suggest that the dialectical relationships between social structure and human agency act as a supplement to the capital approach in answering the research questions in this study and in understanding the educational disparities between the privileged and the less privileged social groups. This study is of significance in four aspects:

Firstly, it enhances the understanding of the urban and rural educational disparities associated with social structural factors: the Chinese *hukou* system. The discussions of urban and rural, especially the definition of rurality elsewhere, involve various indicators, such as demographic, geographic, cultural and contextual ones (Flora et al., 2016; Leibowitz, 2017; Montgomery, 2020; Roberts & Green, 2013). However, the definition of urban and rural in China is decided by a national institution which acts as a social structure: the *hukou* system. It has created acute life chance differences between urban and rural *hukou*-ers, whereby the rural has been discriminated against (Chan, 2009; Vickers & Zeng, 2017). This discrimination extends to rural students' access to Chinese elite universities. The impact of the *hukou* system on Chinese children's education, including the students in this study, will be presented in Chapters 2 and 6.

Secondly, this study is of significance in understanding the cumulative dis/advantages of students' pre-university experiences and their influence on students' access to elite universities. Chinese rural students have been at a disadvantage educationally from pre-university stages (Hannum et al., 2010; Hao et al., 2014) up until their access to Chinese elite universities (Li et al., 2015; Wu, 2016; Zhang & Huang, 2017). Even after accessing elite universities, they still face difficulties in getting through (Cheng, 2016; Cheng & Chen, 2018; Xie, 2015, 2016b), although this is not the specific focus of this particular study. Through collecting students' life stories prior to their entry to Chinese elite universities, the cumulative mechanism of educational dis/advantages will be revealed through presentation of the data.

Thirdly, this study enhances the understanding of Chinese urban and rural students' access to Chinese elite universities in a Chinese cultural context. The Chinese HE system adheres to the 'Post-Confucian Model' (Marginson, 2013). Chinese cultural values, especially Confucianism, have placed education, especially HE, in a prominent position to form and preserve the Chinese way of life (Hu, 1984; Li, 2019). The potential influence of traditional cultural elements on HE in China will be illustrated by the data in this study.

Fourthly, this study is transferable to other national contexts. Although this study is specific to Chinese institutional, educational and cultural contexts, researchers elsewhere might reflect on educational disparities apparent in their own countries. For example, apart from the urban and rural division, there are other indicators of social status in educational research, such as social class (Achala, 2019; Ball, 2003), wealth (Hällsten & Pfeffer, 2017; Jez, 2014), race or ethnicity (Boliver, 2014, 2016; Posselt et al., 2012; Vincent et al., 2012), geographical factors (Donnelly & Gamsu, 2018; Lindgren & Lundahl, 2010) and migration status (Antony, 2018, 2019; Hanson & Woodruff, 2003) to name but a few. A common factor existing in varied indicators of individuals' social status in educational research is the pattern of educational disparity: the privileged versus the less privileged. This study contributes to an understanding of both privileged and less privileged students' access to elite universities and their parents' roles. The implications are of significance in a wider global context. Additionally, part of the data in this study will focus on how Chinese rural students access Chinese elite universities, where Chinese rural parents' positive roles will be demonstrated. This shifts the deficit

view of less privileged parents' roles in their children's education based on the capital approach.

In this chapter, I will firstly set the scene for this study in Section 1.1. I will then address the research questions and their rationale in Section 1.2. Finally, I will turn to the outline of this thesis in Section 1.3.

### **1.1 Setting the scene of this study**

Every year in July, Chinese elite universities announce their undergraduate admission results for the coming academic year (starting in September). Taken as a whole, this study in essence explores the theme emerging from two stories: Two trajectories, one destination. This will be illustrated by quotations from two Chinese mass media interviews below. The interviewees were two Chinese students who received their admission letters from Chinese elite universities.

I came from a privileged urban family. I never worried about materials. My parents are all intellectuals. They are diplomats. They had created a good family environment. They cultivated my study habits, my personality. Those are long-term subtle influences. I had solid ground for every step.

When conditions are ripe, success will come... I had access to the best educational resources... Nowadays, the highest scorers are like me whose families are privileged. (China Daily, July 31, 2017)

I grew up in an impoverished rural county with extremely low per capita income. My whole family lived on small farmland and whatever my father

was earning. My mother was in bad health. Our family had to scrimp and scrape for our livelihood... I understood that happiness does not come out of a perfect life, but out of your ignorance of those imperfections. Then you hug all visible beauty and sunshine. Although poverty narrowed my vision, stabbed my self-esteem, and even took the lives of my loved ones indirectly, I still want to say, 'thank you, poverty'...Thanks, poverty. You let me believe in the power of education and knowledge. Material deficit could bring different results: the deficient spirit and the rich spirit. I chose the latter. The joy of exploring new knowledge is worth way more than the bitterness and saltiness of sweat... I came from an ordinary family who were obsessed with education and knowledge. My mother told me that this is a path to a broader world. From then on, the belief that knowledge could change destiny had deeply rooted in my heart. (China News, July 29, 2018)

The first quotation is attributed to a Chinese urban student; the second quotation comes from a Chinese rural student. Quoting the rural student's words above does not glorify the poverty and any other difficulties experienced by Chinese rural *hukou*-ers. Instead, both testimonies paint a vivid picture of Chinese urban and rural students' access to Chinese elite universities in this study: Two trajectories, one destination.

The metaphor of 'two trajectories, one destination' is used to illustrate Chinese urban and rural students' differentiated life experiences prior to arriving at one destination: Chinese elite universities. For example, the two interviewees above described their differentiated previous life trajectories; they commented on

differentiated influences from previous life trajectories on their access to Chinese elite universities; they described parents' differentiated social backgrounds and roles in their access to Chinese elite universities. However, they arrived at the same destination: Chinese elite universities. Such differences in life experiences but similarities in destination inspired this study's exploration into how Chinese urban and rural students achieve access to Chinese elite universities.

## **1.2 The research questions and their rationale**

There has been literature highlighting Chinese urban and rural students' disparate access to Chinese elite universities, where rural students are far fewer in number than their urban counterparts (Li & Wu, 2012; Li et al., 2015; Wu, 2016; Ye & Tian, 2012; Zhang & Huang, 2017). However, there still have been Chinese rural students, as shown by the above quote and examples of other rural students in this study who, against the odds, have achieved access to Chinese elite universities. In light of such complexity, the main research question (MRQ) is:

**How do Chinese urban and rural students achieve access to Chinese elite universities?**

The existing theoretical explanation of Chinese urban and rural educational disparities has largely adopted the capital approach based on the social production theory (Bourdieu, 1977a, 1985, 1986; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). This asserts that parents with different social status play differentiated roles in their children's education. This raises the first sub-research (SRQ 1) question:



**How do Chinese urban and rural parents play a role in their children's access to Chinese elite universities?**

Existing studies have shown that it is less likely for students with less privileged parents, such as Chinese rural students, to achieve academic success (Wu, 2016; Zhang & Huang, 2017). This partly results from their parents' shortage of certain capital, which is regarded by this study as presenting a view that less privileged parents' roles in their children's education is in deficit. This raises the second sub-research question (SRQ 2):

**How do Chinese rural students achieve access to Chinese elite universities?**

There is a cumulative mechanism of dis/advantages behind inequality (DiPrete & Eirich, 2006; Merton, 1988), However, previous studies on Chinese urban and rural educational disparities have largely focused on one single schooling stage, such as preschool education (Luo et al., 2012), basic education (Yi et al., 2012), high school (Loyalka et al., 2013; Wu, 2016), university entry and after (Wen, 2005; Zhou & Yue, 2019). When examining urban and rural students' access to Chinese elite universities, few studies have examined the cumulative effects of previous schooling pathways. This raises the third sub-research question (SRQ 3):

**How do dis/advantages accumulate regarding Chinese urban and rural students' access to Chinese elite universities?**

These research questions are born out of placing this study in a Chinese context, in addition to the literature review. They will guide the design of this research and facilitate the organisation of the findings. Through answering the research

questions, I will argue and justify an understanding of Chinese urban and rural students' access to Chinese elite universities which looks beyond the capital approach. I will suggest the two types of dialectical relationships between social structure and human agency proposed by Sharon Hays (1994) as a useful supplement to the capital approach. They are: structurally reproductive agency and structurally transformative agency.

### **1.3 The outline of this thesis**

Following this Introduction Chapter, I will introduce the Chinese context of this study in Chapter 2, which will help readers understand the key terms relevant to this study. It includes the characteristics of the Chinese HE system under the 'Post-Confucian Model' (Marginson, 2013) or, in a similar term used by sinologists: the Confucian/East Asia Cultural Circle (Feng, 2004; Zheng, 2013); the categorisation of urban and rural under the Chinese *hukou* system; Chinese rural to urban migration and its impact on children's education; Chinese urban and rural pre-university educational disparities; the definition of Chinese elite universities in this study and Chinese urban and rural students' disparate access to them; the significance of studying in elite universities in China.

In Chapter 3, I will review the existing literature regarding understanding Chinese urban and rural educational disparities which has largely adopted the capital approach based on the social reproduction theory proposed by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1977a, 1985, 1986; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). I will firstly introduce the capital approach based on Bourdieu's social reproduction

theory in educational research, of which one thesis is that individuals' social status is decided by the volume and composition of their capitals (Bourdieu, 1987).

Another thesis of social reproduction theory is the relationship between children's educational success and their parents' social status. Parents' investment in their children's education is one of the strategies to reproduce social privileges (Bourdieu, 1990). Therefore, privileged parents transmit their capital advantages to their children's academic advantages while students with less privileged parents are less likely to succeed academically.

I will argue that despite Bourdieu's efforts to mediate the impasse between structure and agency, the capital approach limits the understanding of and devalues the human agency of the less privileged to make social changes (Joas & Knöb, 2011; Yang, 2014), i.e., Chinese rural students featured in this study achieved access to elite universities. This relates to the social structure and human agency debate in social theory. I will then, therefore, introduce this debate.

Firstly, I will explain how the capital approach based on Bourdieu's social reproduction theory in educational research fell into the structure category (Crossley, 2001; Marginson, 2008). Then, I will justify how the two types of dialectical relationships between social structure and human agency proposed by Hays (1994) enabled me to understand the complexity of Chinese urban and rural students' access to Chinese elite universities. Finally, I will develop a diagram to summarise the gaps in literature, where the research questions emerge (Figure 3.1).

In Chapter 4, I will address the methodology considerations in this study. The overall qualitative research design is decided by - and echoes - my philosophical

stance (critical realism) and research questions. This further decides the nature of the data to be collected, the research methods I used to collect the data and the analysis of the data (Matthews & Ross, 2010). Firstly, I will state my philosophical stance of critical realism. Then, I will justify the qualitative research design.

Specifically, it is narrative-oriented from a life course perspective, with the aim of collecting students' previous life stories prior to their entry to elite universities.

Afterwards, I will tell my data collection story, presenting the sampling strategies and showing how I collected data through semi-structured interviews with small-scale questionnaires. Additionally, my data analysis story through thematic analysis will be presented. Subsequently, I will address the issues relating to the translation of the data, the ethical considerations and my position as both insider and outsider in this study.

In Chapter 5, I will present the participants' profiles, which are mainly collected through questionnaires with some explanations provided by the interview data.

Participants' profiles are essential in understanding the following chapters.

In Chapter 6, I will offer an in-depth presentation and interpretation of the interview data. It is organised in terms of seven main themes which aim to answer the three sub-research questions. The seven main themes are: (1) Systematic involvement versus less involvement (parents' roles within families); (2) Chinese urban and rural parents' roles outside families (with three pairs of sub-themes); (3) The power of rural parents' language; (4) Rural students as the keys to open the doors of elite universities; (5) Rural teachers' significant roles; (6) A virtuous cycle versus a vicious cycle (Chinese urban and rural students' schooling pathways); and

(7) Concerted cultivation versus free ranging (Chinese urban and rural students' outside school time). The first two answer SRQ 1. Themes 4, 5 and 6 answer SRQ 2. The last two answer SRQ 3.

In Chapter 7, I will synthesise the findings to draw the big picture of 'Two trajectories, one destination' to answer the main research question. On the one hand, the data in this study echoes the capital approach based on the social reproduction theory to show the relationships between parents' capital and their children's education (Bourdieu, 1985, 1996b, 1990). On the other hand, it illustrates the two types of dialectical relationships between social structures and human agency (Hays, 1994). This will justify my argument to regard the two dialectical relationships of social structure and human agency as a useful supplement to the capital approach in explaining the complexity of Chinese urban and rural students' access to Chinese elite universities in Chinese institutional, educational and cultural contexts.

In Chapter 8, I will conclude this thesis. I will briefly discuss the main finding of this study, after which I will present its implications and limitations. The contributions of this study are, on the one hand, specific to a Chinese context. On the other hand, they are transferable in the global sphere. Finally, topics for possible future research based on this study will be discussed.

## Chapter 2 Chinese context of this study

This chapter provides the Chinese context relating to some concepts relevant to this study. It includes the characteristics of the Chinese HE system under the 'Post-Confucian Model' (Marginson, 2013) in Section 2.1; the categorisation of urban and rural under the Chinese *hukou* system in Section 2.2; Chinese internal rural to urban migration and its impact on children's education in Section 2.3; Chinese urban and rural pre-university educational disparities in Section 2.4; and how this study defines Chinese elite universities, Chinese urban and rural students' disparate access to Chinese elite universities in Section 2.5. Finally, I will discuss the significance of studying in China's elite universities in Section 2.6. There is no definitive explanation of certain specific terms in this study. Instead, the contextual information facilitates the understanding of the following chapters and the justification of my research focus on Chinese urban and rural students' access to Chinese elite universities.

### 2.1 The characteristics of the Chinese higher educational system under the Post-Confucian Model

Some Chinese scholars and other sinologists worldwide categorise China within the Confucian/East Asia Cultural Circle (Feng, 2004; Peterson et al., 2001; Zheng, 2013). For example, Marginson (2013) proposes that China and other East Asia countries, such as Japan, South Korea, Vietnam and Singapore, are greatly influenced by Confucianism (Marginson, 2011, 2013). He posits that the HE system in the Asia-

Pacific region shares a common 'Post-Confucian Model' <sup>1</sup>, although these countries have their own national characteristics (Zheng, 2013). This study borrows the term 'Post-Confucian Model' from Marginson (2013), which is supported by other scholars, to describe those HE systems grouped within the Post-Confucian Model, but with a specific focus on China. This model differentiates from those in other areas, such as Western Europe, the UK and the USA, in four interrelated aspects (Marginson, 2011, 2013).

Firstly, the strong nation-state policy drivers and relatively close supervision and control (Sun, 2013). Secondly, the rapid growth in the HE participation rate (Marginson, 2016a), which is partly grounded in Confucian values and with a long lasting and deep respect for education. Thirdly, the 'one chance' national examination systems, which decide the level of higher educational institutions (HEIs) to which students can be admitted within the legitimate university hierarchy. Fourthly, the increased public investment in improving research science partly through building World Class Universities (WCUs) (Marginson, 2016b, 2019c). I will introduce the above four aspects of the Chinese HE system in what follows.

### **2.1.1 The role of the state in Chinese higher education**

There has been a close relationship between the state and Chinese HE since ancient time, where the state has exercised strong support of and control over HE, which, in turn, has served state interests (Li, 2019; Sun, 2013). The earliest record of higher learning institutions in China appeared in the *Xia* dynasty (2,070-1,600 BCE), which

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<sup>1</sup> Marginson (2011) firstly used the term 'Confucian Model', which was criticised as carrying unwanted baggage. He (Marginson, 2013) considered the term 'Post-Confucian Model' more accurate.

were under the authority and administration of the central government (Wang, 2012). During the *Zhou* dynasty (1,046-256 BCE), teachers in higher learning institutions were governmental officials whose only task was to teach.

During the Spring and Autumn periods (770-476 BCE) and the Warring States period (475-221), Confucian ideas began to largely influence Chinese education traditions. Confucius recognised that educating people played a major role in realising the state's authority (Xiao, 2016). One feature of Confucian educational ideas involved teaching students in such a way that internalised state-supported values. Literacy education was considered as beneficial, firstly to individual well-being, then to maintain social order and finally to the legitimacy of the state (Li, 2019; Yang, 2017). The most influential higher learning institution during Warring States period was called *Jixia xuegong* (*Jixia Academy*, 稷下学宫), which was under the absolute control of the state (Li, 2019). *Jixia* was a place for both learning and political debate, which exercised huge influences, on national governance (Yang, 2017).

In the *Han* dynasty (206 BCE-220), a public higher learning institute was established called *Taixue* (太学), where teachers were called *Boshi* (doctors, 博士). They were special governmental officials, enjoying the customised accommodation provided by the state. Students at *Taixue* were either recruited directly by *Boshi* or recommended by local officials. The state supported all teachers' and students' living expenses, the campus construction and maintenance expenses (Yang, 2017; Zhang, 2006). *Taixue* also served as the ministry of education at that time (Li, 2019).



In the *Sui* dynasty (581-618), a special educational administrative agency was established to monitor education, which was called *Guozijian*(国子监). It existed for more than 1,000 years until the *Qing* dynasty (1,644-1,911). In the *Song* dynasty (960-1,279), a specialised local agency was established to manage higher learning, called *Tijvxueshisi* (提举学事司) (Li, 2006). During the *Ming* dynasty (1,368-1,644), both teachers and students in public higher learning institutions were well paid by the state (Yang, 2017). Summarily, it is a tradition that the state in China has controlled HE, which has served the state's interests.

Due to the closely political, financial and administrative relationships between the state and Chinese HE, the role of the state support and control has been pivotal to the dynamic developments in Chinese HE (Yang, 2017). Therefore, public institutions had been the most popular choices for students' learning as demonstrated by the idea '*xue zai guan xue*' (learning inside the government, 学在官学). The bond between the state and Chinese education was further strengthened by the association between Chinese HE and officialdom.

Chinese HE had long been associated with governance (Hu, 2019; Marginson & Yang, 2020), especially with official recruitment (Cheng & Yang, 2015). This has been demonstrated by a Confucian slogan '*xue er you ze shi*' (officialdom is the natural outlet for good scholars, 学而优则仕), which was highly intertwined with *keju* (the civil service examination, 科举) (Pan & Yi, 2011).

*Keju* was established in 606 during the *Sui* dynasty (556-618; Yang, 2017). Since then, it had acted as a tool to achieve social control, political efficacy (Elman, 1991)

and political legitimacy of the state (Chaffee, 1995) until its abolition in 1905.

During the *Sui* dynasty, the role of *keju* was to test students' political ability. Since the *Song* dynasty (960-1,279), *keju* has begun to be integrated with officialdom (Li & Zhang, 2002). People with different level of degrees were appointed to different official positions (Yang, 2017). In this way, education, especially HE has long been regarded as the main channel to realise merit-based social mobility in China (Cheng & Yang, 2015; Marginson, 2011; Ryan, 2019). The merit-based attitude towards education in China will be illustrated in Section 2.5 and in Chapter 6: the presentation of the interview data, especially in relation to rural students' stories.

In modern era, especially since the 'reform and open door' policy<sup>2</sup> in the 1980s, China has experienced great social changes, including the changing relationship between the state and Chinese HE (Hu, 2019). Marginson himself also expresses that 'The traditional Confucian imaginary is no longer sufficient as a guide to modern China.' (Marginson, 2019c, p. 2). Some Chinese scholars advocate that the relationship between the state and Chinese HE has transformed from the logic of state-control to the logic of state-supervision (Hu, 2003; Yao, 2018). However, the central role of the state in Chinese HE still remains, exemplified by its continued control over HE programmes, personal recruitment and research (Hu, 2019; Marginson, 2019c). Modern Chinese universities function almost as a part of governmental institution (Li, 2019). For example, the presidents of public universities are appointed by government rather than being selected by university

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<sup>2</sup> Since 1978, China has begun to implement a series of policies regarding foreign trade, foreign investment and foreign borrowing, through which the reliance on market forces, domestic and foreign, has been strengthened (Howell, 2016).

authorities. Currently, HE and research are regarded by the Chinese government as part of a national strategy to 'catch up to the West' (Marginson, 2016b, p. 10).

'...Old Chinese ideas can once more be put into practice, in more modern guise, expanded to the new scale, but fundamentally the same ideas...' (Fitzgerald, 1964, p. 20). The role of the state in Chinese HE is therefore still significant.

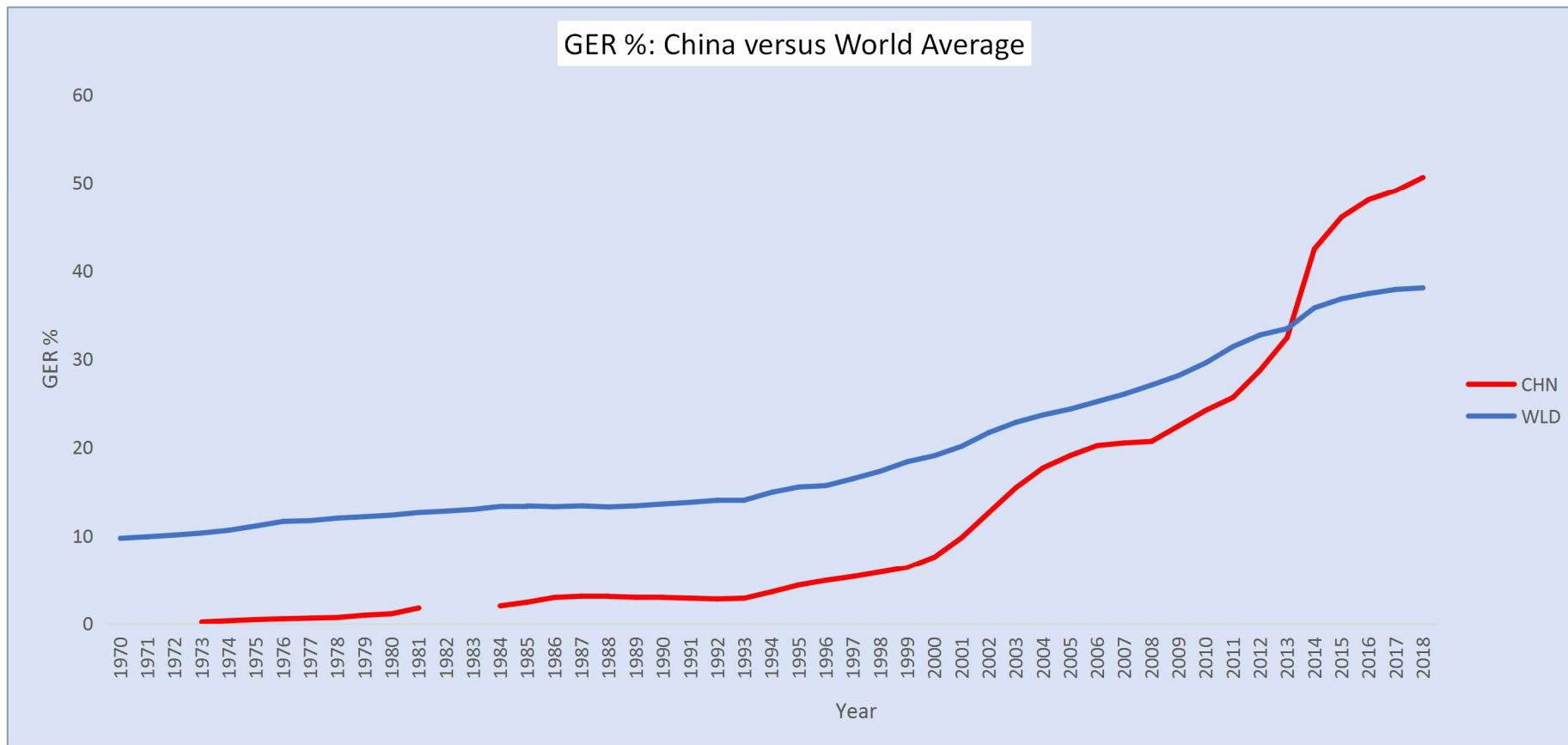
### **2.1.2 The rapid growth of participation in Chinese higher education**

HE has experienced a great leap forward globally since WWII (Tillman, 2010; Trow, 1973). Worldwide, this has led to high participation in HE, although the rate has varied among different countries (Altbach et al., 2016; Cantwell et al., 2018). Martin Trow (1973, 2007) proposes that the development of HE occurs in three stages, using the Gross Enrolment Rate (GER) as a measurement. The GER represents the percentage of an age cohort attending universities each year. When the GER is below 15%, it is the elite stage; when it is between 15% and 50%, it is the mass stage; once it exceeds 50%, it reaches the universal stage. At the beginning of the 1990s, the total enrolment ratio in HE worldwide was 14.0%, which more than doubled to 38.04% by 2018 (UNESCO, 2019). It is predicted that the number of students studying in HE will reach 150 million by 2050 (World Bank, 2000). A similar trend can also be seen in Chinese HE.

Chinese HE began to expand on a large scale - both in the number of institutions and the enrolment rate - in the 1990s. In terms of the number of HEIs, in 1998 there were 1,022 public regular HEIs, which nearly tripled to 2,663 by 2018 (Chinese Statistical Yearbook, 2019). Alongside this large-scale institutional expansion, the enrolment rate increased rapidly. In 1998, the Chinese government set out to

achieve its massification goal by 2010. It was achieved by 2002 with a GER of 15.3 % (Bai, 2006). From 2014, the GER in China exceeded the world average, reaching 50.6 % in 2018 (UNESCO, 2019; Xu, 2019). See the details in Figure 2.1.

**Figure 2.1 The comparison of the GER in China and World Average**



Based on the data from UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2019)<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> There is no data for China in the years of 1971, 1972, 1982 and 1983 from UNESCO.

When explaining the high participation rate of HE in China, government investment has been vital (Marginson, 2011, 2013), epitomised by the expansion of the number of HEIs mentioned above. Besides the state's heavy investment, the whole population's desire for HE in China, both urban and rural, has been claimed to be stronger than countries outside the 'Post-Confucian Model' (Zheng, 2013). The Confucian values regarding education can provide another possible explanation for the high participation rate of HE in China. This will be explained in Section 2.5.

### **2.1.3 The examination systems for admission to Chinese elite universities**

The nationally unified entrance examination to universities in modern China is called the *gaokao* (the National College Entrance Examination, 高考), a revision of *keju* (Liu, 2011). Before 2004, the examination scores in the *gaokao* were the only factor in deciding which level of universities a student can enter. Since 2004, in addition to the *gaokao*, Chinese HEIs can make student admission decisions which took into account students' scores in the Independent Recruitment Examination (the IRE, 自主招生), a university-specific multistage admission policy largely enjoyed by Chinese elite universities.

#### **2.1.3.1 The *gaokao***

*The gaokao* takes place every June, lasting 2-3 days. It is a high-stakes, standardised test of students' academic knowledge, involving the study of subjects, such as Chinese, Maths, English, History and Physics. Based on their *gaokao* scores, students fill out an application form with a priority list, ranking their preferred university and subject choices. However, students do not know the cut-off

admission scores of any university or subject (Wang et al., 2011). If students fail to be admitted to their first choice, they might be admitted to universities they ranked lower. The application and admission for different level universities occur in three continual time sequences. The first sequence is application for universities with special functions, such as army and political colleges; the second is for elite universities; then for institutions with ordinary status; and the third for those offering only diplomas (Davey et al., 2007). If students are admitted to their first choice, they will not be considered during the second and third sequences. *Gaokao* has been criticised due to several drawbacks.

Firstly, university places are scarce and cannot accommodate the enormous demand. The competition in the *gaokao* is likened to *qianjun wanma guo dumuqiao* (thousands of troops crossing a single-log bridge, 千军万马过独木桥) (Yeung, 2013, p. 58). In 2018, for example, 9.75 million *gaokao* attendees competed for 2,663 undergraduate places in public universities (Chinese Statistical Yearbook, 2019; China Education Online, 2018). Less than 10% of students were admitted to elite universities (Zhao et al., 2018). Secondly, the *gaokao* is a single stage standardised test. Students' university destinations are significantly influenced by the 'once-for-all' exams. Should an unexpected occurrence happen, there are few alternatives available to compensate for it (Altbach & Yu, 2012). Thirdly, the *gaokao* tradition of rote-learning from textbooks has been criticised by the public on the grounds that students' many special and all-round talents remain undiscovered. Finally, the *gaokao* has been criticised as inefficient because of the high possibility for students to lose opportunities if they do not list the most suitable universities as their first

choice (Zhang, 2009). Under such conditions, the IRE has been launched as a supplementary criterion for Chinese students' university admissions, and specifically for elite university admissions.

### **2.1.3.2 The Independent Recruitment Examination**

The IRE was initiated in 2004, which is expected to counteract the drawbacks of *gaokao* stated above. Hereafter, the *gaokao* was no longer the only pathway for high school graduates' university admission (Altbach & Yu, 2012). Universities, especially elite universities, can recruit students based on their combined scores in the *gaokao* and the IRE.

Firstly, the IRE is a multistage evaluation. It basically involves three stages. Prior to the *gaokao*, applicants submit materials required by their preferential universities before the end of March. Typically, the application materials include, but are not limited to, academic records in high schools to show students' school performance, personal statements, all kinds of certificates obtained during high schools to indicate students' specific talents and one or two reference letters. The reference letters can be written by schoolteachers, high school principals or even eminent scholars. Notably, most universities limit the eligibility of recommendations from principles to key high schools (Liu et al., 2014). In my interpretation, the IRE, in itself, discriminates against the rural students who were less likely to study in key high schools due to their educational disadvantages during primary and middle schools (Wang et al., 2010). This will be explained in Section 2.3.



After reviewing these materials, at the end of April universities announce who can step into the second stage: written examination and third stage: interviews. Several days (varied among universities) after the *gaokao*, eligible students attend the written examination and the interviews. The written paper and interviews are designed by individual universities. The written examination is similar to the standardised tests in the *gaokao*. However, its contents are more difficult than those of the *gaokao*. Some topics are not covered in the high school curriculum. The interview in the IRE is expected to test students' overall ability beyond classroom knowledge. The topics are wide ranging - from social issues to international news. There are no right or wrong answers to interview questions. The winners in the IRE will be assigned bonus points, adding to their *gaokao* scores. The bonus points range from five to 60, with students being admitted once their *gaokao* scores exceed the province-specific cut-off admission scores set by individual universities. After the release of the *gaokao* scores, universities make final admission decisions according to students' integrated results from the *gaokao* and the IRE. If students' *gaokao* scores passed the cut-off score, they can use the combined scores in the *gaokao* and the IRE to choose highly competitive subjects. For those whose *gaokao* scores did not reach the cut-off scores, some can also be accepted if their bonus points make up the deficit. They are usually known as the exceptive admission, and represent the biggest benefit provided by the IRE (Wu & Li, 2017; Wu et al., 2019).

Secondly, the IRE is university specific. Each university can design its own selection procedures and admission requirements. For example, in 2018, one of the entry

requirements for the material review in university A was ‘Got the excellent results in the final national middle school discipline Olympic competition (Mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology, informatics) during high schools.’ For those in university Z, it was ‘Won the third prize or above in the national middle school discipline Olympic competition (Mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology, informatics) in the provincial division or above during high schools.’ (“Predicting the trend,” August 30, 2018). Although nuances exist, the general principles and processes among universities are similar to those stated above.

Thirdly, the IRE is largely employed by Chinese elite universities. Currently, the Chinese government allows 95 universities to hold the IRE every year. 92 of these are elite universities belonging to the Double First-Class University Plan (which will be introduced in the next section). Evidence shows that the IRE has played an increasingly vital role in Chinese elite university admissions. It has, however, worsened the issue of disparate access to elite universities between urban and rural students (Cheng, 2013; Liu, 2016; Luo et al., 2018; Wang & Xun, 2011; Wu & Li, 2017; Wu, 2016, 2019; Yin et al., 2014). For example, Luo et al. (2018) claimed that the association of receiving bonus points with attending elite universities in China was stronger than the *gaokao* score. Wu & Li (2017) found that among three Chinese elite universities, 25.5% of their students were admitted via the IRE. Cheng (2013) investigated the students in one Chinese elite university to find that among those admitted through the IRE, 73.1% were with urban *hukou*, nearly three times that of rural *hukou* (26.9%), echoing the study of Luo (2011) and Wang & Xun (2011). Students in key high schools are more likely to sit the IRE (Liu et al., 2014;

Wu, 2019). However, urban students are overrepresented in Chinese key high schools (Ye, 2015).

Compared to the *gaokao*, the IRE has expanded the universities' autonomy to admit outstanding students. It has encouraged students to develop their all-round abilities during primary and secondary schools (Liu et al., 2014; Zheng, 2010). Ideally, it had been expected to select students with excellent and special talents which cannot be fully realised through the unified and standardised *gaokao*. In this way, the Chinese HE system would become more academically and socially diversified (Liu et al., 2014). The original purpose of the IRE is to select all-round students. However, the opportunities are not equally enjoyed by Chinese urban and rural students. This will be further illustrated by the data in this study.

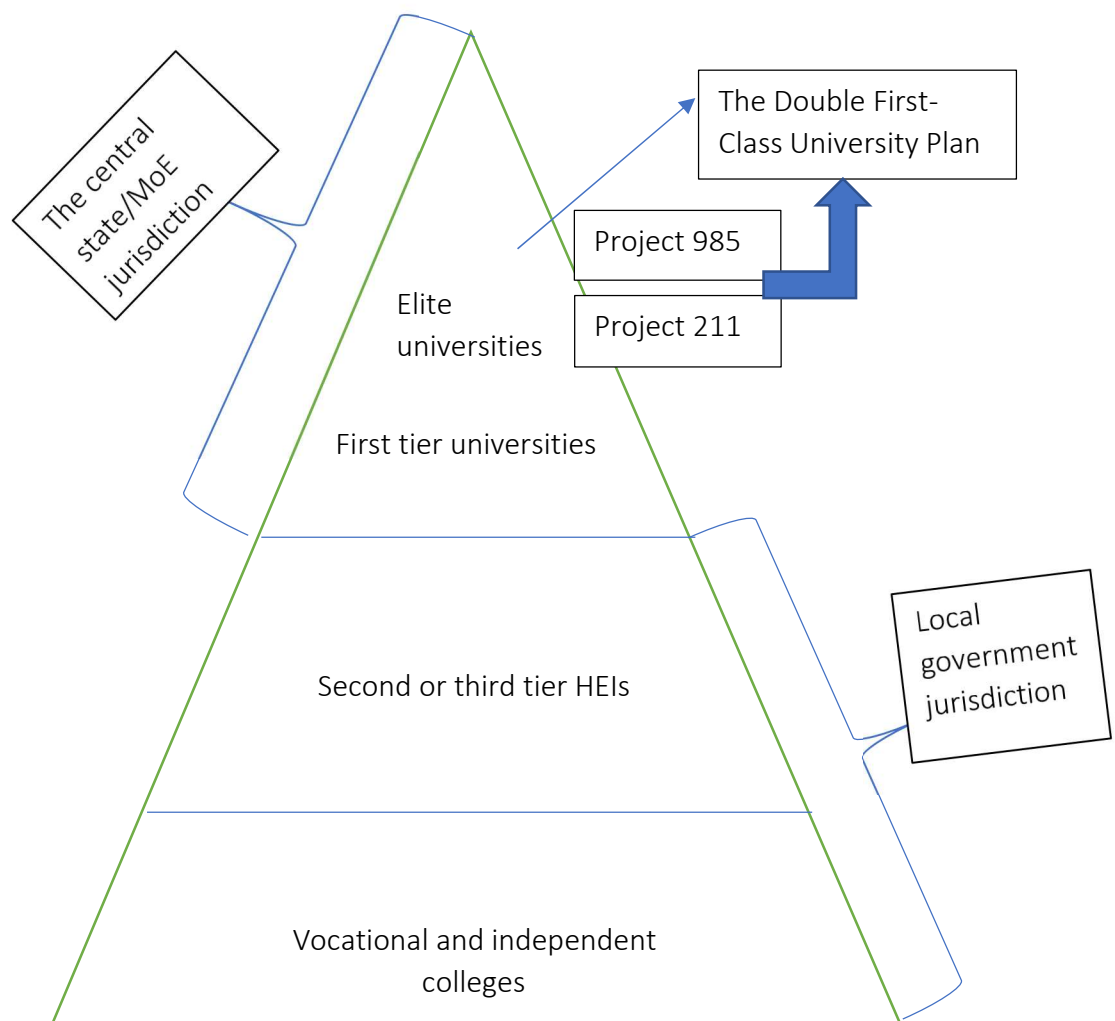
#### **2.1.4 Chinese higher education hierarchy**

There are two differentiations of HEIs in China. One is the horizontal differentiation based on sponsorship, whereby Chinese HEIs are classified as either public or private (Hu et al., 2018). Private universities, called *minban* (people-run, 民办), are sponsored by the private sector. Until 2018, there were 786 private universities in China. Public HEIs are sponsored by either central or local government. Until 2018 there were 2,663 public universities in China, including regular HEIs, adult HEIs, higher vocational colleges and independent colleges (Chinese Statistical Yearbook, 2019; Zhu & Lou, 2011). Public universities have been the main form of HEI in China; thus, the focus of this study is on regular public HEIs, which reside in a vertical

hierarchy (Li, 2007). This is the second differentiation of Chinese HEIs based on their status.

Different types of Chinese HEIs are assigned to national, provincial or municipal jurisdictions respectively (Du, 2000). According to their administrative status, Chinese public universities consist of national elite universities under the direct supervision of the Ministry of Education (MoE), institutions under the provincial or municipal level of administration (second or third tier universities) and autonomously vocational and independent colleges (Chinese Statistical Yearbook, 2006). Until 2018, 75 out of 2,663 Chinese HEIs were under the direct supervision of the MoE (Chinese Statistical Yearbook, 2019). Apart from these different administrative levels, in term of governmental discourse Chinese universities operate under a hierarchical structure. The premier status of Chinese elite universities was first established in the Project 211 and Project 985 initiatives. Both were replaced by a new governmental initiative: The Double First-Class University Plan in 2017. I designed Figure 2.2 to show the Chinese university pyramid, with the elite universities at the very top within the national first-tier universities, the second or third tier HEIs in the middle and, lastly, vocational and independent colleges at the bottom.

Figure 2.2 Chinese university pyramid



Project 211 (initiated in 1995) and Project 985 (1998) were national strategies which selected a certain number of research universities who would receive billions of RMB [Chinese dollar] in funding to reach the WCU standard by improving their teaching and research quality (Li, 2004; Hu et al., 2018; Huang, 2015). The number 211 implies that 100 universities and disciplines were selected in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to realise WCU standard. This aim was further enhanced by Project 985, where only 43 universities were included. It was reported that 72% of national educational expenditure was taken by universities in these two projects from 2009 to 2013

(Nanfang Metropolis Daily, December 18, 2014), causing an imbalance in the distribution of HE resources between the top- and low-level HEIs. Chinese university hierarchy was enhanced by the Double First-Class University Plan in 2017, which replaced the Project 211 and Project 985.

In 2015, the Double First-Class University Plan was first drafted. 'Double' in this case refers to both university and discipline. 'First-Class' refers to the objective of reaching the WCU standard. It was finally implemented with the release of the two name lists of the selected universities and disciplines on September 21, 2017 (MoE, 2017). The first one includes 42 first-class universities, divided into category A (36) and category B (6). The second one contains 465 first-class disciplines, distributed among 140 HEIs, mostly within first-class universities. It is noticeable that all previous Project 211 universities (112) and Project 985 universities (39) are included in the list, along with 25 newcomers. It is aimed at creating WCU and disciplines by 2050 based on a series of five-year cycles (The Charlesworth Group, 2017). The Double First-Class University Plan represents a new era for Chinese elite universities. Thus, the elite universities in this study are referred to those in the name list. See Appendix I for the list of universities.

So far, I have introduced the four characteristics in the Chinese HE system under the Post-Confucian Model (Marginson, 2013). As Marginson (2011, 2013) and other researchers (Feng, 2004; Peterson et al., 2001; Zheng, 2013) remind readers that countries under the common Post-Confucian Model or the Confucian/East Asia Cultural Circle have dissimilar national characteristics. Thus, it might helpful to think

beyond the common model to examine what is unique in a Chinese national context.

One of the unique aspects of Chinese education is its urban and rural division.

Worldwide, discussions on urban and rural educational disparities, especially disadvantages in rural education, are rising. This is evident in developed countries, such as in the USA (Ardoin, 2018; Nugent et al., 2017), the UK (Hargreaves, 2009; Kirke, 2017) and Australia (Cuervo, 2016; Roberts & Cuervo, 2015). This can also be seen in many developing countries (Buchmann & Hannum, 2001), such as in South Africa (Januarie, 2019; Mqgwashu, 2016), Sub-Saharan Africa (Zhang, 2006), Iran (Kamyab, 2015), Romania (Voicu & Vasile, 2010), Georgia (Chankseliani, 2013) and also in cross-national comparisons (Ulubasoglu & Cardak, 2007). However, the global concepts of urban and rural, especially the definition of rurality, involve varied indicators, such as demographic, geographic, cultural and contextual ones (Flora et al., 2016; Leibowitz, 2017; Montgomery, 2020; Roberts & Green, 2013). In contrast to the indicators of urban and rural elsewhere, one unique aspect of China is its urban and rural division under the *hukou* system. Existing studies have shown Chinese urban and rural educational inequality (Hannum et al., 2010; Hao et al., 2014; Wu, 2011), including urban and rural students' unequal access to Chinese elite universities (Liang, 2013; Zhang & Huang, 2017). In what follows, I will explain how the *hukou* system, as a national institution, has created a Chinese urban and rural division along with its associated effects on Chinese urban and rural students' access to Chinese elite universities.

## 2.2 The *hukou* system

The urban and rural division in China also intertwines with class, ethnicity, spatial segregation and occupation, similar to many countries worldwide (Ardoin, 2018; Montgomery, 2020). For example, rural *hukou*-ers have been regarded as the underclass (Chan, 2009), in a similar way to the division between social classes.

However, the Chinese urban and rural educational disparity is distinctive because it has been embedded in an institutional factor (Wu, 2011): the *hukou* system, which creates a 'rural-urban apartheid' (Vickers & Zeng, 2017, p. 34).

China's modern *hukou* system was created in the 1950s, and is still in place today (Hong & Fuller, 2019; Wu, 2011). From birth, all Chinese people are grouped under two *hukou* categories: (1) the *hukou* location, the name of the registration city, such as Beijing or Shanghai; and (2) the *hukou* type: urban(non-agricultural) or rural (agricultural) (Chan, 2009). The former is used to distinguish administrative districts. The latter creates acute differences in life chances between urban and rural *hukou*-ers (Whyte, 2010), along with their associated effects on access to Chinese HE. In this study, the main focus is on urban and rural educational disparities rather than differences among administrative districts. Thus, the terms 'urban' and 'rural' refer to individuals' *hukou* type (i.e., 'urban students and parents' refers to their *hukou* type being urban; similarly, for rural students and parents). The modern Chinese *hukou* system was formed in unique Chinese national contexts and associated characteristics. This will be explained below.



Firstly, the *hukou* type is hereditary. Before 1998, a child's *hukou* type was assigned to them from their mother's record. Afterwards, a child can inherit either their father or mother's *hukou* type (Liu & Shi, 2019; Wang, 2010). However, the *hukou* type has been an important consideration in marriage in China (Lu, 2004). In practice, it is common for urban *hukou*-ers to marry urban *hukou*-ers or rural *hukou*-ers to marry to rural *hukou*-ers. Thus, in most practical cases, both a child's mother and father are urban or rural *hukou*-ers. One of the couples is designated as the head of the household whose *hukou* type is transmitted to the child. Even if a family changes residence, the *hukou* type remains unchanged (Chan, 2009).

Every household has their own *hukou ben* (household register book, 户口本). On the first page, it states what kind of *hukou* type the household is (urban or rural), and the name of the head of the household. The remaining pages record individual family members' information. The information includes, for example, gender, date of birth, ID number and ethnicity. On each individual page, it does not state the individual's *hukou* type because it is considered that the remaining family members, by default, are the same *hukou* type as the head of the household (See the Appendix II for the photos of my family's *hukou ben*: obtained with parents' consent). In this sense, rather than being self-earned, urban or rural status in China is ascribed, as are the advantages associated with the urban *hukou* and the disadvantages related to the rural *hukou*.

Secondly, the *hukou* system discriminates against rural *hukou*-ers. China's modern *hukou* system was a product of the planned economy (Chan, 2009). During Mao's era, China deployed state socialism with a redistributive economy, where the *hukou*

type was more of an occupational division. Under the state socialist ideology, almost all resources were owned by the centralised state (Szelényi, 1978). The state enjoyed absolute control over farmers' lands, which were considered as collective assets rather than personal possessions (Selden, 1998). The national strategies of the planned economy aimed to achieve rapid industrialisation and urbanisation by taking in agricultural surplus to support industrial capital accumulation and urban subsidies (Gong, 2009). This strategy was called 'agricultural assists industry; rural assist urban'. Some authors claim that it is a strategy which supports the stronger by constraining the weaker (Zhang & Wei, 2011). In my interpretation, this might be the root of the discrimination towards the rural population embedded in the *hukou* system.

The *hukou* system also limits an individual's eligibility for all kinds of social welfare within their registered locale, such as food, job assignment, access to education, housing and health care (Chan, 2009; Tam & Jiang, 2015; Wang, 2010).

Without registration, one cannot establish eligibility for food, clothing or shelter, obtain employment, go to school, marry or enlist in the army.

(Banister, 1991, p. 328).

You can only enjoy those social entitlements according to your *hukou* status, rather than the place where you physically live or work (Hong & Fuller, 2019). The 'rural assist urban' policy orientation led to an unequal distribution of resources between urban and rural *hukou*-ers (Afridi et al., 2015). Urban *hukou*-ers are entitled to better social insurance, better access to educational resources and local

government-funded public housing, while rural *hukou*-ers have been excluded (Naughton, 2006; Tao, 2010).

Taking education as an example, there has been an urban and rural dichotomy in terms of educational resources distribution (Hao et al., 2014). Governmental funding per student in urban schools has largely exceeded that for rural schools. Such disparities have been expanded (Xiao & Wu, 2018). Urban schools have been equipped with more qualified teachers and better teaching facilities than those in rural schools (Ryan, 2019). However, students have to study in schools belong to their *hukou* locale. Thus, rural students are excluded from enjoying better educational resources (Chen, 2019). The associated effects of the *hukou* system on urban and rural students' educational disparities last from pre-university stages up until their access to elite universities. I will provide more relevant details in Section 2.4.

Due to its ascribed characteristic and its association with social entitlements, the third unique element of the *hukou* system in modern China is its separation of physical movement and citizenship in China, which is reflected in the situation of Chinese rural to urban migrant workers. The next section will explain the rural to urban internal migration and its impacts on rural children's education in China. This will help readers understand the relevant data presented in the following Chapters 5 and 6 because some rural parents in this study are migrant workers.

## 2.3 Rural to urban internal migration and its impact on children's education in China

Since the 1980s, China has experienced fast economic growth and urbanisation, especially in the eastern coast areas, which has increased the urban and rural economic disparities. The people of rural China are facing limited economic opportunity, low standards of living and land shortage due to urbanisation, while urban cities are full of employment opportunities, have higher living standards and prosperity (Davin, 1999) along with an increasing demand for manufacturing workers (Chan, 2009). This partly results in massive internal rural to urban migration in China in search for better living standards (Kim, 2019). Although rural to urban internal migration also happens in other countries, the case in China is considered among the most overwhelming in human history (UNICEF, 2016). Currently, over half of the Chinese population (57.65%) are registered as rural *hukou*-ers (Chinese Statistical Yearbook, 2019). In 2018, China's rural to urban migrant population numbered more than 288 million, accounting for around 20% of the total population and over 51% of the whole rural population (National Bureau of Statistics, 2019). The large number of internal rural to urban migrants has a significant impact on children's education in China.

Due to the *hukou* system, Chinese internal migrants experience a disparity between physical movement and citizenship privileges (Chan, 2018). For example, a rural to urban migrant can physically move to a new place, but it is less possible for rural migrants to enjoy *hukou*-based social rights, service and welfare, such as voting, public education and the social insurance scheme (OECD, 2016). Taking children's

education as an example, rural migrant children are barred access to urban public schools (Sheehan, 2017; Ye & Lu, 2011). The tuition fees (textbooks and miscellaneous fees) in public primary and middle schools have been free of charge in China since 2006 (MoE, 2006); however, if rural migrant children want to study in urban schools, they need to pay transition fees. The average expenses (including tuition fees and other academic expenses) per year for a rural student studying in an urban school during basic education was 9,593.34 RMB in 2015. This took up 14.59% of a rural migrant household's annual income (Wu & Li, 2016). In 2018, a rural student was required pay an urban primary school around 2,000 RMB in tuition fees (Wen, March 9, 2018). Moreover, rural children studying in urban schools experience all kinds of discrimination and exclusion (Mu & Jia, 2014). Apart from the institutional constraints on children's education, Chinese rural migrant workers also encounter multi-faceted difficulties, which are partly embedded in the *hukou* system.

Most rural migrants work at the low end of the labour market with minimum salary and benefits (Chan, 2012; Zhang, 2017). Although recent years have witnessed a relative increase in rural migrants' wages, a huge wage difference still exists between rural migrant workers and urban workers due to discrimination against rural migrant workers in the labour market (Lee, 2012; Wei & Huang, 2019). They live in dormitories or poorly equipped rental housing in peasant enclaves because they cannot afford to buy homes in the cities in which they work (Wu, 2013; Yang, 2013). Additionally, as temporary contract workers, their employment status is unstable (Jin et al., 2017). They face multifaceted risks due to the lack of social

protection, as well as material difficulties (Zhang, 2013). Many studies have shown that few rural migrant workers are covered by any social insurance scheme (Chan, 2001; Lee, 2012; Li & Wan, 2004). Faced with low incomes, their children's lack of access to urban education and the many obstacles preventing them from living in the city, a huge number of rural migrant parents leave their children behind in their home villages (Hong & Fuller, 2019; Jacka et al., 2013; Kim, 2019).

There were nearly 70 million Chinese 'left-behind' rural children in 2018 (China Association of Social Security, 2018). Most rural migrant parents return home only during the Spring Festival each year. Their children's guardians are mainly grandparents or other relatives (Duan et al., 2013; Yiu & Yun, 2017) with most left-behind children attending rural boarding schools (Mu et al., 2013). This situation is echoed by the experiences of many rural student participants in this study. For example, five out of nine rural students in this study are left-behind children whose parents are rural migrant workers. Chapter 5 will include more detail from these participants.

Piloted experiments have been ongoing to unify urban and rural *hukou* in order to make it easier for rural children to be schooled in their parents' working cities. For example, an increasing number of migrant schools are providing private schooling to migrant children. However, they are not government-funded (Roberts & Hannum, 2018) and most of them are unlicensed with unqualified teachers and poor facilities (Mu & Jia, 2014). Even though some rural students obtained temporary schooling places outside their *hukou* locale, they still had to return to their registered locale to attend the *gaokao* (OECD, 2016). Since 2014, the restrictions on migrant children

sitting the *gaokao* in their parents' working cities have been slightly relaxed through governmental initiatives. However, these initiatives came with many additional conditions attached. The rules in one province, for example, stated that 'at least one parent must own a legal, stable residence and have a job locally; they must hold a local residence permit; have bought local social insurance for at least three consecutive years; lastly, the student should complete three years of schooling in city high school.' (Xu, 2016).

Given the difficulties most rural migrant workers are facing (discussed above), such reforms might just target certain 'desirable' rural migrants as defined by their employment status and economic conditions (OECD, 2016). Reforms have been implemented, but the barriers embedded in the *hukou* system for rural children's education in urban schools have not changed radically. The *hukou* system still remains the institutional barrier that separates rural students from their migrant parents. This is also evident in the rural students' stories in this study, which will be presented in Chapter 6.

Apart from the above mentioned features, the original purpose of the *hukou* system also included the control of national internal mobility, the aim of which was to ease the food shortage in urban cities and to ensure the ideology of collectivism in the rural countryside (Tsang, 2013). It was essentially a political strategy intended to tackle high population density, labour surplus and capital shortage in a predominantly agricultural society (Cheng & Selden, 1994). The *hukou* system, then, has played a role in social control, especially with regard to the special control of

‘targeted’ people, such as political subversives whose names are kept in a confidential list by the police (Wang, 2004; Wang, 2010).

In summary, the Chinese *hukou* system was launched in a unique Chinese economic, social and political context. Unlike the measurement of urban and rural using other indicators elsewhere (Leibowitz, 2017; Montgomery, 2020; Roberts & Green, 2013), the *hukou* system in China is a national institution, which ‘is even written into law’ (Harvey, 2005, p. 142). This does not deny the intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) of urban and rural with other measurements of social status in China (Xie & Tan, 2009; Montgomery, 2020). It is worth noting that, within the *hukou* category, urban and rural *hukou*-ers have ‘sharply different rights and opportunities in life’ (Whyte, 2010, p. 13), including students’ disparate educational opportunities from their pre-university stages up until their access to elite universities. This will be introduced in the next section.

## **2.4 Chinese urban and rural educational disparities during pre-university stages**

Before presenting the Chinese urban and rural pre-university educational disparities, I will introduce the Chinese pre-university educational system as a whole. This will help the readers to better understand the complexity of Chinese urban and rural educational contexts.



### 2.4.1 Chinese pre-university educational system

China's formal educational system is state-run public education under the Ministry of Education (Ryan, 2019). It consists of preschool, primary, middle, high school and HE. Within the five stages, there are both academic and vocational schooling pathways. For example, students can attend *zhongzhan* (secondary vocational schools, 中专) after middle school and *dazhuan* (tertiary vocational schools, 大专) following high school. More recently, the number of private schools have increased in China (Chinese Statistical Yearbook, 2018). However, the public nature of China's educational system has not changed. Neither the urban nor rural students in this study experienced vocational schooling. The public educational system introduced in this study refers to the academic pathways, which are summarised in Table 2.1.

**Table 2.1 Chinese public educational system in academic pathway**

Educational stages	Compositions	Years of schooling
Preschool education	Infant education (currently not part of the formal schooling)	Normally for 0-3 years old.
	Kindergartens	Three years (normally for 3-5 years old)
Basic education (Compulsory education)	Primary schools	Six years (normally for 6-11 years old)
	Middle schools	Three years (normally for 12-14 years old)
High school	High schools	Three years (normally for 15-17 years old)
Higher education	Bachelor; Master; PhD	4-5 years for bachelor's degree; 1-3 years for master's degree; Normally, 4-8 years for PhD.

Based on data from UNESCO Institute of Statistics (Accessed on October 25, 2018).

Preschool education in China is not compulsory. In a broad sense, it includes all the activities that influence preschool age (0-5) children's cognitive and non-cognitive developments in society, school and families. In a narrow sense, it refers specifically to schooling offered by professional institutions, such as nurseries or infant learning centres (0-3 years old) and kindergartens (3-5 years old). Traditionally, Chinese infants between 0-3 were domestically cared for by parents or grandparents. More recently, the number of early learning centres has increased (Qi & Melhuish, 2017). In this study, I consider preschool education as a broad concept, including all forms of infant education - at homes or in learning centres - and kindergarten schooling.

Schooling in primary and middle schools is basic education in China, which has been compulsory by law since 1986 (MoE, 1986, accessed on July 28, 2019). Both primary and middle schools are open registration without entrance examinations. However,

children cannot choose schools randomly. Instead, they are assigned to neighbouring schools based on their *hukou* locale or their long-term residence (MoE, 1986). This is called *jiujin ruxue* (nearby enrolment policy, 就近入学). Residential communities near to schools are called *xuequ* (school districts, 学区). Although textbooks and miscellaneous fees for basic education have been free for all since 2006 (MoE, 2006), there have been certain hidden charges. For example, if the assigned schools were not desirable, parents could buy their children places in schools outside their own *xuequ* through school choice fees. Alternatively, they could change residence to *xuequ* where the housing price is extremely high (Ryan, 2019). The choice of schools and residential moving will be illustrated by urban students' stories in this study. Also, boarding schools in China have been the norm, especially in middle and high schools (Hansen, 2015), where students' daily study is intensive (Ryan, 2019). This will be illustrated by both urban and rural students' stories in this study.

Chinese high school education is non-compulsory and fee-charging. Middle school graduates who are planning to continue on to high school schooling need to attend provincially unified high-stakes examinations called *zhongzhao* (high school entrance examination, 中招). Generally, urban middle schools' admission to high schools is within municipal level districts while that for rural middle schools is within county level districts. Meanwhile, students are allowed to apply for key schools in other counties within the same municipality or in other municipal cities within the same province (MoE, 2005, 2007; Tam & Jiang, 2015). The data in this study will show that urban students are more competitive in competing for places

in key schools in capital cities. In the next section, I will introduce the key schools in the Chinese public educational system.

#### **2.4.2 Keys schools in China**

Schools in China, especially middle and high schools, are divided into two categories: 'key' and 'ordinary'. Since the 1950s, the Chinese central government has begun to concentrate educational resources on few schools due to the nation's limited educational capacity (MoE, 1984). Although the key school system was officially abolished in 1997, many previously 'key schools' changed their names to 'experimental school' or 'NO.1 school'. They still enjoy better educational resources, which is sufficiently attractive for students to compete for places there (Wu, 2008). In this study, I still use the term key schools to refer to those academically prestigious schools.

Disparities are seen in the promotion rate, teacher quality, student resources, financial resources, reputation, school buildings, teaching facilities, libraries, staff welfare and bonuses, etc. (Qin, 2008, p. 335)

Key middle schools are able to promote their students' (usually those elites) competitiveness in admission to key high schools (You, 2007). Key high schools are able to provide their students with high quality teachers and educational resources to facilitate their admission to universities (Wang, 2012). It shows that key high schools provide a substantial proportion of university candidates (90–99%) (Liang, et al., 2013), especially to Chinese elite universities (Wu, 2019). Thus, Chinese parents and children are keen on gaining admission into key high schools.

Some key high schools enrol students through their individually designed tests. Reputable high schools tend to attract the highest scorers from the whole province (Li & Yeung, 2017). It is common for competent students to attend several key high schools' entrance exams. However, studies have shown that rural students are less likely to attend key high schools than their urban counterparts (Wang et al., 2010; Ye, 2015). The next section will show that Chinese rural students have been at an educational disadvantage from their preschool stages. They are less competitive and less likely to win a place in key high schools, which will also be illustrated by the rural students' stories in this study.

### **2.4.3 Chinese urban and rural pre-university educational disparities**

Existing studies have shown that Chinese rural *hukou*-ers' pre-university educational level has significantly lagged behind that of urban *hukou*-ers (Hannum et al., 2010; Hao et al., 2014). For example, in 2018, only around 27% of registered primary school students were rural. That fell to 14% in middle schools (Chinese Statistical Yearbook, 2019). There is no officially published data indicating urban and rural students' representation in high schools in China. The study from Hao et al. (2014) shows that, in 2008, only 25% of rural *hukou*-ers were enrolled in high schools, compared to 62.7% of urban students. Rural students' participation in high schools has been increasing (Lu & Zhang, 2019); however, there is still a disparity when compared with urban students. Using data from household surveys conducted by the National Bureau of statistics in 2015, Bai et al. (2019) finds that 100% of Chinese urban youths were studying in high schools, while the proportion of Chinese rural youths was 77%. There are many reasons for such a disparity.

Studies have indicated various reasons for disadvantaged rural education, such as remoteness, family poverty, unbalanced allocation of educational resources and a lack of qualified teachers (Bao, 2006; Li, 2018; Wang, 2012; Zhang, 2018). Taking urban and rural teachers' quantity and quality as an example, studies have shown that rural teachers' overall quantity and quality are lower than those in urban settings (Liu, 2019), with fewer full-time teachers in rural primary and middle schools (Wang, 2012). Most rural teachers are graduates from local teacher training institutions rather than comprehensive universities or elite universities (Liu, 2014). Due to low income, rural teachers' retention rate has been low (Peng, 2015). Urban schools are more attractive to quality teachers due to their better resources and bonuses (Ryan, 2019). Consequently, new graduates are not willing to teach in rural schools and more experienced rural teachers tend to change jobs and move to urban schools (Qian et al., 2018; Youngs et al., 2017). This does not mean that all Chinese rural teachers are not qualified. Instead, the data in this study will show that rural teachers played significant roles in rural students' access to Chinese elite universities. Nonetheless, Chinese rural schoolteachers' low teaching quality will also be illustrated by the testimony of three rural parents in this study, all of whom are rural schoolteachers. The relevant data will be presented in Chapter 6.

Although the Chinese government has initiated varied schemes to narrow the urban and rural educational gap (Yue et al., 2018), lack of educational resources and the quantity and quality of rural schoolteachers are still placing rural students at a disadvantage (OECD, 2016). Rural schools still face varied issues, such as less rural schools, large class sizes and long and risky commuting (Roberts & Hannum, 2018;

Si, 2019). These urban and rural pre-university educational disparities are not unique to China. They are repeated both in advanced economies, such as in the USA (Ardoin, 2018; Nugent et al., 2017), the UK (Hargreaves, 2009; Kirke, 2017), Australia (Cuervo, 2016; Roberts & Cuervo, 2015) and emerging economies such as Mexico (Beachman, 2011) and South Africa (Januarie, 2019; Mqgqwashu, 2016). In the case of China, urban advantages and rural disadvantages accumulate simultaneously, contributing to urban and rural disparities in HE.

The evidence above shows that Chinese urban and rural pre-university educational disparities contribute further to urban and rural students' unequal access to HE opportunities and resources (Liu & Gao, 2015). For example, some researchers posit that the cumulative advantages from pre-college education benefit urban students along their entire schooling journey; cumulative disadvantages significantly influence rural students' HE opportunities and attainment (Tam & Jiang, 2015; Wu & Treiman, 2004). Within the Chinese HE hierarchical pyramid, urban and rural students' opportunities to access elite universities have been unequal (Parker et al., 2016). This will be explained below.

## **2.5 Chinese urban and rural students' disparate access to Chinese elite universities**

Although some scholars advocate that Chinese rural students' overall enrolment in HEIs after HE expansion has increased (Liang, 2013), Chinese urban students still have greater opportunities to enter elite universities compared to their rural peers (Li & Wu, 2012; Li et al., 2015; Wu, 2016, 2019; Xie & Li, 2000; Ye & Tian, 2012;

Zhang & Huang, 2017). For example, before Chinese HE expansion, rural students accounted for only 10% - 20% of freshers in B University during 1980 to 1990, and the figure was still only around 15% from 2000 to 2005 (Liang et al., 2013; Liu et al., 2009). Li et al. (2015) uses nationwide statistics to show that after Chinese HE expansion, rural students were 11 times less likely to study in Project 211 universities. This is similar to Li & Wu's (2012) and Fan's (2008) study on Project 985 universities. In 2019, more than 80% of the freshers in A university (listed 1<sup>st</sup> in the Double First University Plan) were urban ("Statistics on," August 15, 2019). Urban and rural students' disparate access to Chinese elite universities is thus evident.

This study does not deny that the doors of Chinese HEIs as a whole seem to be more open for rural students. However, in my interpretation, the doors of elite universities have still been closed for most rural students. This is one of my motivations in focusing on Chinese elite universities. Nonetheless, there are still cases of rural students, although they are in a minority amongst their rural peers, who - against the odds - achieve access to Chinese elite universities (Cheng & Kang, 2018; Dong, 2015). The rural participants in this study are an example of this. A lack of understanding of how they achieved academic success has inspired me to examine this minor group as part of this study. Furthermore, my focus on elite universities is partly connected to the significance of studying in elite universities in China.



## 2.6 The significance of studying in elite universities in China

Because university rankings order the status of institutions, they regulate the relative value of graduate credentials. They affect the social position of many people. They have become an integral part of status culture (Marginson, 2014, p. 45).

As discussed in Section 2.1.2, there has been a high worldwide participation rate in HE. As the college-educated cohort increase, the value of their credentials is dependent upon the status of the institutions attended (Bowen, 1997; Zimdars et al., 2009). Receiving education in elite universities is currently of significance worldwide, as being admitted to prestigious universities is an indicator of the potential credentials and promising qualifications. This can significantly influence one's status attainment and social mobility (Allen, 2016; Blau & Duncan, 1967; Cantwell et al., 2018; Li & Walder, 2001; Walder et al., 2000). Global studies have indicated the impact of university selectivity and resources on a range of life outcomes (Allen, 2016; Reeves et al., 2017; Stevens, 2007). For example, degrees from elite universities play crucial roles in acquiring prestigious job positions and high incomes (Brand & Halaby, 2006; Britton et al., 2016; Sullivan et al., 2017) and gaining elite leadership and power (Karabel, 2005; Sutton Trust, 2019). This is similar to China.

One result of the dramatic HE expansion in China is the exponentially increasing unemployment rate due to the soaring number of graduates (Knight et al., 2017; Li et al., 2014). This is reflected by the folk adage: *biye dengyu shiye* (graduations

mean losing of jobs, 毕业等于失业). The fierce competition in the job market further enforces the issue of 'credential inflation' or 'academic degree disease' in present-day China (Sheng, 2017). It is not the graduates' degrees, but the quality of their diplomas which determines whether they can be hired or not (Brown, 2013). In this sense, students in elite universities 'can start celebrating the moment they begin their studies' (Kuan, 2015, p. 59).

In China, it has been common for employers' recruitment requirements to stipulate that the most valued degrees are those obtained by students attending elite universities. Studies show that it is more likely for Chinese students from elite universities to find a job than their peers from ordinary universities (Yang, 2006). Employers favour graduates from elite universities (Rivera, 2011); moreover, the starting salaries of students from elite universities are 40% higher than those from other universities (Luo et al., 2018). Evidence shows that the Chinese elite in the scientific and cultural, as well as the official and commercial fields, are primarily graduates from selective HEIs (Li & Walder, 2001; Liang et al., 2013). This study does not claim that there is a strict linear continuum between elite HE and higher earning as proposed in the Western human capital theory (Marginson, 2019b), although it is evident to some degree. The case in China is more complicated.

Chinese perceptions of education and the advantages of graduates in Chinese elite universities do not just appear in the present-day job market. Some scholars note that status drivers have been just as important as economic drivers in China's HE development (Goodman, 2014; Zhao, 2012). This is rooted in a Chinese culture dominated by Confucian classics (Liu, 2011; Ryan, 2019), where literary education

has been in an unsurpassable position in terms of self-cultivation and duty to family (Marginson & Yang, 2020; Tu, 1987). Thus, HE has played an extraordinary role in the formation and preservation of China's way of life (Li, 2019; Mok et al., 2016). This will be discussed below.

Firstly, Confucian doctrine advocated a descending social order among four 'social groups': *shi, nong, gong, shang* (governmental officers, peasantry, artificial workers and businessmen, 士, 农, 工, 商), with governmental officers at the top of the social ladder (Eberhard, 1962). As discussed previously in Section 2.1.1., governance was linked with education (Marginson, 2019c) and governmental positions were linked with scholarship (Pye, 1984). In addition to the high social position enjoyed by governmental officers, the scholar-officials also benefited from official stipends. Thus, the transformation from scholars to officials has been widely glorified (Eberhard, 1962). The scholar-officials, called the literati or gentry (Weber, 1962), were regarded as an elite class in imperial China, which was illustrated by a popularised motto: '*wanban jie xiapin, weiyou dushu gao* (to be a scholar is to be the top of society, 万般皆下品, 惟有读书高)'. For ordinary people, education has been the only avenue for ambitious ordinary citizens to realise upward social mobility and, at the same time, for those in the elite to maintain the status quo (Zha, 2011). Chinese students and parents tend to hold high educational expectations, even those from poor families (Zhang, 2014). This is supported by the data in this study.

Secondly, achieving personal aspiration through education is an indication of egalitarianism and malleability in Chinese culture. Confucianists believed that all

human beings (males at that time) are born equal with intrinsic goodness and that everyone is able to be educated. As Confucius stated, ‘*you jiao wu lei*’ (In education, there should be no class distinctions, 有教无类) (Holcombe, 2001), Confucius himself put this principle into practice by taking in many underrepresented students (Kuang, 1985). The belief in egalitarianism and malleability raises the significance of education, which should mould students according to their specific personalities rather than social backgrounds (Zheng, 2013). Although it seems to contradict current practices in Chinese HE hierarchy in light of urban and rural students’ disparate access to Chinese elite universities, as discussed in the last section, the beliefs in egalitarianism and malleability are more or less demonstrated by the data relating to the rural students’ stories in this study. This will be presented in Chapter 6.

Thirdly, the belief in egalitarianism and malleability leads to confidence in a meritocracy towards education. As discussed above, governmental positions could only be offered to the virtue received literacy education (Taylor, 1981). The rankings of imperial officials were determined by the qualifications they obtained in *keju*, which were, in theory, based on the principle of merit regardless of their financial position or birth origin (Bai, 2011; Weber, 1962). Education, especially HE, has long been regarded as merit-based in China (Cheng & Yang, 2015; Kipnis, 2001; Ryan, 2019). Indeed, the ideal of merit-based educational and social mobility is currently being challenged worldwide (Markovits, 2019). As discussed previously and in Chapter 3, there has been a close relationship between parents’ socio-economic characteristics, such as their possession of all kinds of capital, and their children’s

education, future career and social position (Friedman & Laurison, 2019; Markovits, 2019), China included (Jin & Ball, 2020). However, the Chinese public's belief in merit based HE is still shaping their educational attitudes. This can be illustrated by the data in this study in Chapter 6.

Fourthly, the Confucian legacy also stressed that receiving schooling is a mutual responsibility between parents and children (Marginson, 2013; Zhao & Biesta, 2011), and can even be considered as the families' duty to the ancestral lineage of the family tree (Marginson, 2011). Chinese parents and children are believed to be bound by a common destiny, where it is their obligation to take on familial responsibilities together. As parents, to fulfil their responsibilities, they are obliged to offer the utmost support to their children's education (Wei, 2012). Then, Confucius stressed empathy and sympathy (Tu, 1996). Chinese children are supposed to understand parents' care and support; furthermore, they should please and repay their parents through studying hard (Sung, 1999; Qin et al., 2009). Since the days of imperial China, it has been universally understood that Chinese families' investment, both financially and spiritually, has played a primary role in supporting their children's schooling, including HE (Marginson, 2011; Ryan, 2019). Urban parents are anxious about their children's future, leading to the children's huge study burden and pressure to gain entry to key schools, then elite universities. They are therefore eager to improve their children's competitiveness; for example, by enrolling them in private tutoring and paying school choice fees for desirable schools (Li & Yeung, 2017; Ryan, 2019). In rural China, education is regarded as a significant channel on the road to changing one's ascribed destiny. Those rural

children able to access HE are believed to '*tiao long men*' (jump into the dragon gate by permanently leaving the poor countryside, 跳龙门) (Annunziata et al., 2006). This is partly because of the fact that receiving HE makes it possible for rural students to convert their *hukou* type from rural to urban.

It has been possible but extremely difficult to change one's *hukou* type from rural to urban (Chen & Fan, 2016) except through strictly formal conversion procedures (Chan, 2009). For example, to change rural *hukou* to urban, one has to obtain approval from central or local government. S/he must submit an application to the Public Security Bureau in the city. The application materials include proof from the city's Labour Department, a school's admission acceptance, or a permit of migration from the local authority that is responsible for registering permanent residency in that city. The transfer quota should be less than 1.5 % of the total urban population in a given year (Householder Registration Regulations of the People's Republic of China of 1958, cited in Li, 2013, pp. 205-207). The conversion criteria are designed to facilitate the state and local development; thus, only a small percentage of qualified persons succeed in altering their status (Chan, 2009; Chen & Fan, 2016; Liu & Shi, 2019), such as students enrolled in HEIs, the rich who make business investments, those being hired permanently in state-owned enterprises, those employed as public servants, people making sacrifices for the nation's sake and armies being demobilised to cities (Chan, 2009; Liu, 2005; Liu & Shi, 2019; Wang, 2005). Theoretically, one possible way to alter rural *hukou* to urban is through receiving HE.

The Chinese government has allowed students to move their *hukou* locality to that of the HEI where they were admitted. Upon graduation, if a student was employed by a state-owned enterprise or a prestigious company, it is possible but not certain, that they will achieve conversion (Wu & Treiman, 2004). However, it is common for urban *hukou* status to be one of the requirements for receiving a job offer (Chen, 2012; Li & Zhang, 2010). Although many barriers are placed in the way, receiving HE has still been the primary path for rural students to change their ascribed *hukou* type (Chan & Zhang, 1999; Deng & Björn, 2014). Within the Chinese hierarchical HE system, degrees from elite universities have become a significant factor in *hukou* conversion. For example, in 2018, the city of Shanghai (Chinese economic and financial centre) announced that undergraduates from A and B universities (the top two Chinese elite universities) who were willing to work in the city were eligible to change their *hukou* status to that of Shanghai citizens (The Chinese Youth Daily, August 08, 2018). For Chinese rural students, receiving HE in China's elite universities appears to be a significant factor in escaping the ascribed disadvantages embedded in their rural *hukou*.

To sum up, in present day China, as in many other countries, studying in elite universities plays a major role in a student's future life opportunities, especially in the job market. Additionally, Chinese cultural values, especially Confucian heritages, from the stress on social order, emphasis on social standing through academic achievement to the belief of meritocratic advance, increase the significance of education, especially HE, in Chinese society. Furthermore, studying in elite

universities takes on greater significance for rural students as a possible way to transform the ascribed disadvantages associated with the rural *hukou* type.

However, as discussed above, Chinese urban and rural students' disparate access to Chinese elite universities echoes similar issues involving the privileged and the less privileged elsewhere in the world (Arum et al., 2007; Boliver, 2016, 2017; Cahalan & Perna, 2015; Cantwell et al., 2018; Chetty et al., 2017). Many scholars have tried to explain such disparities by adopting the capital approach based on the social reproduction theory developed by French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu (1977a, 1986). In the next chapter, I will review the existing literature outlining the theoretical perspectives in order to understand Chinese urban and rural students' access to Chinese elite universities. This will be examined under the broader explanatory framework of educational disparities between the privileged and the less privileged.



## **Chapter 3 Theoretical perspectives on Chinese urban and rural students' access to Chinese elite universities**

Existing studies have shown that children's educational achievements are greatly influenced by their parents' social status (Alexander et al., 2014; Crawford et al., 2016). Scholars worldwide have adopted varied criteria to measure parents' social status, such as social class (Achala, 2019; Ball, 2003), wealth (Hällsten & Pfeffer, 2017; Jez, 2014), race or ethnicity (Boliver, 2014, 2016; Posselt et al., 2012; Vincent et al., 2012); geographical factors (Donnelly & Gamsu, 2018; Lindgren & Lundahl, 2010) and migration status (Antony-Newman, 2018, 2019; Hanson & Woodruff, 2003). This is not a complete list. Although different authors use different indicators to measure parents' social status, they basically share a similarity to Chinese urban and rural educational disparities: children whose parents enjoy privileged social status tend to be higher achievers academically compared to those with parents enjoying less privileged social status.

Another similarity among many educational researchers within and outside China is that they largely adopt the capital approach based on Bourdieu's social reproduction theory (Bourdieu, 1977a; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) to explain educational disparities. However, I will argue that merely adopting the capital approach limits our understanding of how less privileged students (rural students in this study) achieve academic success. Closely related, it leads to a deficit view of less privileged parents' roles (rural parents in this study) in their children's education. This partly results from the fact that Bourdieu's social reproduction

stance (Bourdieu, 1977a; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) in the educational field weakens his own efforts to end the impasse between structure and agency. He limits the role of human agency in making possible social changes (Joas & Knöb, 2011; Yang, 2014), in spite of his efforts to mediate the dichotomy of structure and agency through his theory of practice (Bourdieu, 1977b, 1984).

As discussed earlier, China's urban and rural dis/advantages are distinctive under the *hukou* system; the Chinese HE system is unique under the 'Post-Confucian Model'. Although rural students studying in Chinese elite universities are in the minority, some did achieve access against the odds. In order to examine the complex issues around Chinese urban and rural students' access to Chinese elite universities in the Chinese institutional, educational and cultural contexts, I will draw on Sharon Hays' (1994) proposal regarding the dialectical relationships between social structure and human agency. I will therefore suggest that the dialectical relationships between social structure and human agency act as a supplement to the capital approach in answering the research questions in this study and in understanding the educational disparities between the privileged and the less privileged social groups.

This chapter consists of four sections. I will introduce the capital approach based on Bourdieu's social reproduction theory in educational research in Section 3.1, followed by a review of the limited studies relating to Chinese rural students' access to Chinese elite universities and their parents' positive roles in Section 3.2. Based on these, I will discuss the social structure and human agency debate in social theory in Section 3.3. I will justify my argument that Bourdieu's social reproduction

stance in educational research weakens his efforts to mediate the impasse between social structure and human agency. I will then introduce Sharon Hays' (1994) discussion on the two types of dialectical relationships between social structure and human agency, where the culture as a social structure has been taken into consideration. Finally, the gaps in explaining Chinese urban and rural students' disparate access to Chinese elite universities will be discussed in Section 3.4.

### **3.1 The capital approach based on Bourdieu's social reproduction theory**

Bourdieu's social reproduction theory (Bourdieu, 1977a; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) has been used widely to explain national educational disparities (Achala, 2019; Lareau, 2003; Tzanakis, 2011), including those of China (Mu et al., 2018). It argues that family is a site for social reproduction (Bourdieu, 1996b), whose aim is to maintain social privileges. One strategy to reproduce social privileges involves parents' investment in their children's education (Bourdieu, 1990). One thesis of social reproduction theory suggests a relationship between children's educational success and their parents' positions in social space (social class in Bourdieu's studies). Another argument in social reproduction theory is that individuals' position in social space is decided by the volume and the composition of their capital (Bourdieu, 1985). According to the volume and the composition of their capital, individuals are 'assigned a position, a location or a precise class of neighbouring positions' (Bourdieu, 1987, p. 4). Therefore, when explaining educational disparities, a specific focus is on the types and distributions of parents'

capital, through which parents get the most for their children (Bartee & Brown, 2011; Vincent, 2017).

The individual's position in a certain social space in Bourdieu's theory resembles other measurements of social status as mentioned above. For example, the urban and rural educational disparities in China share similarities with those involving social class, race, and ethnicity to name but a few. Therefore, although Bourdieu focuses on French social class in his own empirical studies, researchers elsewhere have still found the capital approach based on the social reproduction theory useful in explaining educational disparities in their own national contexts, including China (Achala, 2019; Lareau, 2003; Mu et al., 2018; Tzanakis, 2011). In what follows, I will unpack, on the one hand, how the capital approach is relevant to answer the research questions in this study and on the other hand, how it has certain limitations.

### **3.1.1 Capital in educational research**

Originating in 'bourgeois' and Marxian economics (Joas & Knöbl, 2011), capital has been traditionally referred to physical assets, such as land, labour and money, which is grounded in economic principle. Using these criteria, the definition of capital is gradually broadened. In educational research, Bourdieu (1986) made a seminal contribution to the capital approach which many researchers later drew on (Antony-Newman, 2018, 2019; Bartee & Brown, 2007, 2011; Horvat et al., 2003; Lareau, 2003; McClelland, 2011). Thus, the capital approach based on Bourdieu's constructs is the focus of this study.

Bourdieu (1986) proposes that the concept of cultural and social capital as a supplement to traditional economic capital.<sup>4</sup> 'Economic capital is immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalised in the form of property rights.' (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 243). Bourdieu (1986) does not provide a clear definition of cultural capital but proposes three sub-states: the embodied state; the objectified state; the institutionalised state. The embodied state is defined mainly in the form of the disposition of mind and body. Objectified cultural capital refers to culturally material goods and media, such as writings, paintings and instruments. The institutionalised state is shown in the form of academic qualifications (Bourdieu, 1986). 'Social capital is the sum of resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 119). Bourdieu simplifies the idea of social capital as 'what ordinary language calls connections' (Bourdieu, 1993a, p. 33). Furthermore, he highlights the fact that different forms of capital can be converted as one basic strategy to ensure capital reproduction (Bourdieu, 1986). From the outset, economic capital is at the root, driving the other different types of capital while, at the same time, cultural and social capital are able to convert to economic capital.

The most material types of capital - those which are economic in restricted sense - can present themselves in the immaterial form of cultural capital or social capital and vice versa ...as cultural capital, which is convertible, on

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<sup>4</sup> Bourdieu (1977b) also names symbolic capital, as accumulated prestige and social honour. However, it is derived from other forms of capital once they are legitimate, especially non-economic aspects (cultural and social capital) (Calhoun, 1993; Yang, 2014). Thus, this study will recognise cultural and social capital as the two main supplements to economic capital.

certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the forms of educational qualifications; and as social capital...which is convertible, in certain conditions, into economic capital may be institutionalized in the forms of a title of nobility (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 242-243).

Capital can then also be reproduced intergenerationally. For example, parents transmit their capital advantages to their children's educational advantages. This will be explained in detail in the next section. Following Bourdieu, many researchers have also contributed to a comprehensive understanding of capital outside and within Chinese contexts.

Some researchers have criticised Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital for its narrow quantitative dimension, in particular with regard to educational qualifications and participation in high cultural activities. The emotional aspect of parental effects on children's educational achievements were thought to have been excluded (Reay, 2000, 2004; Stefansen & Aarseth, 2011). For example, Reay (1998) argues for an understanding of cultural capital from a qualitative dimension, which stresses the 'affective aspects of inequality' (Skeggs, 1997, p. 10). Reay (2000, 2002, 2004) extends the concept of cultural capital to include the involvement of mothers' intense emotions with regard to their children's schooling, which is conceptualised as emotional capital. The emotional aspect of parents' roles in their children's schooling will also be illustrated by the data in this study.

In terms of social capital, it is a contextually multidimensional concept (Foley & Edwards, 1999). Wide-ranging definitions of social capital have been offered by

varied authors with different foci (Grootaert & Bastelaer, 2002; Halpern, 2005).

Basically, the analysis of social capital is primarily divided into three levels:

micro/personal level; meso/organisational level; and macro/state level (Halpern,

2005; Portes, 1998). The micro/personal level focuses on the relationship between

individuals and resources (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Portes, 1998). The

meso/organisational level is concerned with the extent to which interpersonal

networks spread across the community or the features of organisations, by means

of norms and trust (Leana & Van Buren, 1999). The macro/state level emphasises

the differentiated regional and national attributes, such as cultural and social habits

(Fukuyama, 1995a, 1995b; Putnam, 2000). This study acknowledges the multi-

dimensional aspects of social capital, but also admits the difficulty in deploying an

all-encompassing definition in a single study. The discussion on social capital in this

study will take place at a personal level, which is generally regarded as 'resources

embedded in social networks' which can be used by actors to 'enhance expected

returns of instrumental or expressive actions' (Lin, 2001, p. 25-29). The reasons for

this are as follows.

Firstly, this study partly aims to explore the relationship between Chinese urban

and rural parents' capital and their children's education, which exists at a personal

level. Secondly, the central thesis of social capital is that interpersonal relationships

matter (Andriani, 2013; Field, 2003). 'The core idea of social capital theory is that

social networks have value...social contacts affect the productivity of individuals

and groups.' (Putnam, 2000, pp. 18-19). By making connections with others and

maintaining social connections, people are able to work together to achieve things

that they either could not achieve by themselves or could only achieve with great difficulty (Field, 2003). This will be illustrated by the relationship between parents' interpersonal relationships (*guanxi* in this study) and their children's education in the next section.

Another seminal scholar regarding the studies of social capital in educational research is James Coleman (Dika & Singh, 2002; Halpern, 2005). Coleman (1988) proposes the crucial role of 'closure' (p. 105) in the function of social capital. In the context of this study, he illustrates a complicated situation where parents can exert impact on their children's education: 'the intergenerational closure' (Coleman, 1988, p. 107). It proposes that 'the parents' friends are the parents of their children's friends' (Coleman, 1988, p. 107). It is a closed structure, interlinking parents, students and other parents, which generates social capital for each parent in matters of their children's schooling and beyond, such as monitoring and guiding children's behaviour. An illustration of the intergenerational closure will be presented in Chapter 6.

In the case of China, the term social capital has a contextualised meaning: *guanxi* (关系), which refers to interpersonal relationships. *Guanxi* and social capital are often used interchangeably in Chinese educational studies, although there has been controversy over whether the two terms are synonyms or not. Chinese parents in this study also mentioned their use of *guanxi* to help their children's education. For readers' better understanding, in what follows I will introduce the similarities and differences between social capital and *guanxi*.



### 3.1.2 The comparison of *guanxi* and social capital

*Guanxi* is either a verb or a noun. It comprises two single letters: 'guan' (关) and 'xi' (系). *Guan*, as a noun, means 'a door'; as a verb, it refers to 'close up'. In terms of human relationships, a person inside the door is one of us: an insider; people outside the door have no relationship with us (Ambler, 1995). *Xi*, in its noun form, means 'a system' or 'network'; in its verb form, it means 'tie up or connect' (Huang et al., 2003). Therefore, *guanxi* together conveys the message: 'tying up interface system' (Huang et al., 2003, p. 8). As a verb, *guanxi* means 'relates to', and in its noun form, *guanxi* literally means 'interpersonal relationships'. For example, *tongxue guanxi* (同学关系) translates as the relationship among classmates. As stated above, social capital in this study denotes resources embedded in social networks. In order to link *guanxi* and social capital, I will regard *guanxi* as a noun in this study. For a better understanding of *guanxi*, some basic traits of *guanxi* need to be stated.

There are both instrumental and expressive elements in *guanxi*, ranging from personal affections to bribery (Walder, 1988). Hwang (1987) recognises three types of interpersonal relationships among Chinese people: expressive ties, instrumental ties and mixed ties. An expressive tie is generated from affective feelings among immediate family members, intimate friends and other close contacts, which tend to be permanent and stay stable. Conversely, an instrumental tie is mainly established among people outside families for the purpose of benefit or personal gain. The mixed tie is a combination of certain expressive elements and pragmatic considerations, and exists primarily among distant relatives, neighbours, co-workers

and people from the same birthplace or school. People in a mixed tie share certain commonalities, but they are never as strong as those in an expressive tie. The mixed tie is not expected to last a lifetime, but it can be kept and maintained on the basis of frequent contact. The above discussions on *guanxi* are similar to the different forms of social capital in the West, which will be discussed below.

Putnam (2000) distinguishes two forms of social capital: bonding social capital and bridging social capital. Bonding social capital is insular and exclusive to people who are similar to you, thus reinforcing homogeneous identities, such as the same age, community and race. Bridging social capital is open and inclusive to people dissimilar to you. It expands the wider reciprocity among heterogeneous groups by making friends with those from different niches. Woolcock (2001, p. 13) contributes to the vertical dimension by proposing linking social capital in dissimilar individuals with different socio-economic status. 'Linking social capital pertains to connections with people in power, whether they are in politically or financially influential positions' (Woolcock & Sweetser, 2002, p. 26). Sometimes, linking social capital can be regarded as a variant of bridging social capital (Woolcock, 2001; Lin & Kuo, 2006). It functions as a leverage to enable individuals to connect with others in various hierarchical social positions to expand the possession of resources, ideas and information (Woolcock, 2001). It seems that in China, the discussions on different forms of *guanxi* has been more horizontal: taking into consideration of the distance between people. Contrarily, the discussions on different forms of social capital has been more vertical, taking an individual's status into consideration. However, the vertical dimension can also be found in *guanxi*.

Chinese people adopt varied standards to different *guanxi*. The principle of need, a kind of subjectively personal rule, is suitable for the expressive tie. By this principle, people allocate and exchange resources to meet necessary living demands with little consideration of their relative gains and loss (Wong, 1998). For example, parents are responsible for raising children who, in turn, are obligated to take care of their parents in the future. When it comes to the instrumental tie, people adopt the rule of equity, where *guanxi* involves reciprocity (Yan, 1996b). Individuals are likely to measure the gain and loss for social exchange objectively. It is similar to two-way transactions – ‘I help you, hoping one day you can help me back.’ For the mixed tie, *renqing* (personal favour, 人情) and *mianzi* (face, 面子) are the criteria for social conduct. *Renqing* consists of a basic emotional empathy and understanding of others and a set of moral obligations and social norms. *Mianzi* implies a person’s reputation for fulfilling moral and ethical obligations. For example, a person who fulfils an obligation to neighbours will earn respect from them. In turn, the neighbours will give *renqing* and *mianzi* to that person. People in a mixed tie normally have the same acquaintances, who act as the mediators and the evaluators of their social connections. When allocating resources, they will take the rule of *renqing* into account and consider this when preserving the mediator’s *mianzi* (Hwang, 1987). In my interpretation, the vertical dimension in *guanxi* is evident in instrumental ties and mixed ties. The reasons for this are as follows.

Firstly, ‘*guanxi* is reciprocity’ refers to the fact that you have a similar ability to pay back the person who helped you before. Your abilities, to some degree, are decided by the resources you possess. This represents your status in society. For example, a

professor could help a child of his relative who is illiterate, with the child's homework, not vice versa. Additionally, the consideration of *renqing* and *mianzi* is more evident among individuals with similar status or those individuals with a higher social status than you. For example, people might not offer personal favour to you if they think you could not fulfil similar obligations or mutual assistance. This is illustrated by rural parents' stories in this study which will be presented in Chapter 6.

Besides, *guanxi* is productive, in a similar way to social capital. The people you know, that is, your *guanxi* with others, can produce benefits in certain circumstances (Yang, 1994; Yeung & Tung, 1996). Researchers have examined how using *guanxi* helps Chinese people gain better jobs (Bian, 2002), better school places (Ruan, 2015) and military positions (Wang, 2016), for example. It is recognised that *guanxi* has economic, social and political functions (Yan, 1996a). Due to the mixture of expressive and instrumental elements in *guanxi*, the discussions and value judgment regarding *guanxi*'s productivity are complicated.

On the one hand, some scholars tend to regard the use of *guanxi* as anti-social, selfish and instrumental-orientated; thus, it should be rejected at the ethical level (Wang, 2016; Zhan, 2012). The public are disappointed that the privileged seek preferential rights by using *guanxi*. A popular Chinese proverb: *xuehao shulihua, buru youge hao baba* (it is better to have a powerful father than you are good at studying, 学好数理化, 不如有个好爸爸) indicates that children could be the beneficiaries of their parents' *guanxi*. This is an illustration of the nepotism associated with *guanxi*. On the other hand, *guanxi* can also be expressive; for

example, within the parent-children relationship. Although controversy exists regarding the ethics of *guanxi* in achieving certain objectives, its productivity is evident. This controversy reminds me that the participants might have mixed feelings while talking about *guanxi* in this study. To avoid this, I will not make ethical judgements with respect to their stories where the use of *guanxi* is concerned. Instead, listening to and describing their stories will be my focus.

Several studies have compared social capital with *guanxi*. Some propose that *guanxi* is social capital in China (Fan, 2002; Gold et al., 2002; Wu, 2013), while others have attempted to identify the differences between social capital and *guanxi* (Huang et al., 2003; Huang & Wang, 2011). There is no definitive answer to the question of 'social capital = *guanxi*' in China; different authors have offered specific analysis. It is not the focus of this study to find a universal answer. Instead, I acknowledge that there are overlaps between social capital and *guanxi*.

Nonetheless, in my interpretations based on the discussion of the two terms above, they are two different concepts.

Firstly, social capital and *guanxi* share similarities in terms of their traits, as discussed above. However, there are fundamental differences in terms of their definitions. As already discussed, social capital is regarded as 'the sum of resources' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 119), which is embedded in interpersonal social networks (Lin, 2001). *Guanxi*, as a noun, indicates an interpersonal relationship. Putting these two definitions together, social capital is a resource existing within interpersonal relationships (*guanxi*). Put simply, in a Chinese context, social capital is resources embedded in *guanxi* rather than *guanxi* itself. As a resource, social

capital needs to be activated for personal gain based on the existence of interpersonal relationships: *guanxi*. For example, Chinese parents might generate benefits to their children's education through activating social capital existing in their *guanxi*. Therefore, in terms of the relationship between parents' social capital and their children's education in this study, I will focus on how Chinese urban and rural parents use their *guanxi* for the benefit of their children's access to Chinese elite universities, through which social capital can be activated.

Having stated the theoretical constructs of capital, I will now turn to the empirical studies examining the relationship between parents' capital and their children's education.

### **3.1.3 The relationship between parents' capital and their children's education**

Adopting the capital approach, there have been many studies demonstrating that educational inequalities result from the process by which parents' capital is reproduced. Parental capital can act as the regulator of children's education opportunities and attainment (Bartee & Brown, 2007, 2011); to be precise, the larger and better the parent's capital, the better their children's academic achievements (McClelland, 2011). Specifically, it has been largely shown that privileged parents transmit their capital advantages to their children's educational advantages (Tzanakis, 2011; Vincent, 2017). Contrarily, less privileged students are at an educational disadvantage due to their parents' lack of certain capital. This will be illustrated by studies from both within and outside China.

In terms of economic capital, Chinese parents' possession of economic capital greatly influences their children's HE opportunities (Gao, 2017). The greater Chinese parents' income (economic capital), the higher their children's degree level, which is especially evident in the urban and rural division (Qin et al., 2019). Contrarily, parents' financial difficulties (economic capital) negatively influence Chinese students' academic achievements (Zhang & Cai, 2018). In terms of cultural capital, the higher the parents' educational level (institutionalised cultural capital), the higher their children's school enrolment rate and college aspirations (Hu et al., 2018), and the higher status of universities their children attend (Gao, 2017). Chen & Yang (2009) found that, compared with rural parents, Chinese urban parents are better educated. They positively influence their children's educational academic performance, while rural parents' low educational level partly explains their children's low academic achievements.

In terms of social capital, it is more common for Chinese urban parents to use their *guanxi* (or social capital) to obtain more relevant information, decrease educational risks, compete for precious educational opportunities and provide educational resources to support their children's schooling (Fang & Fang, 2005; Shao & Hu, 2011), HE decisions and access to elite universities (Wen, 2007). Although the use of *guanxi* is common for both Chinese urban and rural parents for their children's education (Xie, 2016a; Xie & Postiglione, 2016), urban parents' interpersonal relationships have been with more prestigious individuals who can provide greater social resources for their children's education (Xiao & Fan, 2015).

The above evidence shows that Chinese urban parents are able to positively support their children's education, including HE, based on their possession of capital while rural parents tend to negatively influence their children's education due to their shortage of a certain capital. A similar pattern of the privileged and the less privileged parents' roles also appears in studies outside China, such as in the UK (Reay, 2018a, 2018b; Ball, 2003), the USA (Ford & Thompson, 2016; Horvat et al., 2003; Lareau et al., 2016; Markovits, 2019), Canada (Antony-Newman, 2018, 2019), the Netherlands (Dijkstra et al., 2010) and in developing countries, such as India (Achala, 2019), South Africa (Hofmeyr, 2018), Zimbabwe (Agüero & Ramachandran, 2018), Georgia (Chankseliani, 2013), Pakistan (Andrabi et al., 2012) and Tanzania (Komba, 2011) to name but a few.

The capital approach provides one theoretical lens through which one can analyse educational disparities among different social groups (Hanafin & Lynch, 2002). However, capital on its own does not play the deciding role in children's education. As a resource, parents' capital is like a mine beneath the earth; without human labour, its value cannot be realised (Huang et al., 2003). Thus, the value of parents' capital in children's education is activated through the varied roles parents play in their children's education. This will be discussed below.

#### **3.1.4 Parents' roles in their children's education**

Existing literature has shown that the roles parents play in their children's education take place in two social settings: within families and outside families (Coleman, 2000; OECD, 2012). Within families, existing studies have portrayed parental roles through parent-children interactions. It includes two aspects: (1)



parental home-based educational practices (2) parents' involvement in children's outside school time (Lareau, 2003; Suizzo et al., 2014). Outside families, parents play their roles through their interpersonal interactions with varied actors, mainly including teachers, other parents and individuals in their social networks (Carolan & Lardier Jr, 2018; Geven & van de Werfhorst, 2020; Li & Fischer, 2017).

Studies specific to a Chinese urban and rural educational context have painted a contrasting picture in terms of urban and rural parents' roles in their children's education within and outside families: urban parents' intensive involvement (Kuan, 2015) versus uninvolved rural parents (Chi & Rao, 2003). Urban parents are willing to sacrifice their own material enjoyment and free time to support their children's schooling (Kuan, 2015; Lin, 1993). By contrast, rural parents often say that they do not know how to help their children; consequently, they pass the buck of children's education to teachers (Chi & Rao, 2003; Kong, 2015). Yue et al. (2017) find that interactive parenting is rare in the rural Shanxi province. Rural parents lack the time and knowledge necessary for good parenting practices, resulting in cognitive delay among rural children. Furthermore, rural parents tend to hold low educational expectations of their children (Chen & Yang, 2009; Fang et al., 2017). This contrasting picture is similar to studies outside China.

As discussed above, researchers have taken various measurements regarding parents' social status, which shared a similar pattern relating to children's educational disparities. Besides, Bourdieu develops his capital approach in educational research through the lens of social class. To maintain consistency, in

what follows I will mainly offer examples of studies focusing on social class outside Chinese urban and rural contexts.

Lareau (2003) conducted ethnographic research in America, presenting a middle/working class binary, although her samples include upper-class and poor families (Vincent & Maxwell, 2016). The middle-class parenting style is referred to as 'concerted cultivation'. That of working class and poor families is termed 'the accomplishment of natural growth'. These two child-rearing approaches lead to 'the transmission of differential advantages' to children (p. 5). Taking parents' roles in children's outside school time as an example, the former lies in parents' structural arrangement of children's time, especially through organised activities. In this way, middle-class parents 'transmit[ting] life skills to children' (p. 748). The latter lies in children's self-entertainment, i.e., self-initiated play. Their parents believe that 'as long as they provide love, food and safety, their children will grow and thrive. They do not focus on developing their children's special talents' (p. 748–749). This is similar to the data in this study.

In terms of parents' roles outside families, middle-class parents are active, assertive and more engaged in parent-teacher relationships, especially when unexpected incidents occur. Working-class parents, in contrast, are passive and hesitant in terms of parent-teacher interactions because they perceive education as the responsibility of the teacher (Lareau & Weininger, 2003). A similar pattern applies to parent-parent interaction (Lareau, 2000) and parent-others interaction regarding children's education (Lareau, 2015). Similar studies can also be found elsewhere,

such as in France (Barg, 2019), the UK (Reay, 2002) and India (Achala, 2019) to name but a few.

Acknowledging that she largely adopts Bourdieu's ideas, especially those relating to cultural capital, Lareau (2003) posits that the cultural logic of concerted cultivation complies with the logic of the modern professional system, which guides schoolteachers' teaching in schools. This helps children to form a sense of entitlement in schools, which in turn facilitates their educational performance.

Children raised according to the cultural logic of natural growth develop a sense of constraint which is detrimental to their academic performance. Moreover, these senses of entitlement and constraint are internalised, becoming comfortable and natural to middle- and working-class children respectively (Vincent & Maxwell, 2016). This further influences varied aspects of their social lives (Lareau, 2003).

Other researchers also show that concerted cultivation benefits children's education more than other types of parenting (Bodovski & Farkas, 2008), for example, in terms of higher educational achievement (Carolan, 2016; Roksa & Potter, 2011) and higher educational expectations (Carolan & Wasserman, 2015; Henderson, 2013). Adopting the capital approach based on Bourdieu's social reproduction theory, previous research has shown how privileged and less privileged parents play differentiated roles in their children's education. However, it also shows how privileged parents greatly advance their children's education, while less privileged parents' roles in their children's education are in deficit.

For example, researchers have presented Chinese rural parents' poor parenting practices, such as the lack of time spent playing with, reading and singing to their

children (Luo et al., 2017; Yue et al., 2017). These have all been identified as being associated with rural children's cognitive delay (Yue et al., 2018). Chinese rural parents have been portrayed as incompetent with regard to their children's education (Yu, 2019). 'They are all the same, busy, don't really value schooling for their children' (Kong, 2015, p. 1).

Parents with more and better resources are able to get the most out of their children's schooling (Vincent, 2017), which leads to the differentiated parents' roles in their children's education among different social groups. This is an example of the capital approach based on the social reproduction theory used by Bourdieu to examine educational disparities. However, the capital approach based on Bourdieu's social reproduction theory 'ultimately remains one in which things happen to people, rather than a world in which they can intervene in their individual and collective destinies' (Jenkins, 2002, p. 91). This relates to the social structure and human agency debate.

Some studies (although relatively few in number) have presented the stories of disadvantaged students who - against the odds - have achieved access to Chinese HE (Lin, 2019), including elite universities (Cheng & Kang, 2018; Dong, 2015) and portrayed disadvantaged parents' positive roles in their children's education. These studies led me to consider the dialectical relationships between social structure and human agency. In the next section, I will review the relevant studies.

### **3.2 Chinese rural students who achieve access to Chinese elite universities and their parents' positive roles**

From the rural students' angle, there have been a limited number of studies focusing on how Chinese rural students successfully achieve access to Chinese HE. Through autoethnography, Lin (2019) tells readers how she, as a girl from a deprived Chinese rural family, was admitted to a Chinese university, progressed as a doctoral student and then became a university professor. Lin (2019) recalls that as she was growing up, she was inspired to travel beyond her rural confines. This inspiration was based on her family background. Her mother always told her about their family's disadvantages; thus, she understood the hardships that her parents faced. Based on such an understanding, she was able to treat life's difficulties calmly and aimed to study hard to change her destiny. Finally, Lin (2019) concludes that the aspiration to change destiny through knowledge is a crucial factor in rural children's high academic achievements, echoing earlier studies from Dong (2015) and Cheng & Kang (2018). The limited number of Chinese studies resonates with similar stories, all of which show that students with less privileged parents do not lack higher educational aspirations (Croll et al., 2010; Fuller, 2009; Januarie, 2019; Yosso, 2005). However, it is claimed that these students 'do a play without a script' (Bok, 2010) because their parents do not have the relevant capital to cultivate their children's ability, and students' life experiences constrain their capabilities to realise their educational aspirations (Bok, 2010; Koo, 2012). Among studies presenting Chinese rural students' successful access to Chinese elite universities, Dong (2015) attributes rural students' academic success to the students themselves.

He speaks highly of the role of teachers. However, he still stresses rural parents' lack of economic, cultural and social capital. The deficit view of Chinese rural parents' roles in their children's education based on the capital approach is evident.

Of the studies exploring less privileged parents' positive roles in their children's education, Gofen (2009) examines first-generation HE students in Israel and finds that their parents, who are poorly educated, are facilitators rather than barriers on their way to HEIs. Non-material family resources that help first-generation HE students' academic success are highlighted, such as parents' attitude and values towards education. In the UK, studies show how working-class parents overcome their social disadvantages to help their children 'against the odds' in terms of academic success (Siraj & Mayo, 2014). Working-class parents often have higher aspirations for their children's education and provide important support for their educational success (Siraj-Blatchford, 2010).

Although Chinese rural parents face varied barriers regarding their roles in their children's schooling, both farmers and migrant workers have high expectations when it comes to their children's education (Kong, 2015; Li, 2018; Li & Yu, 2010; Lin et al., 2009). They regard education as a means of upward social mobility (Kipnis, 2001, 2011), such as by finding a decent job (Chi & Rao, 2003) or leaving the countryside (Murphy, 2014). For example, Kong (2015) finds that when taking about their roles in their children's education, Chinese rural parents' responses are mixed with excitement and expectation. On the one hand, they want to help their children's education but, because of their low educational level, do not know how. On the other hand, they believe that their children could be high achievers in

education - *wangzi chenglong*, *wangnv chegnfeng* (hoping one's child became a dragon or phoenix, 望子成龙、望女成凤). They believe that their children could leave their rural village through education and would no longer feel bitterness towards it. The author claims that stereotyping is involved when describing Chinese rural parents' roles in their children's education; Chinese rural parents are engaged in invisible forms of support, such as migrating to cities to earn money. However, only the parents participated in Kong's study (2015), the students' voices being absent. Furthermore, the author focuses only on parents with children in primary school, rather than examining children's access to Chinese HE. Filling the gaps by listening to both parents' and students' voices regarding Chinese urban and rural parents' roles in their children's access to Chinese HE is of great significance to this study.

The above studies enrich our understanding of Chinese rural students' success in schooling, especially their access to Chinese HE and the potentially positive contributions of rural parents to their children's education. How does one explain Chinese rural students' success against the odds when faced with their parents' less privileged social status in terms of shortage of certain capital? Some authors advocate that although parents' socioeconomic background is important to children's educational achievement, educational success is also shaped by students' aspirations, which stimulate success-oriented behaviour (Fuller, 2014, 2009). This is evident in China where Confucian traditions consider learning to be a form of self-cultivation; individuals take responsibility for their development where literacy education has been highly valued (Tu, 1987, 1993). This reveals a contrasting

picture: social disadvantage versus individual success, which relates to the social structure and human agency debate in social theory.

### **3.3 Social structure and human agency debate in social theory**

One debate regarding social theory centres around the relationship between social structure and human agency (Archer, 1982, 2003; Bhaskar, 1979; Giddens, 1984; Hays, 1994). The two extreme poles are 'structural argument' (Hays, 1994, p. 60) and the opposing one I call 'agency argument'. The former, such as functionalism and structuralism, is inclined to objectivism. They support the pre-eminence of the social whole over the human subject. They believe in the determinism of the 'material' structure of social life - that is, a given set of social relations, natural resources or identifiable economic and political institutions' (Hays, 1994, p. 60). Thus, social structure has primacy over human agency. However, they ignore 'the complex ways in which people mediate and respond to the interface between their own lived experiences and structures of domination and constraint' (Giroux, 2001, p. 108) by obliterating human agency (Macleod, 1987). The latter, such as hermeneutics and other interpretative traditions, emphasises subjectivity as the precondition of social life; the material world exists outside subjective experience; human agency has primacy over social structure (Giddens, 1984). However, they refuse to admit that human actions are the response to objective structures (Macleod, 1987).

Between these two poles, some social theorists have tried to dialectically construct the relationship(s) between social structure and human agency (Archer, 1982, 2003;



Bhaskar, 1979; Giddens, 1984; Hays, 1994; Le Boutillier, 2008; Shen, 2017), including Bourdieu himself (1977b, 1990). However, I will argue that despite Bourdieu's efforts to mediate the impasse between structure and agency, the capital approach based on the social reproduction stance in educational research limits our understanding of less privileged students' and their parents' human agency to make social changes (Joas & Knöb, 2011; Yang, 2014). Specifically, it limits our understanding of less students' academic success. On a related note, it leads to the deficit view of less privileged parents' roles in their children's education. I will suggest Sharon Hays' (1994) constructs of the two types of dialectical relationships between social structure and human agency as a useful supplement to the capital approach in understanding the complexity of Chinese urban and rural students' access to Chinese elite universities.

### **3.3.1 Bourdieu's theory of practice to mediate the impasse between structure and agency**

There have been ongoing discussions on whether Bourdieu is a structuralist/determinist or not (Jenkins, 1982, 2002; Joas & Knöbl, 2011; Lau, 2004; Marginson, 2008; Reay, 2004; Silva, 2016; Yang, 2014). Although Bourdieu (1996c) does not completely agree with structuralism, describing it as a 'strange philosophy of action' which 'made the agent disappear by reducing it to the role of supporter or bearer of the structure' (p. 179), his thoughts have been largely influenced by structuralism (Joas & Knöb, 2011). For example, he calls himself an advocate of 'constructivist structuralism' (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 123) and insists that structuralism is an 'introduction into the social sciences' (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 4). For him, it is not

appealing to analyse individual actor, but to focus on the positional relations within a system, within a field (Joas & Knöb, 2011). I will argue in what follows that, in educational research, his social reproduction stance weakens his own efforts to end the impasse of structure and agency, limiting the role of human agency in making possible social changes (Joas & Knöb, 2011; Yang, 2014). This limits our understanding of how less privileged students (rural students in this study) achieved academic success, leaving the roles of less privileged parents (rural parents in this study) in their children's education in deficit.

Bourdieu's efforts to stress actors' agency beyond objectivism are mainly realised through his theory of practice (Bourdieu, 1977b, 1984), from which he tries to see the 'dialectical relations between the objective structures and the structured dispositions' (Bourdieu, 1977b, p. 3) through the formula:

[(habitus) (capital)] + field = practice. (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 101)

According to this formula, practice is the combined result of habitus, capital and field (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Maton (2008) interprets this formula thus: 'Practice results from relations between one's disposition (habitus) and one's position in a field (capital), within the current state of play of that social arena (field)' (p. 51). I have introduced the capital element of Bourdieu's theory in Section 3.1.1. I will now introduce habitus and field in his theory of practice.

The definition of habitus is not rigidly unified in Bourdieu's works (Silva, 2016). For example, he defines habitus in his earlier work as,

... systems of *durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures* predisposed to function as *structuring structures*... (Bourdieu, 1977b, p. 72, original emphasis)

Later, he defines it as,

...a product of a history, the instruments of construction of the social that it invests in practical knowledge of the world and in action are socially constructed, in other words structured by the world that they structure. (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 148)

He also connotes habitus with many meanings, such as 'embodied history', 'distinction operators', 'second nature', 'defence mechanism' and 'principles of classification' (Bourdieu, 1984, 1990, 1998, 2000). The definition of habitus is not unified. However, it is agreed that Bourdieu tries to transcend structure and agency through the notion of habitus (Jenkins, 2002, Maton, 2008; Yang, 2014).

Nonetheless, in my interpretation, the deterministic nature of habitus is strong.

Firstly, habitus is '*structured structure*' (Bourdieu, 1977b, p. 72, original emphasis), as the internalisation of objective conditions 'associated with a particular class of conditions of existence' (Bourdieu, 1977b, p. 53). This can be understood in two ways. On the one hand, habitus is structured by individuals' history or early experiences. Bourdieu removes consciousness from the notion of habitus. It is 'below the level of consciousness' (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 37). It is not a case of individuals, as social agents, doing what they want to do. Instead, they act according to their inherited habitus, which is a perpetuated and repeated structure

of the past (Yang, 2016). In this sense, habitus is inherited through history.

Individuals' present thoughts and conduct, perceptions of current and future

possibilities and impossibilities originate from what they have learnt since birth.

Following this line, in my interpretation, less privileged parents and students have

learnt from their early experiences that it is less likely for them to succeed

academically. This can greatly impact their current thoughts and conduct. The

opposite applies with regard to their privileged counterparts. If we follow this line

of thinking, it is possible to claim that Chinese rural parents' previous history

regarding their low educational level leads to a feeling of impossibility and that

education is 'not for the likes of us' (Bourdieu, 1977b, p. 56). However, the studies

discussed in Section 3.2 and the data in this study, which will be presented in

Chapter 6, will dispute this claim.

On the other hand, habitus is constructed as 'an internalised form of class condition

and of the conditionings it entails' (Bourdieu, 2004, p. 101). Bourdieu proposes

both class habitus and individual habitus. Habitus is homogeneous within the same

class, which 'makes practices to be immediately intelligible and foreseeable, and

hence taken for granted' (Bourdieu, 1977b, p. 56). He also acknowledges that it is

impossible for individuals in the same class to have completely identical habitus.

However, individual habitus is an expression and reflection of class, where its

members tend to have unified habitus (Bourdieu, 1977b, p. 59-60).

He illustrates this claim through the example of the distinctive tastes among

different social classes. That is, the petite bourgeoisie own 'luxury' while the

working class own 'necessity-driven' taste (Bourdieu, 1984). Following this line, it is

easy to imply that privileged parents and students, as a whole, tend to own a 'luxury' taste for HE (elite universities) while their less privileged counterparts, as a whole, tend to own a 'necessity-driven' taste for HE. Although Bourdieu sees individuals' heterogeneity, it is still too weak in facing the determinism in his classed social world, which excludes all 'extravagances' ('not for the likes of us') (Bourdieu, 1977b, p. 56). In educational research, it is less likely for actors, as individuals, to break such a classed rule.

Even the most disadvantaged tend to perceive the world as natural and to find it much more acceptable than one might imagine, especially when one looks at the situation of the dominated through the social eyes of the dominant. (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990, p. 130-131)

Secondly, habitus is '*structuring structures*' (Bourdieu, 1977b, p. 72, original emphasis). Bourdieu tries to stress the generative potentiality of habitus (Bourdieu, 1984), which is 'objectively adjusted to the particular conditions in which it is constituted'. Although habitus 'engenders all the thoughts, all the perceptions and all the actions', it is still 'consistent with those conditions, and no others.' (Bourdieu, 1977b, p. 95). Habitus has the potential to orientate practice. However, it is bound to a prior structure, 'the historically and socially situated conditions of its productions' (p. 95). Applying this to educational issues, parents' and students' educational practices 'habitually' respond to their prior positions. The generative scheme of practices of the less privileged 'habitually' adjust to their less privileged status. Therefore, they 'habitually' choose the less selective HEIs. In summary, habitus is structured by individuals' history in a classed world, where the generative

aspect of habitus corresponds to the prior structure. In my interpretation, this makes it determinism. Having stated the determinist nature of habitus in Bourdieu's constructs, I will turn to the notion of field.

Bourdieu defines field as sub-domains of positions in a broader social space,

...structured spaces of positions (or posts) whose properties depend on their position within these spaces and which can be analyzed independently of the characteristics of their occupants (which are partly determined by them) ... (Bourdieu, 1993a, p. 72)

Firstly, field can be regarded as an objective structure, where the reproduction of inequality exists because 'whose properties depend on their position within these spaces', as stated by the quotation above. Then, according to Bourdieu (1993b), there are various fields, such as the field of politics, the field of philosophy and the field of education. Each field has its own rules, different from others. Similar to playing a game, the rules in one specific field function as the constraints on actors' practices within it. People are actors in a field which pre-mould their behaviour. In this sense, 'meaning and the social value of biographical events' are determined by actors' 'placement' and 'displacement' within a field (Bourdieu, 1996a, p. 258; Bourdieu, 1998, p. 75).

Besides, field is mutually exclusive (Bourdieu, 1996a). This is evident in terms of class relations, where the upper class and the lower class exclude each other. Additionally, rules in a field constrain its members' practices, although they are usually unaware of it (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). However, actors form

strategies to play the game successfully and improve their (players') position within a particular field, or at least to keep their current status (Joas & Knöb, 2011).

Bourdieu (1993b) describes the relationship between individuals' prior position in a particular field and their position-taking strategies.

Every position-taking is defined in relation to the *space of possibles* which is objectively realized as a *problematic* in the form of the actual or potential position-takings corresponding to the different positions; and it receives its distinctive *value* from its negative relationship with the coexistent position-takings to which it is objectively related. (Bourdieu, 1993b, p. 30, original emphasis)

Individuals' position-taking strategies are the objective responses to the objective field to which they belong, which constrains the possibilities of such strategies. Then, these strategies respond to their habitus. In this way, Bourdieu connects habitus with field (Yang, 2014).

A specific habitus is moulded by the rules within the corresponding field, where its members inevitably have to adapt to the prior habitus (Joas & Knöb, 2011), which is determined by his objective and pre-determined position in the field. Additionally, individuals tend to confirm their familiar world repeatedly (Joas & Knöb, 2011).

Although there is individual habitus, a particular field is stable. In this way, field-specific habitus tends to be constant and reproduced.

For Bourdieu, indeed, there are continuing struggles (position-taking strategies) within a particular field, when a mismatch between field and habitus occurs

(Bourdieu, 1998; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). For example, in an educational field, as discussed earlier, less privileged parents and students try to realise educational mobility. However, 'the most profitable strategies are usually those produced by a habitus objectively fitted to the objective structures.' (Bourdieu, 1977b, p. 292). Taking the field of class relations as an example, the dominant and the dominated classes are in opposite positions (Bourdieu, 1993b) and unequal structures are stabilised, having been reproduced constantly and automatically (Joas & Knöb, 2011). In a 'classed' educational field, if the habitus and field were 'out of sync' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 130), habitus would 'drag the social agents more deeply into failure owing to the nature of perpetuation' (Bourdieu, 2000). For example, Xie (2016b) studies Chinese rural students in elite universities to find that the mismatch between rural habitus and the field of elite universities leads to rural students' feelings of exclusion in university life. In my interpretation, Bourdieu's construct of the field itself is weighed towards structure, whereby new possibilities, i.e., those of less privileged students obtaining academic success, become less possible.

Although Bourdieu does not develop his 'theory of practice' empirically in the educational field, his social reproduction theory based on French educational research greatly echoes the fact that class-based habitus in the educational field has constantly reinforced class-based practices. This has been discussed in Section 3.1. Besides, Bourdieu (1998) believes that, from birth onwards, individuals take it for granted that the structures of domination are valid features of the social world. This is particularly evident for those in the lower classes who automatically accept



the social inequality 'drummed into' them (pp. 53-54), for example, the taste of necessity which the working-class associates with their daily experiences of material shortage. However, class-based inequality is perpetuated and reproduced in nature, and therefore there is little chance for things to get better. This, to some degree, resonates with his criticism of the French educational system (Joas & Knöb, 2011). For example, he insists that accessibility to HE is collectively felt,

...as an impossible, possible, probable, normal or banal future, everything in the conduct of the families and the children (particularly their conduct and performance at school) will vary, because behaviour tends to be governed by what is 'reasonable' to expect... (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977, p. 226)

Nonetheless, Chinese scholar Yu (2019b) challenges the inherited aspect of Bourdieu's classed habitus. The author reveals how a certain group of Chinese rural students reconstruct a similar habitus to their urban counterparts in urban schools, which is different from the habitus learnt from their parents. The author justifies how the concept of habitus limits our understanding of the intra-differences among the same social group. Due to the collectively felt impossibility, it is understandable that many educational researchers who have adopted Bourdieu's social reproduction theory tend to hold a deficit view of less privileged parents' roles in their children's education, as discussed in previous sections. However, an agent is capable of making changes (Sen, 2000). There is a lack of recognition for the role of individual human agency (practice) beyond collective dispositions (habitus), where the less privileged parents and students can, against the odds, achieve success in a specific educational field.

summarily, Bourdieu does make efforts to mediate the impasse between structure and agency through the theory of practice. However, he still aligns himself on the side of structure (Crossley, 2001; Marginson, 2008), at least in educational research. According to his formula: [(habitus) (capital)] +field = practice (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 101), habitus is a dispositional structure. Field is a spatial structure. Capital is one's position in a social space (field). In this sense, rather than fulfilling the task of seeing structure and agency dialectically, practice is mainly seen as the interplay among three structures: habitus, capital and field (King, 2000; Maton, 2008). In my interpretation, Bourdieu sees the self-determining autonomy of agency through the closed lens of a classed and stratified power relationship (Marginson, 2008; Yang, 2014), at least in educational research based on his social reproduction theory. This limits our understanding of the less privileged students' and parents' agency to make social changes. In terms of HE research, the capital approach is helpful to understand the experiences of the majority, such as Chinese urban students in elite universities. However, it is less helpful when trying to understand the experiences of the minority who have made it to the elite universities, such as Chinese rural students in this study.

However, agency can work on social constraints, such as through imagination, free will and initiatives (Gramsci, 1971; Sen, 1985, 1992). This, once again, reminds readers of the possibility that the less privileged students (rural students in this study) achieve academic success against the odds (access to Chinese elite universities in this study); the less privileged parents (rural parents in this study) play positive roles in their children's education. This study never denies Bourdieu's

contributions to ongoing educational research. Many researchers are also trying to modify his theory of practice, such as the concepts of habitus and field, to better fit their research foci (King, 2000; Lau, 2004; Reay et al., 2000, 2001; Xu, 2017, 2018; Yang, 2014).

However, as discussed above, specific to educational research, Bourdieu's efforts to present the dialectic relationship between social structure and human agency is explanatorily weak because he places too much emphasis on reproduction rather than changes (Yang, 2014). Therefore, instead of making modifications to his theories, I will look beyond Bourdieu to seek better explanations. Specific to this study, I will suggest Sharon Hays' (1994) constructs of two types of dialectical relationships between social structure and human agency as a useful supplement to the capital approach.

### **3.3.2 Sharon Hays' discussion on the problem of culture and the dialectical relationships between structure and agency**

The social structure and human agency debate is still ongoing. Even the definitions of these two terms are not unified; however, they still serve each author's research focus (Sewell, 1992). Additionally, it is not easy to abstract their relationship, where many researchers have made seminal contributions (Archer, 1982, 2000; Bhaskar, 1979; Giddens, 1984). Each theorist's constructs are illuminating in their own way. In terms of the dialectical relationship(s) between social structure and human agency, Sharon Hays (1994) proposes two types: structurally reproductive agency and structurally transformative agency. They are both clear and operable in responding to the essence of the data in this study.

Although it is difficult to offer unified definitions of social structure and human agency, some consensus gradually emerges from the continued discussion. In terms of social structure, it is admitted that, firstly, although social structures exist prior to human agency, they are the creation of human beings (Bhaskar, 1979). For example, the capitalist system was created by our ancestors and, although capitalism shapes our behaviour, we, as social agents, are in turn currently reshaping it. Secondly, social structures are simultaneously enabling and constraining, creating the conditions for human agency (Giddens, 1984). For example, language rules do not just limit our ways of speaking, but also enable our ways of thinking. Thirdly, there are different levels of structures, which are more or less hidden from daily life (Hays, 1994, pp. 61-62). This will be explained below.

It is easy to consider social structures as objective and material that can be scientifically and empirically observed. However, social structures are multi-layered and need to be understood in a more or less 'deep' anthropological sense (Sewell, 1992). In a less deep sense, social structures are typically acknowledged as institutions (Gusfield, 1981), political instruments (Geertz, 1973), material conditions (Berger, 1981) and so on, which are solid and structured. However, people tend to pay less attention to a deeper part of social structure: culture (Hays, 1994).

The definition of culture varies among different authors in different disciplines (Hays, 1994; Liu, 2011), among which there have been dichotomic views on its nature. Some authors consider culture as unstructured, and view it subjectively (Lichbach, 2009; Parsons, 1968). Others treat culture as the patterns guiding

thought and actions, further regulating social life (Gullestrup, 2006; Hays, 1994; Hofstede, 2001; Sewell, 1992). Faced with the fluid treatments of the concepts and nature of culture, this study draws on Hays' (1994) argument that culture is a part of social structure. This will be explained below.

Among the ongoing debates within cultural analysis, a growing general consensus recognises that culture with 'the deepest historical roots and greatest continuity' (Hayhoe, 2007, p. 189) provides the contextual features which aid a better understanding of human progress (Harrison, 2000). For example, Weber (1958) regards Calvinism and religious beliefs as vital impetuses of capitalism. Greif (1994) analyses the influence of cultural beliefs on the organisation of society. Green et al. (2006) underlines different societal models within capitalism according to cultural patterns. In educational research, value placed on education is considered as a vital dimension to distinguish different cultures (Harrison, 2000). For example, Ulubasoglu & Cardak (2007) show how different cultural patterns (British model versus French model) shape educational in/equality in 56 countries. Masemann (2013) underlines the significance of cross-national educational study in examining how people play their roles in the educational field under patterned culture and value orientations. Thus, culture has also been regarded as a dimension in analysing educational issues (Liu, 2011), similar to Marginson's (2013) discussion of the 'Post-Confucian Model' when describing the characteristics of the HE system in China (See Chapter 2.1). In this sense, rather than being viewed as a representation of subjectivity or being unstructured, it is helpful to regard culture as a social structure that is,

...a social, durable, layered pattern of cognitive and normative systems at once material and ideal, objective and subjective, embodied in artifacts and embodied in behaviour, passed about in interaction, internalized in personalities and externalized institutions (Hays, 1994).

In my interpretation, this is similar to the three forms of cultural capital proposed by Bourdieu. However, Bourdieu's discussion on cultural capital in the educational field mainly focuses on the individual level, such as the relationship between parents' cultural capital and their children's education. This does not reflect the broader sense of cultural patterns existing in certain civilisations as shown by the above examples. In this study, I will regard culture as one dimension of social structures, which is both the outcome and producer of human actions. It is both enabling and constraining (Hays, 1994).

Synthesising the above discussions on social structure and human agency, Hays (1994) conceptualises social structure generally as,

Those patterns of social life that are not reducible to individuals and are durable enough to withstand the whims of individuals who would change them; patterns that have dynamics and an underlying logic of their own that contribute to their reproductions over time (albeit in slightly altered forms) (p. 61).

It ranges from a system of meaning (culture), rules and resources (capital) to a durable system, such as political instruments and institutions. She denotes human agency as,

Social choice that occurs within structurally defined limits among structurally provided alternatives (p. 65).

Human agency is both conscious and unconscious with intended or unintended consequences (p. 64). Firstly, it is able to create, recreate and transform social structures. Secondly, the functions of human agency rely on the enablement of social structures. At the same time, they are limited by structural constraints. Thirdly, the degree of influence of human agency on social structures depends on the accessibility, power and durability of social structures.

Hays (1994) categorises the previous discussions on the relationship between social structure and human agency into two dialectical types: structurally reproductive agency and structurally transformative agency. The former emphasises that social structures are both the source and outcome of human agency. The latter stresses the power of human agency to change social structures (pp. 63-64). Hays' constructs on social structure and human agency are based on the work of many previous theorists who have made great contributions (Archer, 1982, 2003; Bhaskar, 1979; Giddens, 1984). In the case of this study, it is explanatory. The reasons are as follows.

Firstly, it is a dialectical stance towards the relationship between social structure and human agency. Secondly, she regards culture as a part of social structure, which echoes the cultural context of Chinese HE: the 'Post-Confucian Model' (Marginson, 2013). Thirdly, the two types of dialectical relationships between social structure and human agency are concise and operable in explaining the complexity

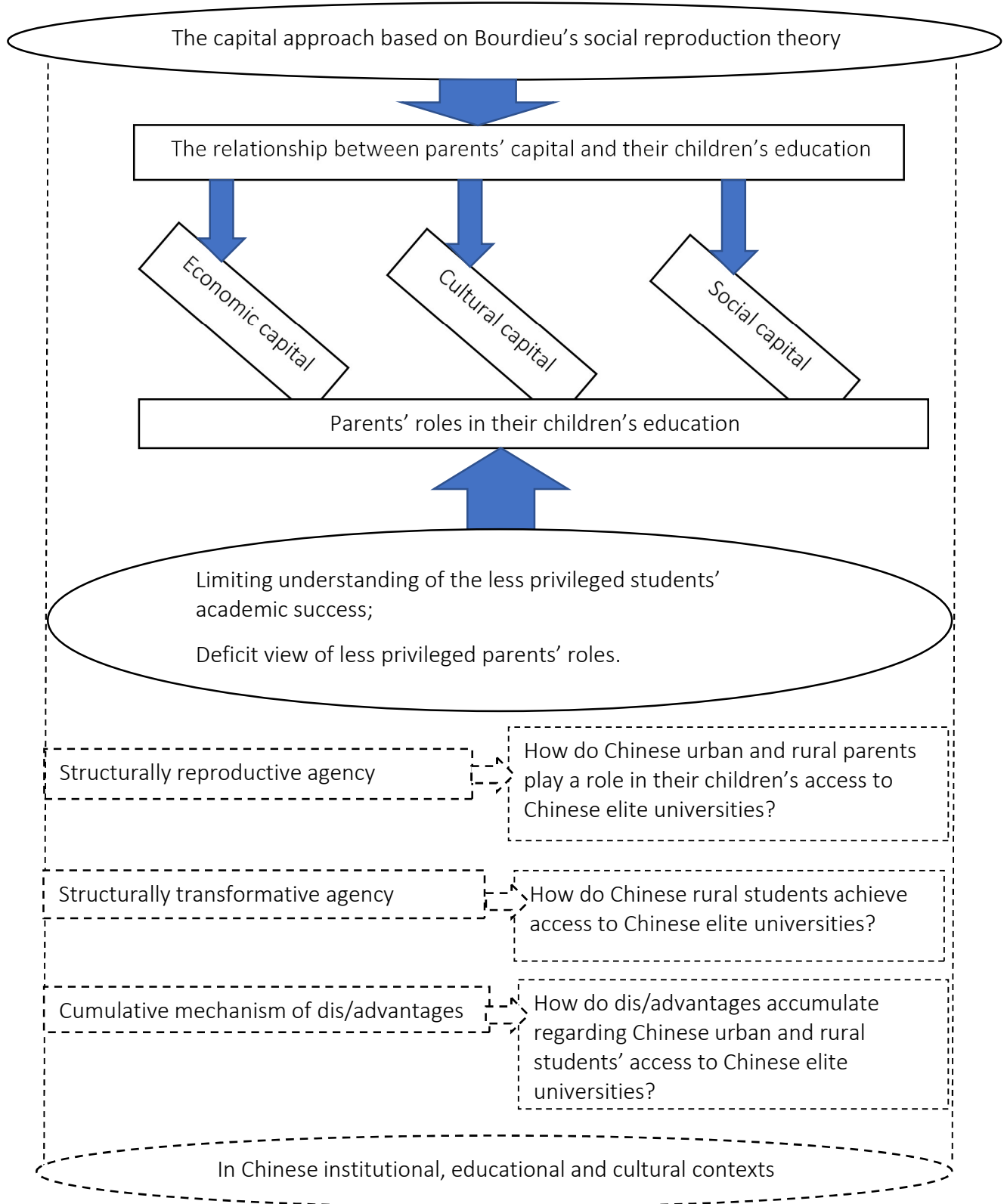
of Chinese urban and rural students' access to Chinese elite universities. This will be presented in Chapter 7, where the data in this study will be discussed.

To sum up, as the social structure and human agency debate continues among theorists, I acknowledge that 'human agency and social structure have a simultaneously antagonistic and mutually dependent relationship' (Hays, 1994, p. 65). This provides a supplementary theoretical lens to the capital approach, helping me examine the complexity of Chinese urban and rural students' access to Chinese elite universities.

So far, I have provided the Chinese context and reviewed the previous literature, by which I identify three gaps in understanding regarding Chinese urban and rural students' access to Chinese elite universities. Figure 3.1 will show what has been explained (in full line) and what has yet to be explained (in dotted line), through which the research questions emerge.



**Figure 3.1 The existing theoretical framework to understand Chinese urban and rural students' access to Chinese elite universities**



### **3.4 The gaps in understanding Chinese urban and rural students' access to Chinese elite universities**

Firstly, according to the notion of 'structurally reproductive agency' (Hays, 1994), in addition to the significance of human agency (parental roles in children's education in this study), the social structures which shape people's circumstances also need attention when explaining educational disparities. This is of special significance in Chinese institutional and cultural contexts. The reasons are as follows.

China is a socialist country with a centralised educational system where state policies exert a great influence on children's educational opportunities (Wu, 2011). This has been indicated in the discussion on the role of the state in Chinese HE in Chapter 2.1.1. A Chinese sociologist, Lu Xueyi (2004), argues that social stratification in China has been largely influenced by national institutions, policies and regulations. This echoes the relationship between the *hukou* system and urban and rural children's unequal enjoyment of educational resources in Chapter 2.2. In this study, the most significant institutional context in China is the *hukou* system. The 'Post-Confucian Model' is a cultural pattern in China, different from the West (Marginson, 2013). How do these social structures shape Chinese urban and rural parents' roles in their children's access to Chinese elite universities? The answer will be explored in this study by asking SRQ 1,

How do Chinese urban and rural parents play a role in their children's access to Chinese elite universities?

Secondly, as discussed above, the capital approach based on Bourdieu's social reproduction theory limits our understanding of the power of less privileged students' and their parents' human agency to make social changes (Joas & Knöb, 2011; Yang, 2014). According to the notion of 'structurally transformative agency' (Hays, 1994), human agency is able to change social structures, i.e., Chinese rural students achieved access to elite universities. This leads to SRQ 2,

How do Chinese rural students achieve access to Chinese elite universities?

Thirdly, as some authors indicate, there is a cumulative mechanism of dis/advantages behind inequality (DiPrete & Eirich, 2006; Merton, 1988), where the haves become more privileged and the have-nots become more disadvantaged. Following this line, to fully understand students' participation and transition into post-secondary education, it is necessary to focus on an individual's contextualised biography and entire schooling process (Ball et al., 2000; Gorard, 2013). This is of significance in a Chinese educational context.

As shown in Chapters 2.3 and 2.4, existing evidence suggests that before entering into universities, Chinese urban educational advantages and rural disadvantages have been accumulated simultaneously (Liu & Gao, 2015; Wang, 2012). However, previous studies on Chinese urban and rural educational disparities largely focus on one single schooling stage, such as preschool education (Luo et al., 2012), basic education (Yi et al., 2012), high school (Loyalka et al., 2013; Wu, 2016), or university entry and later (Wen, 2005; Zhou & Yue, 2019). When examining urban and rural students' access to Chinese elite universities, few studies examine the cumulative mechanism along their entire previous schooling pathways. Thus, I will ask SRQ 3,

How do dis/advantages accumulate regarding Chinese urban and rural students' access to Chinese elite universities?

Having explained how I targeted the research questions, I will now turn to how I answered the research questions.

## Chapter 4 Methodology

This chapter will address the methodological considerations in this study. The overall qualitative research design is decided by and echoes my philosophical stance (critical realism) and research questions. They further decide the nature of the data to be collected, the research methods I used to collect the data, and the analysis of the data (Matthews & Ross, 2010; O'Leary, 2004). I have stated the research questions in previous chapters. Thus, I will firstly present my philosophical stance of critical realism in Section 4.1. I will justify the qualitative research design which is narrative-oriented from a life course perspective in Section 4.2. Afterwards, I will tell my data collection story to present the sampling strategies I used and how I collected data through semi-structured interviews with small scale questionnaires in Section 4.3. Then, my data analysis story through thematic analysis will be presented in Section 4.4. Subsequently, I will address the issues relating to the translation of the data in Section 4.5, the ethical considerations relevant to this study in Section 4.6, and my position as both insider and outsider in Section 4.7.

### 4.1 My philosophical stance

The philosophical stance I hold in this study is 'critical realism' (Bhaskar, 1989, p. 2). On the philosophical paradigm spectrum, positivism and constructivism sit at the two opposite poles with critical realism in the middle (Byers, 2013). Positivists assert that external reality is totally independent of people's beliefs and understandings of it. Conversely, constructivists insist that reality entirely depends on human interpretation and knowledge. Critical realism counteracts the

weaknesses of both positivism and constructivism (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Critical realists agree that,

There is a world of events out there that is observable and independent of human consciousness...Knowledge about this world is socially constructed. Society is made up of feeling, thinking human beings, and their interpretations of the world must be studied. (Danermark et al., 2002, cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 13)

Realism claims that a real social structure exists independently of social actors, who constantly live in a world full of structured constraints that they themselves do not produce. Therefore, social reality itself and social agencies' interpretations of it are distinctive (Haig & Evers, 2015; Ritchie et al., 2003). The critical aspect introduces the generative mechanisms that can change and transform social reality (Bryman, 2015). These mechanisms are the powers of human agency, which can transform social activities (Bhaskar, 1989). As discussed in Chapter 3.3.2, this study draws on the dialectical relationship between social structure and human agency: the pre-existing social structure is the necessary condition for any human activity; human agency is able to recreate and transform social structures (Hays, 1994). In this sense, my philosophical stance (critical realism) resonates with the theoretical perspective I advocate for understanding Chinese urban and rural students' access to Chinese elite universities. It helps me to explore the complexity of Chinese urban and rural students' access to Chinese elite universities in Chinese institutional, educational and cultural contexts. Besides, as a way of 'analysing social problems and suggesting solutions for social change' (Fletcher, 2017, p. 182), it does not just

provide me with the possibility of analysing the social problems (Chinese urban and rural disparities in elite universities), but also the potential to suggest social change (solutions).

Specifically, I acknowledge that there are pre-existing social structures regarding Chinese urban and rural education that “constrain actors’ capacity to ‘make a difference’”(Reed, 1997, p. 25). For example, Chinese students do not voluntarily produce their urban or rural *hukou* type, which is ascribed by governmental institution at birth. Although the *hukou* type is not the only factor relating to rural educational disadvantages, it constrains rural students’ enjoyment of better educational resources in urban schools, as discussed in Chapter 2. However, Chinese parents and students are not completely passive in the face of constraints existing in social structures. Instead, they make the best use of the power of human agency, exerting an influence on social activities. For example, although Chinese rural parents and students face capital shortages compared to their urban counterparts in this study (constraining social structure), Chinese rural students achieve access to Chinese elite universities against the odds: they actively respond to social structures through the role of human agency. This will be presented in Chapter 6.

## **4.2 The qualitative research design**

Social structures are not apparent in the observable pattern of events. Human actions carry an unobservable message and information, which are difficult to be examined by quantitative measurements (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Instead,

qualitative studies, on the one hand, seek answers to how social experiences are created and given meaning (human agency). On the other hand, they are more likely to reveal the constraints of social activities (social structures). A qualitative research strategy is suitable in answering the 'how' questions (Bryman, 2015). In line with my philosophical stance (critical realism) and the research questions in this study ('how' questions), I chose a qualitative research design. Hammersley (2013, p. 13) defines qualitative research as,

A form of social enquiry that tends to adopt a flexible and data-driven research design, to use relatively unstructured data, to emphasize the essential role of subjectivity in the research process, to study a small number of naturally occurring cases in detail, and to use verbal rather than statistical forms of analysis.

Based on this, there are three requirements to consider regarding my qualitative research design.

- (1) Flexibility. The research design needs to be flexible to capture both the human agency and social structures influencing Chinese urban and rural students' access to Chinese elite universities.
- (2) In-depth data. The research design needs to collect in-depth data (relatively unstructured) to answer the 'how' questions in this study.
- (3) Feasibility. The research design needs to be practical considering the time and resources available for a PhD student.



Given these requirements, the most appropriate research approach I chose is narrative-oriented from a life course perspective. The data collection tools I chose were semi-structured interviews with small-scale questionnaires.

Firstly, the MRQ in this study is: How do Chinese urban and rural students achieve access to Chinese elite universities? The meaning of 'access' is not limited to the final admission point, such as students' *gaokao* or the IRE scores. Educational inequality is a long transitional trajectory embedded in structural systems (Crosnoe & Benner, 2016). To identify the trajectory process, I aimed to collect data regarding Chinese urban and rural students' pre-university life stories, specifically about their paths to elite universities. In this sense, a narrative-orientated research approach is appropriate because it shows the "'hows' and 'whats' of storytelling... about specific aspects of people's lives." (Chase, 2011, p. 659).

Life course theory stresses both the dynamic and contextualised nature of social pathways and human agencies in social actions (Elder et al., 2003).

Any point in life span must be viewed dynamically as the consequence of past experience and future expectation as well as the integration of individual motive with external constraint. (Giele & Elder, 1998, p. 17)

As discussed in Chapter 2.4, Chinese urban and rural pre-university educational disparities have largely influenced urban and rural students' access to HE. Both individual actors (Chinese parents and students) and social structures (Chinese institutional, educational and cultural contexts) have shaped Chinese urban and rural educational disparities. In this sense, a life course perspective allows me to

incorporate the cumulative process pertaining to Chinese urban and rural students' access to Chinese elite universities, where both the roles of human agency and social structures will be identified.

Another feature of the life course perspective concerns linked lives (Giele & Elder, 1998). The examination of educational trajectories cannot be isolated from other social institutions and actors in those institutions (Pallas, 2003). This links to SRQ 1, which is: How do Chinese urban and rural parents play a role in their children's access to Chinese elite universities? As discussed in Chapter 3, there has been a close relationship between parents' social status and their children's educational achievements. In this vein, parents' roles are linked with their children's academic trajectories. A life course perspective helps me to explore how Chinese urban and rural parents play a role in influencing their children's paths to Chinese elite universities.

Secondly, although I was informed by a narrative approach and life course perspective, this study was neither a complete narrative inquiry nor an entire life history study. A study labelled as narrative inquiry typically focuses on a single person, reporting individual experiences (Creswell, 2015), and includes unstructured interviews involving a loose schedule of conversations (Shacklock & Thorp, 2005). A life history study is a portrayal of an individual's entire life span (Creswell et al., 2007). However, I conducted semi-structured interviews and collected Chinese urban and rural students' pre-university life stories rather than their entire life span. In this sense, I adopted a narrative-oriented approach and was informed by the life course perspective.

Additionally, semi-structured interviews were used as they allow questions to be asked which are specific to this study. Unstructured interviews focus on a broad area for discussion; the participants can openly talk about the research topic in their own way (Matthews & Ross, 2010). However, the researcher might lose control of the research topic as the interview proceeds (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). This contrasts with structured interviews, which provide control but tend to constrain participants' perspectives (Bryan, 2015). Semi-structured interviews are flexible. The researchers have a list of specific questions or topics to be covered in the interview guide, but the interviewees' replies are open. The researchers can use probes and follow-up questions to collect as rich and detailed data as possible (Bryman, 2015). I chose semi-structured interviews because it can give me certain space to focus on the research questions while providing the participants with the freedom to tell their own stories.

Furthermore, the research questions in this study explore how Chinese urban and rural students achieve access to Chinese elite universities, where their parents might play varied roles. Thus, I chose both students and their parents as my participants to capture the holistic stories. As discussed in Chapter 3, there is a close relationship between the volume and composition of parents' capital and their children's education. Although the indicators of parents' capital are the subject of ongoing debate, mainstream measurements include parents' educational level, occupational type and families' wealth or income (Siraj & Mayo, 2014). In order to better understand the social characteristics indicating Chinese urban and rural parents' possession of capital, I also designed a small scale questionnaire in Chinese.

The information collected through the questionnaires consists of students' basic information, such as their *hukou* type, university names, whether they attended the IRE and home address; and their parents' social characteristics, such as educational level, occupational type and household annual income in the previous year (the year of 2017). See Appendix III for an example of the questionnaire.

### 4.3 The data collection process

The whole process of data collection is the story of how I recruited participants; how I conducted semi-structured interviews and administered questionnaires; how I recorded and transcribed interview data and how I organised the information obtained through the questionnaires.

My research focuses on Chinese urban and rural students' access to Chinese elite universities, which, in this study refers to those listed in the Double First-Class University Plan in 2017. In order to maintain relative uniformity, I selected first-year undergraduates who were admitted in September 2018. There are 42 universities (category A and category B) in the Double First-Class University Plan in 2017, located in various provinces and cities in mainland China (See Appendix I). From these cities, I chose Beijing for my data collection for the following reasons.

Firstly, there are eight elite universities in Beijing, all of which are in category A. The number of elite universities in other cities is less than that of Beijing. Secondly, through attending academic seminars and conferences, I have developed social contacts with professionals in two elite universities in Beijing. They could help me post student recruitment advertisements or introduce me to potential participants.

Thirdly, one of my relatives lives in Beijing and was able to provide me with accommodation during the data collection period. As a self-funded PhD student, this greatly reduced the financial burden associated with the data collection.

The entire data collection took over six and a half months - from November 2018 until June 2019. There was a suspension for around one and a half months during universities' winter holiday (from December 25, 2018 to February 19, 2019). In total, I conducted 46 interviews within four elite universities in Beijing (referred as A, B, C and D in this study). 26 students were interviewed, including 15 urban students and 11 rural students. Four students were from University A, seven from University B, eight from University C, seven from University D. All four universities are in category A of the Double-First Class University Plan. 20 parents were interviewed, including 11 urban parents and nine rural parents. The total amount of interview time is 67 hours 44 minutes 05 seconds. The longest interview took two hours 24 minutes 24 seconds and the shortest lasted 47 minutes 39 seconds (See Appendix IV for the record of the interview schedule). In what follows, I will tell my data collection story in detail, which is summarised in Table 4.1.

**Table 4.1 My data collection journey**

November 2018 to December 2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(1) Convenience sampling;</li> <li>(2) Eight semi-structured interviews (four face-to-face with students; four video calls with mothers);</li> <li>(3) Releasing questionnaires.</li> </ul>
January 2019 to the end of February 2019 (Data collection suspended)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(1) Found 10 more student participants through snowball sampling;</li> <li>(2) Interviews suspended during winter holiday;</li> <li>(3) Transcribed and analysed the first eight finished interview data;</li> <li>(4) Reflected on interview techniques and efficacy;</li> <li>(5) Organised information collected in questionnaires;</li> <li>(6) Supervisor’s feedback on interview data;</li> <li>(7) Made improvements to interview questions;</li> <li>(8) Second-round interviews with the first eight participants and transcriptions.</li> </ul>
End of February 2019 to end of April 2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(1) Semi-structured interviews with 10 more students, six more parents (five mothers and one father)</li> <li>(2) Released online questionnaires;</li> <li>(3) Transcribed interview data and organised information collected in questionnaires;</li> <li>(4) Continued student recruitment.</li> </ul>
End of April 2019 to Mid-June 2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(1) Purposive sampling+ Snowball sampling +Convenience sampling</li> <li>(2) Semi-structured interviews with 11 more students (nine rural and two urban), 10 more parents (six fathers, three mothers, one <i>ershu</i>).</li> </ul>

In total	<p>(1) 46 interviews: 26 with students, including 15 urban students and 11 rural students; 20 with parents, including 11 urban parents and nine rural parents.</p> <p>(2) In four Chinese elite universities  Four students from A; seven from B; eight from C; seven from D</p> <p>(3) 67 hours 44 minutes 05 seconds (from 47 minutes 39 seconds to 2 hours 24 minutes 24 seconds).</p>
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I prepared an interview guide (See Appendix VII) with a concise list of the topics and questions to be asked (Bryman, 2015). The main questions in the interview guide were based on the MRQ and SRQs and the abstract research questions were converted into accessible conversational-style questions for the interviewees. In this way, the broad research topic and problem would be comprehensively explored and investigated (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). Follow-up questions and probe questions were not included in the interview guide. Instead, they were raised flexibly when some puzzling, unclear or unanticipated answers emerged in individual interviews (Rubin & Rubin, 2011).

After each student was interviewed, I asked whether they could introduce their parents to me. They agreed to ask their parents if they were agreeable. Four mothers agreed to support my research. The students' hometowns were scattered throughout China, and as a self-funded PhD student it would place a huge financial and time burden for me to administer the interviews with parents face-to-face. Thus, the interviews with parents were conducted through video calls via WeChat. I coordinated the interview time with parents as I had done with the students. Finally, from November 24, 2018 to December 22, 2018, I conducted eight interviews in total (four face-to-face with students, four video calls with mothers).

I then combined the convenience sampling with snowball sampling. Using snowball sampling allows the initial participants to introduce others with the same characteristics as them for researchers to contact (Matthews & Ross, 2010). Two of the first four interviewed students introduced me to four more students who contacted me at the end of December 2018. However, from January 2019 to the



end of February, the students began preparations for their final examinations, after which they returned home for the winter holiday, forcing me to temporarily suspend the data collection. I remained in contact with the four potential informants and asked for their assistance in spreading information to their friends regarding the project. By the end of February 2019, another six students in four elite universities agreed to participate in the project after their return to university. In total, 10 potential student participants would be interviewed after the winter holiday.

For the next one and a half months, I transcribed the first eight sections of interview data in order to reflect my interview techniques and the interviews' efficacy. The transcription process will be presented in Section 4.4.2. At the same time, I organised the information collected through questionnaires in Microsoft Excel 2016. In order to obtain feedback from my supervisor, who is British, I fully translated one family's (including student and parent) interview data from Chinese Mandarin into English (See Appendix VIII for the example of interview transcripts). Based on my supervisor's suggestion, I added one more question relating to students' current perceptions on studying in elite universities:

What do you think of your/your children's studying in this university now?

Following the first eight completed interviews, I had a second-round chat with the participants through WeChat. I then transcribed and added the transcripts to the first-round transcripts.

At the beginning of the new term, I began conducting face-to-face interviews with the 10 potential students, starting on February 23, 2019. The interview process was the same as stated above. For these 10 students, I conducted five interviews with mothers and one with a father via WeChat. This process lasted until April 21, 2019. Of the 14 students interviewed, 12 were urban. Only two were rural.

Given the imbalance in the number of urban and rural student participants, I began to deliberately select more students with a rural *hukou*. From April until mid-June, I combined purposive sampling, 'a strategy in which particular settings, persons or events are selected deliberately in order to provide information that cannot be obtained from other from other sources' (Maxwell, 2013, p. 97) with snowball sampling and convenience sampling.

12 more students participated in this project. Nine of them were rural *hukou*. For these 12 students, I interviewed five fathers, three mothers and one *ershū*<sup>5</sup> (father's second brother). Interestingly, one rural student's father also joined in the middle of the interview with the student's mother. By June 16, 2019, another 20 interviews had been completed.

Although I continued to actively seek more rural students, the process stagnated. My previous participants also experienced difficulties in finding more of their rural peers in Beijing's elite universities. I summarised the current data and found that 46 interviews had been conducted. 15 students were with urban *hukou* and 11 students were with rural *hukou*. 11 urban parents (eight mothers and three fathers)

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<sup>5</sup> The student said that his parents knew little about his schooling, while his *ershū* contributed the most to his academic achievement since his childhood. I respected his opinion.

and nine rural parents (four fathers, three mothers, one both father and mother, one students' *ershu*) were interviewed. The number were not exactly equal, with less rural participants than urban. Considering the time taken and the amount of resources used, plus the relatively 'saturated' samplings (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), my supervisor's opinion was that I should conclude the data collection. All the interviews were conducted on weekends with the interview data transcribed verbatim on weekdays. At the same time, the information in questionnaires were also organised. Once the last interview was completed on June 16, 2019, the whole transcription process ended on June 30, 2019. I then began data analysis.

#### **4.4 The data analysis process**

I learned thematic analysis from Braun & Clark (2006, 2013) and applied it to this study for two reasons. Firstly, it echoes my philosophical stance: critical realism (Braun & Clark, 2006; Fletcher, 2017). Critical realists typically use the existing theory as the starting point for their empirical research, 'although not necessarily quantitatively' (Bhaskar, 1979, p. 6). At the same time, they 'avoid any commitment to the content of specific theories and recognize the conditional nature of all its results' (Bhaskar, 1979, p. 6). In this vein, the initial theories for critical realists act as a starting point, requiring more accurate explanations of social phenomenon (Fletcher, 2017). As opposed to ignoring the information provided by initial theories, such as grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), thematic analysts acknowledge that researchers can be simultaneously theoretically and data driven, with the themes emerging from the data (Braun & Clark, 2006).

Secondly, thematic analysis is theoretically flexible and practically feasible in answering the research questions. As demonstrated in Chapter 3, the research questions in this study were firstly informed by the existing theoretical frameworks used to explain Chinese urban and rural educational disparities by the capital approach based on Bourdieu's social reproduction theory and the social structure and human agency debate in social theory. Then, there are the gaps in knowledge relating to Chinese urban and rural students' access to Chinese elite universities. These factors influenced the formation of the MRQ and SRQs and required me to be open to the themes emerging from the data. In this way, using thematic analysis allows me to examine,

underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualisations - and ideologies - that are theorized as shaping or informing the semantic content of the data. (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 84)

I applied six phases of thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006, 2013) in order to analyse the interview data with the assistance of NVivo 11, including: (1) Familiarising myself with the data; (2) Generating initial codes; (3) Searching for themes; (4) Reviewing themes; (5) Defining and naming themes; and (6) Producing the report. This will be presented from Section 4.4.1 to Section 4.4.6.

The whole process was not linear but recursive and started as soon as accurate transcription of the first set of interview data was completed and uploaded into NVivo 11. Then, with more and more transcripts coming in, I did not simply move from one phase to the next one. Instead, I constantly referred back to the raw transcripts, picking up extracts for each code, with the themes emerging from the

data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I had remained sensitive to any patterns of meanings and issues with potential relevance contained in students' and their parents' answers to the research questions. At the same time, I integrated the writing into my entire analysis process - not simply leaving it until the end (Braun & Clarke, 2006). For example, my very first writing consisted of simply jotting down similar points emerging from the first two interviews. In this way, my writing continued to become more and more systematic as the six-phase process progressed. The whole data analysis story concerns *Ten Iterations* I experienced during the six phases. The ten iterations were not strictly linear; they occasionally overlapped. For example, when I read and reread the transcriptions during the first two iterations, I picked up a list of interesting ideas, although they were not organised in a systematic way. This will be presented below.

#### **4.4.1 Phase one: Familiarising myself with the data**

In this phase, I immersed myself in the interview data in order to become familiar with its depth and breadth (Braun & Clarke, 2006) through the first two iterations. *Iteration One* involved manually transcribing the audio recordings of interview data into written texts. This started when I finished the first interview. I used brackets with my explanations to include participants' nonverbal elements within the main verbal transcriptions, such as (laugh), (silence) and (tears), and my explanations to some contextualised information (e.g., I comforted some participants when they became down or depressed). After I finished each transcription, I checked the transcripts against the audio recordings. Since Chinese Mandarin was used as the interview language, all the transcriptions were in Chinese Mandarin.

I then sent the transcriptions in Microsoft Word 2016 to the participants for their memory checking (Bryan, 2015) and also to hear their opinions on the pseudonyms. I was open to their suggestions relating to the transcripts. Two interviewees expressed a preference for their own pseudonyms. I changed the transcripts accordingly.

Through transcribing and double checking, I developed an initial understanding of the data set prior to my formal analysis. Making sure that the transcripts were accurate, I uploaded them into NVivo 11, where *Iteration Two* started. I read and reread the transcripts through NVivo 11 at least three times. My reading was not just mechanical repetition, but active and reflective; I tried to search for those possible meanings and patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006) which could potentially answer the research questions. When I read and reread through the entire data set, the initial ideas of potential patterns began to appear. I then started phase two.

#### **4.4.2 Phase two: Generating initial codes.**

I began to generate the initial codes in NVivo 11 in this phase, where I began *Iteration Three and Iteration Four*. *Iteration Three* started as a systematic identification of codes, which are 'the most basic segment, or element, of the raw data or information that can be assessed in a meaningful way regarding the phenomenon' (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 63). The MRQ is: How do Chinese urban and rural students achieve access to Chinese elite universities? This means that I need to tell both urban and rural students' stories. Therefore, I created two working programmes in NVivo 11 - one for urban, the other for rural.

The process of coding involved organising the data into meaning groups (Tuckett, 2005). To make the codes meaningful, underneath each working programme I produced three columns in line with the three SRQs. The column names were a concise representation of the three SRQs, including parents' roles, rural students' successful stories and cumulative dis/advantages. I worked through each data item with full and equal attention (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This enabled me to identify any possible points that would potentially address the research questions, I then assigned code names to any possible points in NVivo 11. Codes were assigned to different columns regarding each SRQ. Some code names came from the interviewees' own words, others were summarised by me. The code names were not abstract, but descriptive; they clearly reflected what that segment of data was about and presented the feature of the data extracts. Some extracts were under one code name once they were overlapped, while some were coded more than once if they were relevant to all three SRQs (See Appendix IX for some examples of the code names I produced in NVivo 11).

Although all of the transcriptions were in Chinese, all of the code names were in English. This was helpful in keeping the codes more concise, and was also convenient for supervision communications. The coding process was organic and evolving (Braun & Clarke, 2013). As stated at the beginning, I started when I finished the first interview transcription. By the time the last transcription was completed, I had almost produced the initial coding. I identified as many codes as possible that potentially answered the research questions. The urban programme

ultimately produced 834 codes in total, and 803 were produced for the rural programme.

The total number (more than 1600 codes for two working programmes) surprised me. At this stage, I felt that I did not have a thorough understanding of the meaning of all the codes. Thus, I started *Iteration Four*. I revisited the whole data set after I finished the first coding. Some of my understandings of the text were different from the previous code names I had given them. Some codes names appeared more than once under the three columns within one working programme; additionally, some code names seemed irrelevant to the research questions, but provided more contextual information. Under such conditions, I re-coded certain items and combined some repetitive code names. Few code names were discarded because one of the coding principles at this phase was inclusivity (Braun & Clarke, 2013): ‘you never know what might be interesting later’ (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 89). This helps to avoid the common criticism of coding that the context is lost (Bryman, 2015). Finally, 1600 codes were reduced to 986 (501 for the urban programme and 485 for the rural programme). I then started phase three.

#### **4.4.3 Phase three: Searching for themes**

After all data had been initially coded, I began to sort codes into candidate themes. Each theme had a central organising concept consisting of many related facets (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2013). My search for themes was the process of *Iteration Five*, which started when I tried to combine different codes to form an overarching theme. It was not a definitive, once-and-for-all effort but an active identification of patterns that were relevant to the research questions. I kept reviewing the codes



and collated extracts; I considered the differences and similarities between codes; tried to identify the boundaries among different codes; considered their relationships to the three SRQs, and identified their overlaps (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Those sharing the same central organising concept were either assimilated with each other using the same theme name or grouped into a new candidate theme. Those codes with no discernible theme, I named as the 'to be decided theme group'. Finally, I produced 18 candidate themes for the urban working programme and 21 candidate themes for the rural working programme. I then began phase four.

#### **4.4.4 Phase four: Reviewing themes**

This phase is a process of refinement of candidate themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006), where I underwent *Iteration Six and Iteration Seven*. *Iteration Six* began when I started to consider the internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity (Patton, 1990) of the candidate themes I produced. I focused on identifying if they could reflect a coherent pattern (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which aimed to answer the research questions. I reread the extracts for each theme to collate the data under one theme. Meanwhile, I tried to distinguish different themes with 'clear and identifiable distinctions' (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 91). I was more selective during *Iteration Six*, where candidate themes were reworked or discarded. For example, I identified some candidate themes which were not supported by enough data to answer the three SRQs, and some candidate themes which could form one main theme. At the end of *Iteration Six*, 10 candidate themes were identified for the urban working programme and 13 identified for the rural working programme in NVivo 11.

I then began *Iteration Seven*, where I considered if these candidate themes “‘accurately’ reflects the meaning evident in the data set as a whole” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 91). Thus, I reread the entire data again. To some extent, it was a process of re-coding, especially in the case of those I grouped as ‘to be decided theme group’ so that I could ascertain that no meaningful data was missed and all candidate themes fitted the data set as a whole.

During *Iteration Seven*, no new themes emerged. The three columns according to the three SRQs that I had created under both urban and rural working programmes in NVivo 11 began to play a role at this stage. Although I began collating the codes into different columns during phase two and tried to put candidate themes into different columns during phase three as presented above, they were not organised enough. From phase one until now, I had developed an overall idea of what the different themes were about through the seven iterations. Thus, I began to focus more on how different candidate themes fit each SRQ to tell the whole story of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I found that some themes were overlapping within the three columns beneath urban and rural programmes. Under such conditions, I evaluated their relevance with each SRQ. For example, the use of *guanxi* for school admission was firstly collated into both parents’ roles and students’ cumulative dis/advantages. After reflecting how the use of *guanxi* demonstrated the ways in which parents activated their social capital to play their roles, I finally put the use of *guanxi* under the heading of parents’ roles. After I categorised the candidate themes into three columns, I began phase five.

#### 4.4.5 Phase five: Defining and naming themes

This process is aimed at identifying the ‘essence of what each theme is about (as well as the themes overall), and...what aspects of the data each theme captures’ (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 92). As described above, this started from *Iteration Seven*, when I tried to categorise the candidate themes into three columns. During this phase, I defined and refined the themes through my writing in *Iteration Eight and Iteration Nine*.

As stated above, urban and rural working programmes were grouped separately in NVivo 11. If I analysed them separately, it hardly answered the MRQ: How do Chinese urban and rural students achieve access to Chinese elite universities? This is a comparative question, therefore I started *Iteration Eight* by producing a draft writing which compared the stories emerging from the themes collated into the three columns in each working programme. By doing this, I tried to give the themes working names, which should be ‘concise, punchy, and immediately give the reader a sense of what the theme is about’ (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 93). This was achieved by producing headings and subheadings in my writing. At the end of *Iteration Eight*, I made drafts under three headings: Comparison of urban and rural parents’ roles; Rural students’ successful access to Chinese elite universities; Comparison of urban and rural students’ previous life experiences.

So far, I had grouped all candidate themes into three main categories pertaining to the three SRQs: Parents’ roles as the answer to SRQ 1; Rural students’ successful stories as the answer to SRQ 2; and students’ previous life experiences as the answer to SRQ 3 regarding cumulative dis/advantages. At the top of each section, I

produced a table of contents showing the heading and subheadings, which were born out of candidate themes in NVivo 11. The three tables of contents worked as my 'thematic map' of analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87). Within each section, headings represented the main themes while subheadings represented the sub-themes.

I further categorised candidate themes into nine main themes with working names. Beneath urban and rural parents' roles, there were four main themes: parent-children interactions; parent-teacher interactions; parent-parent interactions; and parent-others interactions. Beneath rural students' successful stories, there were three main themes: rural parents as contributors; rural students as contributors; and rural teachers as contributors. Beneath the stories of urban and rural students' previous life experiences, there were two main themes: urban and rural students' organisation of daily life and schooling journeys. Each main theme contained various sub-themes. On completion of the three drafts, I presented them to my supervisor for feedback. Based on this feedback and my own reflections, I started *Iteration Nine*: to reshape the three thematic maps through polishing my writing.

During *Iteration Nine*, in line with my critical realism stance and being partly informed by theoretically driven thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), I did not ignore previous literature. Instead, I integrated some previously analytical frameworks identified in the literature reviews to reach a certain abstraction of the theme names in my writing. I also reordered the presentation of some themes in my writings to demonstrate clearly how the overall story evolved. For example, parents' roles were abstracted as within families and outside families, as reviewed

in Chapter 3.1.4. In this way, nine themes were reduced to seven at the end of *Iteration Nine*. Two pairs of comparative themes answer SRQ 1. Three themes together answer SRQ 2. Two themes together answer SRQ 3. To capture the essence of each main theme, sub-themes were also given meaningful names. The seven main themes will be presented in Table 4.2 below. The more detailed sub-themes within then will be presented in Chapter 6.

**Table 4.2 The presentation of the seven main themes to answer the SRQs**

MRQ: How do Chinese urban and rural students achieve access to Chinese elite universities?	
SRQs	Seven main themes
SRQ 1: How do Chinese urban and rural parents play a role in their children's access to Chinese elite universities ?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(1) Systematic involvement versus limited involvement (parents' roles within families)</li> <li>(2) Chinese urban and rural parents' roles outside families</li> </ul>
SRQ 2: How do Chinese rural students achieve access to Chinese elite universities ?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(3) The power of rural parents' language</li> <li>(4) Rural students as the keys to open the doors of elite universities</li> <li>(5) Rural teachers' significant roles</li> </ul>
SRQ 3: How do dis/advantages accumulate regarding Chinese urban and rural students' access to Chinese elite universities ?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(6) A virtuous cycle versus a vicious cycle (Chinese urban and rural students' schooling pathways)</li> <li>(7) Concerted cultivation versus Free ranging (Chinese urban and rural students' outside school time)</li> </ul>

#### 4.4.6 Phase six: Producing the report

As stated above, I integrated writing into the analysis process, and the final report on the findings had been drafted by the end of *Iteration Nine*. During *Iteration Ten*, I focused on the 'selection of vivid, compelling extract examples' (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87) to provide 'a concise, coherent, logical, non-repetitive and interesting account of the story the data tell-within and across themes' (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 93). At the same time, I was aware that the final writing up was not just a description of the data, but involved a process of building an argument regarding the research questions. During *Iteration Ten*, I moved back and forth within the entire data set, the selected extracts, the sub-themes and the main themes. At the same time, I constantly discussed the draft writings with my supervisors. After three rounds of drafts, a final report of the finding chapter was produced. This will be presented in Chapter 6.

#### 4.5 The translation of the data

This study has a Chinese focus and the language used in interviews and questionnaires is Chinese Mandarin. I am Chinese and pursuing a PhD in the UK. These considerations affected the cross-cultural nature of this study where an additional methodological consideration was the translation of the data (Bryan, 2015). Specifically, data translation started during the data analysis stage and continued up until the writing up of the whole dissertation. However, it did not mean that I translated all of the data from Chinese Mandarin to English. During the data analysis stage, the data was analysed in Chinese Mandarin. In this way, the

source data could be ‘wholly and correctly understood’ (Nord, 2005, p. 1). Besides, certain translations were made for the convenience of supervision discussions. I carried out the major translation during the data presentation stage, including the formation of participants’ profiles in the subsequent Chapter 5 and the presentation of interview data in Chapter 6.

Carrying out translation at the data presentation stage ensured that the translations captured ‘the subtle meanings of the original language’ (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p. 211). Due to the respective nuances of Chinese and English, certain Chinese Mandarin elements were expressed in *Pinyin* format (the officially romanisation system for Chinese Mandarin) with explanatory brackets in English when they first appeared, such as, *ershū* (father’s second younger brother). Additionally, as stated earlier, I considered both the relevance of data to the research questions and the variants of participants when deciding which piece of translated data to be included. For example, when I presented quotations of the interview data, if some sentences were discursive to the interview questions, I used ‘...’ to replace them within the quotations.

## **4.6 Ethical considerations**

The ethical considerations involved in this study included the processes of entering the field, the protection of participations and the processing of data.

### **4.6.1 Entering the field and approaching participants**

As stated earlier in this chapter, two friends working in elite universities in Beijing helped me during participants’ recruitment. This did not mean that I used my



friends' status as professors in universities to influence the students. Indeed, in the first place, they posted the advertisements using virtual names, without stating their position in the universities. They then agreed that they would not be involved in the process after posting the student recruitment advertisements. In this way, it was the students themselves who decided whether to contact me or not through the contact information I provided.

After entering the field in the correct manner, I ensured that my approaches to potential participants would not put pressure on them. For example, for those who agreed to participate, the interview time slots and sites were arranged to take place at their convenience. Some students and parents who showed interest at the start failed to participate at the last minute for various reasons (four students, one mother). In these cases, I followed the guidelines regarding voluntary participation (BERA, 2018; Bryan, 2015). I respected their personal choices, so did not try to persuade or approach them further.

#### **4.6.2 Participants' voluntary informed consent**

The participants' voluntary informed consent needs to be obtained at the start of a study (Bryan, 2015). This ensures that firstly, the participants fully understand the following: (1) the purpose of this study; (2) the methods used to collect data by questionnaire and semi-structured interviews; (3) the protection of their privacy through anonymity; (4) their rights to withdraw for any reason at any time; (5) that the data will be used in my PhD dissertation; and (6) to my supervisors the data will be presented (BERA, 2018).

To comply with the guidelines, firstly, before data collection, I obtained ethics approval from the Department of Education, University of Bath and University of Durham<sup>6</sup>. In the application, I identified the main participants; how I would find and contact them; how they would be involved; how I would safeguard their identity and privacy. The application was revised once based on feedback from my supervisor, the Director of Studies. The data collection started only after obtaining permission from the ethical committee.

Secondly, I explained my responsibilities to participants in student recruitment advertisements. Before each interview, the interview guide was sent to them via WeChat on request. On each interview day, I read the consent form (in Chinese) for the student participants orally and made sure that they fully understood my responsibilities to them before they signed it. For interviews with parents, I sent the online consent forms to them prior to the agreed interview via WeChat. They returned the signed consent forms through WeChat before the interview. Before I started the audio recorder in every interview, I again made sure that every participant was clear that the interview would be recorded, and that they could withdraw at any time for any reason. All participants were informed that they could access their individual data at any time and also that they were able to withdraw their data at any time. None of the participants exercised those options. I also reminded them that I could share the results of this study with them once my research had been completed. I am still in touch with them via WeChat so that they are able to approach me at any point.

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<sup>6</sup> My first two year of PhD study was in Department of Education, University of Bath, the UK, from October 2017 to September 2019. From October 2019, I have transferred my PhD study with my supervisor to the School of Education, Durham University, the UK.

### 4.6.3 Protection of participants' privacy and data storage

Another aspect of the research process involved the confidential treatment of participants' data to protect their privacy (BERA, 2018; Bryan, 2015). I used pseudonyms for all students', parents' and universities' names and did not reveal private information, making sure that readers cannot identify the participants. For example, only I was clear about the coding system that I used to match each participant's personal information. Then, bearing in mind the risk that readers might identify the participants from a detailed home address, I presented information which was relevant to this study only. For urban participants, I included their city names and province names. The details of rural participants included their county names, city names and province names.

To ensure the safe storage of the data (Data Protection Act, 2018), I immediately uploaded the audio recordings of the interview data to my iCloud drive account at the interview sites once each interview finished. When I arrived at my temporary accommodation, I backed up the audio recordings and questionnaires in three places: my personal laptop, my university H-drive and my USB device. All four storage sites were encrypted. All transcripts of interview recordings in Microsoft Word 2016 were also passworded. In addition, all transcripts and questionnaires were printed as physical backup. They were locked in the drawers at my temporary accommodation during the data collection process. When I returned to the UK after the data collection, they were locked in the drawers assigned to PhD students for storage in my university.

#### 4.7 Insider and outsider: My position in this study

My position in this study was that of both an insider and an outsider, where both empathy and distancing were exercised during the research process. These are regarded as positive qualities for a researcher (Hammersley, 1993).

My position as an insider referred to the fact that my personal background partly provoked my interest in this study. Firstly, I am of Chinese nationality and therefore familiar with the Chinese contexts, such as the *hukou* system, the educational system and Chinese cultural values regarding education. Secondly, I was born with rural *hukou*; both of my parents were also rural *hukou* at that time. I grew up and studied in rural China until attending middle school, and was then able to study in urban key high schools based on my performance in *zhongzhao*. I was further admitted to a 211 Project university. After obtaining a bachelor's degree, I was able to change my ascribed rural *hukou* to the urban *hukou* type as I was employed by a public school.

This school was located in a rural area where some students were 'left-behind' children. Throughout the four-year working experience, I witnessed the disadvantages in rural schools, rural children's disadvantages in schooling and the disadvantages experienced by rural schoolteachers. The mixture of rural childhood, rural schooling experiences and urban early adolescence, urban schooling experiences, plus the mixture of urban citizenship with working experiences in rural schools confirmed my position as an insider in both urban and rural families' stories.

On the one hand, I had first-hand experience of both Chinese urban and rural educational situations. On the other hand, due to my personal life and schooling experiences, I had an empathetic understanding of the participants' stories. This contributed to a responsive and open dialogue once the interviews began. It also narrowed the distance between the participants and myself. For example, some participants said that they regarded me as '自己人' (one of us, *zijiren*). Being an insider in both rural and urban families' stories enabled me to 'gain more intimate insights into their opinions' (Mullings, 1999, p. 340) because

All research is influenced to some extent by the values of the researcher.

Only through those values do certain problems get identified and studied in particular ways. (Silverman, 2013, p. 403)

Secondly, I also reminded myself of my position as a researcher. I tended to keep an analytical distance from the participants' stories, but I did not stand outside in a superior position as an 'omnipotent researcher' (Vincent & Ball, 2007, p. 1063). On the one hand, I was not equipped with "unquestionable 'truth'" (Hellawell, 2006, p. 486) before obtaining the data and tried to avoid assumptions concerning the participants' experiences and personal views. During the data analysis, I tried to be a stranger to the research data: I remained reflective (Bryman, 2015) in order to interrogate myself if I produced assumptions based on what the participants told me. Thus, every code and theme I framed was examined and cross-referenced against the raw data.

On the other hand, some of my participants, especially rural parents, tended to keep a psychological distance when first meeting me. They considered me, as someone pursuing a PhD degree overseas, to be in a higher intellectual position than themselves. For example, one rural father said during our interview,

You are a PhD. I am just a farmer. How could I help your study? (Rural, Min's father, farmer)

Facing the psychological distance between myself and some participants at the beginning, I reflected on how I presented myself in front of my participants, and realised that certain terms I used in conversations with them, such as 'interviews' and 'research', sounded too formal to non-academic individuals. I then began to adopt a more conversational approach during interviews; talking and chatting to, rather than interviewing, the participants.

Overall, my position of being simultaneously both insider and outsider to the participants contributed to my research interest, to building a rapport with my participants, to my intimate understanding of their stories and to my self-reflectivity in conducting academic research. Having laid out how I collected my data, I will now turn to the presentation of the data.

## Chapter 5 Urban and rural participants' profiles

Participants' profiles are essential in understanding the following chapters. Thus, this chapter will present the profiles of the urban and rural students and their parents, which were mainly collected through questionnaires with some explanation provided by the interview data. I will present all students' profiles first in Section 5.1 followed by all parents' profiles in Section 5.2. All of the participants' profiles are anonymous. Every student and their respective universities are given pseudonyms.

### 5.1 Urban and rural students' profiles

Table 5.1 and Table 5.2 summarise urban and rural students' profiles respectively. The questionnaires asked about their *hukou* type, universities' names; whether they attended the IRE; how many bonus points they obtained in the IRE; gender; ethnicity; home address; and university subject.

Table 5.1 Urban students' profiles

Urban students' pseudonym	Universities' pseudonym	Whether applied for the IRE	How many bonus points obtained	Gender	Ethnicity	Home address (City, Province)	University subject
Xiaoshuo	C	Yes	0	Male	<i>Han</i>	Weifang city, Shandong province	Environmental Science
Linlin	D	Yes	20	Female	<i>Han</i>	Zhengzhou city, Henan province	Educational Technology
Wen	C	Yes	50	Male	<i>Han</i>	Dalian city, Liaoning province	Environmental Science
Fang	C	Yes	0	Male	<i>Han</i>	Zhongshan city, Guangdong province	Environmental Science
Jing	D	No	0	Female	<i>Han</i>	Xiamen city, Fujian province	Educational Technology
Yuan	D	Yes	20	Female	<i>Han</i>	Xiamen city, Fujian province	Educational Technology
Dong	D	Yes	30	Male	<i>Han</i>	Chongqing municipality	Educational Technology
Li	D	Yes	20	Female	<i>Han</i>	Jieshou city, Anhui province	Educational Technology



Urban students' pseudonym	Universities' pseudonym	Whether applied for the IRE	How many bonus points obtained	Gender	Ethnicity	Home address (City, Province)	University subject
Zi	B	Yes	20	Male	<i>Han</i>	Xuchang city, Henan province	Mathematics
Hong	A	Yes	40	Male	<i>Han</i>	Zhangzhou city, Fujian province	Economics
Yanyan	B	Yes	50	Female	<i>Han</i>	Zhongshan city, Guangdong province	Philosophy
Qing	D	No	0	Female	<i>Han</i>	Xuchang city, Henan province	Statistics
Xi	C	No	0	Female	<i>Han</i>	Xuchang city, Henan province	Public Management
Zhao	B	Yes	10	Male	<i>Han</i>	Xiamen city, Fujian province	Mathematics
Xin	A	Yes	0	Male	<i>Han</i>	Xuchang city, Henan province	Aeronautics & Astronautics

Table 5.2 Rural students' profiles

Rural students' pseudonym	Universities' pseudonym	Whether attended the IRE	How many bonus points obtained	Gender	Ethnicity	Home address (County, City, Province)	University subject
Wan	C	No	0	Female	<i>Han</i>	Huaiyang county, Zhoukou city, Henan province	Environmental Science
Xiaojian	B	Yes	30	Male	<i>Han</i>	Guzhen county, Zhongshan city, Guangdong province	Medicine
Meng	A	Yes	0	Female	<i>Han</i>	Yuanyuang county, Xinxiang city, Henan province	Sociology
Di	A	Yes	0	Male	<i>Han</i>	Gushi county, Xinyang city, Henan province	Bioscience
Yang	B	Yes	0	Male	<i>Han</i>	Zhongmou county, Zhengzhou city, Henan province	Pharmacy
Bo	B	No	0	Male	<i>Han</i>	Xiangcheng county, Xuchang city, Henan province	Medicine

Rural students' pseudonym	Universities' pseudonym	Whether attended the IRE	How many bonus points obtained	Gender	Ethnicity	Home address (County, City, Province)	University subject
Bin	D	No	0	Male	<i>Han</i>	Xingang county, Dexing city, Jiangxi province	Business administration
Min	C	No	0	Female	<i>Han</i>	Zhangpu county, Zhangzhou city, Fujian province	Aeronautics & Astronautics
Mei	C	No	0	Female	<i>Han</i>	Fushun county, Zigong city, Sichuan province	Agricultural Economics and Management
Ke	C	No	0	Male	<i>Han</i>	Zhijin county, Bijie city, Guizhou province	Public management
Xiang	B	Yes	20	Female	<i>Han</i>	Zhangpu county, Zhangzhou city, Fujian province	Archaeology

This study involved 15 urban students. 12 of whom had experienced the IRE. Nine out of the 12 gained bonus points in the IRE, which were added to their *gaokao* scores. The bonus points urban students gained in this study ranged from 10 points to 50 points. The total number of rural students is 11, five of whom experienced the IRE, with only two obtaining bonus points to add to their *gaokao* scores. The students' profiles partly echo previous research indicating that Chinese urban students are more likely to access elite universities through the IRE than their rural counterparts (See Chapter 2.1.3.2).

## **5.2 Urban and rural parents' profiles**

Urban and rural parents' profiles in this study will be presented in Section 5.2.1 and Section 5.2.2 respectively. In each section, the interviewed parent (mother or father) will be stated.

### **5.2.1 Urban parents: Well-educated professionals in certain fields**

Table 5.3 summarises urban parents' profiles.

Table 5.3 Urban parents' profiles

Urban students' pseudonym	Urban parents' educational level - occupation	Urban parents' annual income in 2017 (RMB)	Interviewed parent
Xiaoshuo	Mother: bachelor's degree - public servant	139,000 (around £ 16,000)	Mother
	Father: bachelor's degree - public servant		
Linlin	Mother: junior college - public servant	100,000 (around £ 12,000)	Mother
	Father: junior college - state-owned company manager		
Wen	Mother: junior college - insurance company manager	120,000 (around £ 14,000)	Mother
	Father: bachelor's degree - Joint-venture company manager		
Fang	Mother: bachelor's degree - bank manager	260,000 (around £ 30,000)	Mother
	Father: bachelor's degree - individual business		

Urban students' pseudonym	Urban parents' educational level - occupation	Urban parents' annual income in 2017 (RMB)	Interviewed parent
Jing	Mother: middle school - individual business	190,000 (around £ 22,000)	Mother
	Father: junior college - individual business		
Yuan	Mother: bachelor's degree - state-owned company manager	540,000 (around £ 62,000)	Mother
	Father: junior college - state-owned company manager		
Dong	Mother: middle school - individual business	300,000 (around £ 35,000)	Father
	Father: bachelor's degree - educational council official (belonging to public servant)		
Li	Mother: bachelor's degree - public servant	100,000 (around £ 12,000)	Mother
	Father: bachelor's degree - public servant		
Zi	Mother: bachelor's degree - urban schoolteacher	90,000 (around £ 11,000)	Mother
	Father: bachelor's degree - urban schoolteacher		
Hong	Mother: primary school - individual business	10 million (around £ 1.2 million)	Mother
	Father: junior college - individual business		

Urban students' pseudonym	Urban parents' educational level - occupation	Urban parents' annual income in 2017 (RMB)	Interviewed parent
Yanyan	Mother: bachelor's degree - public servant	240,000 (around £ 28,000)	N/A
	Father: bachelor's degree - public servant		
Qing	Mother: junior college - bank manager	300,000 (around £ 35,000)	N/A
	Father: bachelor's degree - bank manager		
Xi	Mother: junior college - urban schoolteacher	84,000 (around £ 10,000)	Mother
	Father: junior college - public servant		
Zhao	Mother: high school - state-owned company engineer	250,000 (around £ 29,000)	Father
	Father: high school - state-owned company engineer		
Xin	Mother: middle school - private company manager	180,000 (around £ 21,000)	N/A
	Father: bachelor's degree - private company manager		

10 out of 15 urban students have at least one parent with a bachelor's degree. The least educated is Hong's mother, who graduated from primary school. Most urban parents are professionals in certain fields, including public servants (four mothers and five fathers), state-owned/private company managers (five mothers and five fathers), urban schoolteachers (two mothers and one father), individual businesspeople (three mothers and three fathers) and professional engineers (one mother and one father). Jing and Hong described their parents as individual businesspeople. They explained,

My father used to be an engineer. He runs his own company now. It is a private enterprise. My mum is my father's secretary. (Urban student, Jing, D)

My father used to work in a bank. Later he resigned. My father and mother run their own company. It is cross-border electronic commerce...Now they could earn more than 10 million RMB one year. Our company was relatively big, hiring more than two hundred people. My mum worked as the accountant now. (Urban student, Hong, A)

Jing's and Hong's parents were professionals before they established their own business. Hong's mother's background is thought-provoking; although she did not finish primary school, she and her husband earn up to 10 million RMB a year. In my interpretation, this classifies them as successful entrepreneurs rather than ordinary individual businesspeople.

Not every urban family's household income in this study reaches 10 million RMB a year. As shown in Table 5.3, the lowest annual urban parental income in 2017 was



84,000 RMB. According to the official statistics, the average annual household income for Chinese urban families was 72,792 RMB in 2017 (Chinese Statistical Yearbook, 2018). All urban families' annual income in 2017 exceeded the Chinese urban average household income in this study.

Educational qualifications are institutionalised cultural capital. Families' income can be regarded as economic capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Most urban parents in this study are well-educated professionals in certain fields. In this sense, they possess either institutionalised cultural capital, economic capital - or both. Another common trait that most urban parents share is that they are basically physically present in their children's life.

### **5.2.2 Urban parents' physical presence in their children's life**

A recurring thesis in urban families' stories is that most urban parents are physically present in their children's life. Firstly, many urban parents acknowledged that a parent's company is crucial for their children's cultivation.

A parent's company is crucial. Something could happen in a minute, in a second. I kept eyes on him every moment. (Urban, Hong's mother, primary school, individual business)

The significance of accompanying children, especially during their early years, was emphasised by most urban parents. This is a reflection of urban parents' disposition of mind, a kind of embodied cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). However, as presented above, most urban parents in this study have formal occupations. They have to work during the daytime and, under such conditions, some of them needed

to balance work and family life. Others made a choice between work and being with their children; for example, when some urban parents were not able to stay with their children 24 hours a day, seven days a week, they made sure they found the time to be with their children after work and on weekends.

When I was little, my mother was busy with her work. But she still tried to find time to be with me every day. At least, we had dinner together every evening... (Urban student, Yanyan, B)

My *nainai* lived with us, but she backed her home every weekend. On weekends, my parents had time to take care of me. (Urban student, Qing, D)

Some urban parents balanced daytime work and accompanying children with the assistance of urban grandparents. Notably, some urban grandparents' presence did not lead to urban parents' absence. This is different from rural families' stories, which will be presented later. Once facing the conflicts between work and spending time with their children, urban parents prioritised their children. Four urban parents suspended their jobs or resigned in order to become a physical presence in their child's life.

At that time, his father was in an administrative post, which was quite relaxing. It was just for taking care of the kid. After Wen going to the university, he [father] returned to old profession to do construction. He likes it. (Urban, Wen's mother, junior college, insurance company manager)

From my first grade, my mum resigned till my graduation from high school.

(Urban student, Jing, D)

In addition to the fact that they value the importance of being with their children, it is urban parents' economic capital that helps them to be physically present. In the first place, most urban parents in this study are professionals in certain fields. Formal employment provides them with a stable income, freeing them from worrying about their livelihood. It also theoretically means that they enjoy after work time. The nature of their occupations, to some extent, offers them a relaxed mental mood and guaranteed free time to spend with their children.

Some urban parents are able to prioritise their children through sacrificing one family breadwinner by means of job suspension or resignation. To put it simply, they can afford to do it. This can be supported by their profiles showing urban parents' annual income in this study exceeding the national urban average in 2017. In this sense, it is most urban parents' possession of economic and cultural capital which makes their physical presence possible. This provides the precondition for their involvement in their children's study and outside school life in terms of their children's access to Chinese elite universities. This will be presented in Chapter 6.

### **5.2.3 Rural parents: Less well-educated self-employed farmers or temporary rural migrant workers**

Table 5.4 summaries rural parents' profiles.

Table 5.4 Rural parents' profiles

Rural students' pseudonym	Rural parents' educational level - occupation	Rural parents' annual income in 2017 (RMB)	Interviewed parent
Wan	Mother: junior college - rural schoolteacher	40,000 (around £ 5,000)	N/A
	Father: junior college - rural schoolteacher		
Xiaojian	Mother: high school - individual business	90,000 (around £ 11,000)	Mother
	Father: high school - individual business		
Meng	Mother: no education - farmer	10,000 (around £ 1,200)	Father
	Father: primary school - farmer		
Di	Mother: middle school - farmer (migrant worker)	20,000 (around £ 2,300)	Mother
	Father: primary school - farmer (migrant worker)		
Yang	Mother: primary school - farmer	50,000 (around £ 6,000)	Father
	Father: middle school - rural schoolteacher		

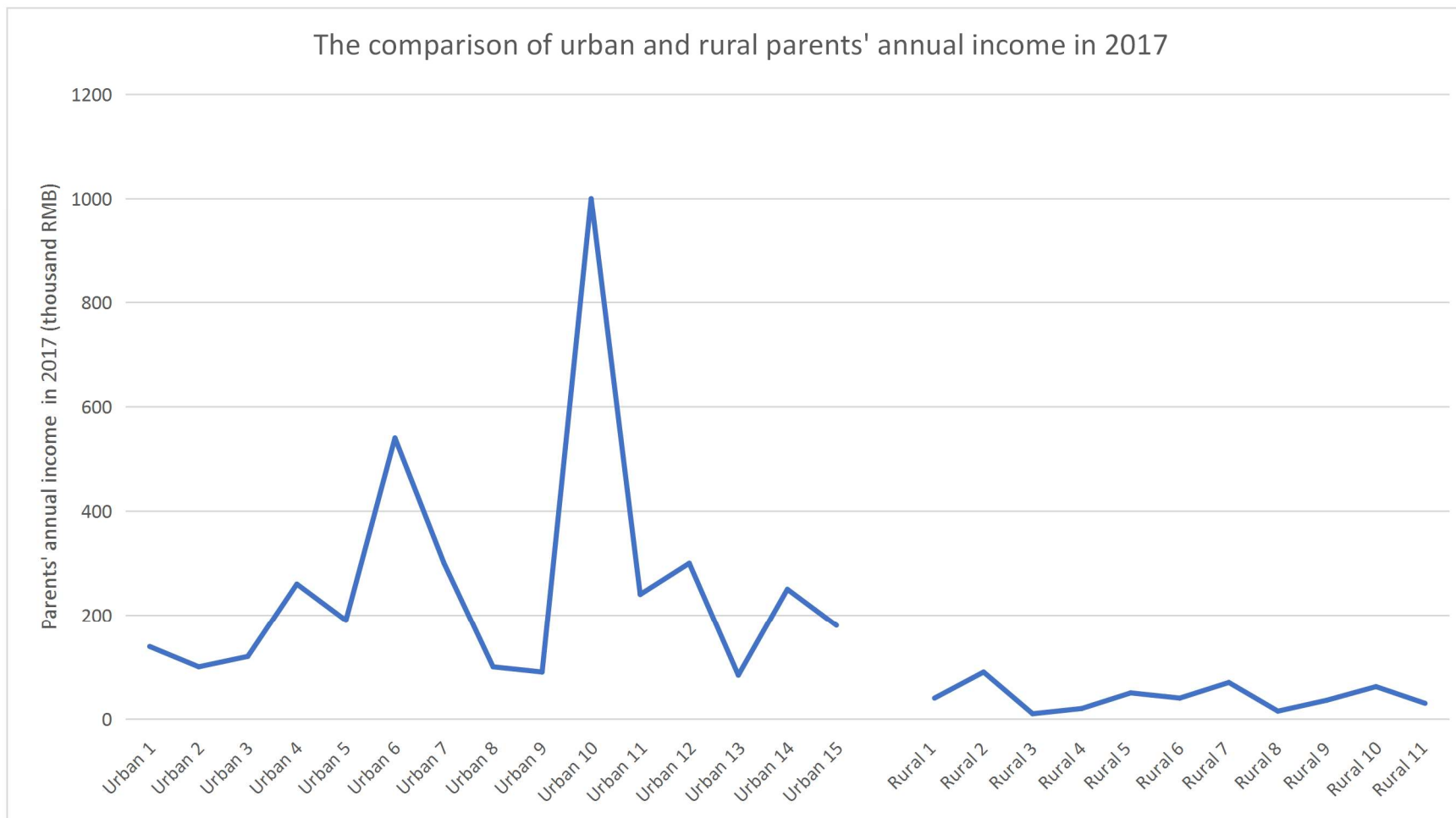
Rural students' pseudonym	Rural parents' educational level - occupation	Rural parents' annual income in 2017 (RMB)	Interviewed parent
Bo	Mother: middle school - farmer	40,000 (around £ 4,500)	Mother (Father joined later)
	Father: middle school - farmer		
Bin	Mother: primary school - farmer (migrant worker)	70,000 (around £ 8,000)	Mother
	Father: middle school - farmer (migrant worker)		
Min	Mother: no education - farmer	15,000 (around £ 2,000)	Father
	Father: middle school - farmer (migrant worker)		
Mei	Mother: primary school - farmer (migrant worker)	36,000 (around £ 4,000)	N/A
	Father: passed away		
Ke	Mother: no education - farmer	62,000 (around £ 7,000)	<i>ersh</i> (Father's second younger brother)
	Father: middle school - farmer		
Xiang	Mother: no education - farmer (migrant worker)	30,000 (around £ 3,500)	Father
	Father: primary school - farmer (migrant worker)		

Four out of 11 rural students have at least one illiterate parent. Wan's and Xiaojian's parents are the best educated. Wan's parents graduated from junior college, which is vocational education followed by middle school. Xiaojian's parents attended high school. Most rural students described their parents as farmers in questionnaires. Through the interviews, it was found that five rural students' parents are rural migrant workers, leaving their home villages to make a living in big cities. Usually, they are temporarily employed. For example,

My parents went anywhere they could find temporary work. For example, they firstly worked in a sofa factory in Hunan province. Then they went to Guangdong, working in a brickyard. And somewhere else. Anyway, they migrated to many places. (Rural student, Bin, D)

In terms of household income, three rural households had an annual income of less than 20,000 RMB in 2017. Seven rural households had an annual income of between 30,000 RMB and 70,000 RMB in 2017. One rural household's annual income was 90,000 RMB in 2017, which was almost equivalent to the smallest urban household income in this study (84,000 RMB). According to the official statistics, the average annual income for a Chinese rural household was around 26,864 RMB in 2017 (Chinese Statistical Yearbook, 2018). Three rural households' annual incomes were below the national rural average in 2017. Another eight rural households' annual incomes were above the national rural average, among which, one rural household's annual income exceeded the national urban household annual income in 2017 (72,000 RMB). All rural household annual incomes were below those of urban households in this study in 2017. For readers' better

understanding, a comparison of urban and rural parents' annual income in 2017 is presented in Figure 5.1.

**Figure 5.1 The comparison of urban and rural parents' annual income in 2017**



The interview data indicates that, whether they are self-employed farmers or temporary migrant workers, rural parents in this study face formidable financial constraints. Speaking about their living standards, most rural parents stated that their life was not easy. For example, rural farmers talked about the hardships involved in making money.

We are farmers. We have no ways to make money, only relying on the farmlands. How much we can earn! We are poor, especially when my child was little. We had no ways to make more money. He [Bo] had a hard life.  
(Rural, Bo's mother, middle school, farmer)

For rural migrant parents who were temporarily employed, they had no stable income.

I am just doing part-time jobs. Sometimes I go here. Sometimes I go there. I have no fixed income. We have noons, no evenings. Our lives are difficult. When She [Xiang] was in primary and middle school, the life was terrible...We cannot make money at that time! (Rural, Xiang's father, farmer [migrant worker])

Due to self-employed farmers' hardship, rural parents in this study left home to hunt for jobs, expecting to earn more money. However, as discussed in Chapter 2.2, most Chinese migrant workers are employed in the low-end labour market with minimum salary and benefits (Chan, 2012; Zhang, 2017). As depicted by Xiang's father: 'having noons, no evenings', on the one hand, illustrates migrant workers' heavy workload from early morning until late at night. On the other hand, it

indicates a threat to their livelihood. They might have nothing to eat for dinner after lunch. Were an unexpected event to occur, even such a 'happy burden' could not be guaranteed. For example, Di's parents were migrant workers in Guangdong province, however, due to an unexpected economic crisis, they lost their jobs and returned to their farmlands.

In the year of 2008, we both lost our jobs. We had to return home. We could do nothing but stick to farmlands. Certainly, the income was reduced. Anyway, I just ensured his eating and clothes. (Rural, Di's mother, middle school, farmer [migrant worker])

In this study, most rural parents are less educated, either being self-employed farmers facing difficulties making money or temporary migrant workers with unstable employment status. They possess less economic and cultural capital than their urban counterparts in this study. Furthermore, the formidable financial constraints result in their physical absence from their children's life.

#### **5.2.4 Rural parents' physical absence from their children's life**

Most rural parents are physically absent from their children's life in this study. Four rural parents are farmers working from early morning until late evening. Rural parents who are farmers do not only work in the fields but also try their best to seek possible part-time jobs, such as temporarily repairing roads and construction work. Two rural students' parents have double occupational identities [Wan's parents and Yang's father]: farmers and rural schoolteachers. These two students described that normally their parents had to go to the fields after they finished

teaching in schools. Five rural students called themselves ‘left behind children’ because their parents were migrant workers in other cities, who only returned home once a year during the Spring Festival. Many rural students recalled childhood memories of staying alone at home. For example,

My parents needed to work. They were seldom at home. They worked from early mornings to late evenings. I had some nightmares. I stayed alone at home. I turned all lights on. I just hid there. Sometimes I needed to go to the toilet. That feeling was just like thrilling movies. I used the quilt to cover myself several layers, then craned my neck to watch. I was afraid that ghosts saw me. (Rural student, Wan, C)

In this study, most rural parents struggle to earn a living for their whole families from morning to evening. In my interpretation, without free ‘after-work’ time and relaxation, it is difficult for them to pay attention to and become a physical presence in their children’s life as their urban counterparts do. Additionally, no migrant parents took their children with them to their working cities in this study. When talking about the reason, some expressed their powerlessness. For example,

The economic and other conditions did not allow us. Living and studying in the city was expensive. Also, we needed to work in the factories. We worked overtime at nights, started to work in the early mornings. There was no time to take care of him at all. (Rural, Di’s mother, farmer [migrant worker])

‘The economic and other conditions’ in the quote above can be understood through two dimensions. Firstly, it is a reflection of the shortage of economic capital. As discussed above and indicated by the literature, rural parents face certain monetary constraints. ‘The economic condition’ refers to the fact that their low income cannot fund their children’s living expenses in big cities; long hours and labour-intensive work left them no time and energy to look after their children.

It is the material conditions of existence that generate the innumerable experiences of possibilities and impossibilities, probable and improbable outcomes that in turn shape our unconscious sense of the possible, probable and ... desirable for us. (Maton, 2008, p. 58).

Secondly, in my interpretation, ‘the other conditions’ mentioned by Di’s mother above refer to the institutional barriers from the *hukou* system which restricted rural parents’ desire and possibility of staying with their children. As discussed in Chapter 2.2, one unique feature of the *hukou* system in modern China is the separation between physical movement and citizenship (Chan, 2018). Rural migrant workers are excluded from urban social life (Zhang, 2013), and their children are excluded from the free basic education in urban schools (Sheehan, 2017; Ye & Lu, 2011). In the face of rural migrant workers’ low income, low integration into urban life and barriers to their children’s eligibility to study in urban schools (Wei & Huang, 2019), they had no choice but to leave their children behind.

In summary, this chapter presents urban and rural participants’ profiles in this study. Urban parents are well-educated professionals in certain fields, which partly creates the conditions for them to become a physical presence in their children’s life. Rural

parents are less well-educated self-employed farmers or temporary rural migrant workers. This is in part, a precondition of their physical absence from their children's life. The differences in their profiles further explain that their roles in their children's education are differentiated. This will be presented in next chapter. It needs to be emphasised that the participants in this study represent neither the population of China as a whole, nor the urban or rural communities as a whole. They only refer to the specific groups in this study. Furthermore, urban and rural parents' social characteristics are explained in relative terms. Thus, any comparisons between urban and rural participants in this study are made in a relative sense.

## **Chapter 6 Two trajectories, one destination: Chinese urban and rural students' access to Chinese elite universities**

This chapter will present the data concerning the complexity of Chinese urban and rural students' access to Chinese elite universities. They correspond to the seven themes emerged from the data with sub-themes underneath each one (See Table 4.2). Specifically, the seven themes answer the three SRQs. SRQ 1 is: How do Chinese urban and rural parents play a role in their children's access to Chinese elite universities? This will be answered in Section 6.1. SRQ 2 is: How do Chinese rural students achieve access to Chinese elite universities? This will be answered in Section 6.2. SRQ 3 is: How do dis/advantages accumulate regarding Chinese urban and rural students' access to Chinese elite universities? This will be answered in Section 6.3. and Section 6.4. The chapter conclusion will be in Section 6.5. The findings together answer the MRQ. They reflect the big picture of the data in this study: urban and rural students' two trajectories prior to their entering one destination: Chinese elite universities.

Each excerpt of participants' interview data will be followed by their background information in brackets relevant to this study. That of students is in the format of (*hukou* type, students' pseudonym, university's pseudonym). Parents are not given pseudonyms. Instead, I state whose parents they are. For example, one student's pseudonym is Xiaoshuo, whose mother is referred to as Xiaoshuo's mother. The parents' background information includes their *hukou* type, educational level and

occupation. For example, (Urban, Xiaoshuo's mother, bachelor's degree, public servant).

The analysis of narrative data can easily become chaotic because some content may be irrelevant (Matthews & Ross, 2010). To be concise, the data presented in this chapter follows urban and rural students' life stories that centres on the most relevant to answer the research questions.

## **6.1 Chinese urban and rural parents' roles in their children's access to Chinese elite universities**

As discussed in Chapter 3.3, existing literature has shown that parents play roles in their children's education in two social settings: parents' roles within families and parents' roles outside families (Coleman, 2000; OECD, 2012). The relevant data in this study corresponds to the existing framework with differences existing in urban and rural families' stories. This section will be divided into two subsections. Section 6.1.1 will deal with Chinese urban and rural parents' roles within families, which is followed by parents' roles outside families in Section 6.1.2. Within these two subsections, there will be more detailed sub-themes. The section summary will be presented in Section 6.1.3.

### **6.1.1 Chinese urban and rural parents' roles within families**

Parents' home-based educational practices can exert a significant impact on their children's academic achievements (Goodall, 2013; Jeynes, 2007). However, as discussed in Chapter 3.1.4, parents' roles in their children's education within

families are different among different social groups: the privileged parents tend to be more actively involved (Lareau, 2003; Luo et al., 2017). The data in this study also shows that, within families, Chinese urban and rural parents play differentiated roles in their children's access to elite universities. The differences are mainly illustrated through parent-children interactions along students' entire schooling processes prior to their entry to elite universities. Specifically, Chinese urban parents are involved systematically in their children's entire schooling processes at home (Section 6.1.1.1) while Chinese rural parents' involvement in their children's schooling at home is limited (Section 6.1.1.2).

#### **6.1.1.1 Chinese urban parents' systematic involvement**

The data shows that when talking about children's schooling matters, many urban parents assumed their children's education as their natural responsibility. For example,

It should be us, parents. You know, parents are children's first teachers.

What parents do has much to do with how children perform. Parents influence kids greatly, no matter in life or study. (Urban, Xiaoshuo's mother, bachelor's degree, public servant)

Most urban students also recognised that their parents were the most influential figures in their schooling.

Personally, I felt that my parents influenced me the most. Compared to my parents, I felt that others' impacts were not that strong. Mainly my parents.

(Urban, Zhao, B)



Urban parents regard themselves as their children's first teachers. This metaphor suggests that they take for granted that their children's education is their natural job. To do their 'job' well, urban parents are actively involved in their children's entire schooling processes in various but systematic ways. During the early stages, they function as their children's study buddies. As their children's study burden becomes heavier in higher grades, they offer more emotional support. When it comes to university applications, they act as logistical crew. The data shows that urban parents' roles in their children's different schooling periods might change, but it does not mean that they only assume one specific role at one certain stage. For example, they also offer emotional support when they act as logistical crew. In what follows, I will describe the most representative roles urban parents play in their children's certain schooling periods for the sake of non-redundancy.

#### **6.1.1.1.1 Urban parents as their children's study buddies**

As shown in Chapter 5, in this study, urban parents were physically present in their children's life, especially when their children were little. The data shows that this provides the precondition of their comprehensive educational involvement during their children's early school ages. Some urban parents described themselves as their children's study buddies.

During the first two years in primary school... I was like her study buddy.

That is to say, once she came back home, we reviewed what she learnt at school. They needed to be consolidated once again. I needed to know about her study status in time. I followed closely...I mainly judged what she had learnt in school. It was fine if she mastered them. If not, especially if it was

due to her carelessness, especially Maths. I, generally speaking, won't allow such cases. If she did, I let her make corrections immediately. (Urban, Xi's mother, junior college, urban schoolteacher)

Many urban parents stressed that they followed their children's study status closely especially during primary schools because they believe what formed in the beginning becomes the foundations for later study.

Actually, I thought that primary school stage was vital for a kid. These six years were very crucial. The first thing was parent's companionship. The second was the formation of the habit... Actually, our involvement was less at the later stages... We paid a lot of attention to let him form good study habits. (Urban, Hong' mother, primary school, individual business)

Many urban parents echoed Hong's mother, in which their close attentions at early stage were aimed at building their children's good study habit. To achieve this goal, urban parents' roles as study buddies have three facets: (1) supervision and instruction on their children's study status; (2) setting norms and guidance on their children's study habits; and (3) stimulating their children's study motivations.

Most urban parents can recall details relating to their children's schooling matters.

For example,

He got full marks in the first Chinese test. (Urban, Zhao's father, high school, state-owned company engineer)

Her seat was in the second row. (Urban, Li's mother, bachelor's degree, public servant)

Such examples reflect urban parents' familiarity with their children's study status. This results from the fact that urban parents closely follow their children's study status in school and at home through supervision and instruction. This is the first facet of urban parents being their children's study buddies.

Specifically, they communicate with their children about their in-school study and monitor homework at home. During daytime, students are studying in schools and it is difficult for parents to track their children's educational progress in person. Parent-children communications become the main channel for urban parents to supervise their children's in-school study indirectly. The data shows that daily conversations about schooling and routine analysis of exam papers are two recurring topics of urban parent-student communications regarding children's schooling.

In order to know her study in school, when I came back home every evening, I talked with her... I asked her about her situations every day. Her performance in classes. I listened to her recitation, her reading of what she had learnt in school. I felt this was the best way to know about her study in school. (Urban, Jing's mother, middle school, individual business)

As soon as the exam scores were released, she sat down with me. She looked at the exam papers. We analysed them together. (Urban student, Li, D)

Asking about daily schooling and exam papers are most urban parents' indirect means to supervise their children's in-school study status. Their aims are to provide appropriate instruction on their children's learning.

When my tests scores were not good, she guided me to analyse my weakness and strength. She helped me to analyse, to find mistakes... (Urban student, Yanyan, B)

Urban parent-children communications are not centred solely on parents, but on mutual interactions between parents and children. Most urban families stressed that there was harmonious cooperation between parents and children.

I was willing to tell my parents what happened in school. Sometimes, I shared with them actively. They listened carefully. We talked a lot about small topics. (Urban student, Fang, C)

Some urban students revealed the reasons behind their willingness to communicate with their parents.

It was like a habit. You knew, every day when they picked up me. I knew what they would ask. Then, I used to tell them what happened. (Urban student, Qing, D)

They knew me well. My parents' suggestions always hit the target. They can save me from puzzles. (Urban student, Dong, D)

The reasons that urban students are willing to share their study status with their

parents are evident. Firstly, urban students know their parents are there and interested in their in-school study. Through daily questions and answers, they are used to sharing. It is not a simple habit, but also a sense of entitlement (Lareau, 2003), which urban parents offer their children through their daily physical presence. Secondly, based on frequent communication, urban parents are familiar with their children's study status. As discussed in Chapter 5, most urban parents in this study are well-educated. The familiarity with their children's study status (coming from their physical presence) combined with their literacy (a representation of their cultural capital), ensures that urban parents can 'hit the target', as stated in the above examples. Verbal communication is an indirect way to supervise children's in-school study. This also occurs between rural parents and their children, but in a different way, which will be discussed in Section 6.1.1.2.

At home, it is convenient for urban parents to monitor their children's study in person. In this study, students' home study mostly consists of homework. Being physically present, urban parents keep a close eye on their children's homework. Being well-educated, they are able to instruct their children regarding homework difficulties. For example, many urban parents recalled that when students were doing homework during early ages, they would physically be there to monitor.

Once I returned home from work, he had to begin studying, like doing homework, reading books...He couldn't do other things, but to be concentrated on homework. I paid more attention to. He was good at science. He had no difficulties in science. For Chinese, I monitored his recitation. (Urban, Hong's mother, primary school, individual business)

Urban parents' physical presence makes their supervision possible. Furthermore, their supervision goes beyond just being physically present. Instead, it is flexible. For example, Hong's mother knew her son's strength (science) and weakness (Chinese) clearly. She monitored his weakness more closely. Besides supervision, when urban students encounter homework difficulties, urban parents are able to help.

At the beginning, my *pinyin* was not good. At that time, my father and mother helped me with remembering *pinyin*. I also asked my dad about Maths. (Urban student, Zi, B)

Urban parents can provide certain study instructions for their children's difficulties in homework, echoing urban parents' self-description as 'children's first teacher'. However, not all people are eligible to be teachers. If urban parents were illiterate, they would not be able to help even if they were there. In this vein, the realisation of urban parents' instructions on their children's homework is based on their physical presence and cultural capital illustrated by their educational backgrounds.

The second facet of urban parents being their children's study buddies is setting norms and providing guidance to regulate their children's study habits. Specifically, they set restricted rules on their children's learning and entertainment activities. Once their children broke the rules, urban parents guide rather than physically punish them.

My parents had strict rules for my study... From the first day in primary school, I must finish teachers' assignments on time. They wouldn't allow me

to procrastinate. They set time limits on homework, say 40 minutes. I needed to stick to time strictly. Then, I should concentrate while doing homework. After I finished homework, I could play. This was for the homework during primary school. Once the habit was formed, all became natural then. (Urban student, Zhao, B)

‘Homework first, then play’ is the most frequent norm that urban parents set to regulate their children’s study habit in this study. In terms of playing, for most urban students, they could not play as they liked. Urban parents set restrictions on their entertainment activities, mainly on TV watching and computer playing.

When she was watching TV, I wouldn’t allow her to watch anything from Japan or Korea. I allowed her to see only those things with educational meanings. For example, The Lion King. Those classic cartoons were helpful for cultivation. (Urban, Linlin’s mother, junior college, public servant)

Whatever he did, I set rules beforehand. Then he must comply with it... I set time limit for his computer playing. For example, he couldn’t play games from Mondays to Fridays, but he could search for study materials. On weekends, if he finished homework, I gave him, for example, one to two hours to play computer games. (Urban, Dong’s father, bachelor’s degree, educational council official)

Children ‘must comply with it’ is most urban parents’ ideal wish. It is common that urban students break the rules sometimes, such as leaving homework unfinished and exceeding the time limit for entertainments. In dealing with children’s off-track

behaviours, most urban parents offer guidance rather than physical sanctions.

Some urban parents use reasoning communications. Some others adopt the 'time-out'.

If I did something wrong, like staying late to play computer games, my mum cared about it very much. Quite often, she left me alone once she found out. She wanted me to reflect on my problems. Then, I should come to tell her my self-reflections, such as how to correct my wrong doings. (Urban student, Xin, A)

Instead of physical punishments, many urban parents tend to guide their children to self-reflect on their so-called 'wrong' behaviours. Almost all urban families have similar experiences on families' rules regarding studying and playing when children were little. Talking about strict family rules, few urban students showed hatred. Instead, they recognised their parents' contributions to their formation of good study habits. As Zhao described above, 'Once the habit being formed, all became natural then'. Through strict families' rules, many urban students achieve self-discipline from being disciplined by their parents.

From the very beginning, my parents built the awareness that study is first. Any playing should be put second; that I should separate play from study; I couldn't play while studying. I thought it primarily because my parents who let me have such awareness, I kept it with me all the way. You know, subconsciousness is important. Once my parents instilled such awareness into me, I took it for granted. I knew that I should study first. I knew that doing homework first is right. (Urban student, Qing, C)



The third facet of urban parents being their children's study buddies is: stimulating their children's internal study motivations.

When I was little, if I took my certificates home, my parents pasted them on walls. The entire walls were full of my certificates. It was like a ceremony each time when they were pasting these certificates. I felt very proud at that time. Once someone, such as neighbours or parents' friends came to visit, they praised me when they saw these certificates. It might be a latent encouragement. That was to say, in order to exchange their praises, I got more certificates. Haha...every child had such vanity. Thus, my scores had been good since I was little. (Urban student, Zi, B)

Many urban families talked about the use of material rewards, such as dolls, additional pocket money or children's favourite snacks, to induce their children's study motivations. Whether it is 'vanity' for material rewards or people's praise, urban children's study motivations are stimulated, as indicated by the data above.

Accompanying and supervising children's study are suggested as one effective way relating to parents' involvements in children's schooling (Castro et al., 2013). As urban parents indicate that the early stages are fundamental to later study, they pay more attention to regulating their children's study behaviours and habits during the early stages. Although most of them admitted that their involvement in their children's study becomes less with their children upgrading, the data reveals that urban parents play roles in a different way: they offer more emotional support to their children's study during middle and high schools.

### 6.1.1.1.2 Urban parents as emotional supporters to their children

Most urban parents admitted that as their children's learning became broader and deeper, they felt it was difficult to help with their homework. Additionally, some urban students went to boarding middle and high schools, reducing the frequency of parents' specific instructions. However, urban parents do not leave their children aside. With their children's study burden being heavier in middle and high schools, urban parents keep a close eye on their children's psychological status.

I felt that they didn't just focus on my study at that time. They cared more about my psychological status. Surely, every parent wanted to see their children achieved high in exams. But they preferred me to live a happy life.

Otherwise, what's the meaning to study well. (Urban student, Yanyan, B)

Several urban families' stories are similar to Yanyan's. On the one hand, urban parents expect high academic achievements from their children. On the other hand, they would not exert pressure on them. It seems to be in conflict. In fact, they are not. Urban parents continue to keep a close eye on their children's study status. At the same time, they realise that a good psychological status can benefit academic study.

I felt a good mood is the most important. Without a positive mentality, she couldn't study well. (Urban, Xi's mother, junior college, urban schoolteacher)

To keep their children's good psychological status, urban parents provide their children with emotional support in two aspects: caring about daily mental well-being and mediating *gaokao* pressure. Children's daily mental well-being is one of

urban parents' psychological concerns, including pressure from frequent exams and sense of loneliness in boarding schools.

Firstly, some urban students expressed the view that, with upgrading, subject exams became more frequent and difficult, and their study load became heavier. Thus, their main study pressure came from the fluctuations in their ranking.

At first, it was monthly tests, then weekly. We had exams every Friday. Then, the results were released on Saturdays. My rankings went up and down. You were highly tense every day. You were constantly afraid that you would go backward. (Urban student, Zi, B)

Similar descriptions of intense exam frequency and fluctuating results were heard from many students' stories regarding their study in middle and high schools. When answering how they reduced such pressure, many urban students said that their parents' emotional support was crucial.

They kept saying to me, no big deal. Almost before every test, they helped me to relax. They wouldn't give me pressure. The more important the exams, the more relaxed they wanted me to be. For example, they took a walk with me. In this way, at least, I wouldn't be mentally tense. (Urban student, Xiaoshuo, C)

Prior to exams, some urban parents help their children to relax. After exams, on the one hand, as discussed earlier, they rewarded good performance. On the other hand, if their children's exam results were unsatisfying, they verbally comforted them.

We won't push her. Contrarily, we reduced her pressure verbally...We kept close attention on her psychological status. Sometimes she felt frustrated about exam results. We resolved it immediately. We said that one single test could prove nothing. We gave her spiritual support. (Urban, Linlin's mother, junior college, public servant)

Pressure of exams is one aspect of students' daily mental burden. Urban parents are also concerned with their children's feeling of loneliness in boarding schools. During middle and high schools, some urban students lived on campus and might return home once a week or less. Children being away from home does not stop urban parents' emotional support through boarding school visiting.

Every Wednesday, parents were allowed to see kids. I went to her school every week. No exceptions. I was afraid that if I didn't go, she might feel that I didn't care about her. I won't let her have such feelings. I used that time to visit her, to deliver treats, to stay with her. I cared for her daily life. (Urban, Xi's mother, junior college, urban schoolteacher)

Some urban students study in high schools in capital cities. The long distances involved do not stop their parents' visiting.

They came every week. They were afraid I was lonely. They loved me... My parents' frequent boarding school visiting were my warm harbours among intensive tempo. (Urban student, Qing, D)

Study burdens during Chinese middle and high schools are extremely high (Hansen, 2015; Ryan, 2019). Many students in this study, urban and rural, recalled that their

daily study in boarding schools started from 6 or 7 a.m., and finished at 10 or 11 p.m. Urban parents understand that studying in a highly stressful environment might be detrimental to their children's mental health, further their study status. As Qing said, parents' frequent boarding school visiting was a harbour for her. A short talk or a home-cooked lunch might be enough to warm children's hearts.

I send lunch to school every day. I was afraid that he couldn't eat well at school. Then, I chatted with him during mealtime. I didn't want him to burn out. He felt stressful at first... He told me everything. I also did many endeavours. I have learnt child psychology. I had the certificate of psychological counsellor. I told him some methods. I gave him many suggestions. (Urban, Fang's mother, bachelor's degree, bank manager)

Fang was willing to chat with his parents. On the one hand, it resonates with the earlier presentation of urban parent-children close relationship. On the other hand, Fang's mother illustrated that the effectiveness of her emotional support resulted from her possession of institutionalised cultural capital (the certificate of psychological counsellor), although not all urban parents in this study are certificated psychological counsellors as Fang's mother is. In this sense, urban parents' physical presence and possession of cultural capital facilitate their role as emotional supporters. In addition to the emotional support to their children's daily study, urban parents also positively contribute to their children's pressure reduction regarding the *gaokao*.

Preparing for the *gaokao* is a rite of passage so normalized that it is considered the central experience of the Chinese teenager. (Naftali, 2016, p 530)

The *gaokao* might be one of the most important moments in the life of most Chinese teenagers. They had studied hard, from primary, middle till high schools, for a satisfying *gaokao* score (Ryan, 2019). Even if some urban students chose the IRE as an extra insurance, the *gaokao* is still the most basic assessment for their university admissions. It is understandable that students would be highly stressful as the *gaokao* approached. The data shows that urban parents' emotional support is also presented by reducing their children's *gaokao* pressure.

We said to him, just show yourself. It wasn't necessary that you must be what. You just showed your own level. When he felt stressed, we just said that, it didn't necessarily that you must go to A or B, other universities were also fine. (Urban, Zhao's father, high school, state-owned company engineer)

Many urban parents said that they comforted their children by saying that they would be happy for their children to study at any university. To some extent, urban parents were telling a 'white lie'. When I asked about their expectations for their children's university admissions before the *gaokao*, some named the exact university names. Some others had no specific targets. However, a similarity is that they basically expected elite universities.

Of course, I hoped he could go to A and B. (Urban, Xiaoshuo's mother, bachelor's degree, public servant)

Her father and I estimated 985 universities were the least, although we had no specific target. (Urban, Xi's mother, junior college, urban schoolteacher)

Most urban parents are self-assured about their and their children's choices of elite universities, as natural as the 'fish in water' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 127).

Their main concern is not whether to choose elite universities but which elite universities to choose. Although urban parents expect their children to be admitted to elite universities, they do not transform their hopes into pressure on their children.

I felt that their dream was that I went to A or B, but they told me that it was OK as long as I could go to a uni. Probably, they were afraid that they would give me too much pressure. (Urban student, Wen, C)

Apart from urban parents' 'white lies', they also offer a relaxing home atmosphere, helping to reduce their children's *gaokao* pressure.

I didn't mention *gaokao* at home. Once she got back home from school, just relaxed. Our whole family atmosphere was relaxing. We went to parks, took a walk after dinner. We tried to ease her mind at home. (Urban, Li's mother, bachelor's degree, public servant)

Urban parents recognise that a good mental status has a positive impact on students' performance. Some urban students also recognised their parents' contributions to their positive mentalities during the *gaokao*.

No pressure, I was quite relaxed. Even when I was sitting in the examination rooms, I felt no big deal. It might be because that my parents took it easy. They appeared more relaxed than me. Not like other parents who were like ants in hot pot. That would make us anxious. My parents never did that. Thus, I just took it as usual. (Urban, Qing, D)

Echoing existing literature examining parents' emotional support to their children's education (Lareau & Cox, 2011; Reay, 2000, 2004), this section shows Chinese urban parents' emotional support in their children's daily mental well-being and their role in reducing the *gaokao* pressure. After the release of the *gaokao* scores, the next stage is the university applications, where most urban parents function as logistical crew.

#### **6.1.1.1.3 Urban parents as logistical crew for their children's university applications**

As shown in Chapter 5, as well as the *gaokao*, a large portion of urban students in this study experienced the IRE. Thus, their university applications are divided into two steps: the IRE application and final choices of universities based on the *gaokao* and the IRE scores. Thus, urban parents' roles as logistical crew are dual: as administrative assistants for the IRE application; as counsellors on university choices.

As shown in Chapter 5, 12 out of 15 urban students experienced the IRE (nine obtained bonus points, three did not) in this study. Their stories reveal that all 12 of these urban students' parents play roles as administrative assistants to help with



their children's IRE applications, including information searching, material preparations and exam escort.

Because the IRE started in 2004, no urban parents in this study were able to relate first-hand experience. Students also had no previous experience. Prior to the formal applications, searching related information is vital in order to be familiar with the system. Many urban parents talked about their experiences in searching the IRE information through the internet.

There was a website specific to the IRE. I looked at it every day. I paid attention to all the timelines during application. I went to lectures. I also joined a lot of online chat groups. There was much shared information and many experiences. (Urban, Linlin's mother, junior college, public servant)

The internet functioned as a major source for most urban parents in searching for and gaining the IRE information. Through the internet, it is easy to gather information open to the public. Additionally, urban parents' information sources are not limited to the internet but expand to their social networks. This will be analysed in Section 6.1.2.3. Urban parents as administrative assistants for the IRE application is also exemplified by their role in online material preparations.

Those materials needed to be uploaded. It was up to me to do this. She wrote the application herself, then she sent to me. I uploaded it to the internet. Uploading was complicated. I didn't want to bother her daily study. I scanned and uploaded. (Urban, Yuan' mother, bachelor's degree, state-owned company manager)

The IRE application is through an online platform. Without exception, all 12 urban students' online applications were done by their parents, such as registrations, filling out forms, photocopying and uploading. In this sense, urban parents' roles as administrative assistants in the IRE application are achieved via the accessible internet connection and their digital literacy. On the one hand, from searching information prior to online application, the internet connection is the basic platform. On the other hand, even if there was accessible internet connection, urban parents could not help without digital literacy.

After the material review, many urban parents' roles as administrative assistants are exemplified by their roles as exam escorts during the written examinations and interviews. In this study, without exception, eligible urban students were all escorted by their parents, either mother or father or both, to Beijing for the second-round evaluations.

We went to Beijing with him because we wanted to ensure his life. We wanted him to know that we were fighting together, that we were supporting him. (Urban, Xiaoshuo's mother, bachelor's degree, public servant)

When talking about commuting between urban students' hometowns and Beijing, high speed trains and flights are the two methods of transport. Urban parents and students generally lived in Beijing for two to three days when the expenses for transport, accommodation and other living costs were all self-funded. In this sense, urban parents as exam escorts, on the one hand, represent their physical presence. On the other hand, it is supported by their possession of economic capital.

This section demonstrates that, from information searching, material preparations, until final exam escort, many urban parents act as administrative assistants in their children's IRE applications. The IRE is one part of the urban students' university application process. Before the IRE application and after the release of the *gaokao* scores, another crucial step is to choose universities. Most urban parents in this study are active in the selection process as counsellors.

Urban parents' roles as counsellors for choosing universities starts with locating expectations up until final decisions. Many urban students held that university choice was a family project rather than students' individual matter. Consulting their parents was a 'taken for granted' step for them.

Certainly, I discussed it with my family. After all, it was my whole family's thing. They gave their advice... I told them what I wanted to study. They considered which university and subject was better based on my scores.

Which was better located. It was a multilateral discussion, not my arbitrary decision. (Urban student, Qing, D)

As stated above, most urban parents' expectations on their children's university admissions were centred on elite universities. When expressing expectations, they had clear criteria, including their children's academic achievements in high schools, the advantages of elite universities and the advantages of Beijing city.

Firstly, urban parents' expectations are based on their children's academic performance. There is an intra-hierarchy within Chinese elite universities where universities A and B are the top two universities in the Double First-University Plan.

Based on children's performance in high schools, two groups of elite universities emerge from urban parents' expectations for their children: universities A and B; any other elite universities excluding A and B.

According to his ordinary performance, my goal was A or B. (Urban, Fang's mother, bachelor's degree, bank manager)

Based on her performance in high school. A and B were impossible. But a good 985 university was no problem. (Urban, Yuan's mother, bachelor's degree, state-owned company manager)

Children's academic performance is the primary criteria deciding urban parents' expectations and final decisions. It is a reflection of urban parents' familiarity with their children's study status, which results from their daily physical presence as illustrated earlier. Besides, all urban parents in this study realise that elite universities' comprehensive advantages can benefit their children's future development. The elite universities' advantages valued by most urban parents include their educational resources, academic atmosphere and employability.

Other universities' educational resources could not compare with elite universities. For example, there are first tier professor teams, a broad range of A+ subjects, dense academic atmosphere, strong cultural histories.

Besides, the students in elite universities are excellent. He will be happy to study with brilliant peers. The biggest benefit to study here is to receive a top education so that he could see further and higher. It has deeper and

longer impact on his values and worldview. (Urban, Xiaoshuo's mother, bachelor's degree, public servant)

Not all urban parents took the overall aspects into consideration when accounted for their choices of elite universities. A similarity is that most of them focus on both instrumental benefits, such as finding good jobs, social mobility and non-instrumental aspects such as children's worldviews and personalities, as indicated above. This is different from rural parents' understanding of the value of elite universities: finding a good job, which will be presented in Section 6.1.1.2.

Additionally, Beijing itself is also an attractive factor for the urban. When talking about their choices, most urban parents emphasised Beijing's advantages.

We hoped that he could study in Beijing because Beijing is better in all aspects. The platform is higher. The development space is larger...Beijing's educational resources are first choice. It has better medical resources. Beijing is the place we are longing for. (Urban, Hong's mother, primary school, individual business)

In my interpretation, locating their expected elite university destinations in Beijing represent urban parents' familiarity with Chinese HE hierarchy: the educational resources have been unequally distributed among HEIs (Hu et al., 2018; Huang, 2015), as discussed in Chapter 2. The data shows that urban parents' familiarity with Chinese HE attributes to their first-hand experience, which can be further illustrated through the proper advice they offer on their children's final university decisions.

Because I was a university graduate, certainly, I am familiar with the university system. I knew which university is better. I told her the advantages and disadvantages of different universities. (Urban, Yuan's mother, bachelor's degree, state-owned company manager)

The data shows that urban parents' advice on the choice of specific universities and subjects is critical to their children's final decisions. As stated in Chapter 5, most urban parents are well-educated. Some have first-hand experience of university study. Most of them are professionals in certain fields. Their roles as counsellors in their children's final university decisions come from their first-hand educational and occupational experiences. Therefore, urban students are able to gain insights to HE system and the employment market in China. Because they are familiar with how things work, their final decisions are oriented in the right direction with regard to their children's future (Ball, 2003).

In summary, this section presents the data detailing Chinese urban parents' systematic involvement in their children's schooling processes up until access to elite universities. This contrasts with rural families' stories, which will be presented below.

#### **6.1.1.2 Chinese rural parents' limited involvement**

As discussed in Chapter 3.3, existing studies have shown that parents with higher social status tend to undertake more beneficial home-based educational practices regarding their children's education (Arnold & Doctoroff, 2003; Sylva et al., 2008; Tudge, 2008). Chinese urban parents tend to be involved more in their children's

schooling than their rural counterparts (Chi & Rao, 2003; Kuan, 2015). Similarly, in this study, compared to urban parents who were able to list many details relating to their children's schooling matters, 'I don't know' or other similar sentences often appeared in rural parents' descriptions about their children's education. Some rural students also admitted that their parents knew little about their schooling.

My parents know nothing about my schooling. They did not even know the time of my summer and winter holidays. Each time when we had holidays, I would call my father to pick me up. If I did not, he could not know when I would go home. Our normal chatting was mainly that they told me to eat and dress well. They could only know about my studies if I told them, otherwise, they knew nothing. (Rural student, Meng, A)

The interview data shows that rural parents' involvement in their children's entire schooling process is limited in terms of concrete educational practices at home. Specifically, rural parent-children communication on schooling matters is characterised by rural parents' procedural asking without follow-up actions (Section 6.1.1.2.1); and rural parents require their children to 'Be strong yourself' in terms of emotional support (Section 6.1.1.2.2). The data shows that rural parents' deterministic educational concept and their shortage of educational confidence bar rural parent-children interaction regarding rural students' home study (Section 6.1.1.2.3).

### 6.1.1.2.1 Rural parents' procedural asking about children's schooling

As discussed above, most urban parents' home-based systematic involvement in children's in-school study status was through daily conversations with children and instructions on their study. The data shows that little detailed communication occurred between rural parents and children. The most frequent topic relating to rural children's schooling was homework. However, for rural parents this took the form of procedural asking without follow-up actions.

After I came back home from school, they asked me whether I finished the homework or not. Then I said that I did. Nothing more. After I finished my homework, they just had a look, but they never looked at it carefully. Then nothing more, we never discussed homework. (Rural student, Yang, B)

Many rural students admitted that their parents asked about their homework, but it was just 'normally procedural asking' (Rural student, Mei, C). Rural students' exam results received similar treatment. When asked what they knew about their children's study, many rural parents stressed that they focused on their children's exam scores.

We didn't ask him about his study status. I only valued scores. If he had exams, I asked him how many points he got. I just looked at scores, for others, I, haha (laughing). (Rural, Bo's mother, middle school, farmer)

As opposed to urban parents' in-depth analysis followed by study advice, rural parents' concerns on exams are focused on 'just' points. Two reasons emerge from their stories.



Firstly, for some rural parents, looking at exam scores is simple and straightforward because being busy with earning a livelihood leaves little time for detailed communication.

Because at that time, the life in the village was hard. All the energy was on work or farm work. We could only pay attention to his scores. (Rural, Ke's *ershū*, rural schoolteacher)

Secondly, numbers on exam papers are understandable for some rural parents. They can only comprehend the exam results in terms of numbers due to their low literacy.

For the exams, they simply looked at the points. They were poorly educated, they had no other competencies, like, to see why I made mistakes. Numbers were straightforward to them. (Rural student, Bin, D)

Rural parents' procedural asking, on the one hand, suggests that they tend to care about their children's schooling. On the other hand, they do not take follow-up actions because they either have no time or do not know how. Put simply, their physical absence reduces the possibility and the shortage of cultural capital (low educational levels) constrains their ability to take actions beyond procedural asking about homework and exam scores. Another aspect illustrating rural parents' limited roles in their children's education at home is their lack of emotional support.

#### **6.1.1.2.2 'Be strong yourself': Rural parents' lack of emotional support to their children**

Compared to urban students, stories of rural students' boarding school experiences during middle and high schools were much more common in this study. Boarding schools are prevalent in rural China (Hansen, 2015). Firstly, due to rural parents' physical absence, boarding schools function as students' caretakers. Secondly, living on campus saves time (Ryan, 2019). Urban students in this study accumulated advantages during their early schooling. This will be presented in Section 6.3. Facing fierce academic competition, rural students needed more time to make up for the disadvantages they experienced previously. In this vein, rural students' study pressure was no less than that of their urban counterparts. As discussed earlier, urban parents frequently visited their children in boarding schools, which was of great benefit to the students' well-being. Contrarily, when discussing rural parents' boarding school visiting, the data reveals that poor transportation limited such a possibility.

How could they come? The transportation was really inconvenient. It took great effort. No cars. Buses weren't frequent. Although it wasn't far from my school to my home, they needed to transfer twice. Why bother? (Rural student, Di, A)

Given the difficulties in commuting, rural parents tell their children to 'be strong yourself' when facing study pressure.

My parents always told me that I needed to be strong myself. They said that you are away from home. We couldn't come. You needed to take care of yourself in school. If you got sick, you just went to the doctor. If you told us, it was impossible for us to see you. That was what they told me. They let me resolve independently. Thus, I seldom talked them about my unhappiness in schools. It was no use. (Rural student, Mei, C)

Poor transportation constrains rural parents' physical presence in terms of boarding school visiting. These two factors reinforce each other, therefore, emotional support, such as comforting children's study pressure and loneliness in boarding schools, are beyond some rural parents' reach. From rural parents' perspectives, they are powerless. They have to tell their children to be strong. For rural students, they understand their parents' powerlessness. Thus, they learn to be resilient by equipping themselves with a strong will.

It might be my personality. I was used to being alone. I used to talk to myself.

My parents were not with me. My grandparents couldn't understand me. If I felt frustrated, I would try to over it by myself. (Rural student, Bin, D)

How rural students' empathetic understanding of their parents' hardships facilitate their final access to elite universities will be discussed in Section 6.2. Rural families' stories so far suggested rural parents' limited involvement in their children's schooling at home. This is partly a result of their physical absence, shortage of institutionalised cultural capital (low literacy) and inconvenient rural transportation. Furthermore, the data shows that rural parents' deterministic educational concept

and their shortage of educational confidence also constitute barriers to their involvement in their children's schooling processes. This will be illustrated below.

#### 6.1.1.2.3 '*Xuexi de liao*': rural parents' deterministic educational concept

When talking about their children's academic success, many rural parents considered rural students themselves and their schoolteachers to be the main contributors. Rural students' endeavours and their teachers' contributions will be discussed in Section 6.2. In terms of rural students' roles in their access to elite universities, many rural parents regarded their children as '*xuexi de liao*' (学习的料), representing their deterministic educational concept in this study.

In Chinese, '*xuexi*', (学习) as a noun, means learning; as a verb, means study. '*de*' is an empty word, representing belonging to. '*Liao*' (料) means raw materials. *Xuexi de liao* is a noun phrase. If someone was called *xuexi de liao*, s/he is thought to be smart and promising in study and possesses the ability to achieve academic success. Students who consistently perform badly in schoolwork would be defined as not a *xuexi de liao*. In this sense, my understanding of the literal meaning of *xuexi de liao* is 'Someone possessing the raw material in terms of study that is teachable, or they are capable of learning'. There is no official translation of *xuexi de liao* into English. After I consulted Chinese professional translators, 'born learners' is suggested. It is because in daily use, '*tiansheng de*' (born, 天生的) often goes before *xuexi de liao* to form a phrase '*tiansheng de xuexi de liao*'. In this sense, whether an individual is a *xuexi de liao* or not is inborn. Thus, it is a kind of determinism. In this study, many rural high achievers are regarded by their parents as *xuexi de liao*.

Haha... (laughing), this kid was a *xuexi de liao*. Study wasn't difficult for her. She just liked it. I couldn't tell you why she studied well. She was a *xuexi de liao*, born. She was destined to make a living from it. I never worried about her. (Rural, Meng's father, primary school, farmer)

Meng's father regards Meng as born *xuexi de liao*. However, when talking about Meng's elder brother, who is a middle school drop-out. Meng's father said that,

Her elder brother could not compare with her. His study was not as good as Meng's. How is it possible to have two such good students in one family! Haha...(laughing). In our whole county, there were only one or two excellent students going to university each year. (Rural, Meng's father, primary school, farmer)

In my interpretation, what Meng's father said indicates that he believes that rural students' academic intelligence is inborn rather than being nurtured by parents.

Apart from this, some rural parents spot their children as *xuexi de liao* through the early display of potential in their studies.

Before she went to school, she could remember phone numbers in her mind clearly just seeing several times. I thought at that time she should be a *xuexi de liao*. (Rural, Min's father, middle school, farmer)

In rural parents' minds, *xuexi de liao* are special people. Thus, once a *xuexi de liao* is spotted, it could possibly raise rural parents' expectations of their children's academic futures.

At the very beginning, they didn't care about whether I studied well or not. When I was in the third grade, I became the No. 1 in my class for the first time. Then, they thought I might be a *xuexi de liao* and I might be able to go to university. After that, they began to have expectations of me. (Rural student, Yang, B)

*Xuexi de liao* indicates that rural parents tend to believe that their children's intrinsic intelligence determines their academic achievements. In some cases, such a deterministic educational concept blinds rural parents to the necessity of parental involvement: in other words, now that their children's academic destiny is determined, there is no need for any more external influence.

Other rural parents wait for their child's natural academic potential to appear rather than actively encouraging it themselves. However, 'ability or potential is itself the product of an investment of time and cultural capital.' (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 244). For example, Yang's potential to be a university graduate was spotted by his parents through his good scores in one exam. After that, his parents began to have certain expectations regarding his study. However, rural parents are mostly absent from their children's life in this study, which might reduce the likelihood for a rural *xuexi de liao* to be spotted. In addition to rural parents' deterministic education concept, their shortage of educational confidence also constrains their involvement in their children's schooling at home.

#### 6.1.1.2.4 Rural parents' shortage of educational confidence in themselves

Some inconsistencies exist between rural parents' and students' descriptions about rural parents' roles in this study. Sometimes, rural students' testimony was contradicted by their parents. For example, Xiang talked about her parents' supervision of her study and entertainment activities at home.

They urged me to do homework, recite and review. They strictly controlled my entertainment time... For example, if I watched two hours' TV on weekends. They kept saying that don't watch anymore. Go to room quickly.

(Rural student, Xiang, B)

However, Xiang's father thought,

It all relied on herself. I was only the third grade. Her mother never went to school. How could we help her! Haha (laughing), we did nothing. She was self-disciplined. (Rural, Xiang's father, primary school, farmer [migrant worker])

Xiang talked about her parents' urge and supervision at home. Her father said Xiang was self-disciplined and they did nothing. The data reveals that rural students in this study are indeed self-disciplined. This will be explained in Section 6.2. What is worth noting are the inconsistencies between rural students' and their parents' accounts. Similar inconsistencies appear in some rural parents' own stories.

What did we do? Nothing. We were farmers. We didn't know how to educate him. We just told him at home that he needed to concentrate in

classes, then play well after classes. We didn't know education. We did nothing. (Rural, Bo's mother, middle school, farmer)

We are farmers. We couldn't help him. I just told him often to study hard.

They were all your fortune in the future. (Rural, Bin' mother, middle school, farmer [migrant worker])

The above examples show that some rural parents did take certain forms of action. For example, 'I told him/her...'. However, they did not realise them. One reason might be that they did not take verbal actions purposely. Another explanation can be identified from their answers.

Expressions, such as 'we were farmers', 'we did not know about education', 'we were almost illiterate' alike, appeared frequently in rural parents' storytelling. It is normal that parents regard their occupational status and general social positions as representations of their ability (Sennet & Cobb, 1972). Rural parents do not believe they are able to help with children's schooling because they are farmers and poorly educated. Put differently, they lack educational confidence in themselves. Even rural parents who are schoolteachers lack the confidence to teach their children because their educational level is still not high. This will be presented in Section 6.3. This is similar to some existing studies which regard parents' level of confidence as a qualitative dimension of cultural capital (Lareau, 2000; Reay, 1998, 2004).

As Chinese scholars point out, there has been rural inferiority in contemporary China. Rural culture lost its confidence. People in rural areas have also lost their self-confidence. People cannot see the value of rural communities, and rural people



cannot see value in themselves (Zhang, 2013). Not only do rural parents not believe in themselves, but their children also lack confidence in their parents.

My parents? Haha (laughing)... They were almost illiterate. How could they educate me? I could educate them. Haha (laughing)... (Rural student, Bin, D)

This is just Bin's joke. He did not show disrespect towards his parents during our conversation; however, sentences, such as, 'they were farmers', 'they did not receive much education' and 'they did not know', echo other rural students' comments on their parents' educational competence. Therefore, sometimes it is not rural parents who refuse to take action, but rural students who decline their parents' attempts to become involved in their study at home.

He studied in his room. If we went into his room, he said, you could go out, I am studying. If he had difficulties, he wouldn't ask us. It was useless to ask. Sometimes we asked him. He said that you don't know. It was useless for you to worry. (Rural, Xiaojian's mother, high school, individual business)

I had never told them about my study. I only listened to them talking about family affairs. I roughly introduced my status in school. I wouldn't say deep. They did care. They would ask. But I knew that they didn't know how to care. They didn't know what to do. (Rural student, Ke, C)

Trust is a crucial component in a relationship, and can lubricate cooperation (Putnam, 2000). In this study, urban parents are self-trusted. Urban students also trust their parents. Thus, there is a mutual willingness to cooperate. From rural

parents' perspectives, they lack self-confidence. They think 'I do not know about education'. They are afraid to make mistakes. This constrains their active involvement. For rural students, they lack confidence in their parents. They think 'they do not know about education'. Therefore, in my interpretation, children's refusal of parents' involvement reduces rural parents' enthusiasm to some degree. Rural parents' shortage of educational confidence is also detrimental to their roles in children's education outside families, especially in terms of parent-teacher interaction. This will be discussed in Section 6.1.2.

In summary, this section presents how Chinese urban and rural parents play their roles within families in their children's access to elite universities. The data illustrates urban parents' systematic and rural parents' limited involvement in their children's schooling at home. On the one hand, it resonates with the existing studies on differentiated parents' roles in their children's studies among different social groups (See Chapter 3.3). On the other hand, it elicits the causes behind urban and rural parents' differentiated involvement in their children's schooling at home. Urban parents' possession of capital facilitates their roles while rural parents face capital shortage and are constrained by the *hukou* system. At the same time, some rural parents' educational practices at home are not recognised by themselves and their children, which will be discussed more in Section 6.2. Having presented the data regarding Chinese urban and rural parents' roles in their children's education within families, it now turns to their roles outside families.

### **6.1.2 Chinese urban and rural parents' roles outside families**

As discussed in Chapter 3.1.4, in terms of parents' roles in their children's education outside families, parents interact with various individuals for the benefit of their children's education, such as with teachers (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; Epstein, 2001), other parents (Coleman, 2000), and individuals in their social network (Israel et al., 2001; Kim et al., 2017). The data indicates that Chinese urban and rural parents play differentiated roles in their children's access to elite universities outside families through interactions with teachers (Section 6.1.2.1), other parents (Section 6.1.2.2), and individuals in their own social networks (Section 6.1.2.3).

#### **6.1.2.1 Connectiveness versus Distance: Chinese urban and rural parent-teacher interactions**

Parent-teacher effective cooperation can benefit children's schooling (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; Epstein, 2001; Lareau, 2003). However, parent-teacher relationships regarding children's education present differences based on parents' social status (Barg, 2019; Lareau & Weininger, 2003; Reay, 2002). Similarly, the data in this study shows that there is connectiveness between urban parents and teachers, while a distance exists between rural parents and teachers.

##### **6.1.2.1.1 Connectiveness: Urban parent-teacher relationship**

Connectiveness (Lareau, 2000) is a characteristic of most urban parent-teacher relationship in this study: most urban parents try to influence their children's schooling experiences by connecting with teachers. They said that they

communicated with schoolteachers frequently and regularly, either face-to-face or through mobile phones and online platforms.

Basically, I actively contacted her teachers once a month. There were so many parents. You couldn't wait for teachers to call you. I made face-to-face appointments with her teachers. If they didn't have time, we chatted via phone. If they said I could come, I went to school. (Urban, Linlin's mother, junior college, public servant)

To stay connected with their children's teachers, most urban parents take varied initiatives on different occasions. Daily physical presence, residential convenience and economic capital facilitate some urban parent-teacher face-to-face communications. Mobile phones and social media make distant interaction possible.

In terms of face-to-face interaction, some urban parents believe that the daily delivery of children to school is a good time to communicate with teachers.

For most cases, I communicated with his teachers when I sent and picked him up. I entered into the classroom to talk with his teacher face-to-face. (Urban, Zhao's father, high school, state-owned company engineer)

Secondly, some urban parents agree that attending parent meetings is a good chance to talk with teachers.

They held parent meetings every term. Each time, I stayed to talk with teachers in private afterwards. I asked her study status recently...The

teachers offered advice. (Urban, Xi's mother, junior college, urban schoolteacher)

Most urban parents talked about occasions when they delivered their children to schools and took part in parent meetings, which reflects their daily presence in their children's schooling. Additionally, some urban parents bought apartments in school district in order to aid their children's admission to desirable schools. This will be presented in Section 6.4. The advantages of living in school districts are evident in terms of parent-teacher interaction.

I thought living near to school was an advantage. Because we lived near to school, we often met teachers in the street, then we would chat. (Urban, Yuan's mother, bachelor's degree, state-owned company manager)

Not all urban families bought high rate apartments in school districts. Without residential convenience, some urban parents had dinner with schoolteachers or gave them presents at certain points.

He (father) kept in close contact with my teachers. For example, he treated my teachers every semester or term. They chatted during meals. Of course, it was beyond just chatting. He wanted the teacher to have special attention on me. Sometimes, he gave them red pockets<sup>7</sup>. For example, if I was weak on certain subjects, or some teachers were influential, he gave them red pockets. Due to these red pockets, I got special attention from time to time.

For example, I was just sitting there while the teachers were standing in the

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<sup>7</sup> A red pocket is normally a red envelope containing money

front, they would come and ask, do you have any questions? (Urban student, Dong, D)

Another urban mother (Linlin's mother) recalled that she gave her daughter's teacher a set of cosmetics in return for more attention. Either through buying school district residency or material temptation, urban parents' possession of economic capital plays a role.

Face-to-face parent-teacher interactions are not accessible to every urban family in this study. Under such conditions, mobile phones and online social media make distant communication possible. Many urban families said that urban parents knew schoolteachers phone numbers, and that parents and teacher were connected through WeChat.

They followed each other on WeChat. If my parents had some questions, they just sent my teachers a message. There was also a chat group. All parents were in this group. The teacher shared information there. It was quite convenient. Also, they knew all of my teachers' numbers. From time to time, they called my teachers to ask my situations. (Urban, Qing, D)

To call teachers, urban parents should know teachers' numbers. To interact through social media, an internet connection and digital literacy are needed. In this vein, urban parents' familiarity with children's schooling through physical presence and their possession of internet resources and literacy (cultural capital) provide the possibility for distant parent-teacher interactions.

Whether it's through face-to-face or distant interaction, urban parents' initiatives in parent-teacher relationship are not without intentions. Instead, they aim to influence their children's schooling experiences. Two functions emerge from the data regarding urban parent-teacher interactions: creating tripartite cooperation; meeting students' individual learning needs.

The data shows that one aim of urban parents' initiatives to connect with schoolteachers is to obtain information on children's in-school study status. It creates tripartite cooperation among teacher, parent and student. Many urban parents recalled that a large portion of their communication with teachers was about children's school performance, good or bad.

I contacted his class teachers every week. I asked about his performance in classes or other things. (Urban, Dong's father, bachelor's degree, educational council official)

Through teachers' feedback, urban parents are informed of their children's study status, from which they create tripartite cooperation among teacher, parent and student.

My parents often went to my teachers. They talked about my homework, my status in class, whether I was active in answering questions. Afterwards, they talked with me. For example, if I didn't finish my homework well, they criticised me. If I performed well, they praised me. (Urban student, Xin, A)

Through teachers' feedback, most urban parents' information about their children's in-school study status is updated, which further guides their actions in parent-

children interactions at home. Thus, urban students flexibly adjust their study, such as correcting mistakes and being motivated for further good performances.

Teacher-parent-student cooperation is evident.

The creation of tripartite cooperation can be regarded as urban parents' positive support to teachers' school teaching. Being supportive does not mean being obedient. Instead, for the sake of their children's individual learning needs, they are assertive and demanding. Some urban parents talked about doubtful enquiries and customised requests to schoolteachers in parent-teacher communications.

It was the third year in middle school. My exam results weren't good. Then my mum went to query our vice principal. She said, how did you teach the kid? How did you put the kid into such a situation? What's wrong with your teaching? She asked my teachers to pay more attention to me, to give me more individualised instructions. (Urban student, Xiaoshuo, C)

Xiaoshuo's mother further explained why she was so assertive.

Haha (laughing)... It was mainly because she was my old classmate. It was like friends' normal conversations. I thought if I hadn't been an old classmate, my tone would be softer. (Urban, Xiaoshuo's mother, bachelor's degree, public servant)

On the one hand, it was the similar identity as a former classmate that gave Xiaoshuo's mother the confidence and courage to doubt the teacher's teaching quality and request individual instructions. On the other hand, 'if I hadn't been an



old classmate, my tone would be softer' indicates that even if they had not been acquaintances, she would still intervene. Other urban families' stories echoed this.

She (Xi) told me that her teacher was keen on chatting with her and added stress on her after each test. I felt that this kid had suffered grievance. Thus, immediately, her dad and I called her class teacher. We had a face-to-face appointment with her class teacher. Our theme was that she shouldn't give Xi pressure anymore. Otherwise, it wasn't good for her...Really. I knew my child best. I knew what was best for her. Teachers' style won't necessarily fit every student. (Urban, Xi's mother, junior college, urban schoolteacher)

Urban families' stories show that for the sake of children's individual learning needs, urban parents are assertive and demanding towards teachers. This is similar to privileged parents in other national contexts. For example, Reay (2002) holds that, in the UK, middle-class parents, especially mothers with a successful education, are sufficiently confident and self-assured in intervening in their children's schooling. Similarly, most urban parents in this study are well-educated. This echoes what has been discussed in Chapter 3 that although researchers adopt various indicators to measure parents' social status, there is a similar pattern relating to the educational disparities.

Furthermore, 'I knew my child' indicates urban parents' familiarity with their children's education, which stems from their daily physical presence. They are entitled and confident enough to require customised teaching from teachers. Additionally, some urban parents' equal social identity with educational personnel, such as being the classmate of a vice principal, also acts as a factor in strengthening

their assertiveness. This section presents data relating to connectiveness between urban parents and teachers in urban students' schooling processes. Contrarily, there is distance between rural parents and teachers, which will be illustrated below.

#### **6.1.2.1.2 Distance: Rural parent-teacher relationship**

The data indicates that there is distance between rural parents and teachers regarding their children's education. The few rural parent-teacher interactions are either initiated by teachers while rural parents are passive or through personal connections in rural communities. Rural parents face barriers to stay connected with their children's teachers.

Few rural parents talked about active contact with their children's schoolteachers in this study. Instead, the data shows that most rural parents wait to be informed by teachers.

Every weekend, his teachers informed us of school finishing time...

Sometimes, we went to school to pick him up, but we left directly. We never had interactions with his teachers. His teachers were responsible. After each exam, his teachers texted us about his performance. We could know him in this way. (Rural, Bo's mother, middle school, farmer)

Unlike urban parents' initiatives in parent-teacher interactions, it is schoolteachers who take the first step in most rural parent-teacher relationships. Even on the occasions where rural parents can take the initiative, they do not seize the chance.

No, I wouldn't stay to talk to his teachers (after parent meetings finished).

His scores were always high. His teachers praised him. Why should I stay?

Only bad students' parents would be asked to stay. Teachers blamed them. I

never was blamed. (Rural, Yang's father, middle school, rural schoolteacher)

Through rural parents' descriptions, their children's high scores in exams are the reasons that they do not have to take further action in staying connected to their teachers. Rural students' self-endeavour will be presented in Section 6.2.2.

However, compared with urban parents who create tripartite cooperation among teacher, parent and student even if their children performed well, their passiveness is evident.

As opposed to waiting for teachers to take the initiative, some rural parents talked about daily interactions with their children's teachers, who are basically village neighbours or even extended family members.

My *saozi* (cousin's wife) was my Maths teacher. We were very close relatives. We had the same *yeye*. She sometimes told my parents about my in-school study. (Rural student, Wan, C)

Few urban teachers are willing to teach in rural schools in China. Chinese rural schoolteachers are mostly local residents (Liu, 2014; Peng, 2015; Ryan, 2019). This is also evident from parents' profiles in this study. For example, three rural parents work as rural schoolteachers (Wan's parents; Yang's father; Ke's *ershu*). Rural extended families tend to live in the same or nearby villages in this study. This will be presented in Section 6.4. To some extent, living in the same rural communities

can offer the same residential convenience as living in urban school districts. However, unlike urban parents who made the best of this convenience, rural parents admitted that they seldom asked for schooling information from their children's teachers.

It was just like normal chatting with others. Did you eat? How was this? How was that? I wouldn't purposely ask them about her schooling. If something happened, her teachers would tell me. I didn't have to ask. (Rural, Min's father, middle school, farmer [migrant worker])

Apart from being passive in terms of being informed by their children's teachers, rural parents tend to leave their children's education to schoolteachers completely.

He relied on his teachers totally in terms of study. I had no worries. I believed in his teachers. His teachers worried him more than us. His school took care of him well. (Rural, Bin's mother, primary school, farmer [migrant worker])

Many rural parents think highly of their children's schoolteachers. They consider teachers as responsible, which frees them worrying about their children's schooling. 'Teachers will tell me if something happened, there was no need to ask' is most rural parents' attitudes towards parent-teacher relationships. Teachers' contributions are acknowledged in terms of rural students' access to elite universities. This will be further explained in Section 6.2. Appreciations towards teachers also appear in some urban families' stories. For example,

Of course, her teachers also had contributions. They taught well, thus she could make improvements. (Urban, Yuan's mother, bachelor's degree, state-owned company manager)

However, one difference between urban and rural families' stories is that urban teachers' contributions do not replace urban parents' systematic involvement, as shown in Section 6.1.1.1. Contrarily, rural parents keep their distance from schoolteachers. 'Teachers were expert. Shouldn't I believe them?' (Rural, Bo's mother, middle school, farmer) is one reason that they tend to leave their children's education to teachers. The rural families' stories indicate that there are varied barriers leading to the distance between rural parents and teachers, including rural parents' lack of confidence and material conditions.

As discussed in Section 6.1.1.2, rural parents' low occupational and educational level give them a sense of inferiority regarding their children's education. They lack confidence in their own educational competence. In terms of parent-teacher relationships, they tend to believe that education is the teachers' sole expertise, which partly causes rural parent-teacher distance.

Parents couldn't help him. It was his teachers who could help him most. He studied well because teachers taught well. I always told him that you should listen to your teachers. They knew everything. You just went to them if you have questions. (Rural, Di's mother, middle school, farmer [migrant worker])

'I did not know' is most rural parent's evaluation of their own educational incompetence. They are afraid of making mistakes in relation to their children's

schooling (Lareau, 2003). Contrarily, 'they knew everything' is rural parent's evaluation of teachers' educational expertise. Expressions, such as 'believe teachers', 'listen to teachers', 'thank teachers', appeared often in rural parents' stories. This sense of inferiority affects rural parents' confidence in intervening in their children's in-school study. Instead, they trust knowledgeable teachers. They think that parents just support children's lives while teachers educate children. It is not just rural parents who think highly of schoolteachers; so do many rural students.

It was my teachers who helped most with my study. Now I felt that my parents had no concrete instructions on my study, because they didn't know. My teachers helped me the most. They took care of me well. I went to them if I had any troubles. It wasn't just limited to study. It included lives, mentality. No matter what troubles I met, I went to my teachers. (Rural student, Mei, C)

Most rural parents regard children's schooling as teachers' expertise because they do not believe in self-competence. 'Go to your teachers. I did not know' is their message passed to their children. Gradually, rural students understand that it is their teachers rather than their parents whom they should and could turn to. Apart from this, the shortage of material conditions also barred rural parent-teacher interactions.

For urban parents, the most desirable mode in which to communicate with children's teachers is face-to-face. However, rural parents' physical absence makes in-person communication with teachers impossible.

My mother wasn't at home till my high school. It was impossible for her to see my teachers. (Rural student, Mei, C)

Except for face-to-face communications, distant communications are also beyond some rural parents' reach due to the lack of mobile phones and internet connections.

We had no mobile phones in primary and middle schools. We seldom used phones even in middle school. We never thought that. We didn't have WeChat to have chat like we do now. None. (Rural, Bin's mother, primary school, farmer [migrant worker])

It might be difficult for rural parents to call teachers when they do not have mobile devices. However, some rural parents said that they did not call teachers because they did not have teachers' phone numbers, a result of their physical absence. This contrasts with urban parents' connectiveness with teachers based on their physical presence. In this vein, rural parents' physical presence and material shortages intertwine with each other, as another cause of rural parent-teacher distance.

In summary, this section presents data relating to Chinese urban and rural parent-teacher interaction regarding their children's schooling processes. It resonates with the previous studies showing that parent-teacher relationships regarding children's education present differences based on parents' social status (Barg, 2019; Lareau & Weininger, 2003; Reay, 2002). A similar pattern appears in Chinese urban and rural parent-parent interactions, which will be illustrated below.

### 6.1.2.2 Intergenerational closure versus Separateness: Chinese urban and rural parent-parent interactions

As discussed in Chapter 3.1.1, parent-parent relationships are constructed as 'intergenerational closure' by Coleman (2000, p. 27) to illustrate that parents know the parents of their children's friends. Similarly, the data shows that intergenerational closure exists among Chinese urban parents which brings varied positive influences and benefits relating to urban students' schooling. Contrarily, there is separateness (Lareau, 2000) among Chinese rural parents. The few interactions among rural parents seldom benefit rural students' schooling.

For example, it is common for urban parents keep contacts with other parents.

I had kept contact with his classmates' parents. Primary school, middle school, high school. I kept contact with all of them. (Urban, Hong's mother, primary school, individual business)

Similar to urban parent-teacher relationships, the data shows two supportive conditions for urban parent-parent interactions: urban parents' physical presence; urban parents' membership of residential communities and workplaces.

Firstly, urban parents' physical presence in their children's schooling in varied instances provides them with opportunities to communicate with other parents.

This is similar to the urban parent-teacher interactions in the last section. The instances mentioned by urban families mainly include daily delivery, boarding school visiting and school-organised activities. Additionally, intergenerational



closure is also a reflection of urban parents' memberships of residential communities and workplaces.

Some urban parents purposely buy expensive apartments in school districts. It is possible that children in the same neighbourhood study in the same school. Several urban students said that they were neighbours with their schoolmates, which was convenient for parents' interactions. Such convenience is supported by urban families' affordability of expensive apartments in school districts. Apart from this, some urban parent-parent interactions are through workplaces.

Some of them were my father's workmates. They were all public servants. They had interactions with my father in the office. Naturally, during free chatting, they talked about children's schooling. (Urban student, Xi, C)

Membership of a particular social group is a 'credential', giving entitled credits to group members (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 249). Notably, such membership is restricted according to group members' social status (Bourdieu, 1986; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). Intergenerational closure among urban parents reflects urban parents' membership of residential communities or workplaces which are insular and exclusive to people sharing homogeneous identities (Putnam, 2000), such as the similar affordability of apartments in school districts and similar occupational type.

The existence of intergenerational closure provides a quantity of social capital available to each parent in raising his (her) children – not only in matters related to school but in other matters as well. (Coleman, 1988, p. 107)

Intergenerational closure among urban parents plays two functions in their children's schooling processes: creating a positive environment; bringing mutual benefits. Firstly, the data shows that urban parenting styles influence each other gradually, creating a positive environment. Some urban parents talked about collective influences from communities. Some others talked about influences from individuals.

My colleagues are all living in the same community. Our children go to the same school...We all have a good family environment. The overall environment, say, about our children's education is good in our district.  
(Urban, Xiaoshuo's mother, bachelor's degree, public servant)

Coleman (1988) claims that within intergenerational closure, certain norms would be effectively shared and maintained. Norms define whether certain actions are acceptable or not, and 'facilitate and constrain actions' (p. 105). Urban communities' positive environment regarding children's education facilitate urban parents' active involvement, as the data in Section 6.1.1.1. shows. Within a positive environment, individual influence is also evident. Some urban parents admitted that they learnt positive and negative lessons from other parents.

One of his (Hong) classmates, whose mother was a teacher. We lived near. I knew that she resigned to be a study buddy totally. I knew this mother since Hong's first grade. I was enlightened by what she did. I felt that I should give Hong (pause), like study instructions, monitoring his homework. All these aspects. I shouldn't let him learn whatever he liked. I strictly supervised all

Hong's aspects since his first grade. (Urban, Hong's mother, primary school, individual business)

One of my neighbour's children went to the key class in key school since primary school. Internet connection wasn't allowed at their home. When s/he was in high school, S/he refused to enter school. S/he refused study due to too much stress. S/he was rebellious. Later, they found a psychological teacher to help with him/her. I saw this situation, certainly, I wouldn't give my daughter pressure. (Urban, Li's mother, bachelor's degree, public servant)

In addition to the collectively positive environment and individual influences, there are some mutual benefits brought by urban intergenerational closure. Many urban parents mentioned that sharing resources was typical among parents. Resources shared among urban parents are basically study materials and experiences.

Aunt Chang and I were colleagues. We often shared children's study experiences with each other. I was impressed that, at that time, Fang hadn't attended Olympic Maths. She told me that we should attend, and what kinds of books we should read. She recommended many books. Her child did like these. Fang followed her... He [Fang] performed excellently in the entrance exam. His school recommended him to No.1 school. This helped his study greatly. I thanked Aunt Chang very much. (Urban, Fang' mother, bachelor's degree, bank manager)

Intergenerational closure exists in urban parent-parent interactions. This is mainly

based on urban parents' physical presence and their memberships of residential communities and workplaces. Contrarily, separateness exists in rural parent-parent interactions.

Specifically, some rural parents do not know other parents. Some others know other parents, but their interactions seldom benefit rural students' education. For rural migrant workers, there is little communication with other parents due to their physical absence. For rural parents who are village farmers, some admitted that they knew other parents.

We lived nearby. We knew each other. We greeted each other in the streets.

(Rural, Yang's father, middle school, rural schoolteacher)

Most rural students studied in the village or county level primary and middle schools in this study. Most of their classmates were also from their village neighbourhoods or lived in the nearby villages. Naturally, some rural parents are familiar with each other. In this sense, there are many daily opportunities for rural parents' interaction. However, rather than bringing benefits to students' schooling, communications between rural parents are more about daily courtesy.

Basically, other parents would praise me. I felt that my families would be modest. Others said, oh! Look at your kid, how good her scores are, something like that. (Rural student, Meng, A)

The rural students in this study are high academic achievers. They are often considered as positive role models in other parents' eyes. In this sense, rural students are the givers, and had gained little academic benefit through rural

parent-parent interactions.

This section presents the data regarding urban and rural parent-parent interactions regarding their children's schooling processes, which echoes the existing literature that parent-parent relationships are differentiated among different social groups (Geven & van de Werfhorst, 2020; Lareau, 2000). The next section will deal with parents' use of *guanxi* in their children's access to Chinese elite universities.

### **6.1.2.3 Chinese urban and rural parents' use of *guanxi***

As discussed in Chapter 3.1, social capital in this study is regarded as a resource embedded in *guanxi* (interpersonal relationships) in a Chinese context. Parents can make the best of their social capital in order to contribute to their children's education (Coleman, 1988). However, it depends on parents' social status and the social status of the participants in parents' social networks (Bourdieu, 1985, 1987). The data shows that, due to Chinese urban and rural parents' differentiated social status, individuals in their own social networks (*guanxi*) present different traits regarding their social positions. The forms of social capital existing in urban and rural parents' *guanxi* are different. Thus, their use of *guanxi* for their children's schooling produce different results.

#### **6.1.2.3.1 As bridges: Urban parents' use of *guanxi***

The data shows that many urban parents have *guanxi* with persons in the educational domain. Urban parents, as bridges, link their children with these people, who are able to bring urban students educational advantages. This includes better

educational opportunities, accessible and timely information and first-hand experiences.

Firstly, many urban parents said that they used their *guanxi* with others in their social networks to create better educational opportunities for their children, including admission to the best schools and special attention from teachers. Not all urban parents were satisfied with the officially allocated schools. This will be presented in Section 6.4. Instead, they used different strategies to enrol their children to key schools. Some urban parents' use of *guanxi* played a vital role in their children's school admissions to key schools. For example, when asked how she came to be admitted to a primary school outside her assigned school district, Yuan said,

It was due to my father's *guanxi*. My father knew the vice principal. Every principal had certain quota. He was my *ganba* (god father, 干爹). He let me go to that school as the transient student. (Urban student, Yuan, D)

Several urban students told the similar stories to Yuan. In these cases, their parents know people who work in educational circles. Through their parents, who act as bridges, urban students are connected with their parents' friends. They become the beneficiaries of linking social capital. 'Linking social capital pertains to connections with people in power, whether they are in politically or financially influential positions' (Woolcock & Sweetser, 2002, p. 26). For example, the vice principal (father's friend) and the student (Yuan) were in a hierarchical power relationship in a school context. Yuan's connection with people in power (vice principal) was

realised through her father. Yuan's connections with the vice principal created linking social capital, which expanded her possession of better educational resources: the chance to study in desirable schools. The latent meanings behind such stories reflect that people in urban parents' social networks own a certain power regarding education.

Additionally, some urban parents know certain powerful persons through certain intermediary parties. This also plays a considerable role in their children's school admissions.

For example, I was studying in this school at first, how could I go to that school directly? It was certainly through some *guanxi*. It was my dad. They were all in the educational circle. He was not very powerful in the educational circle, but he knew a lot of people in other schools. What was more, he kept in contact with his classmates in teachers' college... One is the school principal. My dad contacted his classmate, the principal. Then the principal contacted the educational council. The educational council contacted the principal in another school. That was how they get me in.

(Urban student, Dong, D)

The above quotation illustrates the activation of bridging social capital and linking social capital in *guanxi*. Bridging social capital links the distant ties of similar persons (Woolcock, 1998; Putnam, 2000). For example, Dong's father and his classmates in teachers' college might not be in daily contact with each other, but their social positions are similar as educators. Bridging social capital existing in their *guanxi*. Also, Dong stated that his father was not powerful in educational circles,

but his father's acquaintances or friends knew powerful persons. Urban parents' old friends link them with people of a higher social status. These powerful persons become parents' friends' friends, where linking social capital brings benefits to children's school admissions.

After admission to desirable schools, urban parents continue to act as bridges to help their children get ahead in school. One recurring way is through gaining teachers' special attention. Oversized classes are normal in Chinese schools. For example, in some schools, nearly 100 students study in one classroom (Tao & Lu, 2011). The studying space per student is less than one or two square metres (Zeng & Lv, 2013). It is difficult for teachers to pay adequate attention to every student. Academic chances, such as competitions and extra-curricular activities, are limited. In this sense, a teacher's special attention is a precious educational resource. Teachers' instruction in class is more generalised. However, through 'special attention', urban students can obtain more 'individualised' education.

One of my father's friends taught in my school. He didn't teach my class. But he helped my ancient poems in private. I wasn't good at Chinese. My parents asked him to teach me ancient poems. They were friends. Surely, it is free. My Chinese teacher was in the same office as him/her. S/he might know our relationship, thus, they taught me together how to recite. It was more efficient than just listening in class. I improved a lot. (Urban student, Qing, D)

Aside from the connectiveness between urban parents and teachers discussed in the last section, many urban parents in this study also have *guanxi* with their



children's schoolteachers: they are friends. These teachers, to some degree, have the power to offer their friends' children (urban students in this study) more attention and better treatment. It is not clear whether urban teachers treat the whole class the same way. However, this reflects urban parents' role as bridges linking their children with 'powerful' teachers.

The second dimension in the data relating to the educational benefits brought by urban parents' role as bridges is the availability of accessible and timely information regarding their children's education. It is common that urban children might not be able to access precious information without the help of individuals in urban parents' social networks.

My father knew vice principal Zhang in No. 1 school. He gave me a lot of help in school. Because he was responsible for teaching matters in school. He knew which prize was the most important for the IRE. The most influential one was a science competition. He told me about it. Otherwise, I didn't know it at all. I got a prize in this competition. Thus, I was eligible to the IRE. Without this, I wasn't able to attend the IRE. (Urban student, Yuan, D)

Yuan's story indicates that accessible information played a crucial role in her IRE. Urban students are connected with individuals in their parents' social networks by their parents as bridges. In this way, urban students are able to access information otherwise not available. It eliminates possibilities, filters out unrealistic aspirations and narrows down career choices (Ball, 2003, p. 85). Additionally, during daily

schooling, educators in some urban parents' social networks bring instant feedback on children's study performance.

He (mother's friend teaching in school) was the message deliverer. He sent my mum my exam results immediately. (Urban student, Xiaoshuo, C)

Instant feedback can give urban parents and students more time to formulate responses to their children's daily performance, which contributes to urban parent-student interactions at home. At crucial moments, timely information is vital.

My mum asked my father's classmate about my IRE results. This person was an educator in Beijing. S/he might know the admission persons. They said that I got the bonus points. But s/he didn't take actions before the results being released. The advantage of using *guanxi* was to know the results earlier than others. I didn't need to worry for a long time. (Urban student, Li, D)

One can imagine the anxiety of waiting for exam results, especially for the IRE or the *gaokao*. The earlier they know the results, the less psychological pressure they suffer from. Furthermore, knowing the results earlier allows urban students to prepare their university applications in advance. In addition to educational opportunities and information, some urban students obtain first-hand experience during preparations for university applications from certain individuals in their parents' social networks.

As shown previously, many urban students' university applications consist of preparations for the IRE and the choice of universities. During the whole process,

although some urban parents do not have *guanxi* with powerful individuals in the educational domain, certain people in urban parents' social networks can provide urban students related first-hand experiences.

We didn't know much about the IRE...My colleague's child knew a lot. She performed well last year. We went to her. Through her, we got to know much about the IRE. She told us that you must be active during summer school. You needed to participate in universities' summer camp to finish the tasks seriously...These experiences were helpful for her (Linlin) IRE. (Urban, Linlin's mother, junior college, public servant)

One of my father's workmates, his son was in B uni. He was a PhD in B. He knew this university well. I got to know about B from him. I got the university's situations completely from him. (Urban student, Zi, B)

Many urban students mentioned that children of their parents' friends or colleagues offered them first-hand experience relating to university applications. Without their parents, they might not be connected with these strangers. In this vein, urban parents' role as bridges is evident.

In this study, many urban parents' *guanxi* are expanded, including with powerful educational persons or individuals with first-hand educational experience. As bridges, urban parents bring their children into their own *guanxi*. In this way, their children, the 'possessors of inherited social capital', do not need to 'make the acquaintance' of all their 'acquaintances'; they are known to more people than they know' (Bourdieu, 1986, pp. 250-251). This social capital, which is activated through

urban parents' use of *guanxi*, benefits urban students' enjoyment of better educational resources. Contrarily, most rural parents' *guanxi* in this study is narrowed. Rural parents' activation of social capital existing in *guanxi* regarding their children's education is minimal. This will be presented below.

#### **6.1.2.3.2 Expressive ties and ineffectiveness: Rural parents' use of *guanxi***

Some rural parents also mentioned that they tried to use their *guanxi* with individuals to help with their children's school admission. As discussed in Chapter 3.1, there are three kinds of ties existing in Chinese *guanxi*: expressive ties involving affective feelings; instrumental ties for the purpose of personal gain; and mixed ties as a mixture of certain expressive elements and pragmatic considerations (Hwang, 1987). Rural families' stories indicate that most rural parents' *guanxi* is limited to village circles, where there are more expressive ties among villagers than instrumental ones. Beyond the rural circles, some rural parents' activation of social capital through *guanxi* with people in higher social positions is ineffective regarding their children's education.

Due to the shortage of preschool education and rural parents' physical absence, some rural parents wanted to enrol their children in primary school earlier. As opposed to urban parents, who know certain powerful educational personnel, it was the expressive elements existing in rural parents' *guanxi* with individuals working in educational circles that helped their children's school admission.

The principal came from our neighbour village. Our villages were close...in rural, every village was small. Even people in different villages were

acquaintances. I went to the principal... There were sentiments among us, sentiments among fellow villagers. He wouldn't refuse me. (Rural, Bin's mother, primary school, farmer [migrant worker])

The use of *guanxi* is not unique to Chinese urban contexts. Rural communities are also full of the use of *guanxi* to gain life advantages (Fei et al., 1992). Individuals in some rural families' *guanxi* also benefit some rural students' school admission. However, through rural families' descriptions, it is more out of sentimental expressions from fellow villagers rather than the advantages of knowing powerful educational personnel, such as school principals in urban families' stories. It is bonding social capital (Putnam, 2000) existing in rural parents' *guanxi*, which is insular and exclusive to people who are similar to you. Echoing previous studies using other measurements of parents' social status, such as intensive kinship networks among the working-class (Lareau, 2003; Pena, 2000), the data shows that it is common for the rural community to be full of acquaintances, even relatives.

Within village circles, rural parents might be able to activate social capital in expressive ties. Once beyond the rural villages, the linking social capital existing in *guanxi* between rural parents and people in higher social hierarchy might not be activated effectively. For example, Ke' *ershū* works in a county middle school; he knows certain people in the local educational council. He tried to use his *guanxi* to help Ke enrol in a city middle school but failed.

Because we were grass roots. We had limits in networks, money, *mianzi* (face). We weren't be able to go finally. (Rural, Ke's *ershū*, rural schoolteacher)

Finally, Ke studied in his *ershū*'s school, but he was not assigned to the best class. A similar failure occurred when his *ershū* tried to change him to the best class.

I told my school leader that I knew this child's ability, he could. The leader said that they didn't know. I couldn't let him study in the best class. My *guanxi* was not strong. I came from the rural. I wasn't in the same level as the school leader. (Rural Ke's *ershū*, rural schoolteacher)

One characteristic of *guanxi* is reciprocity (Yan, 1996b). When it comes to instrumental ties, people apply the rule of equity (Huwang, 1987). It is similar to two-way transactions. I help you, hoping one day you can reciprocate and help me back. Ke's *ershū* is a grass root and his social status is not on the same level as educational officers or his school leader. Those with high social status might have the power to assist Ke's *ershū*, who is not able to pay back. Even if Ke's *ershū* has *guanxi* with people in powerful positions, but he has no *mianzi*. *Mianzi* indicates a person's *guanxi* with others or the capacity to mobilise resources generated by *guanxi* webs (Bian, 2001). Thus, Ke's *ershū*'s activation of social capital in his *guanxi* is ineffective regarding Ke's schooling.

There is less data in this study regarding rural parents' use of *guanxi* than that of the urban. From the few examples available, it appears that rural parents' *guanxi* is narrowed to village circles where there are expressive ties among village fellows. Only Ke's *ershū* talked about his efforts to activate the potential linking social capital existing in his *guanxi* with powerful educational personnel; but it proved to be ineffective.

### 6.1.3 Section summary

This section presents the data regarding Chinese urban and rural parents' roles in their children's access to elite universities, which answers SRQ 1: How do Chinese urban and rural parents play a role in their children's access to Chinese elite universities? Chinese urban and rural parents play differentiated roles within and outside families regarding their children's educational matters. This echoes the capital approach in showing that privileged and less privileged parents play differentiated roles in their children's education (See Chapter 3.1.4). Under such conditions, it leads us to SRQ 2: How do Chinese rural students achieve access to Chinese elite universities?

## 6.2 Chinese rural students' access to Chinese elite universities

So far, the data has shown that rural parents' roles in their children's access to Chinese elite universities are not in the form of concrete actions, such as homework supervision, exam escort. Seemingly, it implies that rural parents' roles are less influential than their urban counterparts. However, their children eventually were admitted to elite universities. How did they against the odds? The data reveals that there are three main contributing factors: (1) the power of rural parents' language, which has not been recognised; (2) rural student' endeavors; and (3) their teachers' significant roles. This will be explained in what follows.

### 6.2.1 The power of language: Rural parents' unrecognised contributions

When exploring how rural students achieved access to elite universities in this study, the data indicates that many rural parents contribute to their children's

access to Chinese elite universities through the power of their language. Specifically, rural parents convey to their children supportive educational attitudes, educational expectations and their understanding of the value of HE. They also verbally motivate their children's learning by encouraging their children. They inspire their children's study aspirations through verbally transforming their families' disadvantages into motivations. However, their contributions, to a large extent, are not recognised by themselves and their children.

The data shows that 'study is your first priority before anything else' is many rural parents' message conveyed to their children, through which they indicate their supportive attitudes towards their children's education.

My parents hadn't received much education. They had been longing for knowledge from their hearts. This influenced me greatly. Each time they saw me, they said (pause), their expectations for me was that study is the priority. Nothing is more important than study. (Rural student, Ke, C)

Urban parents in this study also prioritise their children's study. For example, they took leave or resigned from their jobs in order to realise their physical presence. A difference is that most rural parents considered that their children's study took financial priority. They stressed to their children that they can secure their education at any financial cost.

I told him that I would support your study at any cost. Don't worry about money. As long as it was good for your study, I could borrow money to support you. (Rural, Di's mother, middle school, farmer [migrant worker])



In traditional Chinese culture, receiving schooling is a mutual responsibility between parents and children (Zhao & Biesta, 2011). From parents' perspectives, many rural parents offer their utmost financial support to their children's education. For example, to earn money to support their children's study, they work from early morning to late evening in the fields or search for out-migrated jobs. The rural students in this study acknowledged that they seldom encountered monetary issues regarding their schooling.

However, it should be noted that this study only includes rural students who achieved access to Chinese elite universities. These findings do not indicate that all Chinese rural students, especially those who failed to be admitted to Chinese elite universities, have not faced monetary constraints in terms of their education. Instead, for the rural parents in this study, they pass to their children supportive attitudes regarding their education through their language. Rural students understand that their schooling is prioritised, although their parents are facing difficulties, especially in finance. The data shows that it is partly because rural parents understand the significant role of education in their children's future. They expect their children to 'don't be like us', which is their expectation conveyed to their children verbally.

Prior research shows that parental expectations and aspirations for children's academic success have the strongest effect on students' performance compared with other types of parental involvement, such as homework supervision and volunteering at school (Fan & Chen, 2001; Jeynes, 2003, 2007). As shown in Chapter 5, most rural parents in this study are poorly educated. Without diplomas, they are

self-employed farmers or temporary migrant workers on low and unstable incomes. They experience life difficulties and, thus, they do not want their children to copy their life trajectories. 'Don't be like us' is many rural parents' expectation on their children's' education. In most cases, rural parents convey their expectations by taking themselves as negative examples.

I told her that if you didn't want to be like our couples, that if you wanted to stand out, you should study. Study is the only way. Don't do the hard work like us. I always told her like this. (Rural, Xiang's father, primary school, farmer [migrant worker])

Most rural parents hope their children 'don't be like us' through studying hard. They use their first-hand life experiences to express their expectations time and again. Prior to rural students' personal understanding, they already remember that education can pull them out of life's difficulties.

They (parents) said that they didn't study hard at that time and they didn't receive good education, therefore, they didn't live a good life. I couldn't understand at that time, but I just remembered it. It had great impact on my later study. (Rural student, Bin, D)

'Don't be like us' is not rural parents' only expectation of their children to achieve through schooling. Further, they stress the value of HE for their children: 'Go to an elite university for a good future'.

A person's social position significantly affects the conditions of their personal life experiences. These conditions further affect individuals' values (Kohn, 1995). Rural

parents' first-hand life experience taught them the significance of owing a diploma, especially a degree from elite universities, for a better life. Thus, they understand the significance of elite universities for their children's future. Through their parents' language, most rural students have their parents' understanding of the value of HE instilled in them: 'Go to an elite university for a good future.'

My parents always said that you must study hard. You should study hard and go to a good university in the future. In this way, you could have a good life in the future. Unconsciously, they gave me such an awareness. I felt that, yes, I should study hard. At least, I should go to a good university. (Rural student, Mei, C)

As explained in Chapter 2.1.2, HE has long been regarded as the main channel to realise upward social mobility in China (Chang, 1955; Zha, 2011), especially in rural China (Kuang, 2015). From rural parents' perspectives, studying in a good university means a good future. Thus, their children cannot 'be like us' and achieve upward social mobility. They instil personal understanding of the value of HE all the way through their children's schooling processes. Additionally, rural parents also encourage their children to keep going and work harder.

As presented in Section 6.1, urban students' fluctuations in schooling performance are common, and rural students are no exception. Many of them recalled that they encountered ups and downs in exams. Unlike urban parents' material rewards for children's good performance, verbal comfort and advice on bad performance (See Section 6.1.1.1), many rural parents are good at encouraging their children through language. For their children's good performance, they encourage them to keep

going. Once their children encountered difficulties, their verbal comforts are normally followed by a requirement to work harder.

His scores were good. But I still encouraged him. For example, I said that you must try your best effort to improve to the highest place. You should grab the things that you were able to. (Rural, Xiaojian's mother, high school, individual business)

When he didn't get good marks. I just encouraged him. I said, keep working hard. Comforting was one thing. I also encouraged him. I gave him some pressure to say, keep going. If you relaxed a little bit, you couldn't reach what you want. I was afraid he gave up. (Rural, Di's mother, middle school, farmer [migrant worker])

The hardworking ethic has been highly valued in Chinese culture. Striving for educational achievements through hard work has been accepted as the proper life approach by Chinese people (Pye, 1984), which has been used as one explanation in varied cross-national studies on Chinese students' high academic achievements (Jerrim, 2015; Rao et al., 2000). As shown in Section 6.1.1.1, urban parents' verbal communications with their children regarding the performances in exams provide urban students with more emotional support. Although urban parents in this study expected their children to be admitted to elite universities, they did not transform their hopes into pressure on their children. However, rural parents did not want their children to be like them, hence desired them to enter elite universities. In my interpretation, it is straightforward and logical to them that through studying hard,

their children can become high achievers academically. Their verbal encouragements teach their children to keep going and work harder. Through parents' language, rural students learn to try their best constantly, which will be presented in Section 6.2.2.

Additionally, most rural parents know that their families are disadvantaged, especially in material wealth, compared to their urban counterparts. At the same time, as discussed in Chapter 2.1.2, there is also the cultural belief of egalitarianism and meritocracy in education where everyone is educable regardless of their social backgrounds in China (Taylor, 1973, 1981). Instead of being pessimistic, rural parents believe that education is merit-based. Therefore, they transform their material disadvantages into spiritual inspiration by telling their children, 'Don't compare material wealth, compare study.'

Firstly, I told him that we were rural. Our goal was to use this platform (education in school), this environment to chase our dreams... Don't pursue material wealth. If you did want to compete, just make yourself outstanding through endeavours in study. Anyway, I just tried my best to let him not compare himself with others in material condition. (Rural, Di's mother, middle school, farmer [migrant worker])

Similar forms of verbal inspiration were described in many rural families' stories, especially during middle and high schools. In my interpretation, these reflect the fact that individuals do not simply accept social structures passively; instead, they actively respond to social structures in creative ways (Macleod, 1987): human agency can make social changes in the face of structural constraints (Bhaskar, 1978;

Giddens, 1984; Hays, 1994). In county schools, students' backgrounds might be more complicated beyond the village environment. Echoing many urban parents' view that environment is important for children's study, rural parents are concerned with the sense of inferiority suffered by their children when surrounded by diversified peers. Although they cannot provide better material conditions (they actually gave their utmost financial support as stated above), they inspire their children through transforming the family's' material disadvantages into study aspirations verbally. However, the data shows that rural parents' contributions to their children's education through the power of language are not acknowledged by themselves and their children.

In terms of my study, my mum was fifth grade. My father, the middle school. They had no influence on my study. They couldn't instruct me. What they gave me was just more of a kind of concept that I should study hard. Except for cooking for me, my parents just kept saying that, you needed to study hard, and you needed to perform well in exams, such procedural words.

(Rural student, Bin, D)

Many rural families, parents or students admitted that rural parents did not provide academic support in terms of concrete action. At the same time, they often mentioned, 'I just said...'; and 'they just told me...'. On the one hand, such expressions reflect rural parents' use of language regarding their children's schooling. On the other hand, the term 'just' indicates that rural participants do not recognise that what rural parents said can contribute to their education. However,

rural families' stories suggest that rural parents' words had gradually been internalised and normalised by their children.

I just regarded studying hard as a natural thing. It was already deep into my mind. I had formed a habit. I just felt that I should study hard. When I was little, I didn't understand the meaning of studying hard. But this concept had become deep in my heart. (Rural student, Meng, A)

Parental practices in less privileged families are shaped by the challenges of poverty and low social status (Lareau, 2000, 2003). In this study, most rural parents are not able to involve themselves in their children's schooling through concrete action. However, this section shows that rural parents express supportive attitudes, expectations, remind their children of the significance of study and HE, encourage them to keep working hard and inspire their study inspirations through language.

This does not mean that it is completely through rural parents' words that rural students can achieve academic success. I also acknowledge that there might be rural parents who do not participate in my study, who might not use the power of their language to contribute to their children's schooling processes. Nonetheless, the power of rural parents' language cannot be ignored, which is unrecognised by both rural parents and students in this study. Instead, they are internalised and normalised as rural students' empathetic understating to their families' disadvantaged situations, which positively contributes to their access to elite universities. This will be explained below.

### 6.2.2 Rural students as the keys to open the doors of elite universities

The data shows that many rural parents considered their children themselves were one of the primary contributors leading to their own successful access to elite universities. Urban parents also acknowledged their children's agency, such as,

No one could replace him. We were just subsidiary. (Urban, Wen's mother, junior college, insurance company manager)

Both urban and rural students in this study are indeed industrious. No external forces can replace their internal hard work. However, facing varied disadvantages (This will be illustrated in Section 6.3 and 6.4), the data reveals that rural students are the keys to opening the doors of elite universities for themselves. They develop an empathetic understanding of their families' disadvantages (Section 6.2.2.1). They are motivated to aim high in their studies in order to pay back their parents (Section 6.2.2.2). They use varied study strategies throughout their entire schooling processes up until their access to elite universities (Section 6.2.2.3).

#### 6.2.2.1 'Dongshi': Rural students' empathy towards their parents' disadvantages

Talking about their children's academic success, two phrases appeared often in most rural parents' comments on their children: *Xuexi de liao* and 'dongshi' (understanding things, 懂事). The former indicates rural parents' deterministic educational concept as explained in Section 6.1.1.2. This section will explain the meaning and application of *dongshi* in this study.



*Dongshi* consists of two single letters. *Dong* (懂) means understanding. *Shi* (事) means things. According to Modern Chinese Dictionary (Chinese Academy of Social Science, 2013, p. 311), *dongshi* is interpreted as, understanding others' intentions or the general principles of things (知道别人的意图或一般事理).

Among nine interviewed rural parents, six of them attributed their children's good academic performance to being *dongshi* (Di's mother; Yang's father; Bin' mother; Min's father; Ke's *ershu*; and Xiang's father). For example,

I thought she was *dongshi*, thus she could study carefully. (Rural, Min's father, middle school, farmer [migrant worker])

I asked rural parents to provide an illustration regarding how their children were *dongshi*. They talked about some daily occasions.

He was *dongshi*. When he was in the middle school, he returned home once a week. He rarely bought snacks for himself. He bought things for his *yeye* and *nainai*, as well as his younger brother to eat... (Rural, Bin's mother, primary school, farmer [migrant worker])

She was very *dongshi*. Once a time, she was selling bananas with me in the street. The street police didn't allow me to do business in the street. They chased me. She felt the hardships of selling bananas. She might feel that we were too tired. She was just eight years old then. (Rural, Xiang's father, primary school, farmer [migrant worker])

There is no official translation of *dongshi* into English. Through rural parents' different illustrations, I interpret *dongshi* as rural students feeling and seeing things from others' standpoints. Put simply, *dongshi* refers to rural children's empathetic understanding towards others. In terms of its role in rural students' high academic achievements, *dongshi* refers to rural students' empathetic understanding towards their parents' disadvantages. It is developed through rural parents' power of language and rural students' own life experiences. Specifically, the data shows that rural students hold an empathetic understanding of their parents' hardships, necessitating them to be independent, and of the significance of knowledge in changing their own and their parents' destinies.

Firstly, either through their parents' language or their first-hand life experiences, most rural students understand that their parents' lives are hard.

It was my first time to have a contact with society. I experienced bargaining with the customers. I called the passers-by to buy our bananas. I felt that such experience made me *dongshi*. At that time, I felt that my dad was tired. I felt that selling things made him tired. (Rural student, Min, C)

Secondly, they understand that their parents' powerlessness regarding their education, as embodied by their physical absence and low literacy level. Thus, they need to be independent.

Since he was little, I kept saying to him that he couldn't rely on parents. Our families' economic conditions weren't good. We had no competencies. There were no other ways but to rely on self. He knew that. I told him this

till now. I told him since he was little that all should be relied on self. (Rural, Yang's father, middle school, rural schoolteacher)

Thirdly, as discussed in the last section, rural parents keep emphasising to their children the significance of education. Rural students also understand the life hardships their parents experienced. Thus, they understand that knowledge is powerful in changing destinies.

We had no other ways, only study. Knowledge could change my destiny, my families' destiny. (Rural student, Ke, C)

*Dongshi* contains multi-dimensional meanings, including understanding, love, care, independence and payback (Cheng & Kang, 2018). *Dongshi* is rural students' empathetic response to their parents' disadvantages. Being *dongshi*, rural students see their parents and themselves as having one destiny. While growing up, rural students understand the many constraints their parents faced (Lin, 2019). Being *dongshi*, the rural students care about their parents' well-being. They want to pay their parents back by providing them with a better life through going to elite universities: paying back their parents is one of rural students' motivations for entering elite universities.

#### **6.2.2.2 'Paying back parents': One of rural students' motivations for elite universities**

Compared with urban families, it takes great effort for students from rural families to receive a good education. To some extent, rural parents' sacrifice is more than

that of urban parents (Cheng, 2016). This motivates the rural students in this study aiming for elite universities. This has two facets.

Firstly, parents' well-being is the motive for rural students to study hard. Several students acknowledged that they wanted their parents to feel happy and glorious through studying hard.

I remembered it clearly the first day he went to the high school. I went with him. I saw the billboard at the school gate. It shows who went to the famous universities. They pasted students' photos on it. When I saw those photos, I admired them. I said that I really admired them. I said that I hope your photo would be at the top line three years later. He said that I would try to study hard, that I would try to let you feel glorious because of me, to realise your dream. (Rural, Di's mother, middle school, farmer)

Secondly, providing parents a better life is the source of rural students' aspiration for elite universities. Many rural students expressed an expectation of giving their parents a better life through entering an elite university.

To be honest, I would feel guilty to my families if I didn't go to a good uni. I wanted to pay them back. Only if I went to a good university, then, I found a good job, could I give my parents a better life, could I change my families' situation, could I change my destiny. (Rural student, Mei, C)

Schooling is Chinese parents' and children's mutual responsibility (Zhao & Biesta, 2011). From students' perspectives, even if their parents do not mention families' financial issues consciously, rural students are clear about their families' situations.

They can feel what their parents paid for their education. At the same time, rural parents hold high expectations for their children to change their destinies through HE, especially with degrees from elite universities. They convey such expectations verbally. Being *dongshi*, rural students tie their parents' destinies with theirs. They might feel a heavy ethical debt towards their parents (Cheng, 2016). They feel it is necessary to pay them back. They hope to acknowledge and repay their parents' years of scrimping and scraping by giving them a better life, as a way to shoulder their responsibility to their parents. Going to elite universities, then finding decent jobs are possible ways to achieve this in rural students' minds. Being highly motivated, they use varied strategies in order to achieve access to elite universities.

### **6.2.2.3 Rural students' study strategies to achieve access to elite universities**

Rural students' stories suggest that they take varied study strategies during their entire schooling processes to realise their aspirations to access elite universities, including setting clear goals, being self-disciplined, studying hard, making the best use of available human resources and being self-motivated.

Firstly, from daily study until the final *gaokao*, most rural students know clearly what they want. They set clear goals in terms of study.

I kept studying harder to surpass my previous scores. This was one of my goals. (Rural student, Min, C)

My first year *gaokao* result wasn't good. Although it was enough for an ordinary 985 university, it didn't reach my goal. My goal was just A or B. I became a return student. (Rural student, Bo, B)

Secondly, bearing their goals in mind, most rural students are self-disciplined. They prioritise study and resist the temptation of playing.

I thought I should do this (study), I just felt that it was good to do this (study). I was happier if I finished homework firstly, then to play. (Rural student, Xiang, B)

Thirdly, during daily study, they study quite hard, including actively working on weaknesses, and studying longer.

After the evening classes, other students went home to take a shower, or do other things. I continued to study. I didn't go to play on weekends. I kept studying. (Rural student, Mei, C)

Fourthly, many rural students make the best use of available human resources, including actively turning to their teachers for help or borrowing study materials from senior students.

No matter good or bad, I took my exam papers to my teachers. I talked with them to see whether there were some points I had missed. What problems I had. I went to every subject teacher. We found the problems, then resolved them. (Rural student, Di, A)

The neighbouring boy was one-year senior to me. Every year after he finished, I borrowed his study materials to preview. Textbooks, readings and so on. Thus, I felt less difficulties when the new semester started. (Rural student, Xiaojian, B)

Lastly, some rural students are used to being self-motivated.

Occasionally, if I want to drink a cup of milk tea, I required myself to finish a book...I put the money in a spiritual bank. Only if I made some effort and made self-improvement, could I take the money and do some unnecessary things, like drinking milk tea. (Rural student, Mei, C)

Not every rural student in this study adopted the above five strategies completely. Some adopted two or three, some others less or more. What the above shows is the holistic picture that family disadvantages do not defeat rural students. Instead, material poverty leads rural students to become rich in terms of academic study through varied study strategies.

Rural students' endeavours on their way to elite universities echo Dong's (2015) and Lin's (2019) research regarding the significance of rural students' agency, which might be embedded in the Chinese culture of children's responsibility to repay their parents through a hardworking ethic in their schooling (Sung, 1999; Qin et al., 2009). This study does not claim that culture is a decisive factor. Instead, the data regarding rural parents' power of language and rural students' endeavours reminds the reader that the capital approach based on Bourdieu's social reproduction theory cannot fully explain the complexity of Chinese urban and rural students'

access to elite universities, especially the rural students' stories. Contrarily, it reflects the dialectical relationships between social structure and human agency. This will be analysed in Chapter 7. Apart from the power of rural parents' language and the rural students themselves, another significant contributor to rural students' access to elite universities is rural teachers.

### **6.2.3 Rural teachers' significant roles**

As presented above, rural parents tended to regard their children's education as teachers' sole responsibility, leaving their children's schooling matters completely in teachers' hands. Rural students also appreciated their teachers' contributions. The data reveals that, on rural students' entire schooling pathway until their access to Chinese elite universities, teachers' roles are significant contributing actors. They provide rural students with comprehensive support, constant appreciation and encouragement. They also act as free private tutors and counsellors.

Both urban and rural families expressed their appreciation for schoolteachers' contributions. As presented previously, urban teachers' academic contributions did not replace urban parents' comprehensive involvement. Contrarily, rural parents tended to leave their children's schooling to schoolteachers completely. Rural schoolteachers were the persons with whom rural students interacted with most regarding their education, especially in middle and high boarding schools. Several rural students described their teachers' comprehensive support, which was not limited to school study.



One night, I had a fever. I felt quite sick at that time. Teacher S noticed me in evening classes. I said to him I was fine because I didn't want to miss the class. Guess what? He went to town to buy pills for me. That was a cold winter. Big snow. The nearby clinic must be closed. I didn't know how he got the town. He let me go to his office. He passed me hot water. You know, at that time, I just felt that he was like my father. (Rural student, Wan, C)

Not every rural student described moments as touching as the examples above. However, most rural students stated that their teachers' support was comprehensive and not merely limited to study. In terms of teachers' specific roles regarding schooling, most rural students mentioned the constant appreciation and encouragement they obtained from teachers. This is important to rural students.

My English teacher appreciated me very much. I felt this was important for me...S/he always praised me in public. When I made a mistake, she always encouraged me, to let me believe in myself. Maybe it was just teachers' normal praise and encouragement, but it was a confirmation for me. It was like a light into my heart. I felt I was being valued. (Rural student, Meng, A)

Similar stories were told by several rural students. Their teachers' constant appreciation and encouragement provided them the sense of being valued, which increased their confidence and interest in study. This helped them to aim high. Apart from constant appreciation and encouragement, some rural teachers also act as free private tutors.

Few rural students in this study had private tutoring experiences, which will be presented in Section 6.4. This does not mean they studied less than their urban counterparts. As aforementioned, on the one hand, rural students studied longer. On the other hand, many rural students recalled that their teachers individually instructed them without charge.

Because I didn't learn English in primary school, my English was quite poor. My English teacher tutored me in private. We didn't have to pay. She never mentioned that. Not just me, but several students together. She asked us to her office during school days. On weekends, she gave us extra exercises to do at home. Then, she checked and explained our mistakes. It helped a lot. You knew. What she taught in classrooms was general, but when I went to her office, I was more oriented. (Rural student, Bo, B)

Rural students acknowledged that teachers' free extra tutoring facilitated their academic improvements. This, to some degree, reduced their disadvantages in competition with their urban counterparts through daily study. Furthermore, rural teachers' voluntary contributions are also shown through their role as counsellors.

Most rural families' stories reveal that rural teachers took on counsellors' roles, from rural students' daily study advice, exam results, to their university applications. Several rural students stated that their teachers kept a close eye on their daily study status. Through frequent communications, rural teachers provided individual advice to help their daily study.

Our teachers often chatted with us, especially us good students. They asked us to their office or outside the classrooms one by one. We talked about recent situations. For example, if I wasn't concentrating in classes. They reminded me. If they felt that I was stressful, they told me how to release it. Anyway, a lot of study suggestions. (Rural student, Bin, D)

Although 'good students' might receive preferential treatment from rural teachers, those teachers' close attention to their daily study produce instant feedback and suggestions. In this way, they are able to make changes and improvements day by day. Additionally, rural teachers also accumulate affluent working experiences. When it comes to making university choices, many rural students held that their teachers' advice was valuable.

You see, I knew little about the outside world. My parents just let me listen to my teachers. They had instructed many students before. They knew which one (university) I should apply to. I couldn't use computers at that time. I just sat aside. My teacher searched the internet. S/he said I could go to this university. Then I came. (Rural student, Di, A)

Rural parents might not be able to provide relevant first-hand educational and professional instructions. Most rural students felt it was difficult to obtain enough information about university choices. Under such conditions, rural teachers represented the major information sources and consultants for university choices, although this might only benefit good students, as indicated in this study.

This section presents rural teachers' significant roles in rural students' entire schooling journey up until their access to elite universities. In my interpretation, to some extent, teachers play a more vital role to rural students than to urban students, due to the relative lack of educational resources and parental involvement that rural students received. Rural teachers in this study made varied voluntary contributions to rural students' final access to elite universities. However, through the data, it is also acknowledged that they tended to treat good students preferentially.

#### **6.2.4 Section summary**

This section presents the data regarding rural students' successful access to elite universities against the odds, which answers SRQ 2. The three contributing actors are rural parents, rural students and rural teachers. Notably, the data in this section does not mean to conceal the varied disadvantages rural students accumulated on their paths to elite universities. Instead, the cumulative dis/advantages mechanism will be presented in the next two sections.

### **6.3 A virtuous cycle versus a vicious cycle: Chinese urban and rural students' schooling pathways to elite universities**

The importance of childhood in the educational life course is that this stage is when the foundation of long-term trajectories is built and the roots of disparities in these trajectories are laid. (Crosnoe & Benner, 2016, P. 181)

The above quotation reflects the fact that individuals' educational life courses can be largely influenced by what has been accumulated in their early life. SRQ 3 is: How do dis/advantages accumulate regarding Chinese urban and rural students' access to Chinese elite universities? Home and schools are the two most significant social settings in exerting impact on children's development and learning experiences and results (Bronfenbrenner, 1989; Kim, 2019). In this sense, the process of Chinese urban and rural students' cumulative dis/advantages regarding their access to elite universities does not just happen during school time, but also outside school time. Thus, the answer to SRQ 3 consists of two parts: Chinese urban and rural students' schooling pathways and their outside school time. This section presents the interview data regarding Chinese urban and rural students' schooling pathways to Chinese elite universities. Their outside school time will be presented in Section 6.4.

This section will be divided into three subsections to present urban and rural students' schooling pathways to Chinese elite universities: preschool education experience (Section 6.3.1); basic education experience (primary and middle school); Section 6.3.2); high school education experience (Section 6.3.3) with a section summary in Section 6.3.4. Overall, Chinese urban students' pathway to Chinese elite universities is a virtuous cycle while that of rural students is a vicious cycle. The data in this section echoes the existing literature on Chinese urban and rural pre-university educational disparities (see Chapter 2.4). It further shows the process of Chinese urban and rural students' cumulative dis/advantages in schooling experiences, and the impact on their access to Chinese elite universities.

### 6.3.1 Urban and rural students' preschool education experiences

The data shows that all urban students in this study experienced certain forms of at-home infant education from their parents; all urban students received kindergarten schooling; most urban parents purposely chose high-end kindergartens for their children. Preschool education experience prepared urban students for their later study and placed them at a higher starting point. Contrarily, barriers were in the way regarding rural students' preschool education.

#### 6.3.1.1 Urban students' preschool education

No urban parents mentioned that they had sent their children to infant education centres. This might be due to their relatively recent development (Qi & Melhuish, 2017). However, it does not mean that the urban parents did not place a high value on children's early development. Instead, they believed that 'one's fate [is] set before they walk into kindergarten on the first day of school' (Carr & Kefalas, 2009, p. 33). Some urban parents began preparing their children's readiness for schooling from pregnancy.

Wasn't there prenatal education during pregnancy? I let her listen to music during my pregnancy. Sometimes I told stories to her. It was like this during the earliest time. I began to prepare from my pregnancy. It is normal now. Right, this should be called pre pre-education. (Urban, Yuan's Mother, bachelor's degree, state-owned company manager)

Some urban mothers echoed that, during pregnancy, they purposely immersed themselves in highbrow culture, such as classical music and books. They believed

that through ‘pre preschool education’ during pregnancy, babies’ intelligence would be better prepared. Once their child was born, more urban parents began to teach their children academic knowledge.

I remembered that my dad and mum put a poem book in front of me every morning. We read together. At the beginning, I couldn’t recite, just read.

Then, they taught me to recite. I could recite many poems when I was three years old. (Urban student, Wen, C)

Similar stories were told by most urban families. Some parents recalled that they purposely taught children vocabularies or poems. Others said that they did not have specific aims, but just did it; for example, by playing English music or teaching easy Maths. Studies show that home learning activities during pre-school age are positively associated with children’s later academic ability (Duursma et al., 2007; Melhuish et al., 2008). Similarly, many urban parents believed that they laid a good foundation for their children’s later schooling through at-home preschool education. For example,

I read poems to her. I read for her every day before sleep. She could recite many poems before she went to kindergarten. It benefited her later study.

(Urban, Jing’s mother, middle school, individual business)

Some urban students received at-home ‘pre pre-school education’ before birth. After that, most of them were taught easy academic knowledge by parents. In this way, urban children’s early potential was believed to be best stimulated. Being

well-prepared, urban students headed to high-end kindergartens that their parents chose for them.

Chinese urban parents tend to offer their children the most 'elite' educational pathway. They believe that only by attending the best kindergartens could their children go to the best primary, middle, high schools and finally elite universities (Ryan, 2019). In this study, most urban students' kindergartens were not randomly chosen. Instead, their parents took varied aspects into consideration.

That was the best kindergarten in our city. A Taiwanese ran it. It was bilingual with foreign teachers. Actually, sending him to this kindergarten was due to a concern. That was because their education was relatively (pause). It wasn't like old-fashioned public schools, where kids must do this or that. In this school, kids didn't raise their hands for speaking. They were not like public schools. They protected children's individualised personality. (Urban, Dong's father, bachelor's degree, educational council official)

As presented in Chapter 2.4.1, Chinese preschool education is not currently included in formal public schooling. It has been largely privatised under the free market mechanism (Qi & Melhuish, 2017). Being attracted by better environments, foreign teachers or westernised teaching models, urban parents are keen on sending their children to private kindergartens (Ryan, 2019). Although fees in private kindergartens could be extremely high based, the varied aspects that most urban parents considered exclude money.



Their tuition fees were very expensive. It seemed 10 or 20 thousand RMB per year. Their (parents) income was not high at that time, but they still let me go to the best kindergarten. (Urban student, Xiaoshuo, C)

Money is not urban parents' primary concern even if 'their income was not that high' because many urban parents believed that kindergarten schooling is crucial for later study.

It helped. People said that the ground at early age was the enlightening teacher. Teachers at the kindergarten were his enlightening teachers. From my heart, they educated him well. Generally, kindergarten was the start. If students did not have a good start, they couldn't be good later. (Urban, Zhao's father, high school, state-owned company engineer)

Many urban parents agreed that their children received a head start academically in high-end kindergartens.

...Before she went to the primary school, she understood basic Chinese. She could read the newspapers. These were all cultivated in the kindergarten. She was good at Maths because her kindergarten taught mental arithmetic... She might have a higher starting point comparing with other children... After she went to the primary school, her comprehensive performance was better, no matter the exam marks or other aspects. (Urban, Linlin's mother, junior college, public servant)

The above examples show that urban parents value early ages' fundamental role in their children's later study. This reflects their certain type of embedded cultural

capital, the disposition of minds (Bourdieu, 1986). Most of them paid high tuition fees for their children's high-end kindergarten schooling. This reflects their economic capital. Preschool education prepares urban students at a higher starting point for later study. This is in contrast to their rural counterparts, which will be presented below.

### **6.3.1.2 Rural students' preschool education experience**

Rural students in this study seldom received preschool education, neither infant education from parents nor kindergarten schooling. Terms, such as 'no', 'none', or 'never', appeared in most rural families' descriptions regarding children's education before primary schools. The data indicates that many barriers were in the way. On the one hand, rural parents confronted varied barriers regarding teaching their children during preschool age. On the other hand, rural communities were short of educational resources.

Rural parents seldom practiced infant education at home. The data shows that rural parents confronted three barriers: physical absence; lack of pre-educational awareness; and low literacy.

Firstly, rural parents' physical absence acted as a barrier to educating infants at home. Secondly, many rural parents lacked the awareness to educate children in advance. They thought feeding their children was their primary responsibility.

How could I educate her? She was just a kid. I gave her something to eat, to drink. Little kid, I never thought to educate her. It was enough to just let her have things to eat and drink. (Rural, Meng' father, primary school, farmer)

Less privileged parents tend to think it is enough for their children just to have things to eat and drink (Lareau, 2003). In my interpretation, rural parents' lack of pre-educational awareness is a reflection of their embodied cultural capital.

Thirdly, some rural parents' illiteracy, as a reflection of their institutionalised culture capital (educational qualifications), made their children's pre-education at home impossible.

We seldom educated her. Her mum is illiterate. She never went to school. I received little schooling. We couldn't educate her. (Rural, Min' father, middle school, farmer [migrant worker])

The above three barriers do not work separately but reinforce each other. For example, the lack of educational awareness might constrain rural parents' pre-educational practices even when they were literate. Furthermore, physical absence can constrain the educational awareness and competence. This is exemplified by Wan's and Yang's stories. Wan's parents and Yang's father are rural schoolteachers. They admitted their parents were able to teach them easy knowledge at early stage, but they seldom took action because,

My father was busy. He went to school to teach and he also needed to help my mum with the farm work, such as watering, selling the vegetables in markets. (Rural student, Yang, B)

Yang's father added,

I didn't have the concept of preschool education. I didn't know. When you had no time to drink, how could you consider education. (Rural, Yang's father, middle school, rural schoolteacher)

Yang's and Wan's parents have double occupational identities: rural schoolteachers and farmers. As schoolteachers, they are able to educate small children. However, they have to be farmers outside school hours in order to make ends meet, leaving no time to consider and practice infant education. In this vein, rural parents' awareness and ability regarding at-home infant education are constrained by their economic conditions and physical absence. As discussed in Chapter 5, rural parents' physical absence is mainly caused by their shortage of economic capital and the institutional constraints resulting from the *hukou* system. When it comes to rural students' kindergarten schooling, in addition to the barriers above, the lack of educational resources in rural communities also acted as a barrier.

Eight rural students in this study never went to kindergarten. Only three rural students talked about their schooling experiences in poor quality kindergartens. The data shows that it is explained by the combined barriers that many rural parents confronted and rural communities' lack of educational resources.

Firstly, some rural students never studied in kindergarten because of their parents' tight financial budget. Secondly, some rural parents did not consider kindergarten schooling as a rigid necessity, which is a reflection of their inadequate educational awareness. Additionally, the lack of educational resources in rural communities (no schools and poor teaching quality) was also a barrier.

When talking about kindergarten schooling, the lack of kindergartens in villages is a recurring barrier in some rural families' stories.

There was one in our village recently. It seemed that it was the first time we had a kindergarten. There was none before it. (Rural student, Ke, C)

As stated above, Chinese preschool education has been privatised. Private kindergartens are clustered in urban communities, with few starting up in poor rural communities. However, going to urban kindergarten was unrealistic for most rural families.

If we wanted to go to kindergarten, we needed to go to city schools. How could it be possible? It wasn't realistic. (Rural student, Wan, C)

It was not realistic because most rural parents could not afford urban kindergartens.

It was quite expensive to go to the urban kindergarten. It would be a big expense for my families at that time. (Rural student, Di, A)

Rural parents' shortage of economic capital (tight financial budget), embedded cultural capital (inadequate educational awareness), institutionalised cultural capital (being illiterate), combined with rural communities' lack of schools leads to some rural students' low access to pre-school education, including kindergarten schooling.

Three rural students (Yang, Bo, Bin) attended kindergarten. However, in contrast to most urban students who gained a head start from kindergarten schooling, they did

not benefit much from it. Yang stressed that he did not learn academic knowledge in kindergartens.

They even didn't teach us the multiplication tables. They didn't teach us *pinyin* (Chinese alphabet). We learnt nothing there. (Rural student, Yang, B)

Bo had unpleasant memories.

I didn't feel that I had learnt something. I just felt the indifference. I didn't learn anything. I had horrible memories. I didn't know what I experienced, I felt kindergarten was horrible. (Rural student, Bo, B)

Rural students' memories about kindergarten schooling also echo rural parents' perceptions that their children would not benefit from kindergarten. The data indicates that rural kindergartens' poor teaching quality and risky facilities are part of the reason.

Firstly, unlike the foreign teachers and advanced teaching models in high-end kindergartens mentioned by the urban families above, the few kindergartens in some rural families' stories were full of unqualified teachers.

The teachers in the kindergarten seldom graduated from high school. They were all the females who had nothing to do in the village. They just looked at the kids. It was impossible for them to educate us. (Rural student, Yang, B)

When answering why they sent children to kindergartens with unqualified teachers, the three rural students' parents stressed that it was because they needed to find someone to 'look after' their children; they just regarded kindergarten teachers as babysitters.

He went to kindergarten just because no person at home could look after him. We all went to the fields to grow vegetables. I thought it was just for finding someone to help us to look after the kid. Haha... (laughing). (Rural, Bo's mother, middle school, farmer)

As shown in Chapter 5, whether being stuck in farm work or being a rural migrant worker away from home, it is understandable that some rural parents expected kindergarten teachers to just 'look after' their children. Nonetheless, the quality of those 'babysitters' was problematic.

My mother told me that I had a fever one time, but the teacher just left me alone. They didn't take any actions. When I returned home, my temperature was over 40 degrees! (Rural student, Bin, D)

In addition to the unqualified teachers, the facilities in rural kindergartens were risky in rural families' stories.

They used the unsafe school bus to pick us up in the village. The school bus was with highly potential safety hazard. There were many students in one car. Sometimes, when raining, it couldn't move. That old truck. (Rural student, Yang, B)

Unqualified teachers and risky facilities are common in rural China's kindergartens (Cai et al., 2017). The data shows that unqualified teachers, who should be called unqualified babysitters, and unsafe school buses were typical of rural kindergartens in this study. Unlike urban students obtaining a higher starting point, some rural families' stories reveal that rural students needed to work harder to make up for what they had missed in their preschool education.

At the beginning, his Chinese was not good. There might be several reasons. Firstly, he never touched the preschool education. Secondly, there was no such environment and resources to influence him at home. Chinese was a subject that needs readings and so on. His Chinese had always been weak. (Rural, Ke's *ershū*, rural schoolteacher)

Although rural students in this study overcame their early disadvantages to be admitted to Chinese elite universities as presented in Section 6.2, the barriers they faced regarding their preschool education are evident. Urban and rural students' schooling differences continue during primary and middle schools, as will be shown below.

### **6.3.2 Urban and rural students' basic education experiences**

As stated in Chapter 2.3.1, Chinese primary and middle school are regarded as the basic education stage, where school admission is open registration by the rule of *jiujin ruxue* (nearby enrolment policy, 就近入学). In this study, not all urban parents were satisfied with their officially allocated schools. Instead, they used various strategies to ensure that their children are enrolled in key schools. Studying in key



schools benefited urban students in different ways. Contrarily, rural schools were most rural students' only choices, and had many disadvantages. I will firstly present urban students' basic education experience in Section 6.3.2.1, followed by that of rural students in Section 6.3.2.2.

### **6.3.2.1 Cumulative advantages in key schools: Urban students' basic education experience**

The children have only got one education and you have to make sure it's a good one. (Vincent, 2017, p. 541)

The above quotation reflects most urban parents' attitudes towards their children's school choice. The data shows that, during the basic education stage, most urban students went to key urban schools which their parents chose for them. Key schools are better resourced and boast advantages in learning atmosphere, teaching quality and academic opportunities, all of which bring urban students varied benefits.

According to the nearby enrolment policy, all urban students in this study were assigned to urban schools, which, as suggested in existing studies, possess better educational resources than rural schools (Ryan, 2019; Wang, 2012). However, not all urban parents were satisfied with the officially assigned school results. Similar to kindergarten choices, they paid special attention to their children's school quality. They chose the best key schools from the 'already good'.

In terms of study, my parents thought that what they could do at first was to send me to the best school. Thus, I didn't go to the primary school I was assigned but to the best one they chose for me. (Urban student, Xin, A)

To gain their children's entry to the best schools, urban parents made a great deal of effort, including being far-sighted, monetary investments and the use of *guanxi*.

Firstly, some urban parents were far-sighted. For example, some schools have preferential policies which favour students from their partner institutions. Some urban parents took later school admissions into consideration when their children were in lower grades.

It was for his middle school. We considered that after he finished the last year in this school, he could continue the next three-year middle school here. Thus, it was not for his sixth grade, but for the middle school. Thus, he changed to this school in his last year of primary school. (Urban, Wen's mother, junior college, insurance company manager)

Some other urban parents' far-sightedness is demonstrated by their long-term consideration when buying houses.

Before he went to the primary school, we already knew which middle school it was assigned to. We knew that the assigned middle school was pretty good. We took all of these into consideration. We bought this apartment just so that he could go to this primary school. Then he could go to the best middle school. (Urban, Hong's mother, primary school, individual business)

Similar to China, parents' school choice strategies through the housing market is common in many other national contexts, such as in France (Benson et al., 2015), the UK (Allen et al., 2013) and Mexico (Fierro et al., 2009) to name but a few. In these cases, their children's enjoyment of educational resources in the best schools

relies on a huge monetary investment, as house prices in school catchment areas have been high, especially those in the best school districts (Davidoff & Leigh, 2008; Gibbons, 2012; Kane et al., 2006; Nguyen-Hoang & Yinger, 2011). Apart from buying houses in school districts, urban parents' other monetary investment involved paying school choosing fees for ideal schools outside assigned school districts.

We didn't belong to this school district. My parents paid the school choosing fees. (Urban Student, Qing, D)

Apart from urban parents' far-sightedness and monetary investment in their children's school admission, some urban parents' use of *guanxi* also played a role. This has been explained in Section 6.1.2.3. The following data will show that, urban parents' choice of the key schools during basic education benefited their children in various ways. These include a competitive atmosphere, advanced teaching models and rich academic opportunities.

Firstly, some urban families stressed that a competitive in-school learning atmosphere positively influenced urban students' study. For example, the competitive atmosphere among urban school peers inspired urban students study aspirations.

Good school was like this. It had such atmosphere. Once the kids formed the habit. His mentality was positive. He won't look down. He could see higher and higher. He wasn't satisfied with current situations. He compared himself with those who were stronger. He had a competitive mentality. (Urban, Dong's father, bachelor's degree, educational council official)

Based on the nearby enrolment policy, urban schools generally gather urban students. They might experience similar preschool education and benefit from being at a higher starting point, as shown in the previous section. Being immersed in schools full of excellent peers, the urban students in this study were more likely to be inspired by positive models, who act as a 'shining light' (Hoxby & Weingarh, 2005, p. 6).

Secondly, the data shows that the advanced teaching models that urban students experienced improved their learning interests and abilities.

It (school) didn't have those old, boring traditions. The teaching method was, was quite alive. In ordinary schools, teachers were just teaching in the front, students were just listening. But there were kids-prepared classes in this school every week. Teachers were listening while students were teaching. After this, teachers would summarise and further explain... Thus, kids were willing to go to school. Once having holidays, he [Wen] would feel bored. He was eager to go to school. I felt this was the biggest benefit for those kids.  
(Urban, Wen's mother, junior college, insurance manager)

Thirdly, many urban families listed the rich academic opportunities in urban schools, including academic competitions, diversified extra-curricular activities and the eligibility of school recommendations, all of which facilitate urban students' academic competitiveness.

For example, many urban students mentioned that they attended various academic competitions organised by their schools. They won honourable prizes, which brought them benefits, such as preferential school admissions.

As early as my third grade, there were Maths competitions in school. Then in the fourth grade, I went to Olympia Maths Competition and won a first prize. I also attended other Maths competitions. Thus, I was recommended to this middle school without worrying about the admission. In the second year in middle school, I attended all kinds of competitions, like chemistry, biology, physics. I won the first prize for most of them. Thus, I went to this high school directly. (Urban student, Fang, C)

In addition to the benefits to their further school admission, some urban students commented that, through academic competitions, their intrinsic potential and interests were triggered.

I got a second prize for this Maths competition. It was my first time entering such a competition. I was impressed. It improved my interest in learning Maths. My major in Uni was Maths now. (Urban student, Zi, B)

Apart from academic competitions, urban schools also provided students with diversified extra-curricular activities, contributing to urban students' comprehensive competency.

Middle school broadened horizons. We had frequent interactions with international students and teachers. People in other countries would exchange there. (Urban student, Wen, C)

Certainly, it is urban students' excellence which makes them stand out. Notably, in the first place, urban schools provided opportunities for academic competitions, through which urban students gained honourable prizes and intrinsic study interests. They also organised diversified extra-curricular activities, through which urban students enhanced their overall development. Then, as Linlin's story indicates below, there is the 'existing system' within urban schools to recommend good students for their further school admission.

I went to this school through school recommendation. This was an existing system. Urban middle school gave urban primary school certain quota. They allowed primary schools to recommend good students. I was recommended to No. 1 middle school, then was recommended to its affiliated high school directly. (Urban student, Linlin, D)

In this sense, urban schools do not just provide opportunities to improve students' academic excellence, but also act as platforms for students' best presentations of their academic excellence.

Notably, not all urban parents in this study paid a large amount of money to buy houses in school districts or pay school choice fees. For example, Yanyan and Zhao said that they went to the primary schools they were assigned to. However, Yanyan's mother works as a teacher in her school. Zhao's primary school is affiliated to his parents' companies. They both stressed that their parents' main concern was the convenience of taking good care of them. Additionally, 'It was quite a good school' (Urban student, Yuan, D), or 'I got a lot there' (Urban student, Zhao, B) were their comments. Even if their parents did not purposely choose schools for them,

they still ‘got a lot’ because urban schools are already ‘quite good’. Contrarily, rural students faced limited school choices, with disadvantages. This will be illustrated below.

### **6.3.2.2 Limited school choices with disadvantages: Rural students’ basic education experience**

Most rural students in this study went to the assigned rural schools according to their *hukou* locale. Unlike the better resourced urban schools, rural schools were disadvantaged in terms of qualified teachers and academic opportunities.

According to the nearby enrolment policy, all rural students in this study went to primary schools in their residential villages. Mostly, their middle schools were at county level, gathering students from several neighbouring villages. The data indicates that the schools which rural students went to were their only choice.

He went to the village school. It was the only one in the village. One village had one school. We had several hundred villagers, but just one school. It was the case in the rural. It wasn’t like the urban. (Rural, Bin’s mother, primary school, farmer [migrant worker])

Some rural parents also realised that they could buy children places in better urban schools; however, it was their children who refused parents’ proposals because they understood their parents’ financial situation.

Actually, my mum wanted me to go to the city middle school, but I didn’t want to. The expenses would be huge if I went to the city school. (Rural student, Bo, B)

As Lareau (2003) writes, 'children are well aware of what their parents can or cannot afford to spend money on' (p. 59). Rural students understand clearly that only stable finance can support their study in urban schools, which is beyond their parents' reach. An exception is Min, who went to a private urban middle school given that his father earned more money one year.

Our local middle school was messy. Gang fighting was quite often. There were seldom good students, thus, my father didn't want me to go... It [an urban school] was a private school. The tuition fee was the highest in the district. You needed to pay 10 thousand RMB per year. We didn't have money. What made my father send me to this school was that our family sold a piece of land. We had certain income. Thus, my father wanted me to go to a better middle school. (Rural student, Min, C)

However, a better study environment means her parents needed to 'bite the bullet'.

They bite the bullet to let me go. I was the only one in my class. Only my parents send me to this school. (Rural student, Min, C)

For Min's parents, they could bear to 'bite the bullet' in exchange for a better study environment for Min. Finally, they believed their sacrifice brought a good result for Min.

I asked her which one she liked. I said that if you liked this private school, no matter how hard and tired we were, we would let you go. You got what you paid for. There were all good students and teachers in this school. She was



influenced naturally. Finally, she went to the best high school. (Rural, Min's father, middle school, farmer)

Rural parents also realise that studying in good schools might benefit their children. As long as there is a possibility, they are willing to invest financially. However, this is not always possible when suffering financial constraints.

The data above shows that most rural students' only school choices were limited to rural schools. The following data will show that rural schools in this study were in disadvantaged conditions, including teaching quality and academic opportunities.

Firstly, unlike the advanced teaching model in urban schools, rural schools' teaching content was inferior, resulting in students being left behind.

At that time, the primary school in our village did not teach English. When I started to learn English in middle school, I wasn't used to it. I couldn't understand what the teacher was saying. I really couldn't understand at all. I was in a bad mood every day. (Rural student, Mei, C)

Many rural students mentioned that they are poor at English. One rural student (Di) stressed that his poor English has held him back in understanding English references in university. Chinese, Maths and English are the three main academic subjects throughout Chinese students' entire schooling journey. Unlike Chinese and Maths, which can be taught in the mother tongue, English is a foreign language. The precondition of being taught English is that there are English teachers. However, disparities in the quality of urban and rural schoolteachers has been one dimension in urban and rural educational inequalities (Hannum & Park, 2007), as

discussed in Chapter 2.4. For those teaching in rural schools, their low standard of English level might cause problems. This is reflected through Yang's father and Ke's *ershū*. Both of them are rural schoolteachers. Talking about their ability to help their children's study, they said,

My level was not high. I just graduated from middle school. (Rural, Yang's father, middle school, rural schoolteacher)

I teach Maths. I know nothing about Chinese and English. I couldn't help. (Rural, Ke's *ershū*, rural schoolteacher).

Apart from the shortage of teachers and their poor quality, the rural schools in this study also lacked academic opportunities. For example, rural schools did not provide students with as many academic competition opportunities as urban schools. Few rural students mentioned their experiences of academic competitions during basic education. Two students had related experiences. They described them as,

It was just within the county level. It was of no value. We were from the village. We could only attend the county level competitions. It was impossible to expand to the municipal level. (Rural student, Meng, A)

That English competition was the only one I attended. It was impressive because the school paid for our meals on the road. I ate well. I didn't care whether I could win prizes or not. If I won, I would have money as rewards. Although I didn't, I ate well. (Rural student, Di, A)

Meng did not anticipate municipal competitions, while Di's only expectation was free meals. Academic competitions are more difficult than school tests. Sometimes they go beyond the contents of school textbooks. As presented above, rural schools could not guarantee normal teaching due to poor teaching quality. It is, therefore, understandable that competing with their urban counterparts was considered beyond rural students' reach.

In addition to the lack of academic competition opportunities, few rural students talked about in-school extracurricular activities, echoing the latest OECD report that, on average, Chinese urban students are involved in more than nine extracurricular school activities, with rural students engaged in less than seven (Echazarra & Radinger, 2019). From teaching quality to academic and extracurricular opportunities, rural students' schools were in a disadvantaged position.

The data so far has shown that rural schools may not possess the rich educational resources of urban schools which benefit students in many ways. However, being able to study in school brought rural students different life experiences.

I felt the more important thing was a kind of moral education. Before that, the people I interacted with were neighbours. The things I witnessed were those trivial matters in life. Once I was in school, I learnt something beyond daily life. It broadened horizons. Furthermore, I learnt some (pause), more things about moral qualities, such as goodness, patriotism. Those things couldn't be learnt from my neighbours. I felt that those things were important for me, for my personality. (Rural student, Wan, C)

For rural students, going to school opened a new window on the world. Rural students seized their chances, achieving high in terms of admission to Chinese elite universities, as shown in Section 6.2.

Summarily, this section shows that urban and rural students' basic schooling experiences are different. The accumulated effects of previous schooling experiences influence urban and rural students' preparations for elite universities in high schools, which will be illustrated below.

### **6.3.3 Urban and rural students' education experiences in high schools**

As discussed in Chapter 2.4.1, generally, urban middle schools' admission to high schools is within a municipal level while that for rural middle schools is within a county level. This is also illustrated by the data in this study: although urban and rural students went to the key high schools, the key high schools in urban students' terms were in municipal cities whilst most rural students went to key high schools in counties. The data shows that urban and rural high schools are at an advantage and a disadvantage respectively, especially regarding the IRE. Urban students' previous schooling experiences positively contribute to their admission to high schools in local or capital cities. These high schools accumulate advantages in terms of students' admission to elite universities. Urban students' and their high schools' previously accumulated advantages enable most urban students to secure access to Chinese elite universities through the IRE. Contrarily, rural students' previous schooling experiences and their high schools' disadvantages partly result in that most rural students have to place all their bets on the *gaokao* in terms of their access to Chinese elite universities. I will firstly introduce urban students' education

in high schools in Section 6.3.3.1, followed by that of rural students in Section 6.3.3.2.

### **6.3.3.1 ‘The *gaokao* could not decide my destiny’: Urban students’ education experiences in high schools**

The data shows that, on the one hand, progression from urban primary, middle to high schools was a natural process for urban students in this study. On the other hand, as shown above, during the basic education stage, some were recommended to urban high schools due to the recommendation policies between lower-and higher-stage urban schools (examples including Linlin, Wen and Jing in Section 6.3.2.1). In this sense, cumulative advantages during previous schooling, especially during basic education, benefited most urban students’ high school admissions in municipal cities. Notably, there are some urban students for whom key high schools in local cities could not meet their expectations. They studied in key high schools in capital cities.

I attended the entrance examinations in several top high schools in the capital city. The schools there were definitely better than those in my hometown. The schools in the capital city had higher enrolment rate to good universities. (Urban student, Zi, B)

In China, the main criterion for high schools’ rating is their annual enrolment rate to universities, especially elite universities. Reputable high schools never have difficulty in attracting excellent students. On the one hand, students want to increase their chances of attending top HEIs through a better platform. On the

other hand, high schools want to enhance their *gaokao* results by enrolling the best students; thus, not all applicants can be admitted. Key high schools in capital cities are battlefields for excellent students from the whole province. It is difficult for students to stand out. Some urban students admitted that their previous study facilitated their excellence in competing for places in key high schools in capital cities.

Their (high schools in capital city) exams were more difficult than *zhongzhao*. There were much deeper questions similar to those in academic competitions. Luckily, I attended many academic competitions before. So, I passed. (Urban student, Zhao, B)

Indeed, the determining factor for entry to key high schools in capital cities is urban students' excellent performance in entrance exams. However, urban students' stories indicate that their excellence was accumulated from previous schooling. As discussed above, during the basic education stage, urban schools possessed more academic resources and provided urban students with more opportunities to improve their academic competence. Even when competing with high achievers from the whole province, these previous cumulative advantages facilitated their excellent performance. When preparing for admission to elite universities, they secured their access to elite universities through the IRE, in addition to the *gaokao*.

When answering why they attended the IRE, most urban families regarded it as an insurance for elite universities' admission.

I thought as long as there were more opportunities, you should seize them.

Give yourself more insurance. (Urban, Yuan's mother, bachelor's degree, state-owned company manager)

As shown in Chapter 2.1.3.2, Chinese urban students are more likely to enrol in elite universities through the IRE (Liu, 2016; Wu et al., 2019; Yin et al., 2014). In this study, many urban students did not stake their destinies completely on the *gaokao*. The IRE played a vital role in some urban students' elite universities' admission and subject choices.

I couldn't come to D university without the 30 bonus points. I couldn't come if one point was missing. (Urban student, Dong, D)

Although my *gaokao* scores passed A's cut-off scores, it wasn't high enough to choose a good subject without the 40 bonus points. (Urban student, Hong, A)

Evidence suggests that for Chinese urban students, receiving bonus points has a stronger correlation with attending elite universities than the *gaokao* scores does (Luo et al., 2018). Seven out of nine urban students who won the bonus points in the IRE commented that they could not study in the current universities or subjects without them. The insurance function played by the IRE for urban students in this study is evident. Additionally, the IRE also acts as high schools' insurance, because every student they send to elite universities increases the high schools' market positions.

Our school had high enrolment ratio to A or B through the IRE in previous years. It was really difficult to be admitted by them via the *gaokao*. For our school, it could be called a shortcut. (Urban student, Yanyan, B)

The data shows that preparing insurance was not just a rational decision for urban students themselves, but also a strategy of high schools. Thus, they provided varied methods of support for their students' IRE preparations, including raising IRE awareness, arranging varied academic training and offering recommendations.

Firstly, many urban students commented that their high schools placed high value on the IRE. They kept instilling in them IRE awareness.

Our school valued the IRE very much. They emphasised it for us since we entered high school. They especially stressed it for us in the key classes. The school instilled the concept in the first two years, that is, you should attend more competitions to prepare for the IRE. Thus, we took part in all kinds of competitions for the IRE. (Urban student, Li, D)

One requirement for the IRE applications is various qualifications, especially prizes in academic competitions. Many high schools in this study had systematic arrangements aimed at improving students' competitiveness by providing IRE-specialised training.

Every year, our school organised the best students to attend the training. Teachers went to gather information, then school paid the money. We lived in Z city for two or three weeks for training. We also had in-school training.



The school selected the top students for extra evening classes. (Urban student, Zi, B)

Urban students who experienced the IRE, either by obtaining bonus points or not, acknowledged that prizes in academic competitions were their major application materials for the IRE. By meeting the basic requirements, they can apply for the IRE either through self-application or school recommendations. Not all high schools are eligible to recommend students. Elite universities allocate small quotas to those high schools which have previously achieved high rate of elite university enrolment. When the application time approaches, those eligible schools recommended potential students to elite universities.

A was recommended by our school. A gave our school quota because our school sent a lot of excellent students to them in previous years. (Urban student, Xin, A)

Due to high schools' good historical records, elite universities allocate them a higher recommendation quota, which facilitated more urban students' access to elite universities through the IRE.

This year, there were 11 students going to A or B. Six or seven of them were through the IRE. (Urban student, Xiaoshuo, C)

The virtuous cycle of cumulative advantages in urban students' stories emerges. Firstly, urban students' previous schooling accumulate them advantages in terms of admission to and study in key high schools in municipal and capital cities. Then, high schools consider the return on their investments. Those 'already excellent' students

are more likely to be supported by high schools regarding the IRE. Secondly, elite universities take high schools' previous graduation rate into consideration; the better the high schools' previous records are, the larger the IRE recommendation quota they allocate. Urban high schools' previously cumulative excellence in admission rate to elite universities increases students' chances of being recommended in the IRE. Urban students' better prospects of securing access to elite universities through the IRE stem from both their own and their high schools' accumulated advantages. Therefore, the *gaokao* alone cannot decide most urban students' access to elite universities. This is in contrast to their rural counterparts, which will be illustrated below.

### **6.3.3.2 'The *gaokao* was all my bets': Rural students' education experiences in high schools**

The data shows that, due to the lack of academic competitiveness during their previous education, most rural students in this study had difficulty attracting high schools' investment based on their IRE-related competence. Secondly, rural high schools were also disadvantaged in human and financial terms regarding their IRE preparations. Additionally, the data implies that rural students' high schools' enrolment record to elite universities was not as competitive as that of urban schools, largely due to the accumulated disadvantages of their high schools. Most rural students in this study placed all their bets on the *gaokao* in terms of their access to elite universities.

When talking about the IRE, most rural students held that they were not competitive in the IRE. They had to place all their bets on the *gaokao*.

I was not qualified for the IRE. I didn't attend competitions, had no prizes.

Few students in our school did. Only one or two students in our school could be admitted to A or B each year. All relied on the *gaokao* scores. (Rural student, Min, C)

I attended the IRE but failed. I applied for A and B. They had many requirements for material reviews. For example, the municipal excellent students and provincial prizes in academic competitions. I didn't pass (the material review). I didn't attend academic competitions. I had no valuable prizes. (Rural student, Meng, A)

As shown above, prizes in academic competitions are a basic requirement for the IRE. However, similar to their experience during basic education, rural students seldom mentioned their academic competition experiences in high schools. The data shows that it was less likely that they attended or won prizes in academic competitions in high schools. This results from rural students' and their high schools' accumulated disadvantages.

Most rural students mentioned their schools' devaluation of the IRE.

Our school still insisted that you should rely on the *gaokao* scores. Our educational concept was still that studying hard could obtain high marks.

They didn't pay attention to the IRE. (Rural student, Bo, B)

The rural students' stories reveal two reasons behind rural high schools' 'old educational concept': rural students' accumulated disadvantages discouraged high schools' activeness; and rural high schools' accumulated disadvantages in the IRE.

As discussed above, high schools consider the return on their investment in the IRE. They are willing to invest in potential students; however, during their previous schooling, most rural students in this study did not have valuable IRE-related experiences, such as prizes in academic competitions. This discouraged rural high schools' activeness.

Our school would like to stress the IRE. However, the students' quality didn't match. At that time, they found the lecturers from A or B to teach us. However, we couldn't catch up. Thus, the lecturers weren't that helpful. I tried to apply but failed. The school also didn't expect us to (pause). You know, they were clear about our potentiality. They invited the lectures just for water testing. Only this, nothing more from the schools, say, support our IRE, nothing. (Rural student, Yang, B)

Facing students' lack of competitiveness, the rural high schools in this study made certain efforts; however, they did not possess the human resources (such as experienced teachers) required to improve their students' ability.

The IRE has existed for so long, but our schoolteachers were not familiar with it. They just taught what been written in the textbooks. They seldom asked us to do deeper exercises, like Olympic Competitions. Maybe, they

couldn't handle them themselves. They were too difficult. (Rural student, Ke, C)

Without internal personnel, some rural high schools tended to seek external resources to improve their students' competitiveness, which means more financial investment. Thus, long-term external recruitment was impractical for rural high schools, leading to less systematic arrangements.

It seemed that the school sometimes, but not often, found some tutors from outside to teach us some difficult questions. The time was squeezed from the cracks, like weekends and self-study time in the evenings. But the frequencies were quite low. There were just several times during three years in high school. Our school didn't have money to pay for the outside teachers. (Rural student, Bin, D)

No rural students actively mentioned their high schools' recommendation in the IRE. When asked about their or their classmates' related experiences, many of them said they were not clear about it. As shown above, the recommendation quota from elite universities is based on high schools' previous enrolment records. As illustrated by the urban students above, urban students' success ratio in the IRE and elite university enrolment is high, such as 'This year, there were 11 students going to A or B in our school. Six or seven of them were through the IRE.' (Urban student, Xiaoshuo, C). Rural students' success ratio in the IRE and elite university enrolment was illustrated as, 'Each year, only one or two students could be admitted to A or B in our whole county.' (Rural student, Mei, C); and 'There were four or five students in our school who applied for the IRE. No one passed.' (Rural student, Meng, A).

Although rural students did not explain explicitly why they did not receive high schools' recommendation in the IRE, in my interpretation, their high schools' low elite university enrolment rate in previous years might be part of the reason.

The vicious cycle of cumulative disadvantages in rural students' stories emerges. Firstly, during preschool and basic education, rural students do not enjoy as many academic resources and opportunities as their urban counterparts. When they enter high school, they are not at the same starting points as urban students, especially in terms of IRE-related competitiveness, which discourages their high schools' motivation for investing in their students' IRE opportunities. Secondly, rural high schools' shortage of human and financial resources leads to less systematic IRE training to improve students' competence. Their previous elite university enrolment rate might earn them a lower recommendation quota from elite universities. Therefore, fewer rural students are able to be admitted to elite universities through the IRE. They can only place all their bets on the *gaokao*.

Notably, Xiang and Xiaojian are exceptions to their rural peers in terms of their IRE experiences. Xiang was admitted to B through the IRE. She obtained 20 bonus points. Xiaojian was admitted to B with 30 bonus points in the IRE. When I tried to find explanations for Xiang's and Xiaojian's experiences in the IRE, their schools' significant roles stand out.

Our school valued the IRE. They let us finish the textbooks as soon as possible. From the third year on, they taught the key class deeper things.  
(Rural student, Xiang, B)

Our school cared about the IRE very much. Before the formal application, they held training for all students. Thus, we had no puzzles. Our school resolved all things for us. They kept training us in Maths, once to twice every week...For the interview, the school assigned us teachers to prepare for the interview. When we arrived in Beijing, they also found us the senior graduates in previous years...They told us what we should be aware of, what the process was. (Rural student, Xiaojian, B)

Xiang's and Xianjian's high schools were more competent in the IRE than other rural students' schools in this study, although they were also at county level. The explanation can be found through the lens of Chinese regional disparities (Qian & Smyth, 2008). Xiang's hometown is Xiamen city, Fujian Province. Xiaojian's is Zhongshan city, Guangdong Province. Guangdong and Fujian provinces belong to the eastern coastal regions which have benefited from advanced economic development. Other rural students in this study are from Henan, Jiangxi, Sichuan and Guizhou provinces. All of them live in western and central regions with weak economic power. Regional educational disparity in China has been focused on in research (Li & Li, 2017; Yao & Shi, 2019). This echoes the discussions of urban and rural, especially the definition of rurality elsewhere, involving various indicators, such as demographic, geographic, cultural and contextual ones (Flora et al., 2016; Leibowitz, 2017; Montgomery, 2020; Roberts & Green, 2013). This study does not deny the intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) of urban and rural with other indicators of social status in China. Chinese regional educational disparities deserve separate attention from this study. In my interpretation, Xiang's and Xiaojian's stories reveal

that schools' roles in rural students' access to elite universities are significant. This is especially evident for those rural students whose parents do not possess enough resources to support their children's study, as discussed in Section 6.1. For example, when there are sufficient conditions for rural high schools to play their roles, Xiang and Xianjian are just 'rural' in terms of their *hukou*. Their competitiveness in the IRE is similar to their urban counterparts.

#### 6.3.4 Section summary

The data in this section indicates that urban students' schooling pathway to elite universities is a virtuous cycle of accumulated advantages, while that of rural students is a vicious cycle of accumulated disadvantages, as the first half of the answer to SRQ 3. It is acknowledged that the students in this study, both urban and rural, are industrious. Firstly, both urban and rural students in this study were admitted to key high schools through excellent performance in *Zhongzhao*. Secondly, they were all engaged in three years' intensive study in high schools, which is an indispensable factor in their successful entry to elite universities. When describing their high school lives, both urban and rural students experienced three years of hard work during high schools. Their daily study routine was similar: studying from around six o'clock in the morning till nearly ten or eleven o'clock at night; being engaged in reciting textbooks or doing numerous subject exercises every day. Urban and rural students' own endeavour is necessary for their access to elite universities. However, the cumulative dis/advantages in urban and rural students' schooling pathways to Chinese elite universities is evident. Having



demonstrated urban and rural students' schooling experiences, I now turn to their experiences outside school time.

#### **6.4 Concerted cultivation versus Free ranging: Chinese urban and rural students' outside school time**

There has been evidence showing students' unequal access to organised activities outside school time among different social groups, such as sports activities and international community assistance. These have increased inequality in terms of attending prestigious universities or even obtaining elite jobs (Reeves & De Vries, 2018; Rivera, 2011; Stevens, 2007). The interview data shows that urban and rural students' outside school time are different: urban students are concertedly cultivated (Lareau, 2003); and rural students are freely ranged. This section will be divided into two subsections. In Section 6.4.1, the data will show that based on urban parents' physical presence in their children's life, urban students' outside school time is comprised of cultural activities with their parents and private tutoring at their parents' request. Urban students gain varied benefits in terms of their overall development and in-school study. Meanwhile, urban parents' leading role in arranging the pace of their children's outside school time reduces urban students' freedom; some urban students feel a sense of 'I had to' regarding those daily activities initiated by their parents. Contrarily, in Section 6.4.2, the data will show that, based on most rural parents' physical absence from their children's life, rural students interact intensively with their extended families. Their outside school time is full of informal play and domestic self-care. Rural students enjoy more childlike freedom; however, their overall well-being faces varied pitfalls.

### **6.4.1 Concerted cultivation: Urban students' outside school time**

As discussed in Chapter 3.1.4, Lareau (2003) uses 'concerted cultivation' (p. 6) to describe middle-class parents' child-rearing style in America, where the author presents how middle-class parents structurally arrange their children's daily life. The data indicates that, outside of school time, urban students are also concertedly cultivated. Specifically, they conduct cultural activities with their parents and receive private tutoring at their parents' request. These bring them various benefits.

#### **6.4.1.1. Urban students' cultural activities with their parents**

The data shows that, based on urban parents' physical presence, outside their children's school time they conducted varied cultural activities with their children, among which home reading and family travelling are the most popular.

Firstly, most urban students mentioned that reading took up a large part of their spare time at home.

Others' dolls were Barbie, mine were books. (Urban student, Li, D)

The data shows that most urban students did not read alone. Home readings happened between urban parents and children.

Since Fang was born, I read to him. When he was little, I read to him every day. I read the original texts to him. I bought a lot of kids' readings. (Urban, Fang's mother, bachelor's degree, bank manager)

Home reading cannot happen without books. Buying books or subscribing to reading materials were often referred to in urban families' stories.

I liked to subscribe to children's literature. Since her birth, I never stopped subscription. I subscribed to extra-curriculum readings every year. (Urban, Linlin's mother, junior college, governmental institution)

Furthermore, book storage at home was a common theme in urban families' stories.

My mother had a lot of books. She was a Chinese teacher. She had many books on the shelf. We had a room exclusively for books. There were plenty of books, I just searched on the shelf. Some of the books were older than me. (Urban student, Yanyan, B)

By subscribing to reading material and storing books, urban students are able to access rich cultural resources. However, possessing cultural resources does not necessarily translate into social profit. For that to happen, these cultural materials must be effectively activated by individuals (Lareau, 2000). In this study, many urban parents' physical presence in terms of reading with their children extended beyond just 'being there'. They also paid constant attention to their children's reading habits.

I bought those books he was interested in. Although he was interested, we, as parents, also needed to check. For example, he wanted to buy cartoons. If I felt that those were not suitable, I won't buy... Besides, there was a book corner in his room. I bought many books. Once he entered the room, he could take one book to read. I put the newly bought books on the easily reachable place. That was to say, I changed the book order regularly. For example, I put those he had already finished on the top. There were ten

levels on the bookshelf. I put those new or helpful books, or his favourites in a convenient place. I kept close attention to what he liked to read every day.

(Urban, Hong's mother, primary school, individual business)

Some urban parents also recalled paying attention to the contents of their children's reading; they adjusted the book order from time to time. In addition to home reading, another frequently mentioned urban family cultural activity is family travelling. When asked why their families are fond of travelling, two reasons emerge: to realise urban parents' physical presence; to broaden urban students' horizons.

Firstly, some urban families regarded family travelling as a good opportunity for parents to present in their children's life. As discussed in Chapter 5, some urban parents were not able to stay with their children 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Family travelling during vacations represent good opportunities for them to realise physical presence in their children's life.

He(father) might feel that he could stay with me. When travelling, we stayed together every day. He accompanied me little during working days, but he travelled with me once he had holidays. (Urban student, Yuan, D)

Secondly, travelling can broaden children's horizons. Some urban parents admitted that they wanted to expand children's knowledge base through travelling.

Of course, travelling was good for her cultivation. Like the saying, it was better for you to travel ten thousand miles than you read ten thousand books. (Urban, Linlin's mother, junior college, public servant)

Apart from home reading and family travelling, some urban children and parents conducted other cultural activities together during leisure time, such as playing English songs (Urban student, Zhao, B) or going to scientific museums (Urban student, Jing, D). Studies have shown the positive correlation between at-home cultural experiences and children's academic ability and achievement (Huntsinger et al., 2016; Manolitsis et al., 2013; Skwarchuk et al., 2014). This study does not claim that urban families' cultural activities, such as family reading or travelling are the only factors leading to urban students' academic success. However, many urban families acknowledged the benefits children obtained from cultural activities with parents.

At least it enriched my knowledge. Besides, we were happy when we three went out together. We could see the outside world. We went to different places to get new perceptions. For example, when you went to the museum, you could know something. If it was not seen by yourself, you won't have such feelings. (Urban, Yanyan, B)

Extracurricular activities can benefit children in the long run. Besides the cultivation of 'natural talents', the benefits also include the development of personal qualities (Levey, 2009; Vincent & Maxwell, 2016) or the soft skills currently being stressed in the job market (Donnelly et al., 2019; Stefansen & Aarseth, 2011). The data in this study shows that, through cultural activities, urban students accumulated knowledge beyond which is learnt from textbooks. They expanded their horizons. The benefits might not be visible instantly. Instead, the urban students in this study accumulated advantages gradually, in unconscious ways.

In addition to cultural activities between urban parents and their children during leisure time, most urban students also engaged in varied private tutoring at their parents' request, including supplementary tutoring in academic subjects and non-academic enrichment courses.

#### **6.4.1.2. Urban students' private tutoring at their parents' request**

In this study, private tutoring refers to those additional study activities outside the school curriculum, for which parents pay the tutors. The data illustrates two aspects of urban students' private tutoring: supplementary tutoring on academic subjects; non-academic enrichment courses. In this study, academic subjects refer to those taught in the Chinese mainstream curriculum. They are counted in the upgrading exam scores, and include Chinese, English and Maths, to name but a few. Extra-curricular subjects such as art and music are also taught in Chinese mainstream schooling, but they are not tested in upgrading exams. They are considered as non-academic.

All urban students highlighted their experiences of supplementary tutoring on academic subjects (which is called supplementary tutoring). Many of them admitted that supplementary tutoring took up a large portion of their outside school time.

I went to the tutoring centre every weekend. The most terrible period was when I stayed there on Friday evenings, the whole Saturdays, the whole Sundays and the entire summer and winter holidays. (Urban student, Fang, C)

Most urban parents, especially mothers, took the lead in proposing supplementary tutoring for their children. Many urban parents admitted that they paid for their children's supplementary tutoring because they were afraid that they will be left behind by their peers.

His English was not like others who could always get 100 points. He was always lost by one point. I was anxious. You knew, one point could be critical in final exams. Thus, I enrolled him an English private tutoring. (Urban, Wen's mother, junior college, insurance company manager)

The data suggests that it was urban parents', especially mothers', anxiety at comparing their own children with others which pushed them to engage their children in the chasing game of attending academic private tutoring. However, such a chasing game is not free for all. Better-off parents are more likely to pay for private tutoring because they can afford it (Cooper, 2014; Park et al., 2016). This resonates with the role of parents' economic capital in their children's education.

Academic excellence is not urban parents' only expectation of their children; they are also concerned with their children's overall development in non-academic aspects. Thus, many urban parents bought non-academic enrichment courses for their children.

Studies have shown that engaging in enrichment activities, such as music, dancing and sport benefits students in varied ways (Donnelly et al., 2019), including their schooling achievements (Schuepbach, 2015) and access to universities (Kaufman & Gabler, 2004). This study does not claim that these enrichment activities determine

students' access to elite universities. However, the data shows that the potential benefits were recognised by most urban parents. Apart from supplementary tutoring on academic subjects, most urban students were also engaged in varied non-academic enrichment courses outside school time, mainly in the arts and sport, at their parents' request. Similar to supplementary tutoring, expressions such as 'my mum thought...', 'it was my mum...', and 'my mum wanted me to...', appeared frequently in most urban students' descriptions of these enrichment courses. For example,

For the normal days, I attended all kinds of courses from Mondays to Sundays. Electronic organ, piano, Kongfu, painting. Oh! I forgot Latin. I felt that my mum wanted me to develop comprehensively. (Urban student, Zi, B)

Enrichment activity is one way in which parents invest in their children's future, including their competitiveness in education (Vincent & Ball, 2007). In this study, urban parents, mainly urban mothers, had three motives which drive them to buy their children's enrichment courses.

Firstly, many urban parents believed that attending enrichment courses can contribute to their children's comprehensive development, including intelligence improvement (Urban, Linlin's mother, junior college, public servant), talent learning (Urban student, Yuan, D), physical health (Urban student, Wen, C; Urban student, Yanyan, B; Urban student, Zi, B) and a strong will (Urban, Xiaoshuo' mother, bachelor's degree, public servant).



Secondly, immersing children in a study environment through enrichment courses was the primary intention of some urban parents.

For us parents, we would give him free time. Also, we were willing to pay tutors to teach him, to give him a study environment, to let him be in a study status, to let him have the study awareness. (Urban, Zhao's father, high school, state-owned company engineer)

As opposed to urban parents' descriptions of the varied enrichment courses they enrolled their children in, Li's mother expressed her regrets,

I never registered her any talents courses. It was all up to her. If she wanted to learn, she would go. If she did not like, that's it. Thus, I am now (pause), other children could this, could that. My daughter had no (pause), except painting. She could play *dizi* (a traditional instruments), which she liked. Others (pause), she didn't benefit much like others. Others had talents. It seemed that never forcing her had been a regret. (Urban, Li's mother, bachelor's degree, public servant)

Li's mother regretted that she did not register her daughter for as many talent courses as others. However, Li learnt painting and *dizi*. Li's mother reveals an 'open secret' among most urban parents as below,

An advertising could illustrate parents' psychology. There was no best, but better. (Urban, Linlin's mother, junior college, public servant)

Privileged parents' educational practices are responses to their anxieties in securing privileges (Vincent & Ball, 2007; Ball, 2006), although some of them have a certain degree of 'assuredness' (Irwin & Elley, 2011, p. 486). Many urban parents admitted that their children's peers influenced their choice of enrichment courses. For example,

His classmates were learning something, which had some influence on me. If he wanted to be better than others, he needed to earn more. (Urban, Hong's mother, primary school, individual business)

'Better' is a comparable form. When only being compared with others, one can be called better or worse. Helping their children be better than others was some urban parents' third motive regarding children's enrichment courses. This reflects urban parents' anxiety in 'making up' their children where 'reproduction appears uncertain' (Vincent & Ball, 2007, p. 1061). The three factors above motivate most urban parents, especially mothers, to pay for their children's varied enrichment courses. If private tutoring can help students become more mature, the precondition is to buy it first. Urban parents' possession of economic capital is the first step in making that happen. The positive influence of supplementary tutoring on in-school study was recognised in urban families' stories.

The Maths tutoring helped me to adapt to Maths study quickly. It laid a solid ground for my later study. To be honest, I felt it difficult at the beginning. Then I attended private tutoring. Thus, I turned the disadvantages to advantages. (Urban student, Xin, A)

In terms of non-academic enrichment activities, from urban students' perspectives as shown above, they 'had to' be forced by their parents. Many urban parents, however, expressed their satisfaction and pride regarding the benefits their children gained from enrichment courses.

She started to learn painting from kindergarten. She began with children's painting, then started to learn oil painting from the third or fourth grade until the end of middle school. When she graduated from the middle school, she released a painting album! Did you see my background wall? (pointed me to her background wall in WeChat video interview). These were all her paintings! (Urban, Yuan's mother, bachelor's degree, state-owned company manager)

Money by itself cannot necessarily guarantee a child's ability to flourish (Smith, 2018). However, their parents' efforts in paying for the cultural activities and private tutoring facilitate urban students in gaining benefits to their overall quality, both academic and non-academic.

So far, the data has shown that outside school time, urban students were concertedly cultivated by means of their parents' physical presence. However, many urban parents in this study tended to control their children's pace of life. Through urban families' stories, expressions such as 'She forced me', 'I registered him', were often heard. When talking about their outside school time, especially about their private tutoring, some urban students expressed a sense of 'I had to'. For example,

I started to learn dancing from my first grade. It was because my mum wanted me to. She felt that a girl should have a graceful figure. But for me...I wasn't happy when I was dancing. They asked me to learn, I just did it...Later, I told them I didn't want to learn anymore. Because I stopped dancing, I had spare time. Then she asked me what I wanted to learn. She felt that doing body exercises was good, then I had to learn taekwondo. (Urban student, Xi, C)

Although some urban students expressed a sense of 'I had to' regarding some of their parents' arrangements about their daily activities, few conveyed negative comments on their childhood life experiences. Instead, they depicted childhood memories in a warm hue.

I felt warm every time I thought of childhood. I felt that I had a different childhood from my cohorts... I felt that they were right to (pause), kind of force me a little bit when I was little. They were good for my growing. I experienced a colourful childhood. I thought it was quite an unusual childhood experience. It is still a very warm and happy memory for me now. (Urban student, Wen, C)

Being structured by parents' outside school arrangements, urban students might experience a reduction of certain childhood freedoms. However, when recalling their childhood after growing up, they did not comment negatively. Similar to Wen, urban families' stories basically indicate that urban students gained varied benefits through being concertedly cultivated. This resonates with previous studies in terms

of the positive influence of concerted cultivation on children's development (See Chapter 3.1.4).

In summary, this section illustrates how urban students are concertedly cultivated outside school time, which is based on urban parents' physical presence and economic capital. Urban students gain varied benefits to their in-school study and overall development, although they might lose certain freedoms. Contrarily, their rural counterparts have different outside school experiences. This will be presented below.

#### **6.4.2 Free ranging: Rural students' outside school time**

'Free-ranging' appeared in several rural families' descriptions about children's outside school life. For example,

It was a free-ranging style. I just did this, that. (Rural student, Yang, B)

While not using the same expressions, others conveyed similar views, such as,

In the rural, when you were around three or four years old, once you were able to walk, nobody controlled you. You just went out during the daytime, then back for dinner. It is not necessary to have someone look after you in the rural. (Rural student, Ke, C)

The data in what follows will show why and how rural students are 'freely ranged'. Specifically, due to rural parents' physical absence, rural students interact with extended families intensively. Rural extended families, especially grandparents assume quasi-parental roles in rural students' lives (Section 6.4.2.1). Given that the

rural grandparents in this study are facing life hardships, most rural students' outside school time mainly consists of informal plays and domestic self-care. Being freely ranged outside school time brings pitfalls regarding rural students' overall well-being (Section 6.4.2.2).

#### **6.4.2.1 Rural students' intensive interactions with extended families**

Due to rural parents' physical absence, the data reveals that most rural students interacted with extended families intensively in their daily lives. An example is Ke, who introduced me to his *ershū* (father's second younger brother). Ke mentioned that,

My parents involved in my education little... The children in my family clan were all cultivated by my *ershū*. (Rural student, Ke, C)

Ke's example about senior kin's significant role in rural students' education is not a common theme in this study. However, some other rural families had similar experiences regarding extended families', especially grandparents' and senior relatives' quasi-parental roles in rural students' outside school life.

When my parents were out, the only people I interacted with were my *yeye* and *nainai*, my *gugu* (father's sister). My *gugu* accompanied me in my daily life. She took me out to eat, to play. (Rural student, Di, A)

Many rural students mentioned that when rural parents were not at home, their grandparents and parents' siblings took care of them; their parents' siblings regarded them as their own children. When asked why their extended families

regard them as their own children, two rural students gave the same answer, 'Because we are one family' (Rural student, Ke, C; Rural student, Mei, C). Some rural families expressed similar views. The rural families took for granted the fact that the definition of family is extended. It is partly because, in this study, it was common for rural extended families to live together.

For rural students whose parents are village farmers, it was normal for them to live with grandparents and near to relatives. For example,

My *shushu*'s (father's brother) homestead and ours were assigned as neighbours. My *yeye* and *nainai* (father's parents) lived with my *shushu* and us in turn. (Rural student, Xiaojian, B)

My *gugu* married one of the villagers. Their home was less than 200 metres from ours. (Rural student, Di, A)

For some rural students whose parents are migrant workers, it was normal for them to live with senior kin and grandparents together. For example,

My *yeye* and *nainai* lived with my *shushu*. I lived with my *yeye* and *nainai*. Thus, when I was little, my families were my *yeye* and *nainai*, *shushu* and *shenshen* (*shushu*'s wife). (Rural student, Bin, D)

Grandparents as caregivers, especially for left-behind children, is common in Chinese rural society (China Charities Aid foundation for Children, 2018; Ouyang, 2019; Xie, 2019). In this study, rural grandparents were also presumed to take the significant roles in rural students' daily life when rural parents were physical absent.

However, the data shows that some grandparents were also struggling from life hardships, such as low standards of living and bad health.

*My yeye and nainai* were still receiving the minimum living guarantee in the rural. (Rural student, Wan, C)

His *yeye* and *nainai* got sick quite often. We needed to take care of them. We should give them money when they were sick. The youngers and the seniors all needed money. We had a heavy burden. (Rural, Bo's mother, middle school, farmer)

Studies show that due to old age, bad health or lack of knowledge about good parenting and the shortage of labour at home, rural seniors appear indifferent to children's nutrition and rebellious behaviours (Ye & Pan, 2011). No rural students talked about their extended families' indifference towards them. However, given that their parents were absent; their grandparents tended to assume quasi-parental roles; and rural grandparents were facing life hardships, most rural students were freely ranged outside school time.

#### **6.4.2.2 Rural students are freely ranged outside school time**

Existing literature has shown that children in disadvantaged families are less involved in out-of-school or extra-curricular activities (Bennett et al., 2012; Donnelly et al., 2019). The data in this study shows that being freely ranged, most rural students' outside school time consisted of informal play and domestic self-



care. Being freely ranged brought certain pitfalls in terms of rural students' overall well-being.

When describing their outside school time, especially during their early years, most rural students stressed that they just played in the villages. As presented above, rural students interacted intensively with extended families who typically lived in the same or nearby villages. Usually, rural students played with family peers or village peers.

They (parents) all went out. I just played with the kids in our neighbourhood, or with my elder brothers or sisters, like my cousins. (Rural student, Xiang, B)

Most of their play was informal. For example, males tended to gravitate towards mischief.

I was just in the streets. There were many peers. We were all those whose parents worked during the daytime, or they went to grow vegetables. We played together. For example, we stole peaches, burned frogs. Messy things like these. (Rural student, Yang, B)

Female's activities were more 'civilised' in an unstructured style.

We just did whatever we liked. You know, such things like hide and seek, jumping bands, or watching animations. Very free style. (Rural student, Wan, C)

No rural students actively mentioned their experiences regarding private tutoring.

When I asked whether they had related experiences, most rural families offered

negative answers. They stressed that no private tutoring centres were accessible to them during school ages.

Who had ever known things like private tutoring? We never enrolled in outside school study. We had no such conditions...Never heard of it before.

(Rural, Bo's mother, middle school)

One meaning of 'private' tutoring comes from its profit characteristic (Bray, 1999). In this study, most rural parents did not possess enough economic capital to buy for-profit services, such as private tutoring. It is not surprising that profit institutions could not be found in their villages. Min is the only rural student who experienced a short period of private tutoring during middle school. It was short because she understood that her parents could not afford it. Therefore,

I quit after several times. It was expensive, 70 RMB per class. (Rural student, Min, C)

Min's parent's annual combined income in 2017 was just 15 thousand RMB. 70 RMB per class was significant annual figure for her family. Min understood that attending private tutoring adds to her parents' financial burden; thus, she gave up. Not having an extra study burden but being able to play freely does not paint the whole picture of rural students' outside school time in this study. Many also engaged in domestic self-care.

Many rural families talked about children cooking for themselves or helping parents to do housework and farm work, even at an early age.

Since he was very little, he helped with housework. We were stuck in farm work, couldn't return home. He helped us with those trivial things we had no time to do. He helped with any housework. It was mainly because of our family's condition. He helped with any housework. We had large lands. He went to the farmlands to give us a hand. Growing tobacco, weeding, he helped with anything he could. (Rural, Bo's mother, middle school, farmer)

None of the rural students were forced by their parents to do housework or farm work. Their stories show that in rural students' eyes, helping their families was taken for granted. For example,

Especially when I was growing up, of course, I did farm work. I did everything. For example, growing the vegetables, potatoes, corn and so on. I did the farm work immediately after meals. (Rural student, Di, A)

Many rural students understand parents' hardships with regard to putting food on the table. Rural students' empathy towards their parents' hardships leads to their own self-reliance domestically. Such an empathetic understanding of their families' hardships might help them in their access to elite universities, which has been demonstrated in Section 6.2.

So far, the rural families' stories have illustrated how rural students were freely ranged outside school time. Growing up in free-ranging ways means that rural students enjoyed more childlike freedom than their urban counterparts. However, being freely ranged also brought certain pitfalls to rural students' overall well-being as they grow up.

Although none of the rural students expressed bitterness with regard to their childhood memories, they wish they had better ones.

Though my childhood was a happy memory, I wanted a more colourful one.

My childhood was grey. Usually, we did destructions in the village. It was a naughty period. (Rural student, Yang, B)

Rural students' outside school time was full of freedom but, at the same time, it was not easy. Without their parents' company, some rural students' safety was at risk.

At that time, I was naughty. I was just playing on the stairs, no adults, just little kids. I fell from the stairs, hurt nose nerve. From then on, I bleed once I was basked or touched something. Often, I woke up to find that pillow was full of blood. (Rural student, Min, C)

This resonates with what urban parents said above, 'Something could happen in a minute, in a second.' (Urban, Hong's mother, primary school, individual business). Several rural families recalled specific incidents involving rural students when they were small. Although no tragedies happened, the risks rural students faced are evident. However, it does not mean that rural parents in this study did not realise the potential risks. Instead, their absence made them powerless to help in such situations.

What could you do? Nothing. I needed to work. His mother was doing farm work at home. His *nainai* was sick. Luckily, nothing dangerous happened.

How to say, I was not qualified. (Rural, Yang's father, middle school, rural schoolteacher)

The sense of guilt is strong among several rural mothers when recalling their children's childhood.

One time, the theme of a parent meeting was to let students tell how nice their parents were. I saw other children (silent tears), I saw them crying in their mother's arms, but he was untouched. After the meeting, I asked him why he had no tears. He said that I couldn't recall anything touchable you did. My feeling, at that time (silent tears). (Rural, Di's mother, middle school, farmer [migrant worker])

Rural parents' powerlessness and self-contradictions are intertwined. Chinese rural parents leave their children behind for the sake of earning a better living in urban cities. Some studies show that some rural migrant parents can improve families' financial situation, thus promoting investment in their education (Lee & Park, 2010; Mu & Brauw, 2015). However, material improvements come at the price of changed rural parents' functions. The data above shows that the price is the diminishment of parents' roles in providing emotional and academic support. Some studies reveal that, due to being physically separated from parents, left-behind children encounter long-term negative influences on their overall well-being (Hu et al., 2014; Yiu & Yun, 2017), such as physical development (Wu & Li, 2016) and educational attainment (Biao, 2007). Chinese rural left-behind children's disadvantages are considered as double: being poor and without parents (Hong & Fuller, 2019). The data in this study indicates that rural parents' absence partly

results in their children being freely ranged outside school time, which brings pitfalls in terms of their children's overall well-being.

### **6.4.3 Section summary**

This section echoes the previous literature to show that disparities in students' activities outside school time can influence their academic achievements, access to HE, even future life chances (Reeves & De Vries, 2018; Rivera, 2011; Stevens, 2007). The data in this section is the second half of the answer to SRQ 3: Being concertedly cultivated, urban students accumulate advantages outside school time. Contrarily, most rural students are freely ranged outside school time, through which they face certain pitfalls in terms of their overall well-being.

## **6.5 Chapter conclusion**

In this chapter, I present the findings aiming to answer the three SRQs. Specifically, Chinese urban and rural parents play differentiated roles within and outside families in their children's access to Chinese elite universities (answering SRQ 1). This echoes the previous studies about parents' differentiated roles among different social groups (See Chapter 3.1.4). This shows how privileged parents transmit their capital advantages to their children's academic advantages (Bourdieu, 1985, 1996b, 1990). Additionally, it adds an illustration of how less privileged parents' shortage of certain capital constrains their roles in their children's education. This section also shows the three contributing factors in Chinese rural students' access to Chinese elite universities (answering SRQ 2). It is of significance, especially in shifting the deficit view of less privileged parents' roles in their

children's education. This will be discussed in Chapter 7. Furthermore, I show how urban and rural students accumulate advantages and disadvantages respectively in and outside school time (answering SRQ 3). This is of significance in showing the cumulative dis/advantages mechanism by taking into consideration of students' previous life stories before their entry to elite universities. Having addressed the three SRQs, the next chapter will turn to answering the MRQ by drawing the data together.

## **Chapter 7 Understanding Chinese urban and rural students' access to Chinese elite universities**

The purpose of this chapter is to draw the big picture: 'Two trajectories, one destination' by synthesising the findings to answer and understand the MRQ:

### **How do Chinese urban and rural students achieve access to Chinese elite universities?**

By achieving this, I will show that the data, on the one hand, echoes the capital approach based on the social reproduction theory to show the relationships between parents' capital and their children's education (Bourdieu, 1985, 1996b, 1990). On the other hand, it illustrates the two types of dialectical relationships between social structure and human agency (Hays, 1994): structurally reproductive agency and structurally transformative agency. I will justify that merely adopting the capital approach limits our understanding of how less privileged students (rural students in this study) achieve academic success. Closely related, this leads to a deficit view of less privileged parents' roles (rural parents in this study) in their children's education. This partly results from the fact that Bourdieu's social reproduction stance (Bourdieu, 1977a; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) in the educational field weakens his own efforts to end the impasse between structure and agency. It limits the role of human agency in making possible social changes (Joas & Knöb, 2011; Yang, 2014). In Chinese institutional, educational and cultural contexts, I advocate to draw on Sharon Hays' (1994) proposal of the dialectical relationships between social structure and human agency. This helps me to explore



the complexity of Chinese urban and rural students' disparities in access to Chinese elite universities. Therefore, I suggest that the dialectical relationships between social structure and human agency is a supplement to the capital approach to answer the research questions in this study and to understand the educational disparities between the privileged and the less privileged social groups.

## **7.1 Capital reproduction**

As discussed in Chapter 3, Bourdieu (1977) posits that capital exclusively represents the assets of those already privileged. Many researchers worldwide draw on the capital approach to show how privileged parents transmit their capital advantages to their children's academic advantages by playing varied roles in their children's education (Barg, 2019; Gupta, 2019; Lareau, 2003; Reay, 2002). Bourdieu (1986) proposes the reproduction of economic, cultural and social capital through their conversion. In the conversion process, economic capital is the root of the other two capitals. The data regarding urban parents' roles in their children's access to Chinese elite universities in this study supports the capital reproduction of the privileged in their children's education. Additionally, it adds an illustration of how Chinese rural parents' (the less privileged) shortage of certain capital is transmitted to their limited involvement in their children's access to Chinese elite universities.

### **7.1.1. Capital reproduction enables urban parents' roles**

The data in this study shows that through capital reproduction, urban parents' roles in their children's access to Chinese elite universities are enabled. Although Chapter

6 has provided evidence to support capital reproduction in most urban families' stories, Xi's case is representative.

His father said, you should concentrate on taking care of Xi at home and I would find someone to replace your teaching. Haha (embarrassing laughing). It was difficult to make job suspension (pause). I am afraid that you would laugh at me. Haha (embarrassing laughing). (I comforted her and restated the protection of her privacy. She continued). OK, I regarded you as one of us. We paid the school to find the temporary teachers to replace me. Eh (pause). Her father worked in governmental office, you know, he had *guanxi* with educational departments. That was this case. I didn't go to work at that time. I was dedicated to taking care of Xi completely. (Urban, Xi's mother, junior college, urban schoolteacher)

Xi's mother suspended her job to dedicate herself to taking care of her daughter. Firstly, it was because Xi's father recognised the significance of staying with Xi (embedded cultural capital). Xi's mother agreed with her husband's view, otherwise she would not suspend her job - evidence of the role of cultural capital. Xi's mother's successful job suspension, on the one hand, was based on the extra money they paid the school to find temporary teachers - evidence of the role of economic capital. On the other hand, it was because Xi's father had *guanxi* with individuals in educational departments. Xi's mother's embarrassing laughs and hesitations indicate that such conduct might not be ethical in her mind, but the importance of staying with Xi finally overcame ethics - evidence of the activation of

social capital. In what follows, I will analyse the capital reproduction of the privileged based on the discussions of urban students' stories in previous chapters.

Firstly, urban parents' possession of economic capital is at the root of many roles they play in their children's access to Chinese elite universities, including (1) their physical presence; (2) buying their children better educational resources in best schools; (3) urban parent-children interaction at home; (4) structuring their children's outside school time; and (5) their activation of social capital.

In the first place, the realisation of some urban parents' physical presence in their children's life comes from their formal employment status. This provides them with a stable income, a relaxed mood and affordability for the loss of one household breadwinner by suspension and resignation, as discussed in Chapter 5. When urban students are away from home, whether living in boarding schools or going to Beijing for the IRE, urban parents' physical presence is not reduced as they can afford the travel costs associated with visiting boarding schools in capital cities and the IRE examination escort in Beijing. Outside families, urban parents' physical presence partly provides the opportunity for their interactions with their children's schoolteachers and other parents regarding their children's schooling matters.

Urban parents' possession of economic capital also facilitates some urban students' enjoyment of quality educational resources in key schools. Urban parents' economic capital supports their children's schooling in high-end kindergartens. They can afford homes in school districts and transition fees in key schools. Two examples of urban parents giving teachers red pockets and cosmetics in Chapter 6 clearly exemplify urban parents' use of economic capital to win teachers' special

treatment of their children. Additionally, urban parents' involvement in their children's schooling within families and outside families is also supported by their monetary investment. For example, within families, urban parents buy material rewards to encourage their children's good performance. Outside families, buying homes in school district residences brings convenience for urban parents' interactions with teachers and other parents.

Additionally, the urban parents' realisation of the need to structure their children's outside school time results from their ability to afford cultural activities (buying books and family travelling) and private tutoring. Specifically, it is urban parents' economic capital which supports subscriptions to reading materials, books and travelling expenses. The data shows the intensive private tutoring that urban students experienced, which is supported by their parents' economic capital. This echoes previous research showing a strong relationship between parents' socioeconomic backgrounds and the likelihood of their children's attendance at private tutoring, both academic and non-academic (Kim & Lee, 2010; Kirby, 2016; Liu, 2017; Pallegedara & Mottaleb, 2018; Sutton Trust, 2019; Zhang & Xie, 2016). As Bourdieu claims: 'economic capital is at the root of all the other types of capital' and it is 'at the root of other capital's effects' (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 242). In this study, urban parents' possession of economic capital facilitates many of their roles.

Secondly, urban parents' cultural capital promotes their utilisation of economic capital and certain parents' roles. According to the three forms of cultural capital proposed by Bourdieu (1986) (See Chapter 3), urban parents' embodied cultural capital includes their recognition of the significance of accompanying their children;

their recognition of the benefits to children brought by cultural activities; and their sense of entitlement and confidence regarding their children's schooling matters. Based on such dispositions of minds, they are willing to prioritise staying with their children at home, at the expense of their own career development; to buy cultural materials; to pay for cultural activities; to involve themselves systematically in children's at-home study; and to intervene assertively in their children's in-school study.

Urban parents' objectified cultural capital includes owning reading materials, book storage, and broadband. Owning cultural goods facilitates urban parent-children interactions at home, such as reading together. An internet connection makes long-distance communication between urban parent-teacher and urban parent-parent possible. As presented in Chapter 5, most urban parents in this study are well-educated, having high level educational qualifications. Urban parents' institutionalised cultural capital implies their literacy, represented by their educational qualifications and digital literacy. This facilitates their supervision and instruction of their children's homework and exam results. For example, parents and children would not be able to read together if urban parents could not read. Based on their digital literacy, they are able to play administrative roles in their children's IRE applications, including searching online IRE information and uploading application materials.

Furthermore, urban parents' personal educational experience, indicated by their educational qualifications, is the source of their sense of entitlement and confidence regarding their children's education. Thus, they regard their children's

education as their natural job, exemplified by their systematic involvement in their children's schooling processes. For example, urban parents' first-hand educational experience makes them counsellors, able to provide advice when their children make HE choices.

Notably, these three forms of cultural capital do not function separately but form a combined force. For example, without recognition of reading's benefits, it is less likely for urban parents to read with their children even if they possess cultural resources and are literate. To sum up, urban parents' possession of economic capital and cultural capital facilitate each other. Specifically, embedded cultural capital (recognition of significance) promotes the activation of economic capital, e.g., resignation and paying for cultural activities. Economic capital (money), in turn, is used to own objectified cultural capital, e.g., cultural goods. In this way, some urban parental roles in their children's access to Chinese elite universities become possible.

Thirdly, as discussed in Chapter 3.1.2, I regard social capital as a resource (Lin, 2001b; Wacquant, 1992) embedded in *guanxi* (interpersonal relationships) in a Chinese context. Urban parents' activation of social capital is through their use of *guanxi*. Their possession of social capital existing in their *guanxi* enables their roles as bridges in linking individuals in their social networks with their children. This contributes to urban students' enjoyment of better educational resources.

Horizontally speaking, *guanxi* is a reflection of urban parents' broad social networks of educational or educational-related individuals. These people enjoy strategic positions (such as school principals, educational officers) in educational circles. They

benefit urban students' enjoyment of better educational opportunities. When some urban parents do not know people with educational power directly, they have friends who do. Through their friends, urban parents activate bridging social capital existing in their *guanxi* with friends' friends. This is further developed in the relationships between their children and friends' friends. This is another example of activation of linking social capital.

Vertically speaking, urban parents' use of *guanxi* in this study indicates that urban parents have a higher social status within the power hierarchy. One characteristic of *guanxi* is reciprocity (Yan, 1996b). A reason that urban parents can successfully activate social capital through their *guanxi* is that it is highly possible that they can pay back those who helped them. This implies that urban parents in this study might be powerful individuals in other fields. By this token, urban parents' successful activation of social capital partly reflects their similar social status with those powerful individuals. Bourdieu (1985) posits that individuals are 'assigned a position, a location or a precise class of neighbouring positions' (p. 724) according to the volume and composition of their capital. In this vein, urban parents' social status is based on the totality of their capital. Thus, the role of urban parents' social capital in their children's access to Chinese elite universities originates from their possession of the other two forms of capital.

### **7.1.2. Capital reproduction constrains rural parents' roles**

In contrast to urban parents' possession of capital enabling their roles, the data shows that rural parents' shortage of certain capital constrains them taking

concrete educational actions during their children's paths to Chinese elite universities.

Firstly, rural parents' shortage of economic capital partly explains that they cannot be physically present in their children's life and education. This is shown in Chapter 5 by their employment status as self-employed farmers or temporary rural migrant works with low and unstable incomes; in this study, the annual incomes of all rural parents in 2017 were below those of urban parents. During the interviews, they expressed their daily concerns with earning a livelihood, which partly led to their physical absence from their children's daily life, including schooling. Furthermore, their physical absence due to formidable financial conditions prevented interaction with their children's teachers and other parents regarding their children's schooling, as shown in Chapter 6.

Secondly, rural parents' low educational levels (institutionalised cultural capital), on the one hand, ensure that they are not able to instruct their children's study within families, even if they were at home. On the other hand, it leads to a lack of confidence in their own educational competence and a sense of inferiority when facing their children's schoolteachers. This is one aspect of rural parents' embodied cultural capital. Bourdieu (1987) notes that embodied cultural capital can be 'converted into an integral part of the person...' (p. 48). It 'implies habit or unthinking-ness in actions and dispositions...to act in a certain way, to grasp experience in a certain way, to think in a certain way' (Grenfell & James, 1998, p. 14-15). Rural parents' lack of confidence and sense of inferiority when facing their



children's teachers causes their 'unthinking-ness' to say 'I don't know' regarding their children's study at home; they regard education as teachers' sole expertise.

Another aspect of rural parents' embodied cultural capital is their deterministic educational concept: considering their children as *xuexi de liao* (born learners). As shown in Chapter 6, rural parents believe that it is their children's innate intelligence that finally determines their academic success. This is embedded in their minds. Thus, they are unthinkingly passive in their educational methods within and outside families.

Thirdly, rural parents' use of *guanxi* regarding their children's schooling is narrowed down to their fellow villagers, the expressive ties (Hwang, 1987). Few rural parents know powerful educational personnel. The only exception (Ke's *ershū*) failed to activate linking social capital existing in his *guanxi* with his school principal due to 'we were grass roots' (Rural, Ke's *ershū*, rural schoolteacher). This implies his social status was lower than the school principle. Rural parents' capital shortage limits their roles in their children's paths to Chinese elite universities. Without rural parents physically being there, they are not able to interact with their children, their children's teachers, other parents and others in their social networks. Indeed, as shown in Chapter 6.2, rural parents, rural students and rural teachers all play contributing roles in rural students' access to Chinese elite universities. Without rural parents being the intermediary party, it would be difficult to find the same solidarity and strength to support rural students' access to Chinese elite universities as their urban counterparts.

This section illustrates how the data in this study partly echoes the capital approach in explaining the educational disparities between the privileged (Chinese urban *hukou*-ers) and the less privileged (Chinese rural *hukou*-ers). It is achieved through the lens of parents' roles. Bourdieu supports the social reproduction stance in the educational field (Bourdieu, 1977a; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). He claims that individuals' social positions are decided by the volume and composition of their capital (Bourdieu, 1985). Within a specific field (the educational field in this study), individuals with a different social status (social class in his study) are mutually excluded (Bourdieu, 1996a).

Although he admits that actors can take position-taking strategies in a particular field (Bourdieu, 1993b), these strategies respond to their habitus: a long-lasting disposition of mind with classed homogeneity (Bourdieu, 1977b, 2004). A specific habitus is moulded by the rules within the corresponding field, where its members inevitably have to adapt to the prior habitus (Joas & Knöb, 2011). However, one's prior habitus is determined by his objective and pre-determined position in the field (Bourdieu, 1977b). Following this line, it is less likely for less privileged students and parents to make changes to their positions in the educational field. If merely adopting the capital approach, it is less possible to answer SRQ 2: How do Chinese rural students achieve access to Chinese elite universities?

Bourdieu places too much emphasis on reproduction rather than changes (Yang, 2014). In my interpretation, the capital approach based on Bourdieu's social reproduction theory in educational research sees agency, the self-determining autonomy through a closed lens of classed and stratified power relationships

(Marginson, 2008). It can partly explain how privileged parents positively contribute to their children's education. However, it limits our understanding of less privileged students' and their parents' agency to make social changes. It leads to a deficit view of less privileged parents' roles in their children's education. Specific to this study, to fully understand the complexity of Chinese urban and rural students' access to Chinese elite universities, the dialectical relationships between social structure and human agency proposed by Sharon Hays (1994) are explanatory. I suggest it as a supplement to the capital approach to understand the educational disparities between the privileged and the less privileged.

## **7.2 The dialectical relationships between social structure and human agency**

According to Hays (1994), social structures range from a system of meaning (culture), rules and resources to a durable system, such as political instruments and institutions. Human agency, in its simplified term, refers to social choices. It can be both conscious and unconscious with intended or unintended consequences (pp. 61-65). Through a dialectical lens, she constructs the relationship between social structure and human agency into two types: structurally reproductive agency and structurally transformative agency. The former admits that structures act as both the sources and outcomes of human agency, where social structures are simultaneously enabling and constraining. The latter stresses the power of human agency in producing social changes (Hays, 1994). In my interpretation, it is explanatory in terms of its dialectical lens, compared to the capital approach based on social reproduction theory in educational research. It pays attention to a deeper

part of social structure: culture. This is of significance for Chinese education research which is under the 'Post-Confucian Model' (Marginson, 2013). Furthermore, the two dialectical types of relationships between social structure and human agency are clear and operable in responding to the data in this study. This will be presented in the following discussions.

Based on the above conceptualisations, social structures in Chinese urban and rural students' access to Chinese elite universities in this study include the *hukou* system; the Chinese educational system, including the IRE and the existing rules of school choice; and Chinese culture values regarding HE. Human agencies include urban and rural parents' roles in their children's education and rural students' and rural teachers' roles in rural students' access to Chinese elite universities. In what follows, I will illustrate the structurally reproductive agency in Section 7.2.1. By achieving this, I will compare how social structures enable urban students' while constraining rural students' access to Chinese elite universities. I will illustrate the structurally transformative agency in Section 7.2.2. This is mainly achieved by analysing rural students' successful access to Chinese elite universities.

### **7.2.1 Structurally reproductive agency**

One facet of structurally reproductive agency stresses that social structures are simultaneously enabling and constraining (Hays, 1994). The data shows that social structures in urban students' access to Chinese elite universities are enabling. These include the Chinese educational system: the IRE and the existing rule of school choice. The IRE enables urban students to perform their and their high schools' cumulative academic advantages. The existing rule of school choice enables urban

parents' choice and urban students' enjoyment of better educational resources. Contrarily, the Chinese educational system combined with the associated effects from the *hukou* system are constraining social structures in rural students' access to Chinese elite universities. The IRE excludes rural students due to their and their high schools' cumulative academic disadvantages. Due to the associated effects of the *hukou* system, Chinese rural students are excluded from enjoying the same educational resources as their urban counterparts. An exception specific to this study is Chinese cultural values towards HE. It might play a potential enabling role in rural students' successful access to Chinese elite universities.

In terms of the IRE, as shown in Chapter 2, one main entry requirement for the material review in the IRE is prizes in academic competitions and extra-curriculum activities. In order to obtain the qualifications showing all-round abilities, students need to attend extra-curriculum activities which are affordable for rich families, but beyond the reach of lower income families (Karabel, 2005). As discussed in Chapter 6, urban schools provide their students with many opportunities for academic competitions, and urban parents can afford all kinds of non-academic enrichment courses outside their children's school time. The data in this study indicates that the IRE plays a vital insurance role in urban students' access to Chinese elite universities, including admission and subject choices. Urban students' agency in standing out in the IRE cannot be denied. However, compared to their rural counterparts, the design of the IRE, especially the material review requirements, facilitates the presentation of urban students' human agency in terms of their academic

competitiveness. The IRE, as the enabling social structure, helps urban students' successful entry to Chinese elite universities. This contrasts with their rural peers.

Compared to their urban peers, whose families can afford academic and extra-curriculum competitions to win all kinds of prizes, rural students tend to primarily rely on their school performance records for the first-round material reviews in the IRE (Cheng, 2013). The existing literature has also criticised the fact that the written examination and interview questions in the IRE discriminate against rural students (Liang, 2010; Zheng, 2010). Due to the scarce number of rural students in this study with IRE experiences, they did not provide enough data to reveal if the design of the IRE examination questions discriminated against them. However, the evidence from previous studies suggests ways in which Chinese rural students are being excluded. The example, *'please present your opinion on the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen'* was criticised as being more supportive to students from urban cities, because their rural peers living in the remote countryside did not have the channels with which to access such international news (Liang, 2010). Besides, the data in this study shows that most rural students do not accumulate the relevant competitiveness during their previous educational process. For example, they do not experience as many academic competitions as their urban counterparts in primary and middle schools. Thus, it is less likely for them to attend or win prizes in academic competitions in high schools. Their high schools also become discouraged in the face of their students' lack of competitiveness in the IRE. Two exceptions in this study are Xiang and Xiaojian, as discussed in Chapter 6.3.3. Xiang and Xiaojian gained bonus points in the IRE illustrating that high schools can

facilitate rural students' competitiveness in the IRE. However, as shown in Chapter 6.3.3, most rural high schools are also in a disadvantaged situation in the IRE. There are no experienced teachers to improve rural students' competitiveness in academic competitions; they cannot afford to hire external teaching staff; and their prior records with regard to enrolment rate to elite universities are not as competitive as urban schools. This partly explains the devaluation of the IRE in most rural high schools regarding their students' access to elite universities. Although most rural students in this study finally achieved access to Chinese elite universities without the bonus points in the IRE, rural students' exclusion in the IRE cannot be denied.

Another enabling social structure for urban students and their parents is the existing rule of school choice in China. Human agency starts as 'social choice that occurs within structurally defined limits among structurally provided alternatives.' (Hays, 1994, p. 65). Although the official rule of the school assignment in China is *jiujin ruxue* (nearby enrolment policy, 就近入学), the data in this study indicates that urban parents activate their economic and social capital to 'choose the best from the already good' urban schools for their children. The data shows that urban students accumulate academic advantages by studying in high-end kindergartens, key primary and middle schools. This virtuous process of receiving elite schooling is partly initiated by their parents' school choices.

In my interpretation, the official rule: nearby enrolment policy, belongs to the structurally defined limits (Hays, 1994): This policy does not mean to generate urban and rural educational disparities, however, the official rule seems weak in

light of the structurally provided alternatives (Hays, 1994): the existing rules of school choice. Its enabling power in urban students' access to Chinese elite universities is supported by urban parents' economic capital. For example, they paid transition fees, bought homes in schools districts and used their *guanxi* so that their children could study in key schools. Some urban students chose to study in the key high schools in capital cities rather than their home cities. Again, urban students' endeavour cannot be denied. Notably, rural students in this study are also hardworking; however, they were excluded from enjoying the same educational resources as their urban counterparts. This is associated with the *hukou* system.

The *hukou* system, as a national institution (Hays, 1994) in China, is an existing social structure. It acts as the source of urban and rural parents' human agency, simultaneously enabling and constraining their roles in their children's access to Chinese elite universities. As the source, the *hukou* system has temporal primacy (Bhaskar, 1978) over urban and rural parents' roles. As discussed in Chapter 2.2, the modern Chinese *hukou* system has existed since the 1950s. It has shaped different life opportunities among the urban and the rural, including encouraging urban and rural educational inequality. By this token, urban and rural parents' roles are conditioned by the existence of the *hukou* system in China. The data in this study reveals that the *hukou* system particularly acts as the constraining social structure in rural students' access to Chinese elite universities.

Firstly, it partly explains some rural parents' physical absence from their children's life. Then, the association of the *hukou* system with social entitlements, including children's education, partly explains why rural students choose to study in rural



schools: this is the official rule. For rural migrant workers, the *hukou* system excludes their integration into urban lives because of the separation between physical movement and citizenship (Sheehan, 2017). Given that rural migrant parents confront formidable monetary constraints and threats of ‘having noons, no evenings’ (Rural, Xiang’s father, farmer [migrant worker]), the institutional conditions under the *hukou* system partly result in their children being left behind. In terms of education, their children are excluded from the enjoyment of the free and better educational resources experienced by urban *hukou*-ers. As shown in Chapter 6, rural parents’ physical absence further bars interactions with their children regarding schooling matters and outside school time, rural parent-teacher interactions, and rural parent-parent interactions. Chinese rural students are regarded as ‘institutional rather than household children’ (Liu et al., 2012, p. 52).

It is admitted that two students’ stories (Xiang and Xiaojian) show that the *hukou* system also intertwines with another element to define ‘urban’ and ‘rural’ (Leibowitz, 2017; Montgomery, 2020): the regional differences in China. However, it is evident that the *hukou* system is one constraining social structure regarding rural parents’ roles and rural students’ enjoyment of equal educational resources. Apart from the constraining social structures in rural students’ stories, Chinese culture regarding the value of HE acts as a potentially enabling social structure for rural students’ access to Chinese elite universities.

As explained in Chapter 2.1.2, Chinese traditional culture, especially Confucianism, values the significance of education in Chinese society. HE has been central to improving social status, material rewards, individual spirits and family honour (Luo,

1996; Marginson, 2011, 2013; Smith & Prior, 1995). It stresses academic achievement through hard working ethics (Pye, 1984). Urban parents and students in this study are also influenced by Chinese cultural values on education. It is admitted that,

All [Chinese] families instil a strong belief in the value of education amongst their children (along with the realisation that hard work and sacrifice may be needed to achieve it). (Jerrim, 2015, p. 6)

What is notable in the data are the stories about rural students' successful access to Chinese elite universities. This might reflect the potential influence of Chinese cultural values regarding HE, as an enabling social structure, on Chinese rural parents' and students' educational practices. This echoes Hays' discussion on culture as a social structure and reflects its explanatory power in this study.

I consider culture as a potentially enabling social structure although my participants did not explicitly talk about how Chinese cultural elements regarding HE exerted an impact on them. Instead, it is from my interpretation of the interview data that I argue that rural students' access to Chinese elite universities partly reflects the potentially enabling force of certain Chinese cultural values regarding HE. The readers shall bear in mind that this does not mean that culture is a decisive factor, but reflects the Chinese cultural context.

From the Chinese rural parents' angle, their expressions of their supportive educational attitudes, their educational expectations, their understanding of the value of HE, and their verbal encouragements and transformation of disadvantages

to motivate study (See Chapter 6.1.1) reflect the value of HE in Chinese culture.

'Study is your priority' echoes the high status of literal education in Chinese culture, especially the Confucian doctrine (Hu, 1984). For the rural parents, nothing can compare with their children's study because they believe that '*wanban jie xiapin, weiyou dushu gao* (to be a scholar is to be the top of society, 万般皆下品, 惟有读书高)'. 'Don't be like us' and 'Go to an elite university for a good future' resonate with the significance of education, especially HE, in realising upward social mobility.

This demonstrates the belief in meritocracy towards education in Chinese culture.

This merit-based approach recognises education as a facilitator of individual development. Therefore, rural parents also '*wangzi chenglong, wangnv chengfeng*' (wished their sons to be dragons, wished their daughters to be phoenixes, 望子成龙, 望女成凤). 'Don't compare material wealth, compare study' reflects the belief

in egalitarianism and malleability in Chinese culture. Rural parents believe that education is merit- rather than material-based, that their children are teachable.

Thus, they transform their material disadvantages into their children's study motivations verbally. 'Keep going and work harder' reflects the hard-working ethics in education embedded in Chinese culture, where striving for educational achievements through hard work has been accepted as the proper life approach by Chinese people (Pye, 1984). This can be further justified by some rural students' study strategies, including setting clear goals, being self-disciplined, studying longer and being self-pressured.

From the rural students' angle, being *dongshi* and 'paying back parents' reflect the doctrine that receiving schooling is parents' and children's mutual responsibility in

Chinese culture (Zhao & Biesta, 2011). Chinese parents and children are believed to be bonded with the same destiny, where it is their obligation to take familial responsibilities together. Children's personal achievements are crucial (Hu, 2017) in achieving this. Rural students develop an empathetic understanding towards their parents' sacrifices in their education and their hardships in life. Their destiny is bonded with their parents' as a way of shouldering their mutual responsibility.

Social structures are multi-layered and need to be understood in a more or less 'deep' anthropological sense (Sewell, 1992). People tend to pay less attention to a deeper part of social structure: culture (Hays, 1994). By bringing in culture, it helps us to understand the complexity of Chinese HE, especially under the 'Post-Confucian Model' (Marginson, 2013). Although rural parents and students in this study faced multi-constraining structures, the value of HE in Chinese culture might promote their active responses to make social changes: Chinese rural students achieved access to Chinese elite universities and rural parents made positive contributions to their children's education. This, on the one hand, is the culture as an enabling social structure in rural students' access to Chinese elite universities. On the other hand, it relates to the structurally transformative agency.

### **7.2.2 Structurally transformative agency**

Structurally transformative agency stresses the power of human agency in producing social changes. Human agency is both conscious and unconscious, with intended or unintended consequences (Hays, 1994). The most representative structurally transformative agency in this study comes from rural students' stories regarding their successful access to Chinese elite universities, including the power

of rural parents' language, rural students' own agency and rural teachers' significant roles. As shown in Chapter 6.4, rural students, as a whole in this study, experience a vicious process where they accumulate varied disadvantages in terms of their academic competitiveness and overall well-being. However, they are not beaten by these constraints. Instead, rural parents, rural students and rural teachers use the power of human agency to change these structural disadvantages. These positively contribute to rural students' final successful access to Chinese elite universities.

The data shows that rural parents do not realise their positive roles in their children's education through the power of their language. The data in this study partly indicates that they do not use their power of language consciously: human agency can be unconscious (Giddens, 1984; Hays, 1994). Thus, they unconsciously apprehend the world from their own social status: they are disadvantaged as rural *hukou*-ers. It is their first-hand life experiences in a structured world under the *hukou* system and capital constraints that motivate their expectations of their children's education in an unconscious way. Rural parents hope that their children can play their roles in transforming their ascribed disadvantages to change their destinies. The data shows that the power of rural parents' language makes a positive contribution to their children's access to Chinese elite universities: 'I just regarded studying hard as a natural thing' (Rural student, Meng, A). Although it is not recognised by rural participants in this study, in my interpretation, this further reflects the fact that human agency can generate intended and unintended consequences (Hays, 1994).

In terms of rural students as the keys to opening the doors of Chinese elite universities; firstly, rural students internalise what their parents keep telling them. Besides, they develop the empathetic understanding towards their parents' disadvantages. They become *doingshi* in terms of understanding their parents' powerlessness in their education, the significance of knowledge in changing their and their parents' destinies. These all contribute to their final access to Chinese elite universities, as shown in Chapter 6.2. In my interpretation, these are, to some degree, similar to Bourdieu's construct of habitus: the disposition of mind (Bourdieu, 1977b).

As discussed in Chapter 3.3.1, habitus is structured by individuals' history or early experiences (Yang, 2016). Rural students' internalisation of their parents' words while growing up show that it is their life experiences that teach them to be *dongshi*. However, habitus in Bourdieu's construct is defined in terms of classed homogeneity (Bourdieu, 2004). Individual habitus is an expression and reflection of class, where its members tend to have 'unified habitus' (Bourdieu, 1977b, p. 59-60). As indicated by previous literature and acknowledged in this study, rural students are in the minority among their 'classed' rural peers. If following the habitus in Bourdieu's construct, they should regard HE, especially studying in elite universities, as a thing 'not for the likes of us' (Bourdieu, 1977b, p. 56). However, the data shows that they escape from the closed and classed (Marginson, 2008; Yang, 2014) educational field based on Bourdieu's social reproduction stance.

Instead, they take intentional actions (Giddens, 1984; Hays, 1994). Finally, they transform social structural constraints (Bhaskar, 1978; Hays, 1994) against the odds.

However, it must be admitted that few of them manage to succeed. As presented in Chapter 6.2.2, rural students understand clearly their reasons or motivations for studying hard. Being clear about the disadvantages facing them, rural students use the power of their own agency, including setting clear goals, being self-disciplined, studying harder and making the best use of available human resources. Given that the existing literature shows that it is less likely for Chinese rural students to achieve access to Chinese elite universities (Li et al., 2015; Zhang & Huang, 2017), rural students realise the social changes in terms of their successful access to Chinese elite universities in this study.

The significant roles of rural teachers are an important contributing factor leading to rural students' final access to Chinese elite universities, although the relevant data in this study comes from rural parents' and rural students' perspectives rather than rural teachers' first-person testimonies. As indicated in Chapter 6.2.3, rural teachers provide rural students with comprehensive support. The data shows that rural students' parents are physically absent during the course of their education. Especially when they study in boarding schools, rural teachers are the most involved persons in students' study and life. Rural teachers, to some degree, make up for the missing parents' roles. Were it not for teachers' vital roles in rural students' schooling, rural students might not make up academic disadvantages from their early study. However, their teachers' constant appreciation and encouragement provide them with the sense of being valued, which increases their confidence and interest in study. Rural teachers also act as free tutors and provide useful advice on university choices. This changes the constraints that rural students

experience in terms of the shortage of private tuition resources and helpful counsellors in making HE decisions.

The thesis of structurally transformative agency demonstrated by rural students' successful access to Chinese elite universities in this study does not ignore Chinese rural students' low representation in Chinese elite universities, as shown in the existing literature (See Chapter 2.5). Instead, it should be stressed that the rural students in this study represent the minority who managed to use the power of human agency with the assistance of their parents and teachers. Rural parents in this study are also a specific group in terms of their own socioeconomic characteristics, as shown by their profiles in Chapter 5. It is admitted that the majority of Chinese rural students, including the high-achieving rural students in this study, have faced varied constraining social structures on their paths to Chinese elite universities. The question of how to widen Chinese rural students' access to Chinese elite universities will be discussed in Chapter 8.

### **7.3 Chapter summary**

In this chapter, I drew the big picture of 'Two trajectories, one destination' in order to answer and understand the MRQ: How do Chinese urban and rural students achieve access to Chinese elite universities? I justify my argument that merely adopting the capital approach based on Bourdieu's social reproduction theory limits the understanding of the power of less privileged students' and their parents' human agency to make social changes, i.e., rural students' access to Chinese elite universities against the odds in this study. It leads to a deficit view of less privileged



parents' roles in their children's education in educational research. Thus, I suggest the two dialectical relationships between social structure and human agency (Hays, 1994) as a supplement to the capital approach to understand the complexity of Chinese urban and rural students' access to Chinese elite universities.

The data in this study partly resonates with the capital approach, where privileged parents transmit their capital advantages to their children's academic advantages. Urban parents' possession of capital enables them to play varied roles in their children's access to Chinese elite universities. With capital at their disposal, urban parents are able to use the power of human agency and their conscious or unconscious strategies to transfer their advantages in economic, cultural and social capital to their children's academic advantages. In terms of structurally reproductive agency in urban students' stories, capital and social reproduction are realised through capital conversion (Bourdieu, 1977). Conversely, rural parents' shortage of capital constrains their roles in their children's access to Chinese elite universities. The capital reproduction in rural students' stories refers to the transmission of those capital constraints which limit parents' involvement in their children's education.

In terms of structurally reproductive agency, I argue that the social structures play enabling roles in urban students' access to Chinese elite universities while rural students' access to Chinese elite universities is largely constrained by social structures. The Chinese educational system, mainly referring to the IRE and the existing school choice rules in this study, acts as a social structure. However, they are enabling factors in urban students' stories, while constraining factors in rural

students' stories. Chinese cultural values regarding HE might be an exception. The *hukou* system, as a social structure, constrains rural parents' wishes and opportunities to be present in their children's lives. It further limits rural parents' involvement in their children's education. It also constrains rural students from enjoying the same educational resources as their urban counterparts. At last, rural students' successful access to Chinese elite universities potentially reflects the culture as an enabling social structure contributing to Chinese rural students achieving access to Chinese elite universities 'against the odds'.

I also address structurally transformative agency, mainly through rural students' successful stories regarding their access to Chinese elite universities. Notably, the data relating to the role of human agency in producing social changes regarding Chinese rural students' access to Chinese elite universities does not conceal the existing social structural constraints that have barred those rural students and parents who participated in this study and those who have not.

To sum up, both capital reproduction and the dialectic relationships between social structure and human agency are both evident in this study. This reveals the complexity of Chinese urban and rural students' access to Chinese elite universities in Chinese institutional, educational and cultural contexts. The dialectical relationships between social structure and human agency (Hays, 1994) are a useful supplement in understanding the educational disparities between the privileged and the less privileged, in addition to the capital approach based on social reproduction theory (Bourdieu, 1977a; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990).

## Chapter 8 Conclusion

This thesis explores the complexity of Chinese urban and rural students' access to Chinese elite universities. The research questions are born out of placing this study in Chinese institutional, educational and cultural contexts and the gaps in existing literature. In what follows, I will address: (1) a brief synthesis of the main findings of this study; (2) the contributions of this study; (3) the implications that could be drawn from this study; (4) the limitations of this study; and (5) what might be interesting for future research to explore based on this study.

### 8.1 A brief synthesis of the main findings of this study

One major finding of this study is that Chinese urban and rural students experience two trajectories prior to arriving at one destination: Chinese elite universities. The metaphor of two trajectories is mainly exemplified by urban and rural parents' roles in their children's education, urban and rural students' schooling pathways and outside school time up until their access to Chinese elite universities. The metaphor of one destination refers to Chinese elite universities. This study presents that in Chinese institutional, educational and cultural contexts: (1) Chinese urban and rural parents play differentiated roles in their children's access to Chinese elite universities; (2) Chinese rural parents, rural students and rural teachers positively contribute to Chinese rural students' successful access to Chinese elite universities; and (3) Chinese urban students accumulate varied advantages while rural students accumulate varied disadvantages in and outside schools before their entry to Chinese elite universities. Although this study has a Chinese focus, it enriches our

understanding of educational disparities, especially in HE, between the privileged and the less privileged in the global sphere.

Educational researchers worldwide have adopted various indicators to measure individuals' social status. These include social class (Achala, 2019; Ball, 2003), wealth (Hällsten & Pfeffer, 2017; Jez, 2014), race or ethnicity (Boliver, 2014, 2016; Posselt et al., 2012; Vincent et al., 2012), geographical factors (Donnelly & Gamsu, 2018; Lindgren & Lundahl, 2010) and migration status (Antony, 2018; Hanson & Woodruff, 2003) to name but a few. A similarity existing in varied measurements of individuals' social status in educational research is the pattern of educational disparities: the privileged versus the less privileged. When explaining educational disparities between the privileged and the less privileged, the capital approach based on Bourdieu's social reproduction theory (Bourdieu, 1977a; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) has enjoyed currency.

The findings in this study partly echo the capital approach. It shows how privileged parents (urban parents in this study) transmit their capital advantages to their children's academic advantages, and how less privileged parents' (rural parents in this study) shortage of certain capitals limit their roles in their children's education. However, the capital approach based on the social reproduction stance (Bourdieu, 1977a; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) in educational research leaves less possibility for the less privileged to succeed against the odds, i.e., access to HE, especially elite universities. This is partly because Bourdieu sees agency, self-determining autonomy, through a closed lens of classed and stratified power relationships (Marginson, 2008; Yang, 2014). He stresses reproduction rather than social changes

in educational research. This limits our understanding of the agency of the less privileged students and their parents in making social changes in HE: How do rural students (the less privileged) achieve access to elite universities?

The findings of this study further justify my advocacy of regarding the two types of dialectical relationships between social structure and human agency as a supplement to the capital approach in understanding educational disparities: structurally reproductive agency and structurally transformative agency (Hays, 1994).

Structurally reproductive agency is exemplified by how certain existing social structures enable urban students' but constrain rural students' access to Chinese elite universities. These include the IRE, the existing rules of school choice and the *hukou* system. Meanwhile, Chinese culture regarding the value of HE is potentially enabling for rural parents and students. Structurally transformative agency is exemplified by rural students' stories of academic success against the odds: access to Chinese elite universities. It shows that rural parents, rural students and rural teachers are three contributing actors. They perform their agency respectively to transform the existing social constraints, making certain social changes. The findings of this study generate implications within and beyond a Chinese context.

## **8.2 The implications of this study**

Different readers might draw varied reflections from this study. Personally, I draw two implications: (1) for policies to widen Chinese rural students' access to elite

universities; and (2) for a reflection on the meritocratic discourse in HE in a wider global context.

As indicated by previous literature and acknowledged by this study, rural students who achieve access to Chinese elite universities are in the minority among their rural peers, and face various structural constraints. In this vein, policies aiming to widen Chinese rural students' access to Chinese elite universities could firstly seek solutions from broader social structural reforms. For example, abolishing the institutional associations between the *hukou* system and children's education; providing rural migrant parents with more social support to enable their physical presence in their children's life; and improving the quality of pre-university education in rural China. Then, the cumulative dis/advantage process shown in this study implies that more contextual information should be taken into consideration when making admission decisions to HE. For example, urban and rural students accumulate disparate degrees of competitiveness regarding the IRE. It is unfair to use the unified criteria to decide their success in the IRE.

Secondly, rural students' stories demonstrate that human agency can play a role in making social changes: rural students can achieve access to Chinese elite universities despite facing various structural constraints. The role of human agency provides the less privileged a possible way to overcome the social constraints. In this sense, on the one hand, policies could facilitate the building of individual agency, such as enhancing rural students' sense of 'self-formation' (Marginson, 2019a) during daily study; improving rural teachers' working conditions so that they are motivated to provide more support to rural students; and not just 'good

students' as indicated in this study. This does not mean placing responsibilities solely on individuals. Instead, the enhancement of human agency should combine with the elimination of structural constraints, as stated above.

On the other hand, three contributing actors in rural students' stories in this study own the same rural identity in rural communities. Therefore, another possible consideration involves enhancing rural communities' support to rural students. The data in this study reflects the fact that education-related facilities in rural communities, as a whole, are also disadvantaged. For example, poor transport restricts rural parents' boarding school visiting, and rural communities lack the infrastructure to support rural students' outside school time. In this sense, the strength of individual agency should be supported by an overall improvement in the rural community. In this way, the contributing actors for rural students would not perform separately but work together. For example, apart from just promoting rural parents' physical presence, the strength of rural communities as a whole could be strengthened in order to enhance multi-cooperation among rural parents, students, teachers and even extended families.

In a wider global context, this study encourages a reflection on the meritocratic discourse in HE, including in elite universities. As introduced in Chapter 2, Chinese educational admission is a meritocratic ideal which can be traced from Confucian ideology, which links formal schooling, especially HE, with high-profile official positions (Thomas & Postlethwaite, 2014). Examinations have been regarded as a fairer channel with which to select officials based on individuals' merits rather than their social backgrounds (Liu, 2016). The belief in the merit-based educational ideal

can also be demonstrated by the data in this study, especially rural students' stories. Similarly, the meritocracy discourse in HE can be heard in other national contexts.

Worldwide, it is common that admission to HEIs is achieved through testing eligible students' merits through examinations, especially in elite universities (Warikoo, 2018). Selection processes generally include standardised entrance examinations (such as the *gaokao*) and soft evaluations (such as the interviews in the IRE). For example, similar to the *gaokao* in China, examinations exist in other countries, such as the National Centre Test for University Admissions in Japan (NCUEE, accessed on November 10, 2019), the Baccalaureate in France (DNEHER, accessed on November 10, 2019), A-level examinations in the UK (UCSA, accessed on November 10, 2019), the SAT in the USA (formerly known as the Scholastic Assessment Test and the Scholastic Aptitude Test) (NCES, accessed on November 10, 2019) to name but a few. Similar to the soft evaluations in the IRE, the soft criteria in German university selection includes extra-curricular activities and interviews (Schindler & Reimer, 2011). In the UK, personal statements and reference letters are common in university applications (Zimdars, 2010). In the USA, HE admission values the GPA (grade point average for performance in school classes), community activities and civic engagement (Liu, 2016). Elite universities specifically emphasise the ideal of meritocracy during their selection process (Karabel, 2005). However, meritocracy in HE selection has become a trap in modern times (Markovits, 2019).

As discussed in Chapter 3 and through the data in this study, children's academic achievements are associated with their parents' possession and use of capital.

Privileged parents are able to support and invest in their children's academic study,



both in and outside schools (Reay, 2018a). Additionally, it is common that the pathway to elite universities worldwide is through elaborate education in selective high schools, middle schools, primary schools and even preschools. For example, students in Oxford and Cambridge and other Russell group universities in the UK are disproportionately privately educated in independent schools (Sutton Trust, 2019). This is similar to students being admitted to the Ivy League universities in the USA (Markovits, 2019) and cross-national analysis of students' academic achievement gaps in private and public schools (Dronkers & Avram, 2010).

Similar to the key schools in China, private schools provide their students with better educational facilities, extensively educated teachers and all kinds of extracurricular enrichment activities (Green et al., 2019; Henderson et al., 2019; Sutton Trust, 2019). All of these entail massive parental investment (Green et al., 2018; Green & Kynaston, 2019; Markovits, 2019). Less privileged parents, even ordinary parents, can hardly afford elaborate schooling (Henseke et al., 2018). Their children tend to have less-experienced and less-qualified teachers and poor educational facilities (Kalogrides & Loeb, 2013; Massey & Fischer, 2006).

The meritocracy's promise in elite universities worldwide is that they admit students according to their academic merits. However, in practice, 'those with greater resources - cultural, economic, and social - will generally be able to ensure that the educational system will deem their children more meritorious' (Karabel, 2005, p. 550). In practice, this demonstrates 'meritocracy inheritance' (Markovits, 2019, p. 13) rather than equal opportunities for success among students from different social groups.

Allowing certain people to succeed, based not upon merit but upon the cultural experiences, the social ties and the economic resources they have access to, often remains unacknowledged in the broader society. (Wacquant, 1998, p. 216)

This leads to a reflection on the factors that impede the meritocracy discourse in HE, especially in elite universities in the global sphere. As shown in this study, it is certain social structures, such as the *hukou* system and the existing educational system that impede the meritocracy promise, but facilitate the ‘meritocracy inheritance’ (Markovits, 2019, p. 13) in Chinese HE. For example, urban parents in this study buy their children places in key schools through the housing market. Similar situations occur in other countries, such as in France (Benson et al., 2015), the UK (Allen et al., 2013) and Mexico (Fierro et al., 2009). In this sense, researchers in other countries could reflect on their own national contexts: What kinds of social structures enable the privileged but constrain the less privileged in HE, especially with regard to the meritocracy discourse in HE?

Additionally, it is necessary to question the legitimacy of the existence of the HE hierarchy itself. For example, as shown in Chapter 2.6, studying in elite universities currently is of great economic and social significance for individuals. This is partly a result of the university hierarchy regulating the relative value of graduate credentials (Marginson, 2014). This does not just happen in China, but also in many other countries. Facing the disparities between the privileged and the less privileged in terms of access to elite universities, HE should be promoted as a common good, which is inclusive and broadly beneficial to all (Marginson, 2018).

Under such conditions, neither enabling structures for the privileged nor constraining structures for the less privileged would play roles in students' HE opportunities. This requires an egalitarian HE system without hierarchy.

### **8.3 The limitations of this study**

The main limitation of this study was the limited number of theoretical references to non-western scholars, especially Chinese scholars. The 'Post-Confucian Model' of HE, the capital approach and the dialectical relationships between social structure and human agency are western scholars' contributions. Along with my PhD journey, I have tried to search for Chinese or eastern scholars who have contributed to the theoretical understanding of educational disparities between the privileged and the less privileged. Only a limited number of Chinese scholars have pointed out those Chinese characteristics which differ from western theories. For example, some Chinese scholars advocate that the relationship between the state and Chinese HE has changed from the logic of state-control to the logic of state-supervision (Hu, 2003; Yao, 2018). This is in Chapter 2.1.1. Yu (2019b) challenges Bourdieu's inherited aspect of classed habitus. This is in Chapter 3.3. Lu Xueyi (2004) indicates that social stratification in China has been largely influenced by national institutions, policies and regulations. This is in Chapter 3.4. However, among Chinese scholars there has been a dearth of systematic and operable theories which attempt to explain Chinese educational disparities, especially between the urban and rural *hukou*-ers. This, on the one hand, suggests that Chinese scholars should explore indigenous theoretical explanations of Chinese educational issues. On the other

hand, it reminds researchers in other countries, especially non-western countries, to reflect on the applicability of western theories to their own national contexts.

Another limitation of this study is the generalisation of the sampling. When presenting my participants' profiles in Chapter 5, I stated that the participants in this study are not representative of the whole population of China. Urban and rural students cannot represent the entire urban or rural population in China. They only refer to the specific groups in this study. Additionally, all students in this study were first-year undergraduates studying in Chinese elite universities when I conducted my data collection. I realise that a far richer data set could have been drawn upon if the voices of those who did not achieve access to Chinese elite universities were included. Furthermore, the intersectionality of urban and rural with other measurements of social status is beyond the focus of this study. However, it might be interesting to take other variables into consideration, such as ethnicity and regional disparities.

As a qualitative research, this study is transferable, as transferability refers to the fitness of the cases in one study to understand other similar cases (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2010). As discussed above and will be presented in what follows, the transferability of this study is not limited to China, but expands to the global sphere.

#### **8.4 The contributions of this study**

The contribution of this study has two facets. On the one hand, it contributes to the theoretical understanding of both the privileged and the less privileged students' access to elite universities.

Firstly, this study resonates with the capital approach through both urban and rural students' stories. It does not only show how the privileged parents (urban parent) transmit their capital advantages to their children's academic advantages. It also adds the illustration of how the less privileged parents' (rural parents) shortage of certain capital limits their roles in their children's education. Besides, through presenting rural students' stories of successful access to Chinese elite universities, this study suggests the dialectical relationships of social structure and human agency as a supplement to the capital approach in understanding educational disparities. Furthermore, this study presents Chinese rural parents' positive roles in their children's education through the power of their language. This contributes to a shift from the deficit view of less privileged parents' roles in their children's education based on the capital approach. Rural parents' positive roles are not recognised by the participants in this study. It elicits reflections on how to better listen to less privileged parents' and students' voices and pay attention to less invisible forms of parents' roles in their children's education in different national contexts.

On the other hand, this study enriches the understanding of the complexity of Chinese urban and rural students' access to Chinese elite universities in Chinese institutional, educational and cultural context. It provides in-depth data regarding urban and rural students' life stories prior to their entry to Chinese elite universities. The big picture: 'Two trajectories, one destination' shows how institutional and educational structures enable the urban but constrain the rural students. It also presents how Chinese culture regarding the value of HE can potentially enable rural

parents and students. With a particularly Chinese focus, this study suggests the solutions to Chinese urban and rural disparities in Chinese elite universities, as discussed above.

### **8.5 For future research**

Through answering the research questions in this study, more questions are raised for future research. Different readers might make their own interpretations of what will be worthwhile to explore for future research. In terms of my stance, there are two questions which I believe would be interesting to unpack in detail.

Firstly, how will Chinese urban and rural students progress after their admission to Chinese elite universities? Many studies show that less privileged students are 'dealing with a very unfamiliar field' in elite universities (Reay et al., 2009, p. 1110) because there is a mismatch between the culture of elite universities and less privileged students' backgrounds (Sani, 2008). Borrowing Bourdieu's analogy: 'fish out of water' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 127), existing studies demonstrate low-status students' feelings of being a 'fish out of water' in HE (Maslin, 2016), especially with regard to their experiences in elite universities, such as in the UK (Bradley, 2012; Reay, 2018b), the USA (Lathe, 2017; Massey & Fischer, 2006), South Africa (Czerniewicz & Brown, 2014), and China (Cheng, 2016; Cheng & Chen, 2018; Qing, 2017; Xie, 2015, 2016b). Using Bourdieusian concepts, especially those involving the mismatch between habitus and field, less privileged students continue to struggle after they enter the elite universities.

Contrarily, only a limited number of researchers have examined less privileged students' coping strategies (Maslin, 2016; Ingram, 2011) in the unfamiliar HE field. This, in my interpretation, is another aspect of human agency. However, there has been a dearth of research in China exploring Chinese rural students' coping strategies (human agency) after gaining access to elite universities. Put differently, will and how do Chinese rural students successfully get through elite universities?

Secondly, how do Chinese urban and rural parents and students perceive cultural influences on their educational practices? Although I have provided supportive evidence, this study consists of my interpretations of the rural participants' answers rather than their own explicitly expressed viewpoints regarding cultural influences on their educational practices. Additionally, urban students and parents are also living in the same cultural contexts. It might be interesting for future research to directly ask Chinese parents and students about their perceptions of the influences of Chinese cultural values on their educational practices.

By reflecting on national contexts, this study encourages non-western researchers to develop contextual understanding of their own educational issues.

## Appendices

### Appendix I List of the Double First University Plan

#### Category A (36)

学校名称(E) University name	学校名称(C) University Name	省份 Province	备注 Remarks
Peking University	北京大学	Beijing	985/211
Renmin University of China	中国人民大学	Beijing	985/211
Tsinghua University	清华大学	Beijing	985/211
Beijing University (Beijing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics)	北京航空航天大学	Beijing	985/211
Beijing Institute of Technology	北京理工大学	Beijing	985/211
China Agricultural University	中国农业大学	Beijing	985/211
Beijing Normal University	北京师范大学	Beijing	985/211
Minzu University of China	中央民族大学	Beijing	985/211
Nankai University	南开大学	Tianjin	985/211
Tianjin University	天津大学	Tianjin	985/211
Dalian University of Technology	大连理工大学	Liaoning	985/211
Jilin University	吉林大学	Jilin	985/211
Harbin Institute of Technology	哈尔滨工业大学	Heilongjiang	985/211
Fudan University	复旦大学	Shanghai	985/211
Tongji University	同济大学	Shanghai	985/211
Shanghai Jiao Tong University	上海交通大学	Shanghai	985/211
East China Normal University	华东师范大学	Shanghai	985/211
Nanjing University	南京大学	Jiangsu	985/211
Southeast University	东南大学	Jiangsu	985/211
Zhejiang University	浙江大学	Zhejiang	985/211
University of Science and Technology of China	中国科学技术大学	Anhui	985/211
Xiamen University	厦门大学	Fujian	985/211



Shandong University	山东大学	Shandong	985/211
Ocean University of China	中国海洋大学	Shandong	985/211
Wuhan University	武汉大学	Hubei	985/211
Huazhong University of Science and Technology	华中科技大学	Hubei	985/211
Central South University	中南大学	Hunan	985/211
Sun Yat-Sen University	中山大学	Guangdong	985/211
South China University of Technology	华南理工大学	Guangdong	985/211
Sichuan University	四川大学	Sichuan	985/211
Chongqing University	重庆大学	Chongqing	985/211
University of Electronic Science and Technology of China	电子科技大学	Sichuan	985/211
Xi'an Jiaotong University	西安交通大学	Shaanxi	985/211
Northwestern Polytechnical University	西北工业大学	Shaanxi	985/211
Lanzhou University	兰州大学	Gansu	985/211
National University of Defense Technology	国防科学技术大学	Hunan	985/211

### Category B (6)

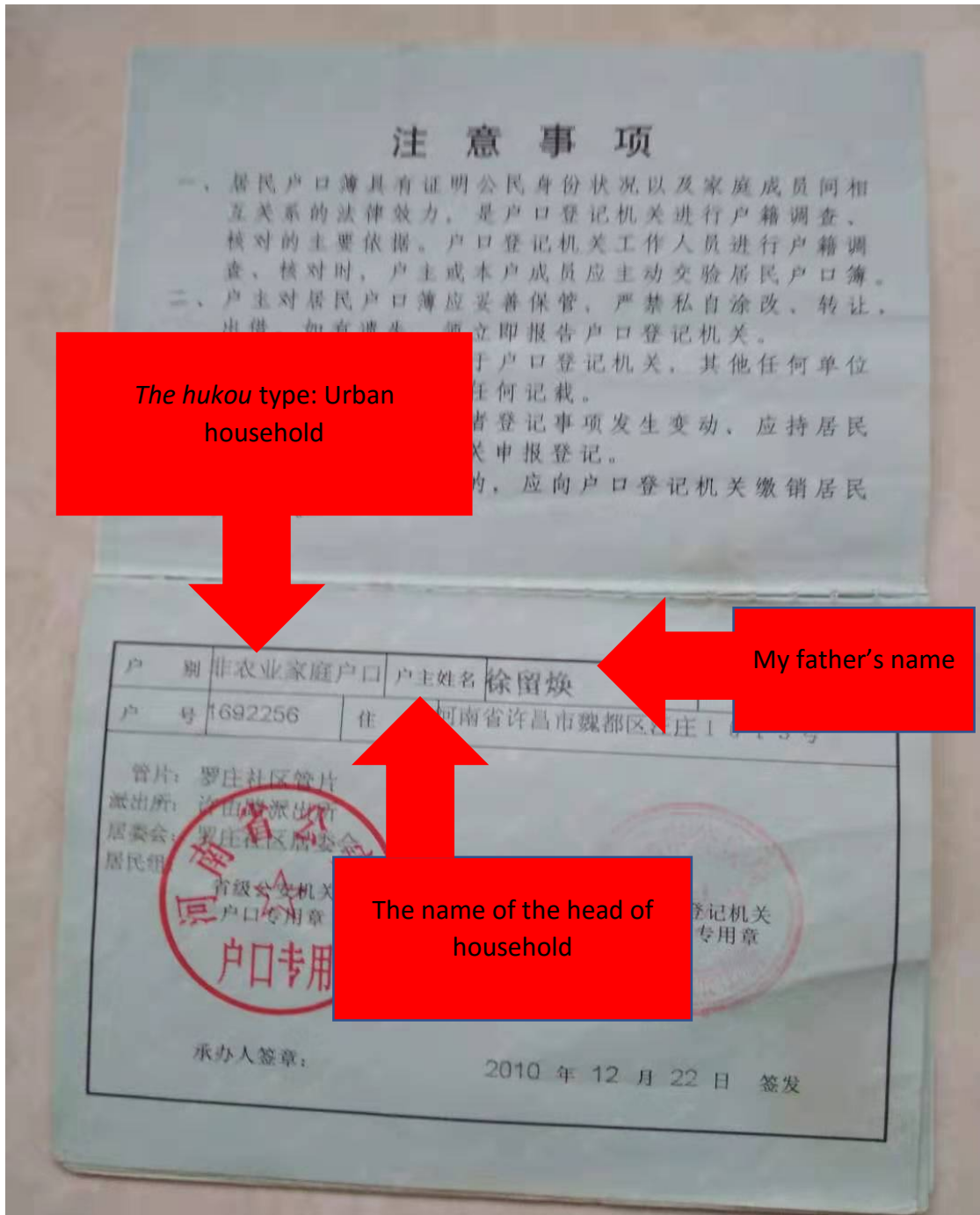
学校名称(E) University name	学校名称 (C) University Name	省份 Province	备注 Remarks
Northeastern University	东北大学	Liaoning	985/211
Zhengzhou University	郑州大学	Henan	211
Hunan University	湖南大学	Hunan	985/211
Yunnan University	云南大学	Yunnan	211
Northwest Agriculture & Forestry University	西北农林科技大学	Shaanxi	985/211
Xinjiang University	新疆大学	Xinjiang	211

**Appendix II Photos of my family's *hukou ben***

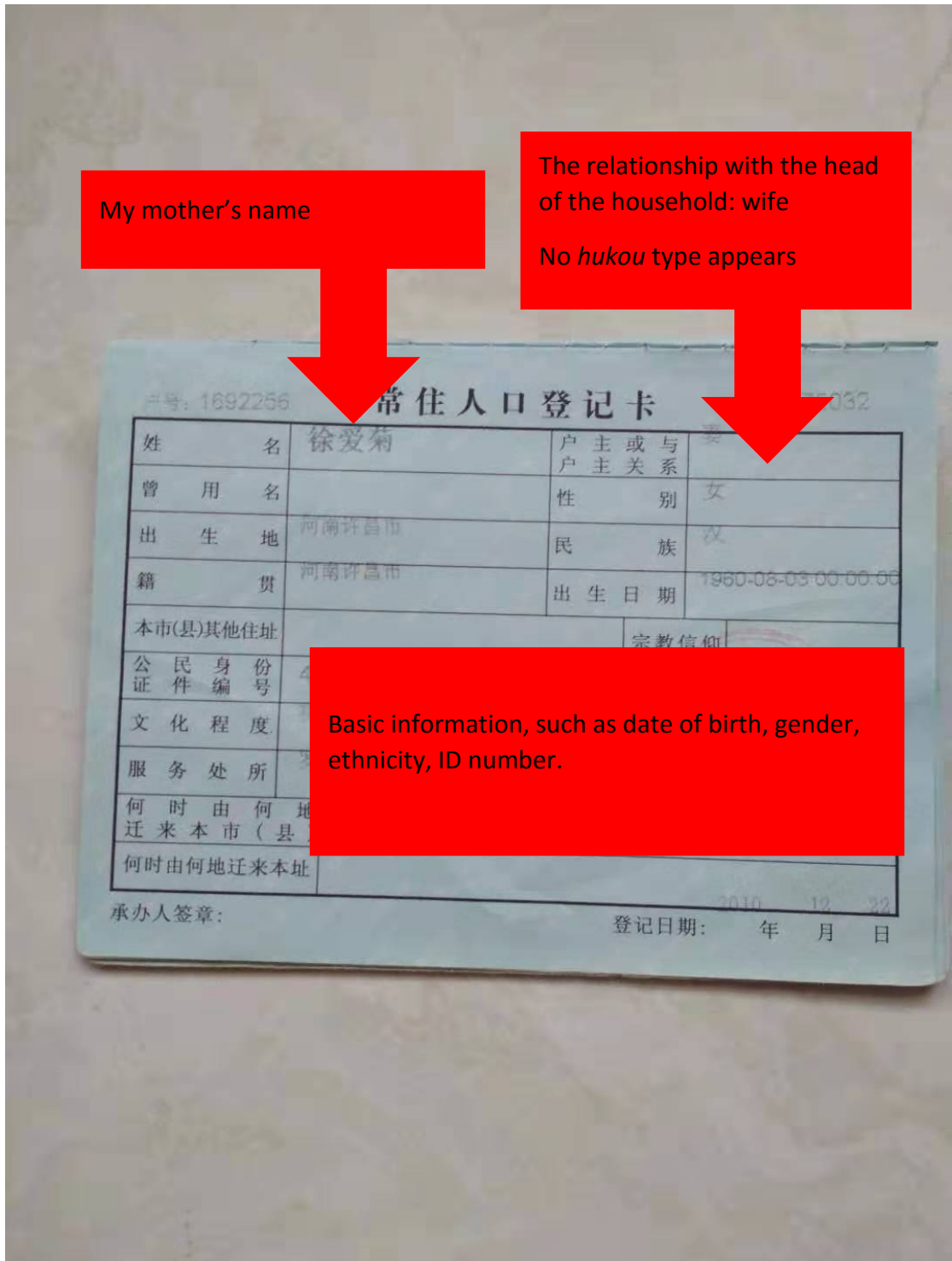
**1 The cover page of my family's *hukou ben***



2 The first page of my family's hukou ben



3 My mother's page in *hukou ben*



#### 4 My page in hukou ben

户号: 1692256 常住人口登记卡 5216

姓名	徐艳茹	户主或关系	女
曾用名		性别	女
出生地	河南省许昌市	民族	汉
籍贯	河南省许昌市	出生日期	1991-7-14 00:00:00
本市(县)其他住址			
公民身份号码			
文化程度			
服务处所			
何时由何地迁来本市(县)			
何时由何地迁来本址			

承办人签章: \_\_\_\_\_ 登记日期: 2013年 07月 04日

My name

The relationship with the head of the household: daughter

No hukou type appears

Basic information, such as date of birth, gender, ethnicity, ID number.

## Appendix III Example of the questionnaire

感谢您参与本次研究！

*Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research!*

关于本次问卷的一些基本信息

### **Some General Information about the Questionnaire:**

本次问卷收集的信息将用于本人博士论文：探索家庭在孩子进入精英高等教育中的角色

- This questionnaire is part of my research: exploring Chinese families' role in their children's access into elite higher education. The data from this questionnaire will be used by the researcher in writing up the PhD dissertation.

您所有的信息都将匿名保密。只有本人和本人导师可以接触到相关信息。您在本次问卷中所填姓名将会生成一个唯一的ID号码。您的信息将会被储存在安全的文件存储空间中。只有本研究者可以接触。所有信息都将在数据收集结束后被销毁。您的名字将不会被识别在任何相关和后续发表的刊物中。

- All your replies are confidential and anonymous. The only people who will see it will be the researcher and her supervisors. Your name will be linked to this questionnaire by a unique ID number. This information will be stored in a safe file storage, accessible only by the researcher and will be destroyed after the completion of the data collection. Your name will not be identified or identifiable in any publication or other subsequent piece of work.

本次问卷不是测验，不会用于评估您本人。答案没有正确错误之分。希望您能够如实回答每一个问题。

- This questionnaire is not a test and therefore will not be used to evaluate you personally. There are no right or wrong answers and hope you will answer each question truthfully!

如果您有任何问题，请随时联系我为您解答。

- If you are not sure about any of the questions or how to answer them, please ask for help.

**Gender 性别:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date of birth 出生日期:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Ethnicity 民族:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Address 家庭住址:** \_\_\_\_\_

**The number of people you are living with 与您一起居住的人口数:**

\_\_\_\_\_

**What is your relationship with them respectively 他们与您的关系:**

\_\_\_\_\_

**The name of your university and subject 你所在大学名称及学科名称:**

\_\_\_\_\_

**Have you attended the IRE ? If Yes, please specify the bonus points 您是否参加过自主招生 ? 如有, 请表明加分值**

\_\_\_\_\_

**The status of your household registration 您的 户口类型:**

Rural 农村

Urban 城市

**The status of your father's household registration 您的父亲的 户口类型:**

Rural 农村

Urban 城市

**The status of your mother's household registration 您母亲的 户口类型:**

Rural 农村

Urban 城市

**Your father's highest education level completed 您父亲的 最高教育程度:**

1 No formal schooling 没有受过任何教育

2 Elementary school 小学

3 Junior high school 初中

4 Full-time senior high School 普通高中

5 Vocational high school 职业高中

6 Technical college 技校

7 Associate degrees 大专

8 Bachelor's degree 大学本科

9 Master's degree 硕士研究生

10 Doctoral degree (e.g., Ph.D., Ed.D.) 博士研究生

11 Others 其他: \_\_\_\_\_

**Your mother's highest education level completed 您母亲的最高教育程度:**

1 No formal schooling 没有受过任何教育

2 Elementary school 小学

3 Junior high school 初中

4 Full-time senior high School 普通高中

5 Vocational high school 职业高中

6 Technical college 技校

7 Associate degrees 大专

8 Bachelor's degree 大学本科

9 Master's degree 硕士研究生

10 Doctoral degree (e.g., Ph.D., Ed.D.) 博士研究生

11 Others 其他: \_\_\_\_\_

**The type of your father's workplace 您父亲的工作类型:**

1 Public servant 公务员

2 State-owned company 国企

3 Private company 私企

4 Transnational company 跨国企业

5 Joint-venture Company 合资企业

6 Individual business 个体户

7 Others 其他: \_\_\_\_\_

**The name of your father's occupation 您父亲的职业名称:**

\_\_\_\_\_

**The type of your mother's workplace 您母亲的工作类型:**

1 Public servant 公务员

2 State-owned company 国企



3 Private company 私企

4 Transnational company 跨国企业

5 Joint-venture Company 合资企业

6 Individual business 个体户

7 Others 其他: \_\_\_\_\_

The name of your mother's occupation 您母亲的职业名称:

\_\_\_\_\_

**Your families' annual income in 2017 :**

\_\_\_\_\_

### Appendix IV Record of the interview schedule

Person	Date	Site	Duration
1 Xiaoshuo	2018. 11.24 9am	C Tea house + WeChat (2019.02.09)	1h 19m 47s+503s=1h28m11s
2 Linlin	2018. 11.25 7pm	D classroom + WeChat (2019.02.09)	1h 17m 31s
3 Wen	2018.12. 1 1pm	C Tea house	1h 27m 27s
4 Linlin-M	2018.12. 8 6pm	WeChat video call +WeChat (2019.02.09)	1h 9m 01s+347s=1h14m49s
5 Xiaoshuo-M	2018.12. 9 8pm	WeChat video call +WeChat (2019.02.09)	59m 30s+216s=1h3m36s
6 Fang	2018.12. 9 3pm	C Tea house +WeChat (2019.02.09)	1h 18m 51s+757s=1h31m27s
7 Fang-M	2018.12.15 2pm	WeChat video call +WeChat (2019.02.09)	59m 56s+585s=1h9m41s
8 Wen-M	2018.12.22 4pm	WeChat video call	1h 55m 38s
9 Jing	2019.02. 23 3pm	D classroom	1h 45m 49s
10 Yuan	2019.02. 24 1pm	D classroom	1h 54m 56s
11 Dong	2019.03. 2 3m	D classroom	1h 31m 39s
12 Li	2019.03. 3 6pm	D classroom	1h 12m 46s
13 Zi	2019.03. 9 9am	B classroom	1h 45m 23s
14 Wan	2019.03. 10 1pm	C Tea house	1h13m 34s
15 Hong	2019.03. 16 9am	A classroom	1h 23m 10s
16 Hong-M	2019.03. 17 3pm	WeChat video call	1h 12m 14s
17 Jing-M	2019.03. 23 10pm	WeChat video call	1h12m 33s
18 Xiaojian	2019.03. 24 9am	B classroom	2h 24m 24s
19 Yanyan	2019.03. 30 9am	B classroom	1h 28m 06s
20 Li-m	2019.04. 06 9am	WeChat video call	1h 44m 02s
21 Dong-F	2019.04. 07 8pm	WeChat video call	1h 53m 21s
22 Xiaojian-M	2019.04. 13 8pm	WeChat video call	1h 42m 31s
23 Qing	2019.04. 20 1pm	D classroom	1h 31m 24s
24 Yuan-M	2019.04. 21 10am	WeChat video call	1h 45m 06s
25 Xi	2019.04. 27 3pm	C Tea house	1h 22m 23s
26 Meng	2019.05. 11 9pm	A classroom	2h 2m 08s

27 Di	2019.05. 12 7pm	A classroom	1h 29m 40s
28 Zhao	2019.05. 18 8am	B classroom	1h 39m 40s
29 Zhao-F	2019.05. 19 3pm	WeChat video call	1h2m16s
30 Meng-F	2019.05. 25 3pm	phone call	47m 39s
31 Di-M	2019.05. 26 6pm	WeChat video call	1h 10m 54s
32 Xi-M	2019.06. 01 8am	WeChat video call	1h 30m 47s
33 Yang	2019.06. 02 1pm	B classroom	1h 29m 23s
34 Yang-F	2019.06. 08 10am	WeChat video call	1h 12m 10s
35 Bo	2019.06. 08 3pm	B classroom	1h 32m 30s
36 Bo-M&F	2019.06. 08 8pm	WeChat video call	1h 2m 26s
37 Bin	2019.06. 09 10am	D classroom	1h 44m 23s
38 Bin-M	2019.06. 09 6pm	WeChat video call	1h 18m 46s
39 Min	2019.06. 15 10am	C Tea house	1h 29m 37s
40 Fang	2019.06. 15 6pm	A classroom	1h 35m 39s
41 Mei	2019.06. 16 10am	C Tea house	1h 19m 57s
42 Ke	2019.06. 16 2pm	C Tea house	1h 45m 05s
43 Min-F	2019.06. 16 8pm	WeChat video call	1h1m 1s
44 Xiang	2019.06. 17 10am	B classroom	1h 29m 20s
45 Xing-F	2019.06. 17 2pm	WeChat video call	1h 14m 35s
46 Ke-ershū	2019.06. 17 8pm	WeChat video call	1h 38m 48s
Total			67h44m5s

## Appendix V Student recruitment advertisement

### 博士项目基本信息

#### Information sheet for PhD project

研究题目：探索家庭在孩子进入精英高等教育中的角色

Research title: Exploring Chinese families' roles in their children's access into elite higher education.

亲爱的参与者 Dear participants :

您好，我的名字叫徐艳茹，是英国巴斯大学教育学院的博士研究生。导师是教授 Catherine Montgomery 和教授 Xiao Lan Curdt-Christiansen。我的博士研究主题是探索中国家庭在其孩子进入精英高等教育中的作用，以此来探讨在中国特色教育，社会与文化背景下家庭对孩子进入精英高等教育的影响。在此诚挚的邀请您参与我的研究。

My name is Yanru Xu, and I am a PhD student in the Department of Education in the University of Bath. My supervisors are Professor Catherine Montgomery and Professor Xiao Lan Curdt-Christiansen. My study aims to explore Chinese families' role in their children's access into elite higher education. I would like to invite you to participate in my study.

如果您愿意参与本研究，您将被邀请填写一份有关个人基本信息的调查问卷，本研究者还将与您进行一个时长为半个小时到一个小时的访谈。

If you choose to participate, you will be invited to fill in a questionnaire relating to your basic information and conduct an interview with the researcher which will last 30-60 minutes.

您在调查问卷中提供的任何信息均会被保密，除了本研究目的之外，不向任何单位和个人泄露。出于日后研究数据分析的目的，您的访谈将会被录音并由研究者逐字翻译为文字资料。

Please note that any personal information you provided in the questionnaire will be kept confidentially, which will only be used for the purpose of this study. In order to analysis the data. Your interview will be audio-recorded and transcript verbatim by the researcher.

您的名字和个人信息将**绝不会**被显示在访谈记录中。本研究结果中呈现的所有有关您的个人信息都将采用匿名的方式保证您的身份不会被识别出。在整个研究项目进行过程中，所有的访谈录音和翻译资料将会被保存在安全的数据中心。只有本研究者及其导师有权接触到访谈数据。

Your name and personal details will NOT be recorded in the interview. Pseudonyms will be used in any reports produced as a result of the study, and every effort will be made to ensure that individuals cannot be identified. All the tapes of the interviews and their transcripts will be kept in a secure and private place for the duration of the research. All identifying data will only be accessible to the researcher and her supervisors.

您的参与完全本着自愿的原则，如果您选择不参与本次研究，您将绝不会面临任何不利的后果。您可以选择随时无条件地退出本次研究。

Participation in this project is completely voluntary. There are no disadvantages, penalties or adverse consequences for not participating. You may withdraw from the study at any time.

如果您想要了解更多的信息，您可以通过以下方式联系到我。本人的电话号码为：18639725972 微信号码为：771681420；QQ 号码为：771681420

If you want more information, you can contact me on 13623746182(Chinese number) or +44 07410206586(UK number) or via WeChat: 771681420, or QQ number: 771681420.

感谢您对本研究的支持。

Many thanks in advance for your interest in this research.

徐艳茹敬上

Yanru Xu

## Appendix VI The consent form

### 博士项目参与同意书

The consent form for PhD project

研究题目：探索家庭在孩子进入精英高等教育中的角色

Research title: Exploring Chinese families' role in their children's access into elite higher education.

我同意参与上述项目中并确认 I consent to participate in the above project and:

- 我已阅读并理解有关该项目的基本信息；该研究者回答了我提出的任何疑问。  
confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet for the above project and the researcher has answered any queries to my satisfaction.
- 我已理解我的参与完全出于自愿的原则，我有权随时无条件地退出该项目，并不会承担任何后果；如果我中途行使了退出的权利，前期收集的我的任何数据都将被销毁。  
understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from the project at any time, up to the point of completion, without having to give a reason and without any consequences. If I exercise my right to withdraw, any data which have been collected from me will be destroyed.
- 我同意访谈内容被录音  
consent to being audio recorded as part of the project.
- 我已理解在访谈中录音的所有信息都将被保密，任何有关个人身份的信息都将采用匿名的形式；除了研究者及其导师之外，任何人都无权接触到访谈数据。  
understand that any information recorded in the interview will remain confidential and no information that identifies me will be made publicly available.

姓名 name:

签名 signature:

日期 date:

## Appendix VII The interview guide

### 第一部分大学前 (从学前到高中)

#### Part one: Pre-university (From preschool to high school)

1 没有上学之前，在家里都做什么？

Before you/your child went to school, what did you do at homes?

2 什么样的学校？为什么选择这个学校？如何进入的 这个学校?(从幼儿园到高中)

What kind of school did you/your child attend? Why this one? How did you/your child go there?

3 家人通过什么渠道了解学习情况的？（家长是怎么跟老师联系的？；怎么跟其他父母联系的？家长是怎么跟孩子沟通的？）

How did you/your family members get to know your in-school study? (contact with teachers? with other parents? with children?)

4 课外时间做什么？（放学后？周末？寒暑假？）

What did you/ your child do outside school? (after schools? weekends? Vacations?)

5 这期间有没有遇到什么困难的事情？如何解决的？

Have you/your child experienced any difficulties with the schooling during this period?

If yes, how did your family deal with it? who did your family ask help for?

6 有没有印象/影响深刻的事情？（时间，地点，人物，影响）

Could you recall any other impressive things relating to schooling during this period? (time, place, person, influence)

7 帮助学习的人还有哪些？

Could you recall any other person who supported your/ your child's schooling during this period?

8 这期间的人生经历对你/孩子有什么影响？

What do you think the influence of the schooling experience for you/your child?

### 第二部分高考

#### Part two: Gaokao

1 有没有参加过自主招生？如果有，如何准备整个过程的？如果没有，为什么？对它有什么看法？

Have you attended the IRE?

If yes, how did you prepared for it? How you/you family experienced any difficulties?  
How did you/your family deal with it?

If no, why?

2 为什么选择这个大学，这个专业？谁提供了意见？

Why did you/your child choose this uni and this major? Who offered advice?

**第三部分结束**

**Part Three: Closing**

1 你觉得家庭在你/孩子整个的学业道路上什么作用？

What do you think of the role of your family in your/your child's whole schooling  
tracking before entering the Uni?

2 What do you think of your/your children's study in this university now?

你对你/孩子目前在这个大学的学习有什么样的看法？



## Appendix VIII Example of interview transcripts

### *Student example (Xi)*

R: Could you introduce your family first?

Xi: How to say... Haha (laugh)

R: You could say anything you would like to share.

Xi: OK. we have four people living together, my father, my mother, my younger brother and me. My father is a public servant, working in the governmental institution, the municipal level government. No, no, not exactly the municipal level, but the county level. Right, county level. My mother is a schoolteacher, working in primary school in our county. Finally, do not be surprised, my younger brother is 17 years younger than me.

R: All right, could you introduce your grandparents on your father's side?

Xi: Previously, they were both farmers in the countryside. But now they are not doing anything, just living the old-age life in urban cities.

R: How did they move to the cities?

Xi: My father has another two younger brothers, they three are all working in cities. So, they found an accommodation for my grandparents in the city together. My grandparents live by their own, but my father and his brothers pay their living expenses.

R: You said you have two *shushu* (uncles on father's side), do they have influence on your study?

Xi: No, I am not quite familiar with them, because they were both migrant workers in other cities. Typically, we have family reunions during spring festivals and we would bring each other some presents. During ordinary times. I feel that they adults may visit each other sometimes. But for me, I mainly go to school, seldom having contact with them, except the spring festivals.

R: Do they have children?

Xi: Yes. My father is the first son, I am the eldest grandchild on my father's side. But again, we children also only meet each other during spring festivals.

R: Do your grandparents on your father's side have influence on your study?

Xi: Nope. Haha(laugh)!

R: Could you introduce your grandparents on your mother's side?

Xi: My *laoye* (mother's father) is a principle in a public middle school. Although he was retired, he was appointed by a private school again. That is, he has still worked as an educator, mainly responsible for managerial stuff. My *laolao* (mother's mother) has been a housewife, helping with her children's family, like taking care of the grandchildren.

R: How is your relationship with the relatives on your mother's side?

Xi: My mother is my grandparent's eldest child, so I am the eldest grandchild on my mother's side. I have a *jiujiu* (mother's brother), a *xiaoyi* (mother's younger sister). We have had many contacts with them. I have a feeling that we had a close relationship with the relatives on my mother's side since I was a little kid. My *laoye* and *laolao* moved to the inner city very early. I have always been to their house to have meals. Then, because their house was bought by my *jiujiu*, they had lived together until recently my *jiujiu* bought another house. I went to their house very often, so I kept frequent contact with my *jiujiu*. For my *xiaoyi*, we also have many contacts, we have been very close anyway.

R: Do they have influence on your study?

Xi: I felt that we are very close. They would bring me presents after business trip. Especially my *xiaoyi*, she has been a good person since I was very little. It seems she treats me better than she did to other children!

R: Could you give me an example?

Xi: She has been very nice! From my early age, she has given me a good feeling every single time I saw her. She also has been very industrious. I did not know why, just that feeling!

R: How did they support your study?

Xi: For my study, I think my *laoye* has had certain impact, other people haven't had so much. My *laoye* ...(thinking). For example, I am in the university now, he also has kept frequent contact with me to ask my study or situation. When I was in high school, he always told me that do not have too much stress, something like this. He gave me some instructions as well.

R: Alright, Let's talk about your study tracking now. could you recall your life before you going to school?

Xi: At that time, my father was also a teacher. He had been a teacher before he became a public servant. My mum and dad both teaching in a private school. We live in the campus. All the teachers in that school lived there. But it was not our house, just let us to live in. I have some impression about the lives then. In the school, my mother's students or some teachers would play with me. People lived there, and it was a middle school, the students there were relatively old. My memory was mainly about the campus, that feeling, I could not recall too many other things.

R: That is to say, before you went to school, your parents need to work during the day?

Xi: Yes.

R: Then, who took care of you when they went to work?

Xi: I cannot remember very clearly, but it should be my mum. It seems that she had applied for a leave from her school to focus on taking care of me for a certain period. Afterwards she went back to school again.

R: So, your grandparents did not take care of you when you were little?

Xi: No, my family is...(thinking). We have not been very close to my *yeye* and *nainai* (grandparents on father's side). They never lived with us. My *laoye* and *laolao* were due to...(thinking), my parents' legend love story. They opposed to their marriage at the beginning. So, they refused to visit my mum at the first several years. My mum did not visit them, either. Their relationship has become better gradually, they have married for such a long time after all.

R: How did your family educate you at this stage?

Xi: There should be little education at that time. I began to go to kindergarten when I was four. It was also because we were not living in the inner city at that time. That middle school was not quite near to city, not very convenient. After we bought our own house in the inner city, it became convenient to pick me up. Then I started to go to school. My impression about kindergarten was that they would give us snacks and let us have an afternoon nap. I could not remember what I have learnt, just about the everyday lives.

R: What kind of kindergarten it is?

Xi: It was a public one in our county.

R: Why did you go to this one?

Xi: There should have few kindergartens at that time. Then, my mum always thought that the teachers, or other things, in public schools were more reliable. So, they chose this one.

R: Could you recall your study in the kindergarten?

Xi: I have no memories about what I have learnt at all! But as I said, I remember the eating and sleeping stuff, especially the afternoon nap! I did not like sleeping after lunch. I was awake during the nap time. The teacher was quite annoying. S/he always asked me to close my eyes. But once we got up, they would give us snacks, then, someone would pick me up, I would return home! Right! My *nainai* (father's mother) lived with us for some time. She picked me up for a period.

R: if not your *nainai*, who would pick you up?

Xi: It has always been my mum, no other person. Even at the beginning of my primary school, when I could not go to school by myself, it has been my mum who was responsible to send me to school and then pick me up.

R: what did you do after you back home?

Xi: For the kindergarten, I have little impression. But before the primary school, I went to one-year preschool class. It did not belong to primary school. At that time, as soon as I returned home after finishing class every day, my mum would ask me what I have learnt today, what I have did today. Then, she would review those things with me again. I had a quite deep impression when I began to learn the *pinyin* (Chinese alphabet). My mum discussed the letters with me very seriously, then we two checked in the dictionary together.

R: what else did your mother do?

Xi: Generally, she let me tell her what I have learnt. She also checked my homework. If I made mistakes, she would tell me the wrong points, then let me to correct them.

R: Could you recall any impressive things at this stage?

Xi: en...(thinking). My parents' quarrel, does that count?

R: Yes, carry on.

Xi: I cannot remember why, but my dad broke the pan. That's it. Haha...(laughing)

R: Do your parents' quarrel have impact on you?

Xi: I feel that, when I was little. I feel that quarrel in a family is normal. Every parent will quarrel at some points. For my parents, they preferred cold war. They kept ignoring each other after each quarrel. When I was a little kid, I felt that I did not dare, maybe I was too obedient. My parents had a sense of authority in my mind. I did not dare to mediate or something like that. When they quarreled, I kept silent, did not know what to do, just staring at them. Then, I just would not like to mediate I think. But when I have grown up gradually, they were willing to listen to me gradually, so I became not so afraid of them. I was really afraid of them before. Then, I began to try to stop them actively, asked them to communicate with each other.

R: could you recall any influential teachers at this stage?

Xi: I remember one teacher; I still know him/her till now. It has been a long time, I cannot say the discreet impact on me, just know s/he has taught me.

R: Could you recall any influential friends at this stage?

Xi: Yes. There were several children in our staff quarter. We were around the similar age. We played games together in the neighbourhood. We could be called the childhood buddy. There are two people, I have known them quite well till now. we

have kept close contact. We went to the same primary, middle and high schools. Our relationships have been so good, they have impact on all the aspects of my life, such as my study and life habits.

R: Could you give me an example?

Xi: Actually, I (thinking). Anyway, among the peers, we have really good relationships. We belong to one circle. At first, when we were in primary school, one of them had the reading habit. His/her mum is a high school teacher, she liked reading, then, all of us became keen on reading. All of us would buy many books, we were eager to finish one book so that we could exchange with each other. Then, at school, there was no big things in primary school. But we were still in the same class in middle school. At that time, we could feel (thinking). We could feel the pressure coming from each other. A feeling that we cannot be left behind, and we should study hard. Something like that. During the high school, we communicated with each other very often. Myself, I would like to talk with them my puzzles relating to the grownup or upsets about study. And also, any puzzles about lives, including the values, views on persons and things as well as my future life plan. We discussed all together. Such communications about thoughts would have many impacts, like small living habits. For example, I used to spend money freely. Because of different consumption value, some of my friends were very frugal. Then, I learnt from them that I should not waste money.

R: Anyone else do you think have influence on you at this stage?

Xi: It seems no more. Actually, I think from kindergarten till primary school, I had led a simple life. I had time to play, and my parents would also instruct me to study when it was time to study. They gave me such guide that I should study hard, then play hard. So, I thought I should study hard without too many personal ideas.

R: you talked about your parents' guidance; how did you guide you?

Xi: I feel that my mum did more, my dad cared very little. For my mum, my exams (thinking). For the ordinary school days, she would ask me to do homework first after school, then I could play. For the exam, if I got bad results, she would pay special attention. She would definitely analyze with me. Or she would say, 'weren't you careless again?' Something like that.

R: That is to say, your mum restricted your play time? Right?

Xi: Yes.

R: What other restrictions do you have at home?

Xi: en...(thinking). Oh! Right! You reminded me! When I was little, we had the habit of going to bed early at home. I must go to sleep before nine. After I finished the homework, it was around 7. After I ate dinner, I could watch TV with my mum for a little while. Yes, watch TV, we had no computer at that time. It seems we had computer from the fifth year in primary school.

R: Did they have restrictions on watching TV?

Xi: Yes, they limited the time length.

R: Could you explain more in detail?

Xi: Generally, I could only watch one hour at most. Or, let me think. I watched Cartoons at that time, they would say, 'you should only watch these episodes, you should not watch more'.

R: Who said that?

Xi: My mum. Including like I must go to bed before nine. They were all my mother's requirements. For my life, I had more impressions on my mum than my dad at the beginning. My dad was busy with his work, left little time at home. Maybe he came back for meals, something like that.

R: Do you have any other rules at home?

Xi: There should be no others. Actually, such rules were from my little age till my fourth year in primary school. During that period, my mum had intervened with my study and life a lot. She set some rules. But she was not arbitrary. My mon was not too strict. She was not to say to force me to do this or that. If one day, I said 'I would like to watch longer TV'. She would say 'OK, do it, but don't be too late'. Then, from my fourth year in primary school, she was loose on my sleeping time. She cared less about my study. Sometimes she would forget to ask whether I have finished the homework or not. Or it was up to me whether I would like to tell her my exam results. She only mentioned them when she remembered.

R: Did you have extra-curriculum study at his stage?

Xi: No.

R: So, what did you do when you had school holidays?

Xi: Just play with friends.

R: Alright, what kind of primary school you go to?

Xi: It was also a public school, named No. 4 primary school.

R: Why did you go to this school?

Xi: Because it was near to my home. Right, just because it was near to my home.

R: Did your home belong to this school district?

Xi: I am not sure, but it was not so strict with the school district at that time. It seems you could go whichever school you would like at that time. Not like today.

R: How was your study in primary school?

Xi: We had around 70 students in my class. My ranking was between 10<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup>. It could be regarded as the upper middle, not the best one.

R: Have your parents tried to help you to be the best one?

Xi: No, I feel that my parents have been particularly open and enlightened. They never asked me or forced me to become the best one. I feel that they did not want me to have too much pressure in primary school. It seems that they thought I was just a kid, I should play when it is to play.

R: Could you recall anyone support your study at this stage?

Xi: It was my mum. At home, it was my mum. For the teachers, they did not to say...(thinking). I feel that what they did were the ordinary things between teachers and students. Of course, teachers have certain requirements on students.

R: What requirements did your teacher have?

Xi: Actually, I have been bad at math from the primary school. I remember one math teacher. Because I always made mistakes on those easy questions because of carelessness. s/he always asked me to be careful and s/he would set goals for me.

R: What kind of goals?

Xi: For example, I had ten wrong answers this time, s/he would ask me to reduce the number to eight.

R: What influence did this teacher have on you?

Xi: I think it is good. Yes, s/he also pushed me sometimes. I felt that I am a little bit fear of math. I felt that I need to study math hard in case s/he would criticized me.

R: You just said your mum care about your study at home, what did she do at this stage?

Xi: We began to learn how to write composition from the fourth year in primary school. I could not get a high mark. She went to school to communicate with my teacher about my recent performance. Then, she would analyze my homework to see the problems. She bought me a lot of reference books about how to write compositions, like good words and good sentences. She asked me to recite them.

R: That is to say, your mum kept contact with your teacher, right?

Xi: Yes, she was active. She has kept contact with my all my teachers in primary school all the time. She would ask them about my performance.

R: How did she keep contact with them?

Xi: Basically, she gave my teachers calls. If...(thinking). For example, sometimes, my performance was not so good, I did not have a good mark, or I had some changes that she thought I had stepped back, she would go to school directly.

R: Except your teachers, whom your mum would talk about your study with?

Xi: Of course, my dad. But my dad was not strict at all. He did not have high requirements on me. He was a person, how to say(thinking). For example, when I was in the first year, our teacher asked us to copy the words from the copybook for calligraphy. We needed to copy many times for a single letter. My dad was very angry. He said that I already could write those words correctly, why should I still copy so many times. Thus, he went to my school to tell my teacher that he would not like me to copy too much. Then, I became the only lucky one in my class who could just copy one line for one letter, I handed over less homework comparing with others.

R: How many did others need to copy?

Xi: One page! Haha...(laughing).

R: Any other person your parents would talk about your study with?

Xi: I feel that there were discussions among parents of my friends or classmates. They might have certain communications. Because my parents also know the parents of my good friends. They were quite familiar with each other. They may discuss children's study on the way to schools or when they waited for the pickup.

R: What would they discuss about?

Xi: I did not know the exact contents, but it was definitely about the recent performance, backwards or forwards. The status at home. Those were typical topics.

R: Why do you say they were familiar with each other?

Xi: They were mostly my fathers' colleagues, the public servants. we all lived in the same neighbourhood. We meet each other quite often. They had many intersections.

R: Anyone of them have had influence on your study?

Xi: No very special influence, they are my friend's parents and my parents would discuss my study with them. That's it.

R: How did your parents support your study at home at this stage?

Xi: Typically, at this stage. They talked with me after my examinations. My mum would keep saying with no stop. After she saw my test papers, she would keep asking me why I made such mistakes. My dad won't say too much. He said, 'it does not matter'. Before the fourth year, my mum used to instruct my study and she was strict with me. We also always read newspapers together. Not that newspapers, but



the reading materials our school gave us. We read together before I went to bed. I also remember a scene. We had read a story together. The messages it expressed was that we need to be considerate, like thinking about things from other people's point of view, and to be positive. My mum's own value is also (thinking). She is a positive person. She always told me that a contented mind is a perpetual feast. I thought I have learnt such things when I was little. I am benign and considerate now. I thought it was because my mum told me these when I was little. They are so impressive that I remember how she said at that time. I maybe childish at that time. But I also reminded myself that I need to take account of other people's feelings. It was a sense of enlightenment. They have great impact on my values and personality.

R: Were there any impressive things at this stage?

Xi: The main things in primary school were around playing and fooling with friends. I really have no conception about study in primary school. My mum and dad asked me to study hard, then I could play freely. They never asked me to reach a certain high level. I feel that I had a happy time, no stress at that time.

R: Have you ever encountered any difficulties at this stage?

Xi: It was my math. I felt math was very difficult. It was a challenge for me to have a mark over 80! My mum also said my exam results were not so good. But she did not ask to me do any after school tutoring.

R: You said you were not good at math, how did your family deal with it?

Xi: They felt it was not good, but also not too bad. Just so-so. My parents still let me, myself, pay more attention and let me to study harder.

R: Did you study harder?

Xi: en...(thinking). I feel that I did not want to make great efforts. I did not like math. Because my mother already did not focus too much on my study, she already hasn't asked too much. As long as my marks were not too bad, like 70-80 points. I thought it was OK. I did the daily routine to do exercises, but I felt I was not dedicated to it at that stage.

R: Could you recall any other people support your study?

Xi: en...no more.

R: Did you have any extra-school studies at this stage?

Xi: After school, I felt that I had read lots of books, I like novels. Right, I loved reading at that time.

R: Where did you get your books?

Xi: I bought them, and I also exchanged books with others.

R: How did you get your money?

Xi: I said, 'I wanna buy books', my parents would give me money, then they let me to buy by myself.

R: Whom did you exchange books with?

Xi: We, classmates, would exchange books we liked. And I also exchanged books with the kids in my neighbor.

R: Why did you like reading?

Xi: When I read, I would feel suddenly...(thinking). The first time I had chance to read novels when I was little, I felt they were interesting. With my grownup gradually, I would have a sense of sympathy when I read certain books. Or sometimes I could find answers from books when I felt puzzled. They also provoked my thinking.

R: What else would you do outside school?

Xi: I began to dance since the first year in primary school. My mum thought that a girl should have a good temperament. But for me, I thought myself, how to say. I followed my mum's appearance; I looks like outgoing. But actually, from the inner heart, I followed my dad's genes. I am actually reserved. I am not good at showing myself. So, I was not so happy when I was dancing. It was just because they asked me to dance, then I did. I had regular classes during weekends and summer and winter holidays. When I was in the fourth year, I felt it was meaningless, thus I told my mum I did not want to continue. My mum said if I did not want to continue, then just stop here. At that time, my friends were attending, like piano lessons, or other instrument classes. Then I said to my mum, 'I would like to learn an instrument'. Then I began to learn *pipa* (a traditional Chinese instrument) from the sixth year in primary school.

R: Why did you choose pipa?

Xi: At that time, my mum also wanna me to learn piano. But I said, 'I was too old to learn piano'. Others have learnt for many years. They were already excellent. I would feel embarrassed if I started from my sixth grade. So, I decided to learn a traditional instrument. I did not know why. I just told my mum. She asked me, 'Do you wanna learn *guzheng*' (another traditional Chinese instrument), I said 'no'. it was a street instrument. We began to look for information, then we found a teacher to teach me *pipa*.

R: How did you find this teacher?

Xi: It was recommended by the agency. They found the teacher in P city, not in X city. They made appointments with him/her. S/he commuted between P city and X city every week to teach me.

R: Anything else you did when you did not go to school?

Xi: en...(thinking). After stop dancing, I had more spare time. Then my mum asked me 'what do you would like to learn'? I thought it was better to do some exercises, then I also learnt Taekwondo.

R: What kind of middle school did you go?

Xi: Still a public school, named Binying School. At that time, people around me thought students should go to No. 1 school. It was better than Binying. But my father insisted that I should go to Binying. For the public, Binying was not as good as No. 1. It was said the students there were undisciplined, and not all the students were excellent at academic performance or something like that. However, my dad did not wanna me go to the school like No. 1. There would be too much stress. He felt that schools like Binying was good because I could do things more freely. Then I went to Binying.

R: How did you go to this school?

Xi: Through the entrance examination. Middle school tracking still belongs to compulsory education. My *hukou* belongs to that district. You also could be accepted once you passed the bottom line.

R: How was your study at this stage?

Xi: It was really...(thinking). I had had no concept of study before. It maybe because we had fewer good students in that school. Then, suddenly, I could reach very high marks. It was that feeling! I kept getting good results in exams all the way through my middle school. I was the first three in my class, in my whole grade. Because I lived in school at that time. My parents did not restrict me too much. It was basically self-study. I, myself, began to be engaged at that time. We, my several friends, we were still in the same class. Firstly, we would unconsciously have a sense of comparison. We need to study hard. Then, a sudden feeling that there were many new knowledges in middle school, like biology, geography. I felt study was a happy thing at that time. I felt interested once I have learnt new things. But I still felt that there were fewer good students in my school.

R: What influence this school on you?

Xi: I felt there was really no stress at all. Comparing with No.1, we had less curriculum tasks, we did less exercises. I was happy. So, I was interested in studying because I was not stressful. Then, just due to the multiple environment, the students were in different levels. You had chance to know all kinds of person. When I stayed with them, I won't think about whether they studied better than me or not. We were just friends. We were the same. Everyone was happy. Thus, I made a lot of friends. Although we have less connections now, I got plenty of care from them at that time.

R: Could you give me an example, what kind of care did you get?

Xi: For example, they would bring yummy things for me from home. I chatted with them once I felt unhappy.

R: You said that you lived in school, why?

Xi: It was a boarding school.

R: Did everyone need to live in school?

Xi: No, you also could live at home, someone did. But most of us lived in school.

R: Why didn't you live at home?

Xi: I wanna to check out the group living. I think living in school was good.

R: Could you describe your campus life?

Xi: I got up at around six in the morning. Then we have morning exercise, just running around the playground. Then we went to the classroom to do morning recitation. Then breakfast. Morning lessons, lunch. Then we had a noon- time self-study, afternoon lessons. Dinner, evening self-study time till around ten pm.

R: How often did you back home?

Xi: Once a week.

R: How did your parents know your in-school study at this stage?

Xi: they would know if I told them when I backed home.

R: What would you tell them?

Xi: Sometimes...(thinking). If...(thinking). Sometimes I might tell them if I thought I have learnt something interesting. I would share with them. Then after exams, of course, I would tell them the results. Oh! Right! We had parents meeting in middle school. Each month, after the monthly examinations, our teacher would hold parents meeting to communicate with parents.

R: How did your parents communicate with your teacher?

Xi: I felt that they did not communicate too much with my teachers. My dad always sat at the back. He seldom talked to my class teachers. He just left directly after the meetings.

R: What did you do after your returning home from school?

Xi: Typically, I spent one day doing homework, then one day playing.

R: Did anyone in your family help with your homework?

Xi: No, they did not help with my homework since middle school.

R: Then, how did they support your study at home?

Xi: I felt that they did not intervene too much since middle school, just asking me the exam results.

R: What did you play?

Xi: We had computers at that time. Sometimes I would play computer games. Or I went out with my friends.

R: What was your parents' attitude towards your computer playing?

Xi: They also...(thinking). I could not play too long. But there was no a clear restriction. When I was playing, they might remind me that I should have a rest, or I should not play too long. Something like that.

R: Could you recall any teachers having influence on you at this stage?

Xi: I felt that our class teacher, how to say, s/he just graduated at that time. I have neutral comment on him/her. Somethings s/he did were OK, I thought. But the ways s/he dealt with some issues were not so mature. Actually, I did not that agree with him/her sometimes.

R: Did you have conflicts?

Xi: Me? Normally, few things would involve my benefits directly. It was when s/he dealt with others' issues. I did not feel good. But I felt myself, actually, as students, we had no right to speak. He just did it, we could only have unsatisfied feelings.

R: Any teachers have supported your study?

Xi: It was still math. My math was still no good. My math teacher at this time was quite nice. s/he always...(thinking). When I did not get a good mark or was careless, s/he always reminded me. I felt that I had been fear of math, so I have the most connections with math teachers.

R: Could you give me an example that how did your math teacher help you?

Xi: That is...(thinking), for my study, maybe sometimes, I asked him/her questions, s/he was very patient to explain. As I said that s/he reminded me of the importance of being careful, then I might feel that I have to be careful, I did not want him/her disappointed.

R: Any of your friends helped with your study at this stage?

Xi: It should also be us. Of course, I definitely made new friends. Both the old and the new, we studied together. When we encountered difficult questions, we discussed together, then explained to each other. Always like that.

R: What did you do when you did not need to go to school?

Xi: en ...(thinking). For example, during the summer and winter holiday, I went to the *Pipa* class once a week, then I could arrange the rest of the time by myself. Once I finished the assignments, I have always kept on playing.

R: How did you arrange your time?

Xi: I left that I played a lot during the middle school. At the beginning, during the first two years (there are three years in Chinese middle school), I would normally first finish holiday homework, then go to play. For some holidays, I did not want to do the homework, then played all the holidays until it approached to the new term dates. Then I would be crazy with making up for the homework.

R: When you did not write the holiday homework, what was your parents' attitude?

Xi: At that time, they thought as long as you could finish it. Others were up to me.

R: Have you encountered any difficulties at this stage?

Xi: Difficulties? I thought everything was not too difficult. Maybe, at the beginning, it was a challenge for me to learn math, physics and chemistry. But I, myself, would think of buying more exercise books to practice. So, they were also...(thinking). That is to say, no big deals, I over them.

R: Who would you turn to when you have difficulties?

Xi: It was definitely my classmates. For example, s/he was good at this subject, then I ask him/her questions specific to this subject. Then, I would go to the teacher directly. Also, I would talk to my mum. I would say, 'I felt that my math...' (thinking). Certainly, she might also feel that my math test failed again or something like that. She would ask me if it was difficult. Then I said, 'yes'. But I felt that my family had no idea about supplementary tutoring. They have kept saying, like step by step, or doing more practices something like that.

R: What kind of high school did you go?

Xi: It was the best one in my county. Then, suddenly, I felt that (thinking). Because the tempo of my middle school was not so tense. I was not so accustomed to this high school. I felt tired all of a sudden. I was lacking sleep all day. I was nerves. Comparing with others, they might have been used to this highly pressured model. I felt that myself...(thinking). It seems that there were many study techniques that I did not know at all, but they have already learnt them. That feeling...(thinking). Physics, chemistry and math were so difficult. I was not in good mood at the first two months. I was not used to doing so many exercises, then I felt extremely stressful. I felt study was difficult.

R: How did you deal with this situation?

Xi: Actually, I would talk to my parents sometimes. I said, 'whoops! I felt that I was a loser'. Then my mum told me that, of course, she would comfort me first. Then,

finally, at that time, it suddenly occurred to her that why not having supplementary tutoring? Haha...(laughing). Then, I began to, like math, I began to. But because the high school was too intensive, I went back home once every three weeks. So, it actually left little time to attend supplementary tutoring in ordinary school days. But I went to the math tutoring during the summer holiday before I entering to the second year in high school.

R: Who did the tutoring?

Xi: We found a tutoring agency, and it was a one to one tutoring.

R: How did you find this agency?

Xi: There were many such agencies. They posted ads.

R: Why did you choose this tutor?

Xi: S/he was recommended by the agency, after a taster class, I felt s/he was nice. Then I went to his/hers.

R: How did you go to this high school?

Xi: I passed their entrance examination. My ranking was between the 100<sup>th</sup> to the 200<sup>th</sup>. At that time, all the classes were divided into ABC level. I was in the B class, not the best one.

R: Did you go to the best class later?

Xi: Yes, after the choose of the subject (in Chinese high schools, typical the second year, students could choose either the arts or the science subjects to study for the rest of their high school. The arts subjects are politics, history and geography, the science subjects are physics, biography and chemistry). I chose the arts subject, then I went to the best arts class.

R: Why could you go to the best arts class?

Xi: May be that the smart students went to the science classes? Haha...(laughing). There were fewer students choosing the arts subjects. Right! After the separation of the subjects, my marks became high suddenly. It might due to that my scores of those science subjects were low, leading to the comprehensive scores were low too. But now they were excluded. That's it!

R: Why were you good at the arts?

Xi: I felt that, personally, I liked thinking, I had strong understanding. But for the science, I was poor at logic.

R: How was your study in the new class?

Xi: Actually, I was not stable at first. I ranked as the third when I entered in this class. But I also ranked as 8<sup>th</sup> or 9<sup>th</sup> sometimes, or between 10<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>. But I, my teacher's comment was that I had explosive power. Suddenly, I could be the No. 1 in the city's joint examination. Our teachers always said to me, 'you were so good sometimes, so bad other times'. That is to say, my study was not stable.

R: What did you do with your unstable situation?

Xi: I felt that it all depended on the math. There were no many differences among other subjects. If my math did well, the comprehensive scores would be high.

R: Were there any supportive persons around you at this stage?

Xi: The people surrounding me...(thinking). After the separation of the subjects, another two friends and I were still in the same class. Like before, we would discuss the difficult questions. We eased each other's pressure.

R: Any supportive teachers?

Xi: One of my teachers liked chatting with students very much. But I was extremely afraid of him/her. I did not agree with his/her teaching methods. My parents had never given me too much pressure. But this teacher was good at pushing you. s/he would like setting goals all day to let you reach a certain score. Then s/he would force you to complete certain amount of assignments. So, I was really depressed at that time. My status was extremely...(thinking ). My psychological status was bad. I felt study, I did not understand that why did s/he do that. How could s/he force me to do these things. I felt I had no autonomy. That was my feeling.

R: How did you deal with this situation?

Xi: Then I talked to my parents. I cried because I felt depressed. I wailed with no stop. Then my parents said how it came. They went to school, had an appointment with that teacher via call. It seemed that they had a talking outside school. After this talking, this teacher chatted with me once. I was afraid at that time. I was afraid that s/he would have bad impression on me. But s/he let me not be afraid of him/her. If I did not wanna too much pressure, s/he won't do that again. Since then, s/he had not restrained me too much.

R: How did your parents know your in-school study at this stage?

Xi: We had fixed monthly tests. Our teachers would send them text messages about the results.

R: What did they do after seeing the results?

Xi: Generally(thinking). They actually did not understand which level you were. They only understood the scores. If they saw that the absolute number was small, they would ask that whether this subject was not good. If the comprehensive scores



were not good, they would ask me if I felt stressful this period or if my status was not good.

R: Could you give me an example that how did they communicate with you?

Xi: I felt that since the high school, I preferred to communicate with my dad. Comparing with my mum, I felt that, actually, as my dad, firstly, it might be because he had wider social networks due to his job nature. Secondly, as a man, he is more broad-minded. His views on things are more open. Then I would discuss with him. I felt that at that stage, I did not just discuss with him about my study, but also my personal views on certain things, including my values, my comments on someone. Then he would tell me his opinion. We two had frequent such interactions.

R: Any other ways they could know about you?

Xi: en...(thinking). During high school, they did not have too many interactions with teachers except during the parent's meetings. Yes, they might talk to teachers during the parent's meetings.

R: What did they talk about?

Xi: The old stuff. About the exam scores. I did not know the exact contents, I was not at site.

R: Could you recall any other person who has supported your study at this stage?

Xi: en...(thinking). Right! At that time, I had some problems with my shoulders. Because I kept writing, then there were some injuries in my shoulders, muscle injuries. Then I began to live at home because I needed to do the massage every evening for half an hour. I was in highly pressure in the third year. I studied from 5am to 10pm every day. I felt extremely tired. But I had no other choices. I went to the doctor. They said that you would feel better if you were not so tired. But the injuries continued, did not recover. I felt that this situation might have some impact on my status. Since I felt tired in mind, my health also went wrong.

R: Then?

Xi: It kept hurt! Haha(laughing). It would be better sometimes but continue to hurt if I was tired again. But my mindset was quite good. Due to the health problem, I felt that why did I turn myself to such a situation? I told myself 'don't be too...', that is to say, in the last year, everyone was so workaholic. They studied overnight after returning to the dormitories. They used flashlight after the room lamps were turned off. They got up around 4 am. For me, I began to live at home. I won't go to school too early. I did not want to push myself to...(thinking). My mindset was good.

R: When you felt stressful, have you turned to anyone?

Xi: My friends and classmates. We communicated study and psychological issues. If we felt stressful, we would encourage each other.

R: Any other difficulties you have encountered at this stage?

Xi: Firstly, it was the up and down at the beginning. Then, later we had a system that divided the building. It was called study departmental system. In each building, there were first year, second year and third year students. It was a total new system for me. At that time, I finally got rid of that teacher who gave me too much pressure. My entire status became extremely good. I felt happy all day long. My new teacher did not give me any pressure. Then, my exam results kept good. I was the top student. My scores became stable. Then, in the third year, this system stopped. Then, I began...(thinking). Actually, in the third year, I felt that my basic knowledge in the first two year was not so well-grounded, like math. Then, my comprehensive scores were not so high in the third year. But not bad, around the first 10<sup>th</sup>, not the best one.

R: Did you try to be the best?

Xi: I still studied hard. For my parents, although they felt I was not as good as before, they still did not give me pressure. They felt that was enough. They always comforted me to let me release my stress.

R: How was your *gaokao* score?

Xi: 634(out of 750). I was the No.1 in the municipal level and the 120<sup>th</sup> in the provincial level.

R: Why could you have such a good result?

Xi: I thought it was because my math was outperformed, haha (laughing). I have reached the highest score ever!

R: Why?

Xi: I felt the questions were so easy. I did not know why. At the very first glance, I have already answered several multi-choices. I was wondering why they were without difficulties. After the exam, I already felt that this time was not bad.

R: Did you know the IRE?

Xi: Yes, of course.

R: Why didn't you attend it?

Xi: Actually, at the beginning, we also wanna try. Like us, the first several students, of course, our teachers would encourage us to apply for the IRE in the top universities. But as a student studying in the county, in reality, we were nearly impossible to pass the material review stage. Because we did not attend any discipline competitions. We had no certificates.

R: Were there any arrangements in you school?

Xi: That is the point. That were the differences between county schools and municipal schools. There were no arrangements in our school at all, especially for us arts students. For the science students, there were a few discipline competitions you could attend. There were seldom chances for the arts students.

R: Why did you choose this university?

Xi: The *gaokao* scores were the pre-condition. It was not enough for A and B universities. I chose C uni, firstly it was the realistic concern. My scores could only go to C uni at most. Secondly, C uni was the best one among arts students. Its social science is the best.

R: Anyone has offered you help relating to your choice?

Xi: en...(thinking). Mainly my parents, others involved little. I discussed with them; they also took considerations of the reality. C uni was the best. Then, we also went to some seminars held by the recruitment staffs from different unis. C uni left me a good impression.

R: Why did you choose this major?

Xi: Whoop! It was completely because of ...(laughing). This major was a trap! At that time, the recruitment leader from C uni is from our school. On my god! I was ...afterwards, I knew that s/he is actually the lectures of our major. I admired him/her at that time. His/her speech was inspiring! So, I felt good about this major!

R: Anyone else you have consulted with?

Xi: We have gone to an agency, like a private company. They would provide you several suggestions. But we just went there once. We felt, 'oh! too expensive'! At the first time, they made an initial assessment, then offered a price. We felt it did not worth it. So, we backed home to handle it by ourselves.

R: How expensive it was?

Xi: Over 8000 RMB. But they only listed six unis to let you choose from.

R: What do you think of your family' s influence on your access to university?

Xi: I felt that when I was little, when I went to the kindergarten and primary school, we lived in the countryside. When we moved to the inner city, we bought the new house, but we needed to borrow money. I felt that our economic condition was not good at that time. Then, our family begun to be stable. It was not rich, but it could be called well-off. We lived a moderate life and became better and better. I felt that it was my mum during my earlier stage. It was my dad later on. How to say, my mum fostered my learning habits and my attitudes towards studying when I was little. Then my mum took care of the most part of my lives. Then, at the later stage, my dad helped with my values. He communicated with me more about those things.

R: What do you think of your study in this uni now?

Xi: I am quite satisfied. You know, in such a good uni. You can know many great people. Your classmates, your teachers. My horizon is opened greatly. I can go to many galleries. I love it.

R: All right, do you have anything more you wanna to add?

Xi: No. You helped me to recall my previous life! I never thought about it before!

R: OK, thanks for your time today. You could contact me if you have anything else you would like me to explain.

Xi: OK.

***Parent example (Xi's mother)***

R: Could you introduce your family?

Xi-M: I am a schoolteacher in primary school. I taught Chinese before. Because my boy is still too little, I haven't taught the major subject recent years. I am teaching drawing, very relaxing. Her dad is a public servant, he is the mayor in our county, could be called as a leader.

R: how old is this boy?

Xi-M: only three years and two months.

R: He is far younger than Xi, why did you wanna a second child?

Xi-M: This question, haha (laughing). At that time, I already felt that one child was not enough. Family's reason counted a lot. Because their family needed a boy. That's it. Prior to we made this decision, we discussed with Xi, she did not agree at first. But she also understood parents' situation. We decided that if it were a girl, we won't let her come, if it were a boy, we would have it. That's it. Then it was a boy, everyone was content. I felt that, my feeling is, you see, I had cultivated this girl to grow up. Now we had a boy, I felt that it is another new challenge for my ability. It is still a question that how good could I rear this boy. It is a test for me, I felt a bit pressure.

R: What did you mean by saying 'family's reason'?

Xi-M: Because her dad was the oldest son in his family. There were no grandsons. It could say that the pressure came from us, ourselves. We felt that there should have

a boy in this family. I felt that just let nature take its course. It would be the best situation to have a boy, but I did not push too much.

R: Were there any influences on Xi after his birth?

Xi-M: Well, how to say, because of such a huge age difference. I haven't seen much impacts from him on his elder sister. He is still a baby.

R: Were there any influences on your family after his birth?

Xi-M: Of course, we felt financial constrains sometimes. But not too much burden. The current situation is that you spent more if you had more, you spent less if you had less. Right? Your consumption level depends on your income level. Right? My family is not up to those above, but above those below.

R: Would you spend less for Xi after the second child?

Xi-M: That never happened. Though we have one more child, for Xi, we treated her as before. As long as it was reasonable, we spent the money without any discount. No matter it related to study or life. You talked about education today, I could say that, especially for education, we have never been mean on that.

R: Why would you like to spend money on education?

Xi-M: Certainly, no matter how poor you are, education is the last thing to sacrifice. It has much to do with a child's future. The destiny. Only if she was educated well from early age, could she find a good job, then live a happy life. It could be regarded as parents' responsibility.

R: Could you introduce her *yeye* and *nainai* (grandparents on her father's side)?

Xi-M: They both originated from the rural. They moved to city these two years. At first, they took turns to live in their sons' houses. Xi's father has another two brothers. Then after a while, they felt like a fish out of water living in city. They three brothers rent an independent accommodation for them. They live by themselves. After all, their budget could not afford to buy a house. But it is enough to rent an apartment. It was planned to share the expenses by them three, but we are the oldest and we have formal jobs. We pay more than another two.

R: Have her *yeye* and *nainai* had influence on Xi?

Xi-M: They were both farmers. They have many grandchildren. I felt that they did not pay much attention to the next generation. They seldom asked Xi's study as well as lives. They lived in the rural before. we only went to visit them during festivals or when we had time. They seldom came to the inner city. We asked them to come, they did not wanna. We had no other choices. I felt that their focus has been on their farmlands, on how to make the land harvest. They have not paid much attention on Xi.

R: Have her two *shushu* (father's brothers) had any influence on Xi?

Xi-M: It might because we have been busy with our work. We have not too many connections. They have not paid much attention to Xi.

R: Do her *shushu* have children?

Xi-M: Yes, Xi is the oldest, others are all younger than her.

R: Have they had influence on Xi?

Xi-M: I felt it might due to their education at home. They are not good at interpersonal relationship. Xi's personality makes her easy to get along with them. They are reserved. I felt that when they are together, Xi is more active. She would talk with them about study, ask their study things. They have not paid much attention to Xi's.

R: Why do you say it because the education at home?

Xi-M: I felt that...this(thinking)... Because they are both migrant workers, they might have not pay much attention to education. I don't know.

R: Could you introduce her *laoye* and *laolao* (grandparents on mother's side)?

Xi-M: Xi's *laoye* was also a teacher in middle school. He has been the school leader all the time. He is principle now and he was teaching dean before. My mum was a farmer. I am also the firstborn girl, I have a younger brother and a younger sister after me.

R: Have they had any influence on Xi?

Xi-M: I felt that we visited each other a lot. Her *laolao* has shown her utmost care for Xi's lives. Her *laoye* often asked all aspects about her study. Their concern extent has been high. That is the case.

R: Could you give me an example?

Xi-M: Because we live very near, in terms of daily lives, like meals...(thinking). for example, when I was busy with work, they would replace me to send her to school or pick her up from school. Or her *laolao* cooked for her more. For her *laoye*, he was busy with work, he did not take care of lives as much as her *laolao*, but he has also been concerned with Xi. He always asked whether she felt cold or hot. Once he saw Xi, he would ask her recent study status. He tried to know about all aspects relating to her study. Especially when Xi was in high school, I felt that...(thinking). There are some details. The study tempo was quick and tense in high school. Xi felt stressful, her *laoye* always comforted her to release the pressure. I thought it has been good to her. Xi has kept a good relationship with her *laoye*. Even though she is in the university now, her *laoye* often asks her situation via WeChat. Their relationships have been good!

R: Before Xi went to school, who looked after her?

Xi-M: Mostly it was me. At that time, her father was busy with work in the council. I took the most responsibilities to take care of her.

R: Didn't you go to work?

Xi-M: Before she went to the kindergarten, I did not come to city. I was still teaching in a school in the countryside. It was my father's school. My father was teaching in that school. My mother also lived in school. My parents helped me with taking care of Xi. I went to work, at the same time I also looked after her. It was a release for me that we lived in the school, my parents helped me.

R: That is to say, when you were on duty in school, her *laoye* or *laolao* looked after her, right?

Xi-M: Yes.

R: How did they take care of her?

Xi-M: At that time, I felt that it was not a big deal. It did not take them too much energy. You see, we all lived in school, I stayed with her. Xi's personality, her all aspects, I felt that, she was not a naughty kid. We were free from worrying about her. She would eat when it was time to eat, she would sleep when it was time to sleep. I felt that it was similar to the farmer's rearing way, a kind of free-ranging way. That is the case. We were not like in big cities. We had no entertainment parks to play around. There were no such conditions at that time. She just played in school, running with other kids in the neighbours. I felt very relaxing, that's it. I did not feel that she brought troubles.

R: Did the family educate her at this stage?

Xi-M: For example, when she was playing with other kids, you would teach her how to get along with others. Then, I felt that the conditions at that time were not good. Do you know VCD? You definitely do not know. We had a VCD at that time, we would buy some children's songs to let her to listen to. And... (thinking). of course, you are talking about education, I will not mention others. She listened a lot of children's songs. The conditions were too limited. We had less resources. We would also read children's books for her. That's it!

R: Who would do these things?

Xi-M: Me. After I backed home

R: Why did you do these things?

Xi-M: en... I did not do it intentionally, I just felt that she should learn something. And they were all I could do. I just do it. At that time, I would buy some reading books. But very limited. Because we were in the countryside at that time. It was not

comparable to now. I have bought lots of stuff for my son. I felt that we were inadequate in this aspect at that time, thus, I bought more now. it was too less at that time.

R: Have these things had influence on Xi?

Xi-M: I think yes. You see, especially she could concentrate her attention on one thing. I felt that she could not be affected by exterior surroundings when she was studying. No matter how chaotic the surroundings were, or no matter what other people were doing, she could concentrate her attention on her study.

R: Could you recall any impressive thing happened to her at this stage?

Xi-M: I felt that no significant things happened.

R: Could you recall any other influential persons for her?

Xi-M: I felt none.

R: What kind of kindergarten did she go?

Xi-M: We have moved to the city at that time. I made relevant considerations, so we moved to the inner city. Although my workplace did not change. I did not change my workplace successfully at first. I made it the second year. It was a tough time during the first year, it was tough for her dad. She was with her dad for the first year. Her dad was already working in the town at that time. Her dad needed to go to work, at the same time, he needed to send her to school, then picked her up. I went to the city every two days. She was with her father, going to the public kindergarten in the town. That is to say, she had been to school in the inner city. I have been teaching in the countryside for the first year. Then, for her schooling reasons, I adjusted my teaching place. It was difficult to make job transfer. Firstly, I changed to a school nearby the inner city. In this case, her dad still was responsible for sending and picking up her. When he was too busy, I would do these.

R: Why did she go to this kindergarten?

Xi-M: I felt that, after all, I firstly chose the kindergartens in inner city. I felt that there were more teachers in inner city schools. Their knowledge was broader. I chose this school because I felt that it was public school, the teachers were reliable. Their overall quality was better. I felt that would have great influence on children. That was my thinking.

R: Have your family encountered any difficulties when entering into this school?

Xi-M: I did not feel difficulties, I just registered, no need to use *guanxi* or find someone for help.

R: Has this school had influence on her?



Xi-M: Yes, at the beginning, when she started, her personality, I often asked her teacher about her status. At first, her teacher said that she was not active in the class. she did not talk too much. But her performance was good. It means that she never made troubles, let her teachers free from worrying about her. But she did not like interact with others. But gradually, she has been in this school for three years. During the three years, at the later stage, her teacher said, 'Xi becomes outgoing, she liked talking'. That was such case. I felt that there were changes in terms of her personality. It might be affected by the environment. Their teachers were nice. That was the reason. I felt that her presentation skill had improved greatly. Especially they had a lot of language classes. They read language books. Of course, their teachers had paid a lot energy. After school, when I back home every evening, I would let her show me what she has learnt from today's language book to see how she learned. She also studied hard; she has learnt the daily contents very well. She could recite all the contents without looking at the books. I felt very good. Although she could not recognize these letters, she could recite them, at least, I felt that it could fully practice her presentation skills.

R: Why did you say it was affected by the environment?

Xi-M: You see. Xi lived in the countryside school before. The people surrounded her were mainly villagers. After she went to the kindergarten in the city, the kids were all from the city. Rural children and urban children have different living experiences. The urban children must have been braver, they are good at expressing themselves. Gradually, they must have exerted the positive impact on Xi. Then, their teachers are more knowledgeable, they are good at enlighten.

R: Did you have other ways to know her study?

Xi-M: Firstly, although I did not send and pick up her every day, I had kept contact with her teacher. For example, when I picked up her, I would chat with her teachers face by face. I did the same when I send her to school. I would ask about her performance in school. Of course, in order to know her study, when I backed home every evening, I must, when I interacted with her, that was what I did. I asked her about her situation every day. Through her recitation, her reading of what she had learnt in school. I felt this was the best way to know about her study.

R: How did you interact with Xi?

Xi-M: I felt that I respect her. For example, if she encountered something, I would definitely ask her explanation about it first. After that, I would make my own judgement, then we tried to deal with it together.

R: Did she do other things after school?

Xi-M: During the kindergarten, you know, I did not send and pick up her in the first year. For the rest two years, I have already made job transfer to the city. It became convenient for me to do those things every day. After school, she began to learn how to write in the last year. She would write the words she learnt by herself. I felt that she was not tired in kindergarten. I also felt relaxed. At that time, I mainly paid

attention to her language class. I would judge whether she could give me feedback about her study status in time. I felt satisfied when seeing that she could recite the books so well. Really, it was a solid ground for her later language study.

R: You mentioned that you felt her teachers were good, have any teachers influenced her?

Xi-M: Yes, her dorm teacher. In the last year, there were extra-curriculum classes. she has attended the drawing class for one year. It was her dorm teacher coaching them drawing. I felt it was good for her. During that year, although there were no high requirements on the drawing quality, it, at least, activated her interests. Xi is originally a calm girl. Drawing, I think, is helpful for her ability to concentrate on study. It is also beneficial to her carefulness.

R: Why did she go to the drawing class, not others?

Xi-M: I chose the drawing class for her. Because I felt that, of course, I asked her opinion first. I asked her whether she liked dancing or singing or drawing. For me, myself, I personally prefer drawing. I liked drawing when I was a student. I also have bought some drawing pencils and books. I, sometimes, draw at home. She chose drawing directly. I could also be able to coach her at home.

R: What did she do when she did not go to school?

Xi-M: At that time, there were no many entertainment parks. I would take her to the supermarkets to hang out. We bought her something to eat, to play, not so many tools. Because the conditions were so limited at that time. I would buy her some snacks. Right, there was one entertainment park, I would select some items for her to play with.

R: Did she encounter any difficulties at this stage?

Xi-M: No big deals. It was just that she did not like afternoon nap. In the kindergarten, everyone needed to have a rest after lunch. She did not. She was energetic. Her teacher told me that she did not sleep. But she did not disturb others. Because I have told her 'if you did not sleep, you should not bother others. You could just lie down'. She seldom slept.

R: What kind of primary school she went?

Xi-M: It was a public school in the inner city.

R: Why did she go to this school?

Xi-M: It was near to our home. The transport was quite convenient. Right! I felt that I forgot one point! The school I worked in was far from my home. At that time, en...(thinking). Haha, let me tell you that, I am afraid that you would laugh at me. Haha (embarrassing smile). Don't laugh at me after I tell you. Haha (laughing).

R: Take it easy, Aunt. It is just a small talk. Nobody would know.

Xi-M: Alright, at the first three years in her primary school, I worked in an outskirts school. Her father said, 'just simply find someone else to replace you to teach'. He asked me to completely dedicate myself to taking care of her. That was such case. Haha (embarrassing smile). It was like this. Her father mobilized his *guanxi* in school, that was this case. I felt a little bit embarrassing to tell the story, haha (hesitation). When the school was short of teachers, I would pay the school money so that they could find some temporary teachers. That was this situation. At that time, I dedicated myself totally to looking after her. I did not work.

R: Did you encounter any difficulties when you transferred your job?

Xi-M: At that time, there was a shortage of the teachers in inner city schools. Of course, we also mobilized certain *guanxi*, haha (embarrassing laugh). There did was certain degree of difficulties.

R: What kind of *guanxi*?

Xi-M: We turned to the minister of education. After all, her dad was working in the county government. He had had connections with such departments.

R: How did she go to this school?

Xi-M: It was not difficult. At that time, they were not strict with the school district. Once you registered, you could go.

R: Could you tell me how did you take care of her?

Xi-M: During the first two years, she finished school very early. They only had three classes in the morning, the school finished at 11am and 4pm. I send and pick up her several times a day. I cooked for her. It seems that I went back to the primary school again. That is to say, when she was back home every day, we would review what she has learnt at school. They need to be consolidated once. I needed to know about her status, instant knowing. I followed closely. That was such case. For the most cases, I mainly judged what she has learnt in school. It would fine if she has already mastered them. If not, especially for those due to her carelessness, especially in terms of math. I, generally speaking, won't allow such cases. If she did, I would let her make corrections immediately. I felt that the first three years were the crucial. I paid a lot; she had made progress. Thus, it saved a lot at the later stage. It was the real case.

R: Any other ways that you could know her in-school study?

Xi-M: I asked for instant information through her teachers. Her test scores could reflect her ordinary status. The daily homework could also reflect. If she could handle them, there was no need to know through teachers. If some points she could not master very well, I would ask her teacher about her in-class performance. I felt, basically, it was quite smooth. I felt relatively relaxed. Although it could be

called that I followed her study daily, I did not feel tired. She also did not feel tired, very relaxing.

R: How was her ranking in primary school?

Xi-M: Good. She could be called the top students.

R: Why could she be the top?

Xi-M: The reason? I felt that it mainly because she liked studying. She was interested in studying. Yes, she had shown great interests. Then, I thought that we two have cooperated very well. Each time, when I checked her homework or asked about her study, she would be willing to communicate with me.

R: Any supportive teachers at this stage?

Xi-M: Of course! Especially in the third year. The teachers during the first three years were the same. I thought it was one of the reasons. I felt that the same teachers through the first three years, they knew quite well about her study and personality. I felt it was a great help for her progress. Especially in the third year. You see, in the first two years, it was not clear in terms of Chinese. Reading was vital. Although we did read at home, it was just reading. In the third year, her teacher emphasized reading. They recommended plenty of reading materials to them, especially the novels. They asked them to have a taste of it. In this way, one student read, two students read, then three students all read. So, their reading environment was good. The third year was the crucial time to learn how to write. This had great impact, reading had created a good ground for Xi's Chinese at the later stage.

R: You mentioned the junior years, how about the senior years?

Xi-M: We were in the same school during the senior years. I have been transferred to this school. When there was a chance to change my job site, I required that, in order to take care of her, I required to be transferred to her school.

R: Were there any differences after you working in this school?

Xi-M: Just as I said just now, she was educated quite well at the first three years. It was quite smooth for the later stages. She just progressed along the path. Since then, she has kept going at one fling. Then, from the fourth year, they began to change the teachers. It was coincided with my joining. At the first place, she had good academic performance, of course the teacher would pay more attention to her. She was an obedient student in the class. She listened to the teacher carefully in class. She also conducted self-study after class. All her teacher felt free from worrying about her. That was the fact.

R: Did your coming bring her any benefits?

Xi-M: I would tell my colleagues to keep closer eyes on her. However, even if I left such words to them, the teachers still could do nothing if she did not listen to the teachers, or if she could not concentrate on study. I felt that once you were independent first, you could climb high with the slight assistance from others.

R: Did she have any extra-curriculum study at this stage?

Xi-M: I have registered a dancing class for her. Because I considered that as a girl, I would like to train her temperament. I chose dancing for her, she was also happy to accept it. She had learnt Latin till the fourth year. She did not want to continue. I followed her opinion. She could do what she would like to do. She could do well for those she like. For those she dislikes, she 100 percent could not do well. In the sixth year, I asked, 'shouldn't you learn anything else? Otherwise, you would have no time in middle school. The tasks would be heavy'. She said that she would like to learn an instrument. I let her to choose one. At that time, I suggested her to learn piano or *guzheng*. They were popular. She said she did not wanna because there were too many learners. She was quite different, haha(laughing). I said, 'you just tell me what you wanted to learn'. She said *pipa*. She wanted to learn *pipa* at that time. I felt that, in that small county, it was really my first time to hear about *pipa*. It made me feel a little bit difficult. But she wanna, I would support. Then, we went to an agency, they did not have *pipa* coach. Of course, in order to make money, they found a teacher in P city specially for her. Then we bought her an instrument called *pipa*. This teacher came to our city once a week. twice classes once a time. It could be called the private teaching. You had no choice but to have private teaching. They had no such teachers here. We thought that it was not easy to commute between two cities once a week. It was not enough to just have one class in a week. Thus, the teacher taught two classes in a week. Anyway, it was not too expensive. 60 RMB per class? I forgot how much it was. Anyway, she was the only child. We would like to give her utmost support in terms of study. We, ourselves, could eat less, wear worse. We support her study.

R: Any other difficulties at this stage?

Xi-M: No more, I felt quite smooth.

R: Were there any other persons having influence on her?

Xi-M: en... yes. Although we lived in the commercial residential building. We kept good relationships with our neighbors. There were three families in one floor. we lived in the east side. The kid from the west side has been in the same class with Xi since the first year. They were always together. They played together, went to school together. For the first three years, that kid's mum was busy, I always send them two to schools, then I picked up them two after school. Basically, I took care of them two together for the first two years. They did all the things together. Later on, they two went to school by bike. Xi did not let me to send her again. She let me to work, then they went to school together. They always arrived at school half hour prior to the class time. Then also went home together after school.

R: How did they help each other's study?

Xi-M: When they had difficult questions, they would meet if it was possible. Then we had telephone at home at that stage. It was also normal to have discussion via telephone. Apart from this, I felt that they regarded each other as the learning goal. I felt that it was a good thing to have a goal. No matter it was exam or something else, they did not speak out, but they regarded the other one as the goal in hearts. They both studied well. That was this case.

R: What kind of middle school did she go?

Xi-M: For the middle school, he dad, at that time...(thinking). We also chose a public school. Because this is the only public school in our county. There was a private school, but they were strict with students. I felt that their time tempo was tight. At that time, we firstly preferred the public school. We did not wanna her to have too much pressure. We wanna give her more free time. Another vital point was that, to be honest, the study environment and exam results were not so good. But at the first place, her dad and I took consideration of the teachers. We started from teachers. I felt that teachers in the public school were better. Then, we had always would like to find her a school with more free time. This school have a two-day break once a week. In this case, she could return home to have a rest. I felt it was nice. For the private school, they had a break every two weeks.

R: How did she go to this school?

Xi-M: in the sixth year, she attended the entrance examination, then she was accepted.

R: What was her entering results?

Xi-M: It seemed she did not surpass that kid. She did better than Xi.

R: What was this school's influence on Xi?

Xi-M: It was good. I felt that Xi was relaxed during that three years. It really made her dad and me feel that we made a right decision. This school was really free. During the first month test, she ranked in the upper-middle in her class. In the final term examination, she ranked the No.1. It was a surprise for all of us. I felt that she was used to such environment. I felt that It was a great help for her study.

R: Why could she make such progress?

Xi-M: Firstly, I felt it was the environment, she felt comfortable. The humanistic environment was comfortable. Then, the teachers' teaching. It must suit her. The time tempo was also not tense. It might be such reasons that let her feel easy.

R: You mentioned that she lived in school, right?

Xi-M: yes.

R: How did you know her in school study?

Xi-M: She returned home for two days once a week. I went to her school in the middle of the week. Every Wednesday, the school allow the parents to have a look at the students. I would make best use of her time after the evening self-study. I would visit her and stay with her. I brought her some hot water, somethings to eat. Then I also kept contact with her teacher. I had her teacher's' contact number at that time. Especially when I picked her up once a week, I would go to her teacher to ask about her performance. The teacher always said that she did well. She never let them worried. Their teachers gave you such positive affirmation at the first place. I felt that she never let me headache, very easy.

R: How did you support her study at home at this stage?

Xi-M: Generally speaking, she managed her own time. I felt that our adult had involved less and less at that time. After returning home, she would firstly finish her homework, then played the computer games for some time. Also, she would watch TV and had gathering with friends. She arranged her own time.

R: That is to say, you did not worry about her time management?

Xi-M: We did not control her. She was quite self-disciplined. She could play as long as she like. She managed her time very well, thus we basically did not intervene. Of course, sometimes she would. if you did not say a single word at all, it seemed that you did not care about her. I did not wanna her have such feelings. I would ask, 'Xi, have you finished your homework?' I would also ask something like this. Sometimes, I would remind her to let the eyes to have a rest after playing for a while. Do not let the eyes to tired. Or I would wonder whether she was thirsty or not, I would pass her a cup of water. When it was time to eat, I would ask what she would like. Because she was just at home two days a week, I would cook whatever she ordered.

R: You said that she was self-disciplined, why?

Xi-M: haha...(laughing). I felt quite satisfied with this. I felt that she had her own goals. Her life goals were quite clear. This was my feeling.

R: What were her life goals?

Xi-M: Goals...(thinking). I felt that she knew the priority, she knew when it is the time to study.

R: Would you talk about her study with others?

Xi-M: Yes, especially with her best friends' parents. In our neighborhoods, some children were younger than her, some were similar to her. The kid living upstairs was in the same class with her in middle school. Another one was in the same primary school with her. They three were in the same class in middle school. We three families have also kept close contacts. They three were all good students. If there were some fluctuations relating to their study, or some issues relating to the

daily lives, we have always kept an eye on each other. It was good. Our parents have kept contacts via telephone as well. For example, when we went to school to visit the children on Wednesdays, we always arrived earlier, then we could stand together to communicate about children's study, all aspects.

R: Could you give me an example, what would you talk about?

Xi-M: en...(thinking). the kid upstairs, their level was similar. So, we mainly discussed daily lives. Not too much about study. in terms of study, they two were both excellent. I discussed more study with another mother. Her kid did not study so well as them two. But that kid was quite eager to be stronger. Her mum always told me that her kid was stressful. Or she would ask me something like how I comfort Xi, how I release her pressure. I would share some experience with her in time.

R: Were there any supportive teachers at this stage?

Xi-M: Of course, every teacher was supportive.

R: Could you give me an example?

Xi-M: en...it is hard to say. You see, without too many doubts, teachers were reliable. We trusted them. They would certainly answer her questions if she went to them, like her math teacher. Of course, not just one specific teacher, her class teacher and so on.

R: Could you recall any impressive things regarding with her teachers?

Xi-M: en...it seems, actually, we did not go to her teachers as frequent as before. she performed quite well, no need.

R: Did she do any extra curriculum studies at this stage?

Xi-M: The *pipa* class lasted till the second year in middle school. There was only one class per week. Sometimes, this teacher could not come, it would be one class every two weeks. It became less and less till once a month. I felt that she would forget if she left it there for too long. She stopped since the third year in middle school.

R: Did she encounter any difficulties in middle school?

Xi-M: I don't think so.

R: What kind of high school she went?

Xi-M: It was the No.1 high school. Certainly, we would choose it. The study environment was better. All aspects, the teaching quality were higher. We thought that these were the last three years, she must go to a good school. Of course, she needed to attend the entrance examination. She could not go to if she did not pass it. Actually, it was my idea to go to this school, her father slightly disagreed. What



he meant was still that this school had too much pressure. Students have less free time. He would like to send to C school. It was in municipal city. I said that it was better to study in our county. it was near to us. It was convenient for us to visit her. If somethings happened, it was convenient for us to take care of her. So, her father, Xi did not say anything. She just passed the exam, then went there.

R: How was her entering scores?

Xi-M: OK, the entering line was 580, she got 596.

R: How was her study in high school?

Xi-M: At the beginning, because they had not chosen the arts or the science, her ranking was not good. At that time, she felt the science was demanding. There were occasions that she could not master them. Since it was her first time to confront with such situation, she never experienced it before. there had no time that she could not handle a subject. She felt that, she turned to me. She said, 'mum, I felt that I could not grasp science, what should I do? Could you find me a tutor? I said 'yes.' Then I went to a tutoring center to find her a tutor. She went to the one-one private tutoring, around ten classes.

R: Which subject was this tutoring?

Xi-M: Math, only math. Because after the choice of the subjects, she did not have to learn physics, biology and chemistry.

R: Did it help with her study?

Xi-M: Yes, yes, yes. Under the condition that she could not handle, it was good to have a tutor that help her to pass that period. She could not understand, but once with the tutor's instruction, she did. I mean that the tutor enlightened her. It was good. Ever since she was enlightened, she only attended another two classes. She said that what the tutor taught was similar to she learnt in class. it was not necessary to have more. Then it stopped.

R: How was her study after she chose the subject?

Xi-M: At first, she belonged to the upper-middle, not the best.

R: Did she become the best later on?

Xi-M: There were still around two years after the separation of the subjects. She entered the key-point class in the second year. She ranked around the 10<sup>th</sup>. At that time, her class teacher had strict requirements. s/he often went to students. They had monthly tests. After each test, s/he would go to students to chat with them. That is to say, s/he followed the students very closely. At that time, she felt that she could not accept her teacher's style. She poured out to me. She said, 'mum, I feel that our teacher gives me too heavy pressure, I feel powerless sometimes'. What she expressed to me was that her teacher was keen on chatting with her and would

add stress on her after each test. I felt that this kid had suffered grievance. Thus, immediately, her dad and I called her class teacher. We had an appointment with her class teacher. We gave him/her feedbacks about Xi face to face. Our meaning was that do not give Xi pressure anymore. She has been already dedicated herself. It was enough that she knew her drawbacks by herself. No more pressure was needed. Otherwise, it was not good for her. Really, when Xi talked with me, she cried heavily. I felt distressed, so I cried too. Really.

R: What did the teacher do after that?

Xi-M: Her teacher's meaning, of course, her teacher agreed with his/her own method. That is to say, strict requirements would lead to progress step by step. However, for the kids like Xi, I felt that it had the opposite effect. She did not make any progress. After our meeting, of course, the class teacher listened to our opinion. s/he needed to teach students in accordance of their aptitude. Her teacher could be called open. Thus, since then. For example, between the last monthly test and this monthly test, just during the one-month time, her teacher eased the requirements, she became the No. 1 in our whole municipal. That is to say, the schools in our municipal had the joint test, she ranked the first one. I felt that, look, it was necessary to teach students in accordance of their aptitude. We needed to find the most suitable method for kids. The best method was that was suitable for her. Since then, this teacher, I felt that since then, Xi had always ranked in the top. In the third, they were divided into different classes again. This time, they made two classes called super class. there were fewer students in these classes, everyone was excellent. When choosing the class teacher, Xi said that she did not wanna chose that class teacher again. For these two classes, she chose another one. That teacher was called Chen. It was good. I felt that she made the right decision. She chose the right teacher. Really, this class teacher knew the students quite well. s/he had totally different styles. It is true. I felt the huge differences. I felt the great help for Xi's study in the third year.

R: Could you give me an example?

Xi-M: This new teacher taught math. Xi's math had always not been the top. This teacher was also the class teacher. I felt that s/he could know more clearly. s/he could know where she did not do well. It was a great help to her math. Then I felt s/he was good at class management. In the third year, we did not wanna Xi have too much pressure. We let her live at home, not in school. We send and picked up her every day. We send her to school in the mornings, picked her up in the evenings. This teacher also, I felt that this teacher cooperated with us quite well. Especially in the last half year, they added one more evening class for the super classes. It lasted till 10pm. We felt that we did not wanna the kid to have too pressure. If she would like to attend it, she could. If she did not wanna, that would be fine. If this is for other teachers, they would definitely disagree with that. This teacher was supportive. Then Xi would have a good status during the day. She could leave in advance. That class was just self-study time. This teacher, I felt that, cooperated with parents at this point very well. Then, at the last stage, Xi had some health problems. Because she always has been sitting there for the whole day, her

shoulders hurt. We needed to pick her up in advance to do the massage or have a relax every evening. This teacher gave us special permission to do that, saying 'just go, let her have more rest and let her do the massage'. This teacher was quite supportive on this point. I really appreciated this teacher. At that time, I felt that if she had a bad health, it would definitely have adverse impact on her study. especially without the mental health, let alone the study.

R: You mentioned that a teacher made her feel stressful, how did the family help with her?

Xi-M: We were always, her dad and I, we two had helped her to ease the pressure. How did we do it? That is, when she was back home, at that time, there was free time every week. Once we met, we firstly release her pressure using language. We had no other ways. She felt that we did not give her pressure. But sometimes, she, herself, gave her pressure. Thus, we tried our best to ease her stress.

R: How did you use the language?

Xi-M: At that time, that is to say, after our meeting with that teacher, you see, especially her ranking at that time, was already. After her returning home, sometimes she had unfinished homework, of course, she had to finish them by herself. I could not let her leave them. It did not make sense. I could say that, but she was actually an ambitious child. I could only say go to bed early, don't do too much. If she had been studying for a while, I would pass her a cup pf hot water. She could drink some water to have a rest. We just chat one or two sentences to have a short rest. Her time at home was already very limited, I did not wanna disturb her too much. I tried my best to save her time. While she was doing the homework, I prepared her the water for footbath. While she was doing footbath, I passed her drinking water. Such things. I did my best to help her daily lives. That's it. Helping her to release the pressure.

R: Did your family do anything else to support her study?

Xi-M: For the first two years in the high school, she did not live in campus. We rent an apartment for her. At that time, I considered that it was near to her school. It was next to her school. It was a save of time. I could also take care of her lives. I went there to cook her lunch every day. That was such case. I cooked her favorite lunch. In the evenings, they two kids slept together. So, I did not go there in the evenings.

R: What did you mean by saying 'they two'?

Xi-M: In high school. That kid, that one whose study was not so good. They two lived together. I felt that, all aspects, including study, lives, mentality, they could help with each other. They were willing to be together, so I let them live together. They could help each other's daily life. We could also pay less attention. Otherwise, we needed to stay with her in the rent house.

R: We have talked about your influence on her, what do you think her dad's influence?

Xi-M: Her dad, I felt that they two, I took care about Xi more on her lives. Her dad, I felt that they two talked a lot. Really, she talked a lot with her dad. I felt that her dad supported her more spiritually. I am not sure the contents of their conversations. He never told me this, but I could feel that they were happy.

R: Why did she like talking with her father?

Xi-M: haha (laughing). I had been curious about it too. Really. I felt that I had never exerted pressure on her. We had kept a good relationship. Why she liked to talk with her father. I am still curious about it till now.

R: You said that her father did not tell you what they chatted, right?

Xi-M: Her dad just had one word: whoops! Right, just like this. Just this attitude. 'don't ask her more'. He meant that do not control her too much. He just wanna her to relax, to release her stress.

R: Did she encounter any diffabilities at this stage?

Xi-M: She was nervous the last month prior to the *gaokao*. No big deal. We released her pressure as much as possible. Let her not so panic. It was certainly that she would be nervous. But I felt that Xi's psychological quality was good. She did not display too much nervous signs.

R: Why did she have such good psychological quality?

Xi-M: well, you see, from her early age, we had kept telling her that nothing matters. We had paid close attention to her psychological status. I felt that we never gave her too much pressure. We gave her freedom. I felt that she had led a happy life, no big frustrations. Even if sometimes, she felt frustrated, we would try to resolve it instantly.

R: Why did she choose this university?

Xi-M: At that time, there was her scores at the first place. We thought it over and over again. Firstly, C uni is in Beijing. We first chose Beijing this city. We felt that the humanitarian environment in Beijing is good. For example, the job opportunities here would be beneficial to her in the future.

R: Why did she choose this major?

Xi-M: At that time, we consider the possibility to be accepted. One the one hand, we must make sure she would be accepted, then the employment potential is good.

R: Anyone had offer help when your family made decisions?

Xi-M: No. it was mainly her dad and I. we two. Before they filled out the form, there was an information fair organized by different universities in the capital city. We went there in advance. We got to know some top universities, like W uni, F uni. We tried to know all aspects of these universities. We consulted with the representatives from these unis. We also left our contact numbers, including C uni. C uni called us in advance. They called some students to have further communications. We did go there. At that time, that teacher addressed an inspiring speech, thus Xi felt admirable to this teacher. I felt that she had a deeper understanding of C university. Then she chose it with no hesitation. Of course, after she was accepted, our relative and friends have certainly some expressions. Like her *laoye* and *laolao*, *yeye* and *nainai*, her *shushu* and *jiujiu* as well, we got together to hold a celebration and they all gave her money as the travelling expenses.

R: What do you think your families' impact on her entering into university?

Xi-M: Really, I felt that parents' rearing from the early stage was quite important. Once the early ground was solid, it took little energy at the later stage. I did pay more attention at the earlier stage. Our family was quite open and free at the later stage. she was endeavors by herself at that time. She could get such good results at last. It also owed to herself. After all, no pains, no gains.

R: What do you think of her study in this uni now、

Xi-M: Good, I think we made the right decision. She learnt a lot. She improved greatly. Here, she has many opportunities to be better. I am not sure about her study situation. But I felt that a good uni is definitely better than others. Like some other children, they went to normal unis, I think there be certainly distance.

R: All right, do you have anything more you wanna to add?

Xi-M: Nope.

R: OK, thanks for your time today. You could contact me if you have anything else you would like me to explain.

Xi-M: OK.

## Appendix IX Examples of the code names in NVivo 11

+	3 preschool education		
-	4 kindergarten experiences		
	choosing the good schools		
	in school painting classes		
	learning english from kindergarten		
	no financial concern		
	positive impact of kindergarten education		
-	5 basic education experience		
-	choosing best school		
	be competent		
	best classes		
	for good environment		
	for good teaching quality		
	for take care of children		
	no financial constrains		
	strategies to go		
	changed school in advance		
	guanxi using		
	take school admission into consideration when buying houses		
	transient students		

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