

# Choices, risks and rational conformity: extending Boudon's positional theory to understand higher education choices in contemporary China

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**Abstract** This study extends Boudon's positional theory to understand how students from different social origins make choices about university and how they interpret risks during the choice-making process in contemporary China. I draw upon empirical evidence from 71 in-depth semi-structured interviews with undergraduates from different social backgrounds and from different types of universities. The interview data confirm the relevance of Boudon's thesis in the Chinese context; that is, individuals' family characteristics manifest in the process of choices and strategies. Furthermore, this study provides new evidence on a pattern of class-bound conformity, which sometimes contradicts the rational course of action from students' narratives on socioeconomic and cultural identity as well as opportunity risks associated with the quota system. When hope and chance clash, students from working-class or agricultural families reduce to internalize their socioeconomic or geographical disadvantages, come to terms with a lack of equal opportunities in a seemingly meritocratic system.

**Keywords** Boudon · China · Choice · Higher education · Identity · Risk assessment

## Introduction

Bourdieu's cultural reproduction theory continues to fascinate contemporary sociologists seeking answers to the persistent educational inequality across different social contexts (Reay et al. 2009; Van de Werfhorst and Hofstede 2007; Liu 2018). Comparatively speaking, Raymond Boudon's positional theory—which extends Bourdieu's cultural capital thesis to understand social differentials through educational choices—is still under-explored and under-researched in the contemporary sociology of education. In Boudon's (1974) positional theory

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of “primary and secondary effects”, social reproduction in education occurs through a dual process. Primary social reproduction occurs through the direct influence of a family’s cultural capital on the child and his or her ability to achieve in school. However, social reproduction also occurs through secondary effects, whereby the impact of families’ cultural capital is mediated by choices students make about their educational careers. In turn, these choices influence their future educational outcomes.

Boudon’s theoretical approach is of particular relevance to understanding educational choices at a tertiary level for two main reasons. First, the availability of choices is comparatively more abundant at the transition to tertiary education than within earlier stages of schooling. These choices include types of institutions, fields of study, modes of provision, geographical preference, and international institutions (Liu 2017). Second, the expansion of higher education systems since the 2000s has magnified the provision of choices at both the national and international level (Marginson 2016). The nature of the transition to higher education allows more room for students’ choices to have an impact on their ultimate achievements, thus increasing the space for cultural capital to intensify the process of social reproduction. In an attempt to better understand social inequality in choices and strategies in higher education—a topic overshadowed by the Bourdieuan debate’s focus on the rigid cultural reproduction through education—this study extends Boudon’s positional theory to the Chinese context and investigates how students from different social origins make choices regarding higher education.

Existing research that extends Boudon’s theory of educational inequality in new contexts has focused on comparing the differences between primary effects of cultural capital and secondary effects of educational choices (Nash 2006; Jackson et al. 2007; Jackson and Jonsson 2013; Boado 2011), thereby contributing to the on-going debates regarding whether primary or secondary effects play a larger role in educational inequality. On the one hand, some studies attribute persistent inequality in education to primary effects of cultural reproduction through an individual family’s cultural activities and acquisition, since educational choices are conditioned upon academic performance (Nash 2006; Boado 2011). On the other hand, some scholars argue that secondary effects play a more important role, since students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds do not translate their academic performance to the same level of ambition as their privileged counterparts through their educational choices (Erikson and Rudolphi 2010; Jackson et al. 2007; Jackson 2012).

However, we know very little about how students interpret their sociocultural positions during the choice-making process and how students from different social origins assess the risks involved in navigating through choice systems. In light of this gap, this research explores how students from different social origins navigate through the choice system and how they interpret risks during the choice-making process in contemporary China. I draw upon 71 interviews with university students from the birth cohorts between 1995 and 1997, asking how the students from different backgrounds make choices about university and interpret risks while navigating through the three-choice and quota systems. My data reveal that individuals’ family characteristics and geographical origin manifest in the process of choices and strategies. Furthermore, the students from working-class and agricultural families from non-metropolitan areas are doubly punished by a lack of social and cultural resources and by the institutional discrimination hidden in the quota system. When hope and possibility contract, these students reduce to internalize their socioeconomic and geographical disadvantages and come to terms with a lack of equal opportunities in a seemingly meritocratic system.

## Theoretical framework

Boudon's positional theory argues that students make different choices "according to their position in the stratification system" (Boudon 1974:36). This position is further elaborated in two dimensions: sociocultural identity and economic rationale. The former means that students make decisions that are shaped and constrained by their family characteristics and identity (Glaesser and Cooper 2013; Brooks 2008; Reay et al. 2009). The latter is often argued to be the "rational" choice, which calculates the economic costs and benefits of a university degree given extant resources and maximum long-term returns (Breen and Goldthorpe 1997; Boudon 2006, 1998). This dual position is interdependent during the process of decision-making; however, a person's sociocultural circumstances affect his or her rational choices, thus modifying pure economic rationality (Boudon 2003). Differing from Bourdieu's thesis of rigid cultural reproduction and cultural determinism through cultural capital, habitus, and field (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977), Boudon draws our attention to the choice-making process, which interrogates the competing and complementary roles played by socioeconomic status, cultural capital, identity, and rationality in shaping educational choices.

Prior literature on Boudon's theory follows the thesis of the rational choice perspective, which examines the direct impact of individual families' socioeconomic backgrounds and financial and cultural resources on students' choices in higher education (Reay et al. 2009; Kleanthous 2014; Brooks 2008). It has been shown that students from professional families tend to choose academic pathways and go to elite universities, while their working-class counterparts, even those of the same ability, are more likely to select vocational courses or less prestigious institutions (Duru-Bellat et al. 2008; Thomsen et al. 2013). Moreover, students from culturally rich families tend to choose fields of study to strengthen their cultural advantages (van de Werfhorst et al. 2003). By contrast, students without rich cultural resources, such as those from working-class families and migrant origins in some contexts, tend to choose fields such as engineering or mathematics, which allow them to compensate for a lack of cultural resources (Kleanthous 2014).

Similarly, some studies have shown that students' choices are motivated by rational cost-return calculations of a degree (Wilkins et al. 2013; Davies et al. 2014; Hartog et al. 2010). This is true particularly for students from working-class families who base their decisions on information regarding the economic returns of a degree (Clark et al. 2015, Thompson and Simmons 2013). Given the rising cost and commodification of higher education in some countries like the UK (Wilkins et al. 2013), students from working-class backgrounds are concerned with choosing those fields with good "value for money", according to some recent research (Thompson and Simmons 2013; Clark et al. 2015). The latent impact of socioeconomic backgrounds and cultural capital can be observed in information-seeking patterns and peer effects on students' choices about higher education (Wilkins et al. 2013).

Another stream of literature has linked cultural identity to the patterns of students' choices in universities and fields of study (Reay et al. 2009; Jetten et al. 2008). In some studies, cultural identity is analyzed in relation to individual students' position in the social structure. The French sociologist Duru-Bellat finds that students from working-class backgrounds tend to choose vocational pathways instead of universities mainly because academic pathways are seen to be at odds with their cultural identity (2010). Similar results are confirmed in the research on the educational choices made by children of immigrant origin (Kleanthous 2014; Boado 2011). Kleanthous's study shows that students from immigrant origins are much less likely to make ambitious choices than their non-immigrant counterparts, partly because of a

lack of identity fit in universities in Cyprus (2014). Boado's research confirms the students from migrant origin were conservative about choices of academic track of elite upper secondary schooling in France (2011). Some research also highlights students' geographical identity in the process of choice-making (Donnelly and Evans 2016; Holt 2012). For instance, cultural identity can be interpreted as a strong attachment to geographical identity and locality, which shapes some Welsh students' choices of higher education (Donnelly and Evans 2016). In the case of China and Australia, rural students have a different cultural identity from their urban counterparts, and this geographical distinction not only affects their choice-making about higher education but also involves constant negotiations of their identity in integrating into urban universities (Li et al. 2012; Holt 2012).

We know that students' choices in higher education are affected by the rational calculation of economic and cultural resources, and we also know that their choices are shaped by their cultural or geographical identity. Nevertheless, much less is known about how the two lines of action based on rational calculations and cultural identity complement or contradict each other. In addition, we are not aware of the specific mechanisms through which the risks are assessed by students from different social origins and mediated by cultural identity and rational choice during the decision-making processes. Therefore, I seek to address the aspect of risk assessment in the choice-making process.

Coleman's pioneering research on school cultures in the USA demonstrates the role of the "decision-to-conform" mechanism (Coleman 1961; Coleman et al. 1966) in shaping the academic differences between minority students in different schools (Coleman 1990). His empirical analysis shows that minority students achieved better academic outcomes in "high socioeconomic status schools" where their peers from better-off and well-educated families tended to drive up academic aspirations (Coleman 1990). By contrast, the adolescent subculture in state schools encouraged minority students to pursue popularity and sports excellence rather than academic achievements (Coleman 1990). Thus, Coleman argues that the desire to conform to the school culture explains the over-achievement and under-achievement of minority students. The decision to conform is further developed statistically by Breen and Goldthorpe as the "relative risk aversion" (Breen and Goldthorpe 1997: 283; 1999). Differing from Coleman's qualitative approach, the relative risk aversion formulates the models of educational choices statistically and interprets the educational strategies adopted by both middle-class and working-class families as a way to avoid the risks of status decline and maintain stability in the social structure (Breen and Goldthorpe 1997, 1999).

The decision-to-conform mechanism and the risk-aversion strategy are further unpacked in Yair's analysis of how the evaluation of risks affects the nature of choices in the course of rational action or expressive action (Yair 2007). Drawing inspiration from Swidler's culture as a tool kit thesis (Swidler 1986), Yair highlights the contradictions and compromises between two lines of action based on the rational calculation of instrumental utility and conscious conformity to cultural norms and values (Yair 2007). These two lines of action are not always complementary; rather, risks arise when the action of rational utility is not informed adequately by cultural norms and values. Therefore, he argues that the rational course of action often gives in to conformity choices in unsettled times (Swidler 1986), which require constant pragmatic adaptations to changing circumstances (Yair 2007). Thus, risks associated with different choices are most likely to motivate individuals to conform to their own status and identity instead of taking bold action to maximize their future opportunities.

Risk assessment is particularly relevant in the Chinese context of the choice system, where the penalty for mismatching choices with academic performance has costs not only in terms of

the opportunities associated with the prestige of universities or fields but also, and more importantly, the access to higher education. The next section will examine the complex three-choice system in access to higher education in China, how students from different social backgrounds assess the associated risks, and how they adopt strategies to negotiate the conflicts between rational choice and cultural conformity. I will begin by highlighting some key features of higher education system and university choices in China, which qualify as a strategic case to examine the theoretical standpoints of Boudon's positional theory.

## Stratification of higher education and university choices in contemporary China

China offers some attractive attributes as a case with which to examine the complexity of university choices. First, the massive expansion of higher education since the 1990s has resulted in an increasingly stratified system, with elite universities at the top and a large number of institutions at the provincial level (Liu 2015). Elite universities have resisted the market pressure to expand their recruitments by free-riding the State's elite programs, such as "World-Class Universities" or "Double First-Class" initiatives (Marginson 2016; Liu 2016, 2018). These universities reap substantial financial and opportunity benefits from the State's investment in key fields of study; thus, they further distinguish themselves from the massive production of graduates experienced by the comprehensive and provincial institutions (Carnoy et al. 2014).

Second, in addition to the hierarchical system, the fields of study have become differentiated within the same tier of higher education institutions as well as between different tiers (Li 2012; Liu 2015). Technology, natural sciences, and engineering are comparatively more selective than Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences, as measured by their enrolment criteria (Liu 2016) and evidenced by their labor market returns (Guo et al. 2010; Hartog et al. 2010). The relatively higher value of these fields of study is made further apparent by the fact that nearly 43% of elite universities (985) specialize in technology, science, or engineering (MOE 2011). Moreover, the same fields of study have varied market returns according to prestige, as the graduates from elite universities have much higher earning potential compared to those from less well-known institutions (Marginson 2016; Hartog et al. 2010).

The increasingly hierarchical differentiation of pathways by different tiers and fields of study allows for more space for choices as well as more risks (Liu 2018). The complex choice system and the associated risks deserve some contextualization. After senior secondary graduates and other eligible candidates obtain the *Gaokao* (the Entrance Examinations to Higher Education) results, they are required to list their choices in the *University and Field Forms*, which are submitted to the Ministry of Education at the provincial or local level. Table 1 provides a sample of the form, which details the nature of the choices of universities and fields of study. The three-choice system in this article is used to illustrate the choices at both the vertical level of types of universities and the horizontal level of the order of specific fields of study. For the former, the three preferable institutions are identified in each tier of the system—namely, the key universities, the non-key institutions, and the non-degree institutions. Under each institution, students are required to list at least three preferred fields of study. However, it should be noted that the number of choices varies across provinces, which is often not limited to three. For instance in Shanghai, students can submit four choices for elite and key universities and six for non-key universities, and a further six choices of fields of study in each category.

In theory, individual institutions choose students based on their academic performance in the *Gaokao*. That is, the higher a student's *Gaokao* scores are, the more likely it is that the student will be accepted. However, the three-choice system complicates the entire choice and selection process. The horizontal sequence of the three institutions listed on each tier is of great importance. The choices regarding the sequence of the three institutions involve risk-taking. The first choice of a university in each tier is crucial. The scenario of risks emerges from this point of decision-making. Students will risk being rejected by their first choice if their *Gaokao* scores fail to meet the selection criteria of their first-choice university (Loyalka et al. 2012). It is also likely that students will not be accepted by universities that they list as their second or third choice. This results from the severe competition between universities in the same tier, as each individual institution prefers to be the first choice (Li et al. 2012). Hence, universities penalize those who list their institutions as the second or third choice by raising the admission threshold by at least 50 points (Loyalka 2009). It is of great importance that students are able to make sensible choices of universities; otherwise, they risk not being admitted into either their chosen university or, in some cases, any university in the same tier.

Furthermore, students' choices of university are also constrained by the quota system, which is an estimate of the number of places assigned to different provinces by each institution (Liu 2016). The quota system is supposedly an instrument for recruitment planning used by individual universities to estimate their capacity for enrolling new students (Liu 2016). However, the quota system has resulted in a tendency to prioritize candidates from home provinces, since individual institutions rely largely on financial support from the local governments (Liu 2016). For example, Peking University fixes a quota of 272 new places for home applicants, while only allocating 33 places to applicants from its neighboring province, Hebei, and 17 for those from the Western province of Ningxia, as of 2009 (Liu 2016). Therefore, the quota policy affects the choices and mobility of the students.

**Table 1** A sample of the University and Field Forms

Institution	Field		
Universities with priority selection rights including military colleges, national security colleges and teachers training colleges			
1	1	2	3
2	1	2	3
3	1	2	3
Tier 1 Key Higher Education Institutions (the 985 elite and 211 key universities)			
1	1	2	3
2	1	2	3
3	1	2	3
Tier 2 Non-Key Higher Education Institutions			
1	1	2	3
2	1	2	3
3	1	2	3
Tier 3 Three-year Certificate Colleges (Vocational and Technical colleges)			
1	1	2	3
2	1	2	3
3	1	2	3

Source: the Ministry of Education in Shanghai 2015

The majority of the provinces use similar forms for types of universities and fields of study. However, the Ministry of Education in Shanghai, for instance, includes four choices for each institution, and further six fields of study for each institution

Given this situation, risk assessment is particularly relevant for students to make choices about university. The risks arise first from matching academic performance with desired institutions and fields of study, then from navigating the prestige of the three-choice system. The risks are further complicated by the presence of the quota system when making choices beyond home provinces.

## Methodology and data

The data used for this research are drawn from a total of 71 semi-structured interviews involving undergraduates from a variety of institutions and fields of study. All the respondents were born between 1995 and 1997, with a mean age of 19 years. The city of Shanghai was selected due to its advantage of having a diverse student population from different geographical origins and a variety of universities. Students were selected randomly from different types of universities and fields of study. I recruited students from three main channels. First, I approached students in the canteens, the libraries, and the sports centers on campus. Second, my colleagues contacted and recruited students from a variety of social organizations, including the Youth League, film clubs, and volunteer associations. The third strategy was the use of social media websites and applications such as WeChat to complement the search for the eligible research population.

The students were targeted to represent four different types of universities in China: one elite university, one key university, one comprehensive university, and one university specializing in Finance and Accounting. Students came from a variety of fields. The students' identities and their institutions are anonymized, and pseudonyms are coded instead. Table 2 summarizes in detail the number of in-depth semi-structured interviews by fields of study and types of institutions. The interviews lasted approximately 2–2.5 h. All the interviews were conducted in locations on campus chosen by the respondents. The interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese and audio-recorded with the permission of the respondents, completely transcribed in Chinese, and analyzed in English. Three rounds of coding were employed in the data analysis. First, I relied on opening coding to discover the themes on choices in the narratives. Second, I focused on identifying the incidents relating to risk assessment during the choice-making. In the final round of coding, I sought to interpret whether risk assessment represented rational action, cultural conformity, or a re-negotiation of both courses of action.

**Table 2** The detailed profile of respondents from different fields of study and types of institutions

Fields of study	Number and type of institutions	Number of students
Environmental Science	2 (elite and key)	9
Medicine	2 (elite and comprehensive)	11
Engineering	1 (key)	6
Law	2 (elite and comprehensive)	8
Foreign Languages	2 (key and comprehensive)	10
Literature and History	1 (elite)	6
Accounting and Finance	1 (specialized)	11
Media Studies	2 (key and comprehensive)	10
		Total 71

## Findings

Table 3 presents the detailed number and profile of respondents' socioeconomic and demographic characteristics. Nearly one fifth of the respondents had parents in either managerial positions or leading cadres in a managerial position, with another third having parents from professional families. Students from working-class and agricultural backgrounds made up the other half of the respondents. Around 84% of the respondents had parents who had completed secondary schooling or higher education, while only 15% had parents whose educational was below secondary schooling. Female students accounted for 56.3% of the total respondents, while the remaining 43.7% were male students. Moreover, students from Shanghai accounted for nearly two fifths of the total respondents, while the other three fifths were from the rest of China. More than 66% of respondents identified themselves as graduates from key schools in contrast to around one third from regular state schools.

## University choices and rational action

I first explore the rational choice discourse in the students' narratives and examine the extent to which students' choices are based on rational calculations of economic or/and opportunity returns. Around 85% of the respondents (60 out of 71) confirm that employability of a degree or a university is the key to their decision-making. The remaining 11 students said that personal interests and "passions" were the most important factors affecting their choices. The majority of the students associated their choices in the fields of study or institutions with good future career plans. They also seem to express this logic consistently and coherently in their narratives. As Liangyan, a 19-year-old girl majoring in Medicine in a key university, stated, "going to university is about preparing myself for a career with advanced qualifications and skills."

**Table 3** The detailed number and profile of respondents' socioeconomic and demographic characteristics

	Percentage in the respondents	Number of respondents
Socioeconomic status	100	Total 71
Managerial class and cadres in a managerial position	19	14
Professional class	30	21
Working class	37	26
Agricultural working class	14	10
Parental education level	100	Total 71
Higher education	25.3	18
Completed secondary schooling	59.1	42
Less than secondary schooling	15.5	11
Gender	100	Total 71
Male	43.7	31
Female	56.3	40
Geographical origins	100	Total 71
Shanghai	39.4	28
Non-Shanghai	60.5	43
Types of schooling	100	Total 71
Key	66.2	47
Normal state	33.8	24



As Liangyan was growing up in a medium-sized city in Jiangxi, her father was laid off from his previous “golden rice-bowl” employment (lifelong job security) at a state-owned enterprise in the 1990s, when the massive wave of redundancies occurred during the market reform (Nee and Oppen 2012; Hanser 2005). Ever since, her father had moved from one job to another in order to make a living. Her particular family circumstances shaped the rationale of Liangyan’s university choices. She aimed to choose a field that she described as “unemployment-proof”:

I chose Medicine mainly because of the employability and security associated with this profession. Even during a recession, people still need doctors and medical care. I simply do not want to experience what happened to my father. I need a job that is safe and secure under any circumstances.

It might be difficult to find a risk-free profession; however, employment opportunities seem to represent a shared rationale for choosing a particular field. The word “jiuye” (finding a job) is the most frequently used word in the interview data. Regardless of their social backgrounds, the students all seemed to gather information about the employment prospects associated with a particular field or institution when preparing their university choices. However, students from different backgrounds have developed their knowledge about employability in very different ways. Those from working-class or agricultural families tend to seek advice from their secondary school teachers and the school alumni network. Chungui, a 19-year-old boy from a village in the agricultural province of Anhui, discussed his choice of Engineering in a key university:

I asked my school teacher for advice, and I was put into contact with a couple of school alumni who were already in university through QQ. They advised me that the fields with placements and internship would be more employable in the future. So, I chose Engineering here with plenty placement opportunities.

By contrast, the students from professional backgrounds relied significantly either on the parental help or parental extended social networks. High-status parents tend to mobilize their networks and resources to inform a rational course of action. Xiaotao, an 18-year old student from Changsha, went to an elite school in Hunan province. She is from a provincial middle-class family: her mother is a high-ranking civil servant in a district government, and her father works as a manager in a cooperative company. She recalled how her parents used their contacts to help her to make a sensible decision about university:

My mum chose for me. Her colleague’s daughter studied Finance and Economics several years ago in Shanghai. She got a fantastic job after graduation. She arranged for me to meet this girl, my role model. I was so impressed with her career that I decided to study Finance.

It seems that students both from privileged and disadvantaged backgrounds tend to follow a rational course of calculating employability and labor market outcomes when choosing universities and fields. Both groups’ choices are rational in nature; however, the students from working-class and agricultural backgrounds do not have rich resources and networks to inform their choices, so they tend to gather information about job prospects from their school teachers, classmates, and school alumni. The source of information and advice does not seem to be

consistent, concrete, and coherent, which might affect how these students interpret their risks in making choices about higher education.

### **Choices, socioeconomic, cultural, and academic conformity**

Now I examine how the students relate their socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds to their choices of institutions and fields of study. Students from privileged socioeconomic backgrounds and metropolitan areas seem to make choices, consciously or unconsciously, that closely correspond to their parents' socioeconomic status. Lixia, an 18-year old girl from Shanghai, chose to study German in a key university. She is from a middle-class professional family in Shanghai, with her mother as Mathematics subject teacher in a key school, and her father a Party official in the District government. When asked about her choice of German in relation to her family backgrounds, Lixia acknowledged that she did not want to follow her parents' secure jobs but compromised on a choice that would lead to a professional occupation:

My parents have very secure jobs. My dad is a civil servant and my mum is a teacher. But I don't desire this kind of security. I am more adventurous. I would like to work in international trade. That's why I chose to major in a foreign language. My parents would like me to choose secure jobs. German is a compromise. If I cannot find a job in an international company, I can always teach.

Lixia's self-perceived "adventurous" nature is in fact based on solid socioeconomic and cultural resources. Her compromise in her university choice does not represent a departure from her socioeconomic background; rather, it allows her to seek similar options in professional occupations or even maximize future opportunities, either in "international trade" or in "teaching." Differing from Lixia's adventurous choices, Xiaoshu, an 18-year old female student from Shandong, followed in her mother's footsteps and chose a medical school. Xiaoshu's mother is a senior doctor in a military hospital in Dalian. Her mother appreciated her choice but warned her against the "long and intensive training" in the medical school. Therefore, Xiaoshu chose the less demanding and competitive field of medical quarantine and prevention, which would allow her to choose either "a medical career" or to be "a civil servant in the National Bureau of Customs."

By contrast, students from working-class and agricultural backgrounds are conscious of their socioeconomic, cultural, and academic limitations when making their choices. Xinxia recalled her choice of university and field after the 2014 *Gaokao*. Aged 18, Xinxia is from a working-class family in a run-down industrial area in the city of Wuhan. Having been a top student in a state school during her senior secondary stage, Xinxia was reasonably confident about achieving good academic performance in the *Gaokao*, but she was struggling to find a "suitable" field that would allow her to "extend her competitiveness." She made the a choice to study Law with a focus on civil law, and she explained her decision as follows:

It is a dream to study in Shanghai. But I knew I would be the "tail of a phoenix." I cannot compete with other Shanghai students in English, creativity or presentation skills. My thing is memorization. That is what I am good at. I figured that studying Law would give me a certain advantage.

“The head of a chicken and the tail of a phoenix” is a Chinese saying, which describes positional advantages or disadvantages in less or more competitive contexts. Having been the “head of a chicken” in secondary schooling, Xinxia was conscious of her advantages and skills—that is, learning from memorization. Meanwhile, she was insecure about a lack of “modern skills” such as English, presentation, and communication skills that would cause her to be the “the tail of a phoenix” among her counterparts from privileged backgrounds in university. Yet, the irony here lies in the fact that the legal profession also requires good communication and presentation skills, which was acknowledged in Xinxia’s narratives. Her choice of Law seems to suggest that the desire to conform to an extant academic or cultural identity outweighs the long-term rational course of action.

Having scant social and cultural resources, students from working-class and agricultural backgrounds tend to choose fields that would minimize their “linguistic,” “cultural,” or “academic” disadvantages. Wanggang, a 19-year-old boy from rural Anhui, recalled his choice-making process about university, then his rationale for choosing Engineering. With both parents as agricultural workers, he could not seek help from his parents. He took the responsibility of “researching the recruitment details on-line” and “discussing his choices with his school teachers”:

It is crucial to estimate your chances. The university gave 40 quotas in 2013 for candidates from Anhui. The quota was reduced slightly in 2014, which meant my Gaokao scores had to be higher than the year before. It was like gambling. It was a risky choice.

If choosing the university was like “gambling,” the choice of the field was a painful process of accepting his socioeconomic and cultural disadvantages. He weighed his “passion” in the field of international finance against a “realistic” choice of engineering:

I really wanted to work in international finance. I never had a chance to travel around. International finance was a dream job. But this field requires a lot of communication skills. I am not confident. My spoken English is also poor. Back in the school, we were not taught (English) properly. My schoolteachers also told me that I need some *guanxi* (personal contacts) to get internships if I chose finance. I guess engineering suits me better, as the university will arrange placement and internships. As long as I work hard, I can have good job opportunities.’

Wanggang’s narrative illustrates the deep-seated inequality that which fails to be captured by the numeric measure of the *Gaokao* scores. Wanggang, a *Gaokao* “champion” from a rural village in Anhui, made a glorious transition to a key university in Shanghai. His story might paint a rosy picture of meritocratic *Gaokao* selection. However, his choice of field suggests an internalization of the academic and cultural disadvantages of being a rural student. Constrained by a lack of social capital and cultural resources, he instead conforms to his “academic” identity of working hard in the field where he has a chance.

### **Risks, socioeconomic, and geographical conformity**

Finally, I turn to examine how students from different social origins assess the risks involved in making choices, whether risk assessment affects students differently in relation to their

backgrounds and how they navigate through the three-choice system. The majority of the students (67 out of 71) confirm that they have considered risks when applying for fields of study and universities. However, there is a distinctive pattern of different interpretations about risks by students from different social backgrounds. Students from Shanghai and from privileged backgrounds seem to be confident about their choices and interpret risks as “encountering challenges.” For example, Lijiayan, a 20-year-old female student from a professional family in Shanghai, who majored in Law in an elite university, recalled her choices as “risk taking” and “experiencing challenges.”

The narrative about risks as encountered challenges is echoed in Zihan’s story of making three choices. Zihan, an 18-year-old male student whose father is a chief surgeon from a highly rated state hospital in Shanghai and whose mother is head of finance in the District government, was very bold with his choice of Media Studies in an elite university:

The risk started from the very first choice in the elite category. Every choice I made would have a knock-on effect on the subsequent choice. I decided to risk my first choice in the elite category. I was not prepared to go to any university ranked lower than my first choice. I did not even submit second or third choices. I was prepared to repeat a whole year if I was not chosen by the elite university. My parents thought I was very stubborn, but they were very supportive. Luckily I dared to take the risk and I was accepted.

Contrary to a rational calculation of chances in all categories of universities and fields of study, Zihan’s choice strategy seems to be a deliberate risk-taking, and even a “stubborn” approach, mainly because he could afford the penalty of his bold decision. If his “gamble” for his dream university had failed, his family’s resources could cushion the effect of failure by supporting him to repeat another year and prepare for the next *Gaokao*. Such economic and emotional resources are unavailable for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Throughout their narratives, the students from non-Shanghai areas or working-class or agricultural families translate the disadvantages associated with their geographical or social origins into uncertainties and insecurities about their choices. In sharp contrast to Zihan’s choice strategy of gaining access to elite opportunities, Shilu, an 18-year old girl, is more conservative about her choices. Born into a professional family in a small city in Hubei, and having been to a key school throughout her secondary schooling, Shilu described the “most difficult decision” of her life:

My heart went to the first choice of the elite university, but my head told me that my chance was much slimmer than that of those from Shanghai. I did very well in the *Gaokao*. But it was much more competitive to go to university in Shanghai for someone from outside. I decided to abandon my first choice of the elite institutions, which allowed me to choose a more popular field of study in a less prestigious university. I made a careful second first choice of Accounting and Finance. After all, employment opportunities in this field will pay off.

Shilu’s choice strategy illustrates both a rational calculation of her chances and conscious conformity to her geographical identity constrained by the quota system. On the one hand, abandoning the opportunities in the elite universities would win her more chances on the non-elite track and avoid the penalty of losing out on the opportunities, which suggests a rational course of action. On the other hand, the penalty already kicks

in for those from non-metropolitan areas before making choices about higher education, as the quota system obscures the opportunity structure for those from different geographical origins. Similar strategies are also adopted by students from working-class and agricultural families. Yaoyu, a 19-year-old male student from a rural area in Henan, explains how the risks prevented him from making a bold decision in the same field in elite institutions:

The rules of the game are very simple but cruel. The choice system clearly favoured the native Shanghai students. My Gaokao scores would be good enough to go to an elite university. But it might not guarantee a place in Engineering. I didn't want to risk it. I make a safe bet of Engineering in a key institution. My strategy was to prioritize job prospects over the status of the university.

Yaoyun's narratives illustrate both a rational calculation of his chances and a risk-aversion strategy to conform to less ambitious and safer options in the non-elite track. Lina, a 19-year old girl from a modest working-class family in Jiangsu, discussed the risks of being rejected for English Literature in an elite university and therefore settled on Spanish in a comprehensive university. She admitted the risks of choosing a university in Shanghai but reflected on whether she should have "high expectations" about herself. The desire "not to be a burden to her parents" made her prioritize a safe choice of university and "lower" her expectations, thus giving up her "dream to study in an elite university." Lina discussed how the realization of her "limitations" helped her to make a "sensible" choice. Like many other students from agricultural or working-class families, Lina seems to have come to terms with a lack of economic, social, and cultural resources that might have made her bolder in her choices. When hope and opportunity clash, these students reduce to internalize their disadvantages, adjust their expectations about themselves and the future, and accept the less ambitious university choices, which are filtered by the institutionalized choice system and made available to them as meritocratic outcomes.

## Discussion and conclusion

This study examines Boudon's positional theory to make sense of different patterns of university choices in contemporary China. It has a number of findings, some of which relate to Boudon's theoretical standpoints and some of which are more broadly relevant to the Chinese context. At the theoretical level, most of the interview data support Boudon's secondary effects thesis in the Chinese context; that is, individuals' family characteristics manifest in the process of choices and strategies. Students from professional families and the metropolitan city of Shanghai benefit from rich economic, social, and cultural resources that have enabled them to develop a confident and clear vision about their university and career prospects, which are unavailable to students from working-class and rural families. Even when students from all social origins demonstrate a rational calculation of returns of a degree and employability, the students from working-class and agricultural backgrounds have scant resources and networks to inform their choices, except for their school-teachers, classmates, and school alumni. The sources of information and advice do not seem to be consistent, concrete, and coherent, which might contribute to the less ambitious and confident patterns of choices.

Socioeconomic and cultural inequality is further obscured in the choices of the fields of study. The findings partly confirm Yair's hypothesis that the rational maximization of instrumental utility is compromised by conscious and unconscious conformity (Yair 2007). Those from privileged backgrounds seem to make conscious or unconscious choices, which are informed by their social and cultural resources and closely correspond to their parents' socioeconomic status. By contrast, those from working-class and agricultural families find themselves constrained by a lack of social capital and cultural resources as well as disadvantaged by a lack of modern skills. Thus, they tend to limit their choices in fields that either require minimal cultural and social capital or allow them to extend their extant academic skills, such as memorization. Students from privileged backgrounds do not seem to be conscious of their choices of the fields that might conform to their socioeconomic and cultural identity. However, those from disadvantaged families are much more conscious of their desire to conform to an extant academic or cultural identity, which in some cases might outweigh their long-term rational course of action.

Furthermore, this study explores students' narratives regarding the risks associated with the three-choice system and the strategies they develop during the choice-making process. On the one hand, the three-choice system seems to allow those from privileged backgrounds like Zihan to take chances that might be considered risky and irrational; this is made possible by their socioeconomic and cultural resources and the geographic advantage of being a Shanghai native. On the other hand, students from working-class and agricultural families, bound by their disadvantages, have adopted risk-aversion strategies; that is, they seek to maximize their opportunities in the desired fields of study instead of choosing top-ranked universities. These students sacrifice their elite opportunities in the most prestigious universities in order to secure a position in a field with higher labor market returns at a less well-known institution. This strategy can be interpreted as rational conformity, which on the one hand gives in the desire of upward mobility in status, but, on the other, maximizes the long-term employment opportunities.

At the contextual level, perhaps the major issue that arises, at least in regard to the distribution of higher education opportunities, is that the underlying rules of the university recruitment system—more specifically, the quota system—reinforce the privileges of those from affluent areas like Shanghai. Previous research suggests an uneven distribution of higher education institutions between eastern metropolitan areas like Beijing and Shanghai and poorer western regions (Liu 2016). Those from under-developed western and central provinces seek upward social mobility through higher education opportunities, particularly in eastern areas. However, the quota system undermines the meritocratic nature of higher education selection and exacerbates geographical inequality in the opportunity structures.

Constrained by both the three-choice system and the quota system, many students from non-Shanghai areas seem to come to terms with a lack of opportunities equal to those of their Shanghai counterparts. When hope and opportunity clash, these students reduce to internalize their geographical disadvantages, adjust their expectations about themselves and the future, and accept the less ambitious university choices, which are filtered by the institutionalized choice system and made available to them as meritocratic outcomes. It can be argued that the quota system is a result of the growing power of the eastern political elites supporting preferential access to higher education for their local populations. Consistent with the findings on geographical inequality as the main stratifier in contemporary China (Liu 2018; Wu 2010), this study provides uncomfortable evidence of the creation of legitimized and institutionalized discrimination against those from poorer regions.

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