Thriving in the neoliberal academia without becoming its agent? Sociologising resilience with an early career academic and a mid-career researcher

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Abstract

In educational research, there has been much stricture of neoliberalism as a scourge. In the higher education sector, the neoliberal turn has been observed as eroding academic freedom and deprofessionalising academics. Early career academics are often described as victims of neoliberalism. In this paper, we take a positive perspective through a deep dive into resilience that enables self-transformation and, potentially, system change. Our paper is situated in the Chinese higher education context where the "up-or-out" system has been put in place, mirroring the neoliberal university at a global range. We — a mid-career researcher and an early career academic — analyse our collective narratives generated through WeChat text and voice message. Drawing insight from Bourdieu's reflexive sociology, our narratives lead to four themes: capital accumulation and self-transformation, shaping the publication habitus, emancipation from symbolic violence, and resilience to symbolic domination. We conclude the paper with a call for sociology of resilience and recommendations for deneoliberalising higher education.

Keywords Early career academic · Neoliberalism · China · Resilience · Bourdieu

Introduction

The global massification and marketisation of higher education have witnessed dramatic changes of struggle for entry to, and survival in the academic mass market. On one hand, the growth of PhDs exceeds the availability of academic positions in universities (Andres et al., 2015). Consequently, earning a degree at the highest academic level no longer translates into enough exchange value when one edges into academia. On the other hand, waves of funding

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cuts have given rise to a "silent revolution" (Macfarlane, 2011, p. 59) in the higher education sector, where shrinking tenured positions and precarious casual and contract-based employment make the academic career increasingly instable and insecure (Knights & Clarke, 2014). This is part of a larger problem that Bourdieu (1998, p. 96) critiques as "the neoliberal utopia of a pure, perfect market". While the ideology of free market is a neoliberal utopia, academic freedom is a myth in the neoliberal university. To avoid the problematic use of neoliberalism as "a catch-all for something negative" in education (Rowlands & Rawolle, 2013, p. 260), we specifically define the neoliberal university as an institution fraught with intensified corporate culture that disempowers academics by eroding their autonomy and imposing on them standardised, quantified measures of productivity. These changes are hollowing out the footings of the ivory tower and rewriting the professional life of academics.

In recent years, a burgeoning literature has scrutinised the neoliberalised experience of early career academics (ECAs) (Gordon & Zainuddin, 2020; Hartung et al., 2017; Ratle et al., 2020). While there is no universal definition of ECAs, we refer to those in their first 5 years after completing the PhD (Garbett & Tynan, 2010) and filling entry-level positions (Debowski, 2016). Entering academia with tenuous experience and taxing workload, ECAs are members of the academic "precariat" (Standing, 2011) — a neologism merging "precarious" and "proletariat" to describe knowledge workers suffering from stressful, contingent employment within the neoliberal university. Nevertheless, it is not enough to critique that neoliberal institutional mechanisms leaves little room for ECAs to negotiate their academic subjectivities (Hartung et al., 2017). While ECAs have long been identified as suffering from the powerful neoliberal constraints (Laudel & Gläser, 2008), we argue that ECAs are not necessarily neoliberalised bodies; rather, they constitute the future mainstay of higher education and can demonstrate resilience to neoliberalism. In simplified terms, resilience refers to the empowering process of achieving positive outcome despite challenge and constraint. To date, knowledge about the resilience of ECAs to neoliberalism is largely absent. There is no self-socioanalysis of how resilience empowers ECAs in neoliberal times. Our collective narrative aims to contribute in this regard.

In this paper, we — a mid-career researcher and an ECA — collectively and reflexively sociologise our narratives in neoliberal times. Specifically, we ask: *Is it possible to thrive in the neoliberalised academia without becoming its agent?* The paper is situated in the Chinese higher education context undertaking a transition from the "steel bowl" model to the "up-or-out" system. With the "steel bowl" model, academics enjoy lifetime job security with a decent package of salary and welfare offered by the government. Academic promotion largely relies on seniority (Huang et al., 2018). In contrast, the "up-or-out" system is built on contract-based employment and performance-related promotion. This system, as a mode of neoliberalised higher education (Kim et al., 2018), has been widely implemented in Chinese universities, especially the prestigious ones. Only competitive PhD graduates with an emerging track record of publishing in leading journals are offered tenure-track positions, and this mirrors the global trend that requires ECAs to enter academia as already successful players (Heffernan, 2022). In the "up-or-out" system when a tenured position is available, the possibility of transferring to such position largely depends on performance measured by predefined research productivity over a certain period of time (mostly 5–6 years). For ECAs, this is a period of high stakes.

ECAs in the high-stakes neoliberal university: a literature review

In the neoliberal university, the audit- and performance-based corporate culture "orders the whole system while ranking everyone within it" (Shore & Wright, 2000, p. 77). Indeed, the productivity of ECAs is under constant evaluation, drawing them into a "winner takes all" race for status (Jackson, 2021, p. 2). While universities impose high expectations on ECAs, especially in terms of high quality publications (Wöhrer, 2014), limited resources and consultations are provided (Alfrey et al., 2017). Herein lies the neoliberal logic of individual responsibilisation that coerces ECAs to prove their performance as soon as possible instead of allowing for adequate time to find their feet and build their capacity. After all, it is a risky investment rather than a cost-effective business for the neoliberal university to give ECAs "the luxury of research time" if productivity is not guaranteed. The neoliberalised work condition undermines the career advancement and wellbeing of ECAs (Berg & Seeber, 2016). However, most ECAs choose to remain within academia even though they are aware of the detrimental effects of retention (Bristow et al., 2017). Some even sacrifice their leisure or entertainment time and devote increasing work hours in order to boost productivity (Alfrey et al., 2017; Heffernan, 2022). Behind such devotion lurks the neoliberalised workplace, as Bourdieu (1998, p. 98) writes: "the worker's unremitting commitment is obtained by sweeping away all temporal guarantees". With diminished job security in the precarious academic marketplace, ECAs have to work harder to enhance their odds of survival and success.

Sustaining work commitment despite structural constraints is no doubt laudable as it demonstrates a form of resilience that generates desirable outcomes (e.g., retention and productivity) despite significant challenges (e.g., neoliberalism). From a sociological perspective, however, such resilience does not go without problems. First, resilience — despite being a positive construct — may fall prey to neoliberalism underpinned by a dehumanising agenda of self-exploitation (Mu, 2022). Neoliberalised resilience plays host to an exploiting system and incites ECAs to adapt to a however stressful system and become its agents and representatives. Indeed, a multi-national study has found that most ECAs hold themselves accountable for survival and success in the neoliberal university and struggle to "keep their head above water" (Alfrey et al., 2017, p. 17). Second and relatedly, neoliberalised resilience makes a distinction between "winners" and "losers". It commends high-performing ECAs for their determination in the face of challenge and crafts an aureole of their individual resilience (Jackson, 2021); at the same time, it stigmatises the "low-performers" as "losers" who lack resilience. Third, it exacerbates inequality. While neoliberalised resilience celebrates the achievements of those who work against all the odds, it marginalises those who cannot afford extra time for work. A case in point is female ECAs who are thwarted by motherhood penalty (Maxwell et al., 2019) because their significant caregiving roles do not allow them to "volunteer" any extra work hours. As such, neoliberalised resilience conceals the fact that usable time is not equally distributed and available to all.

The "up-or-out" system in China is grounded on the neoliberal conditions similar to those discussed above; it also grows out of Chinese traditions. Chinese universities have long been bureaucratic institutions rather than self-governing communities of scholars (Huang, 2020a, b). Seniority and "guanxi" (social networking) tower over academic excellence, and constitute capital for symbolic domination (Tenzin, 2017) in the "steel bowl" system. The "up-or-out" system, in this context, has received some support because it is assumed as "fair play" in terms of its transparent, standardised quantitative assessment for everyone (Huang, 2020a, b). Behind the "fair" system is the meritocratic belief that those

who work the hardest and the best take the most. Opposite to the meritocratic sentiment is the strident criticism of the system for exploiting ECAs with intensive workload, replacing their potential by performance, harming their research enthusiasm, and eroding academic excellence and integrity (Ren, Yu, & Wang, 2020; Huang & Fan, 2015). These problems are similar to those brought about by the "publish-or-perish mantra" that prevails globally in academia (Lee, 2014, p. 250).

That ECAs are victimised by neoliberalism is a matter of fact. However, it is by no means our intention to reinforce the image that ECAs are vulnerable victims in the neoliberal university. Neither do we romanticise the success of high-performing ECAs in the neoliberal university, although their individual achievement despite high level of stress is commendable. Our point of departure is to explore the critical and positive responses of ECAs in the face of the powerful neoliberal constraints through collective critiques and sociological reflections. Of all the positive responses to adversities and afflictions, resilience is one of the most prominent constructs. But as discussed earlier, the positive construct of resilience often falls prey to neoliberalism. By celebrating ECAs' successful adaptation to the neoliberal university, neoliberalism becomes self-reinforcing. This does not mean that it is time to sentence resilience to death in the neoliberal context. Our intention is to reinvigorate resilience through a critical re-engagement with the construct. To this end, we have recourse to Bourdieu's sociology.

Sociologising resilience in the neoliberal university: a Bourdieusian perspective

Bourdieu's sociology is relational. Agents venture and are drawn into relations of power within and across multiple fields which also come into relations among themselves. Field, according to Bourdieu, is a differentiating social space that is relatively autonomous. This means that each field has its defining logic of practice but no field is utterly independent of other fields, particularly the field of power. The field of higher education, for example, seeks recognition from outside the field various ranking systems which intensify the competition for symbolic domination within the field of higher education. As a result, the rankings have successfully "embedded in the epistemic fabric of higher education" (Wilbers & Brankovic, 2021).

The rankings boost competitions and what are at stakes here are research outputs and impact. To enhance and/or sustain competitiveness, universities urge academics to be productive according to "league tables, citation indexes, and the kind of research that counts as high status" (Deem et al., 2008, p. 93). Things as such with exchange value and symbolic power that define positional advantage in a field are what Bourdieu (2021) means by capital. Vying for capital, academics concur in their belief and action that the competition is worth the candle. In the graphic language of Bourdieu, "players agree, by the mere fact of playing, and not by way of a 'contract', that the game is worth playing" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 98). In other words, there is a tacit agreement between the higher education field and the academics in the field. This very "ontological complicity" (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 12) comes into being through academic habitus (Bourdieu, 1988, p. 143):

> an immanent law of the social body which, having become immanent in the biological bodies, causes the individual agents to realise the law of the social body without intentionally or consciously obeying it.

For Bourdieu, any neoliberalised field of workplace is a "Darwinian World" housing a "destabilised habitus" with dispositions of "insecurity, suffering, and stress" produced by "the structural violence of insecure employment and of the fear provoked by the threat of losing employment" (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 98). Symbolic violence, as Bourdieu (1991, p. 24) writes, establishes and maintains relations of domination and subordination through strategies "which are softened and disguised, and which conceal domination beneath the veil of an enchanted relation". Symbolic violence is powerfully effective as it imposes constraint through consent. For example, ECAs who seek to learn and play the neoliberal game in order to survive and thrive in academia are complicit with the symbolic violence of the market-mediated and performance-driven agenda such as New Public Management reforms (Carvalho & Videira, 2019) in the neoliberal university (Gordon & Zainuddin, 2020). As discussed earlier, in the Chinese "up-or-out" system, neoliberalised resilience sustains the complicity between the "voluntary" consent of the ECAs and the violent constraint of the system.

To break the enchantment of symbolic violence, we draw on Bourdieu-informed sociology of resilience (Mu, 2021). In this vein, our theoretical framing is different from the structuralist use of Bourdieu to understand ECAs' anxiety, insecurity, management, and self-management in the face of symbolic violence (Ratle et al., 2020). As shown momentarily in our collective narrative, sociology of resilience does not simply facilitate individual adaptation to neoliberalism for the sake of survival in the "up-or-out" system; more importantly, it enables emancipation, at least to a certain extent, from neoliberal constraints and, potentially, forces symbolic violence to retreat.

Methodological considerations

Narrative is viewed as a productive approach to understanding private talks, biographies, personal writings, and the like and artistically framing and rigorously analysing these stories (Polkinghorne, 1995). Narrative data for this paper were drawn from the ongoing online communication between the two authors — Melody and Michael. At the time of writing the paper, Melody was in her second year of service at a first-tier university in China. In 2008, the university implemented the "up-or-out" system. Newly recruited ECAs sign a 5-year fix-term contract. Their employment will be terminated at the end of the 5 years if they fail to accomplish the quantified performance measures. These mainly include, but are not limited to, at least four papers written as first author and published in journals included in the Chinese (Social) Science Citation Index or the (Social) Science Citation Index, one project funded by a grant scheme at the provincial level or above, and one teaching award at the university level or above. Meeting these requirements at the end of the first service term would earn a chance to transfer to a tenured position but this is not guaranteed. To secure a tenured position, ECAs need to be the best among their highly competitive peers. Michael was a mid-career researcher with a tenured position at an Australian university. Since the completion of his PhD, Michael has secured research-intensive positions through various fellowships internally, nationally, and internationally. Neoliberalism no longer troubles Michael as much as it used to, but he understands its consequences for ECAs like his younger self. Over the years, Michael has maintained nurturing working partnerships with many ECAs and mentored their career development. Michael first met Melody on a research visit to China in 2012 and has maintained a close partnership with Melody over the past decade. This ongoing mentoring is a forward-looking approach that

guided Melody towards mapping out career paths and prepared her for future challenges and changes (Jackson, 2021). It also forged the "empowering relationships" — the foundation for narrative research (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990).

Since 2019, we — Michael and Melody — have used WeChat intensively for our critical reflections on work-related matters, and the discussions revolving around the "up-or-out" system become one prominent theme. This prompted us to analyse our WeChat narrative and publish it as a paper. Narrative data included in this paper were drawn from a 30,000-word transcript (in Chinese, equivalent to 15,000 English words) of our WeChat text message and voice message between May 2019 and May of 2021. Similar to previous research that produced narrative data of ECA-professoriate interactions via letters and responses (Rynne et al., 2017) and online communities (Zhong & Craig, 2020), we produced narrative data through our intergenerational dialogue and mentoring. Narrative inquiry comes to grips with data either in storied forms or in the raw format of participant stories (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Different from previous research using ECAs' artificially composed narratives in poeticised forms (Hartung et al., 2017), we produced narrative data naturally through our spontaneous, routine communication, rather than by request; and we analysed the authentic transcript of our communication rather than using the "factitious" narratives.

When analysing our narrative data, we produce both *stories of us* and *stories of ours*. In other words, we are not only "storytellers" of, and "characters" in our own and each other's stories (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2); we are also reflexive narrative inquirers. We therefore draw on Bourdieu's reflexive sociology to engage with the *viewpoint* of each of us — "the point of view we take on the field as a view taken from a point in the field" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 101). This view is possibly, probably, or even inevitably biased by layers of veils that we could not see through due to our own point in the field. As situated knowers, our viewpoints are bounded by our social positions and dispositions. We therefore take the opportunity to invite the reader/you to objectify your scholastic privilege — obtained from your positions — to see things that we are unable to see. This invitation attempts to turn the limitations of our viewpoints into an open space of contestation. Such an epistemological turn will be intellectually productive when you, through different viewpoints, enjoy the freedom to complement and/or challenge any viewpoints communicated in this paper, as the reviewers did before this paper was published.

Informed by Bourdieu, we view sociology as a practice. Many years of practising Bourdieusian sociology has been internalised into our habitus. When we WeChat with each other, we may consciously or unconsciously sociologise ourselves and our social worlds. That is to say, our data were produced partly through a Bourdieusian lens. We then analysed these data consciously through Bourdieu's sociology to make new meanings of our collective critiques and reflections, with a particular focus on resilience to neoliberalism in the "up-or-out" system. Our data analysis unfolded in "a process of collaboration involving mutual storytelling and restorying" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 4) through the following steps.

We first transcribed our WeChat conversations for sociological narrative analysis. The narrative data aggregated our collective critiques and reflections, which would otherwise be regrettably left behind as sociologically insignificant. For the purpose of this paper, we trawled through the 30,000-word transcript and phased out the narratives irrelevant to the "up-or-out" system. Second, each of us separately analysed our narrative data through a re-engagement with our *social selve*s as knowledge workers in the neoliberal university and our *sociological selves* as Bourdieusian education researchers. This, for Bourdieu, is a process of "self-socioanalysis" to objectify the objectifier (Bourdieu, 2007, p. 1). Next, we collectively analysed our data to deconstruct and reconstruct our past, present, and prospective

mo(ve)ments — the three-part structure of time in narratively oriented work (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Through rounds of reciprocal critiques and collaborative validation, we objectified each other's positions and dispositions, bringing to light the assumptions that each of us had in the process of self-socioanalysis. Finally, we came to grips with thematising by considering the principles of analysing ECAs' narratives (Rynne et al., 2017, p. 144): "dominant themes" (e.g., neoliberalism, resilience, symbolic violence), "contradictory cases" (e.g., submission and resistance to the "up-or-out" system), and "interesting stories" (e.g., model achiever discourse, unusually long waiting time for review). In this way, we came up with four significant themes that were crosschecked and mutually verified: (1) capital accumulation and self-transformation; (2) shaping the publication habitus; (3) emancipation from symbolic violence; and (4) resilience to symbolic domination.

"To obtain the 'hard currencies'": capital accumulation and self-transformation

As a member of the "up-or-out" system, Melody felt the high pressure of survival. Her initial excitement of becoming an academic in a good university wore off only 6 months after she commenced her professional journey. However, her devotion to academic work did not fade away.

> Melody: The "up-or-out" system, despite its many disadvantages, is relatively fair. As long as I have enough research outcomes, I don't have to worry about the "unwritten rules". I just try to accumulate my capital, the effective weapon to play this game. I have realised that paper and grant are the "hard currencies" in the field of higher education. As for a young lecturer like me with no family background, to obtain the "hard currencies" seems preferable than competing for social capital. (18/09/2019)

As a Bourdieusian sociologist of education, Melody recognised the significance of capital accumulation in her career prospects. She could accumulate cultural capital — scholarship and publications growing out of scholarship — but considered social capital — the "unwritten rules" of nepotism in the Chinese academia — to be inaccessible to someone like herself "with no family background". Here Melody talked about "family background" not in terms of intergenerational transmission of cultural capital within the domestic milieu; instead, she alluded to the delicate "guanxi" (social networking with powerful others) as a form of social capital that facilitates symbolic domination in Chinese societies (Smart, 1993) and career advancement in the field of higher education (Heffernan, 2022). In this respect, Melody demonstrated resilience by developing a practical sense of (im) possibilities to enhance her odds of success in the neoliberal university. Such a resilient disposition is based on "the perception and appreciation of the objective chances" of attaining capital in "a space of possibles" (Bourdieu, 1993a, p. 64). In his response to Melody's reflection, Michael commended her resilience strategy.

> Michael: ECAs are indeed under great pressure of survival. In the Chinese academic field, all kinds of pressures, even the exploitation of ECAs are adversities existing as a matter of fact. You'd better build resilience and engage with some transformative practice. What does it mean? If you keep viewing the ("up-or-out") policy as a constraint, then it becomes a limiting factor. But if you view it as full of opportunities, then this policy becomes a liberating factor. That is to say, you turn inhibitors into enablers. This won't be an easy journey. But in the long run, it may benefit your

academic development. I hope you stick with your heart, think positively, and turn constraints into tools. (18/09/2019)

Bourdieu (1975, p. 30) found that "new entrants" into academia may be orientated towards "the risk-free investments of succession strategies, which are guaranteed to bring them, at the end of a predictable career, the profits awaiting those who realise the official ideal of scientific excellence". Informed by Bourdieu, Michael encouraged Melody to build resilience through "succession strategies" within authorised limits. He also encouraged Melody to "engage with some transformative practice". This would be a costly engagement in terms of time because capital is "accumulated by spending time" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 253). Furthermore, Michael was concerned that Melody would become *too resilient* in the neoliberal university, over-adaptive to it, and hence disciplined by it. To prevent neoliberalism from enculturating Melody into a habitus of utilitarianism and careerism, Michael proactively reminded Melody of her academic ideals (e.g., "stick with your heart"), asked her to take time and think forward (e.g., "in the long run"), and encouraged her to aim for system-level change (e.g., "turn constraints into tools").

"Bide your time": shaping the publication habitus

The nature of scholarly publishing is changing, as it is not merely a means of sharing knowledge within the academic community but also a means of competing for status and funding. Knowledge workers as agents within universities may have internalised the field change and developed two competing habituses termed by Huang (2021, p. 753) as "the humanising publication habitus" versus "the neoliberal publication habitus". Although the two habituses co-exist, it is the latter that prevails in the neoliberal university. The "up-or-out" system enculturated Melody into a neoliberal publication habitus. The urgency for Melody to publish was exacerbated due to the outbreak of COVID — a challenge that interrupted and disrupted research progress for ECAs globally (Kliment et al., 2020). During COVID times, the review process of a manuscript co-authored by Melody and Michael was seriously delayed. Melody communicated with Michael numerous times about her frustration and anxiety. Michael sensed Melody's urgent and immediate need to address her "deficits" — a habitus similar to many ECAs documented elsewhere (Alfrey et al., 2017, p. 17). He therefore asked Melody to slow down, bide her time, and enjoy the learning curve:

> Michael: These are all invaluable experiences. When you experience more, you accumulate more; while you accumulate, you also reflect; your reflections will eventually turn into wisdom. When you encounter a similar situation next time, you won't feel as concerned as this time since you have experienced it before, right? In fact, the lengthy process of writing, reviewing, and revising is particularly powerful as it provides opportunities to improve the quality of the manuscript. No matter whether the final result is positive or negative and how strenuous the process is, bide your time. This experience is a gift. Just take it. (12/12/2020)

After a 16-month long wait, the manuscript was eventually accepted for publication. Melody was thrilled and wrote to Michael: "I feel the happiness and satisfaction from the deepest end of my heart when I can make some progress". Without resilience, it would be difficult to put up with the excruciating review process. Yet Michael's response to Melody was less laudatory but more critical. To reveal the power imbalances ingrained

in the academic field, he shared with Melody a lengthy quote from Bourdieu, followed by a recommendation for power resistance.

> In all the situations where power is hardly or not at all institutionalised, the establishment of durable relations of authority and dependency is based on waiting, that is, the selfish expectation of a future goal, which lastingly modifies – that is, for the whole period that the expectation lasts – the behaviours of the person who counts on the thing expected; and it is based also on the art of making someone wait, in the dual sense of stimulating, encouraging, or maintaining hope, through promises or skill in not disappointing, denying, or discouraging expectations, at the same time as through an ability to inhibit and restrain impatience, to get people to put up with and accept the delay, the continuing frustration of hopes, of anticipated satisfactions intrinsically suggested behind the promises or encouraging words of the guarantor, but indefinitely postponed, deferred, suspended. (Bourdieu, 1988, p. 89)

In the neoliberal university, ECAs such as Melody are mired in a paradox: the limited time and opportunity to prove themselves on the one hand (Heffernan, 2022) and waiting and being made to wait on the other hand. Michael was aware that his and Melody's patient waiting over the woefully long review process sustained the power imbalance between the authors and the reviewers. He was also conscious of his art of making Melody wait, maintaining her hope, and restraining her impatience, which may further camouflage power imbalance. While resilience did help in terms of getting through the frustrating delay, Michael was not happy with resting on resilience *in* an excruciating context; he took one step further and came up with a proposal for resilience *to* the excruciating context. He encouraged Melody to "forgive but not forget", that is, to forgive the unusually long review process but not to forget the experience: "Whenever you are asked to review a manuscript, return your review report at your earliest convenience".

Michael also shared with Melody his experience of resistance to power in the game of academic publishing. Melody acknowledged such power-rejective practice as a form of sociology of resilience. See the narratives between the two academics.

> Michael: As an author, I played a recalcitrant role last week. I rejected all the opinions of the reviewers. After the weekend, the article was miraculously accepted. Sometimes we must dare to take issue with the powerful reviewers, and fight against their power respectfully, then try to attenuate the power imbalance between authors and reviewers. The final result would be the same if I had followed the reviewers and revised the manuscript accordingly, but "revision" and "rejection to revise" show resilience in different dimensions. (23/10/2019)

Response to review is high-stakes. Properly addressing the reviewers' comments would lead to acceptance for publication; otherwise, the manuscript would be rejected for publication. Nevertheless, when properly addressing the reviewers' comments is achieved through unconditional agreement with the reviewers, the authors assume a subordinate position through a submissive publication habitus. While Michael could have chosen to "please" the reviewers, he chosen to defend his scholarship. He not only claimed authority of his scholarship but also demonstrated resilience in the face of academic power. Melody responded:

> Against the backdrop of neoliberalism, I think ECAs need sociology of resilience so much, which helps us neither blindly complain and resist, nor reluctantly obey.

Instead, as thinking intellectuals, we need to deeply understand and reflect on the system and try to develop and sustain a stance of balancing engagement and resistance. (23/10/2019)

"The model achiever is a myth": emancipation from the symbolic violence of neoliberalised resilience

In the neoliberal university, discourse of "model achievers" prevails. Such discourse romanticises meritocracy while relegating mediocrity as failure and impotency. When ECAs admire the image of model achievers and aspire to becoming part of that image, they may be subject to its symbolic violence. Melody, however, did not rise to the bait of neoliberalised resilience. She expressed to Michael:

> The leadership discourse is full of individual responsibilisation, such as "why someone can achieve fruitful academic outcomes while having two babies to take care? If someone can't make it, it's one's own problem. That person doesn't deserve to stay here, and should make room for capable others." (09/03/2021)

Melody decrypted the discourse of "model achievers" hidden in the language of the leader and attempted to disassemble the stage of neoliberal enchantment. For Melody, the model achiever discourse was crafted to enculturate ECAs into a "responsibilised habitus". By lauding the model achievers who make do and mend in harsh conditions (e.g., remain research-productive while rearing children), neoliberalised resilience made ECAs accountable for their own success and failure and the root causes culpable for the harsh conditions were not contested. Such discourse imposes symbolic violence on ECAs through "threats, reproaches, orders or calls to order" (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 42), leading them to regret their mediocrity.

Melody observed that her colleagues, ECAs, in particular, often felt more anxious when exposed to the discourse of model achievers coming from the leadership team because this discourse of meritocracy often insults the "losers" who are unable to meet the expectations of a failing system. However, Melody seemed emancipated from such predicament as she shared with Michael: "I do not easily fall prey to symbolic violence". Michael responded: "The model achiever is a myth, isn't it"! By thinking and doing resilience sociologically, Melody and Michael unveiled the insidious, insistent, and insinuating symbolic violence of neoliberalised resilience.

"This is the first step to break the spell of reproduction": resilience to symbolic domination

Seeing through symbolic violence, Melody achieved a certain degree of self-transformation, but change at field level remained a puzzle for her. She was inundated with complex and conflicting senses of determination and despair, of flexibility and fragility, of liberation and limitation. Bewilderments and predicaments taking hold of her, she asked Michael:

> Melody: I actually have a question in my mind. Even if we know that we are facing symbolic violence, so what? For example, I still need a certain number of publications to keep my position. It won't make any difference to the reality. If I had not known that I was experiencing symbolic violence, I just needed to work hard. But

I've known! I feel uncomfortable about being shackled by something I can't shake off. What do you think? (28/05/2019)

Michael: Change won't happen overnight. A reflection on symbolic violence creates a critical moment for change, and this is the first step to break the spell of reproduction. (28/05/2019)

Melody's "so what" question is a critical sociological question. For Melody, resistance to the "up-or-out" system can realise her agency but would expose herself to the risk of being excluded from the system; submission to the system may ensure her survival in the system but would translate into a disloyalty to her scholarly heart. It is the seemingly "unresolvable contradiction" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 24) that thwarted Melody. Bourdieu writes in a poignant and satirical manner: "Resistance can be alienating and submission can be liberating" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 24). For Melody, there appeared no way out, as later she said: "I still feel powerless and helpless when confronted with the harsh reality of the 'up-or-out' system". Although capital accumulation and habitus change did make a difference to Melody at an individual level, she lamented for being unable to change the system. As Reay (2018, p. 21) asserts: "we cannot transcend the effects of a field by pulling ourselves up by our own bootstraps".

Michael's response went beyond the pessimistic "doom and groom" although social change at field level is indeed a thorny question for sociology of resilience. While self-transformation does not immediately or necessarily break power imbalance, bringing symbolic violence to light is the first step for social change. Unless intellectual workers as agents in the neoliberal university decode the logic of symbolic domination and unveil symbolic violence, there is no assurance that change will happen no matter what else occurs. In this vein, resilience to symbolic violence offers a "chance of knowing what game we play and of minimising the ways in which we are manipulated by the forces of the field in which we evolve" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 198). For Michael, resilience to symbolic violence creates "a critical moment for change". However, it is by no means Michael's intention to encourage Melody to adopt "subversion strategies, the strategies of heresy" (Bourdieu, 1993b, p. 73). Having worked through his own early career years, Michael knew that any radical approach to change would risk being excluded from the field and hence crowd out future opportunities to change the field. Melody acknowledged Michael's reflexivity by sharing a quote from Bourdieu (1999, p. 626):

They can objectify themselves that they are able, even as they remain in the place inexorably assigned to each of us in the social world, to imagine themselves in the place occupied by their objects (who are, at least to a certain degree, an alter ego) and thus to take their point of view, that is, to understand that if they were in their shoes they would doubtless be and think just like them.

Reflexivity is a "possible vehicle for emancipation" (Atkinson, 2020, p. 15) and is integral to sociology of resilience (Mu, 2022). Indeed, reflexivity is believed to empower ECAs to recast the neoliberal logic towards a post-neoliberal future in which ECAs are valued, supported, and encouraged (Bristow et al., 2017). Reflexivity is also believed to enable ECAs to understand the game and see through the forces of the field, establishing the foundation for change (Alfrey et al., 2017). In another sharing, Michael further explained this to Melody:

Michael: A big idea behind sociology of resilience is that a hegemonic system can conquer my body, but they can't conquer my soul. Once achieving the goal of sur-

vival and obtaining power in this system, many people have been completely assimi-
lated into the system. They've gone too far and forgot where they started. Even if
some people don't forget, they tend to defend their current position, right? When they
occupy the central position in the system, as Bourdieu said, most people will take a
strategy to protect the system. In this situation, there is little reflection and almost
impossible to seek change. If we have tools like sociology of resilience, despite our
privileged position, we won't forget where and why we started, and then we will
reflect on the power we obtained. (27/06/2020)

Habitus is the body in the field and the field in the body (see Bourdieu & Wacquant,
1992, p. 20, n35). The correspondence between habitus and field creates a condition of
"fish in water" (Wacquant, 1989, p. 43). This condition applies to those to whom Michael
referred as "completely assimilated into the system". Being the beneficiaries of their privi-
leged field position, they tended to defend the legitimacy of the field through their habitus,
irrespective of what their previous habitus was. Once the body is in the field and shaped by
the field, the habitus is rather difficult to reverse to its original state. This is what Michael
means by "they've gone too far and forgot where they started". However, Michael believed
that sociology of resilience has potential to create a reflexive "bubble" so that when the
body inside the bubble is in the field, the field is not necessarily in the body. Sheltered by
the reflexive bubble, Michael hypothesised "we won't forget where and why we started,
and then we will reflect on the power we obtained".

Conclusion

The field of higher education across the globe becomes increasingly dominated by the neo-
liberal principles. The "up-or-out" system in the Chinese higher education field mirrors the
global neoliberal turn. To survive and thrive in the "up-or-out" system, ECAs may have
recourse to neoliberalised resilience, contributing to both the stakes of the system — "the
product of the competition between players" — and the *illusio* of the system — "an invest-
ment in the game" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 98). In this scenario, ECAs are sub-
jected to symbolic violence of neoliberalism. Some scholars regard that efforts to disrupt
neoliberal agendas are mainly available to those in positions of power (e.g., tenured profes-
sors) (Spina et al., 2020). Indeed, narrative inquiry elsewhere has barely identified ECAs'
specific critiques about the neoliberal university and their potential to effect system-level
change in neoliberal times (Alfrey et al., 2017). Yet our collective narratives indicate that
sociology of resilience offers an opportunity to awake ECAs from the neoliberalised habi-
tus. We therefore propose sociology of resilience as a tool that is power-rejective, reflex-
ive, and transformative. Here we fundamentally agree with Archer (2010) who powerfully
argues that it is not enough to understand practice as largely unconscious, driven by habi-
tus; what also matters is the art of strategic manipulation of the body and mind through
reflexivity.

For Bourdieu, when one applies reflexive sociology to oneself, there opens up the pos-
sibility of building "modest, practical morals in keeping with the scope of human freedom"
(Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 199). We are indebted to, and benefit from, Bourdieu's
bequest when sociologising our narratives of resilience to symbolic violence. In Bourdieu's
opinion, human freedom obtained through applying reflexive sociology to oneself can be
"small scale" and "not that largely" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 199). Our collective
narratives created a micro collegial dialogic space and margins of freedom for ourselves in

neoliberal times. The ambition of our paper, however, is to form a collective force and critical mass by inviting colleagues to think and do resilience sociologically. If successful, this would create opportunities for system-level change.

To put sociology of resilience to work, we call for collective intellectual activism through peer support, collegial collaboration, ongoing mentorship, and critical communication between veteran academics and ECAs who are veteran academics in the making. This marks a clear distinction from neoliberalised resilience that holds individuals accountable for themselves. The concepts of coping with, and adaptation to, challenges and difficulties, despite their positive framing, are fraught with the logic of self-governance, self-discipline, and even self-exploitation. The collegial mutual support has become extremely weaker when scholars get deeply involved in the current game and become competitors to each other (Berg & Seeber, 2016). Our collective narrative is one of the possible endeavours to bring back collaboration and mentorship, as well as mutual critique and intellectual dialogue for the sake of self-growth and system change. By thinking and doing resilience sociologically, we attempt to turn relations of power into relations of reciprocity.

When parsing the pre-neoliberal scientific field, Bourdieu (1975, p. 30) asserts that "new entrants" into academia "who refuse the beaten tracks cannot beat the dominant at their own game" or "achieve a complete redefinition of the principles legitimating domination". Bourdieu's assertion remains valid in the current neoliberal era. We therefore caution against encouraging ECAs to take any radical approach to changing the whole logic of the "up-or-out" system, which would be a failing strategy from the onset. Expecting ECAs to revolutionise the system provides a disservice to them and exposes them to the risk of becoming the casualty in the hegemonic system. It is equally misleading to romanticise individual success in the neoliberal university, which shrouds the structural problems under a cloak of "model ECAs". We therefore invite ECAs and readers to think and do resilience sociologically.

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