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# Untangling the dominant culture in China's elite universities

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**Abstract**
Western literature has shown that elite universities are not culturally inclusive, presuming that these institutions predominantly reflect the culture of the affluent middle class. While cultural inclusion of socioeconomically disadvantaged students is a globally relevant issue, the overarching presumption does not necessarily apply to non-Western societies. This article reconsiders this assumption in the Chinese context, addressing the lack of systematic research untangling the dominant culture in elite Chinese universities. A two-phase, mixed-methods case study was conducted at two top-ranked universities in eastern and western China. In the first phase, a content analysis of the stories of the universities' award-winning seniors was combined with a thematic analysis of the in-depth interviews with 49 graduating seniors to untangle the formal and informal dominant culture in China's elite universities. The findings led to a three-fold model of dominant culture characterized by an emphasis on individual academic performance, loyalty to Communist Party ideology, and the significant influence of students from advantaged family backgrounds. In the second phase, three hypotheses about the impacts of this dominant culture on students' socio-cultural integration were tested, largely supporting the three-fold model and highlighting the roles of academic and political performance in facilitating cultural inclusion. This study sheds new light on cultural capital studies in non-Western contexts and emphasizes that cultural (dis)advantages should be cautiously examined considering the historical and ideological context shaping higher education.

**Keywords** Elite universities · Dominant culture · Cultural capital · SES · Cultural struggles · Cultural inclusion

## Introduction

For lower socioeconomic status (SES) students, access to higher education (HE) is only half the battle for achieving equity. Beyond financial constraints, researchers have shown that the cultural norms of educational institutions often clash with those of grassroots communities (e.g., Jack, 2019; Stephens et al., 2012; Stuber, 2011). This body of scholarship

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underscores the roles of cultural capital, defined as "widely shared high-status cultural signals (e.g., attitudes, preferences, formal knowledge, behaviors, goods, and credentials) used for social and cultural exclusion" (Lamont et al., 2000, p. 156). A highly relational concept, cultural capital reflects one's competence in mastering a field's dominant culture—the ways of being that the dominant classes take for granted (Bourdieu, 1977).

Empirical research conducted in Europe and North America has vividly depicted how Western educational institutions are structured in ways that reflect the cultural presumptions of affluent middle classes, and how this generates struggles and failures for those students who arrive in universities without the "right" cultural repertoire (e.g., Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013; Rivera, 2016; Stuber, 2011). These unseen cultural barriers are particularly pronounced in elite universities (Aries, 2008). As U.S. sociologist Anthony Abraham Jack (2019) noted:

> Lower-income students may be entering elite colleges in greater numbers now than they were fifty years ago, but these campuses are still bastions of wealth, built on the customs, traditions, and policies that reflect the tastes and habitus of the rich. (p.8)

Jack's assertion explicitly expresses a shared presumption that elite universities are structured essentially by the culture of wealthy people. However, this presumption may not hold in non-Western societies like China, where unique socio-cultural orders have emerged due to longstanding traditions and social revolutions. The socialist revolution movement from 1949 to 1978 has completely subverted the socio-cultural stratification order of traditional Chinese society (see MacFarquhar & Fairbank, 1987),[1] while subsequent market-oriented reforms have rendered the dominance of both economic capital and political power in class distinction (Walder et al., 2000). Understandably, there is no clear consensus on whose class culture is the "dominant culture" in Chinese society (Li, 2021).

As such, the dominant class culture of Chinese HE cannot be simply presumed to be a middle-class culture, as often presumed in Western neo-liberal societies. There is a large wealth gap that resulted from four decades of economic reform, however, that occurred under a social regime whose administrative legitimacy rests on prioritizing equality and common prosperity. This raises questions about what cultural capital comes into play when there is no highly salient middle-class culture that sets the "rules of the game." China's top-tier universities, known for their selectivity and unique model of HE in a post-socialist society, provide a valuable case for exploration. Yet, there is a striking absence of research untangling the nature of the dominant culture at Chinese universities. This may reflect what Marginson (2008) called "American homogeny" (p. 308), steering non-Western researchers to adopt a US template that undervalues the Global South's indigenous uniqueness. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) emphasized that cultural capital should be used with an understanding of the power dynamics in a particular field. It is best understood in relation to the specific surrounding institutional environment wherein certain cultural propositions are valorized and rewarded (Emirbayer & Johnson, 2008). In fact, Chinese research has largely followed the Western templates that underemphasize the cultural resources of civilizational heritage that could be considered "capital" (Hu, 2023). Therefore, it is essential to interrogate the dominant culture of Chinese HE beyond the unwarranted "standard"

[1] In the revolution, the well-educated social groups (e.g., teachers, academics, professionals) have been stripped of their power and status in the revolution. They and their children were no longer welcome in the universities, which instead opened their doors to the underclasses such as peasants and workers (see Andreas, 2009).

presumption before applying it to studying the HE experiences of lower-SES students in China.

This study aims to do just that with a two-phase, mixed-methods case study at two top-ranked research universities in Western and Eastern China, hereafter referred to as "Western University (WU)" and "Eastern University (EU)." It identifies the dominant culture that operates within Chinese elite universities and explains how it affects individual students as they integrate themselves into socio-cultural campus life.

Following Hartshorne (1943), we interpret dominant culture as consisting of the institution's official evaluative standards and unofficial, shared cultural norms. In the first phase, content analysis of award-winning student narratives and in-depth interviews reveal a *three-fold model of the dominant culture* in Chinese elite universities, encompassing academic excellence, political performance, and higher-SES preferences. In the second phase, quantitative analysis of survey data tests three hypotheses derived from this model, providing robust evidence for nuanced findings. Ultimately, we argue that while the dominant culture in Chinese universities shares a partial overlap with the "middle-class oriented" presumption, key differences exist and offer important insights into the role of cultural capital in a non-Western HE context.

## Theoretical framework

This study is guided by Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction (Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977), which has long been the lexicon of researchers interested in the cultural mechanisms of social reproduction. For Bourdieu, social reproduction entails symbolic domination wherein culture becomes a power source. Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) argue that the education system performs three crucial functions in reproducing power relations, centered on the notion of dominant culture. First, it transmits and inculcates society's dominant culture—its dominant groups' cultural heritage, action schemes, tastes, and thought categories—as the only authentic one. Second, the education system reproduces social structures by reinforcing the unequal distribution of cultural capital rather than correcting it. The dominant culture shapes the rules of the "game," where certain habitus, aligning with the dominant culture, become cultural capital. Habitus refers to enduring systems of dispositions acquired through upbringing, while a field is a game arena with explicit and implicit rules where participants compete using their capitals (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Third, the education system legitimizes dominant culture by autonomizing its functioning and presenting its neutrality. It operates as an "immense cognitive machine," ratifying social classifications by imposing intellectual classifications under technical neutrality (Swartz, 2012, p.203). For instance, students with the dominant class habitus are seen as ready for school knowledge, while those from dominated classes are perceived as unprepared and lacking competence.

Taken together, the dominant culture is crucial for understanding the "rules of the game" in a specific field, as it valorizes certain habitus as cultural capital. This theory highlights the relational nature of cultural capital, indicating that some dispositions become cultural capital not due to their inherent superiority but because they align with the dominant culture. It provides a conceptual grounding for this study, which is encapsulated in Hu's (2021) formula:

$$Cultural\ capital = habitus \times dominant\ culture$$

## Literature review

### The problematic presumption

Researchers' understandings of dominant culture in Western societies have been greatly influenced by Bourdieu's own research in the context of France. Bourdieu's studies, influenced by Marxist views of European social classes, highlight the sharp contrast between dominant and working-class cultures in France. In Bourdieu (1984), Bourdieu showed that a dominant class habitus always keeps its distance from necessity, creating a "sense of distinction" from a working-class habitus centered on necessity. The dominant culture in France, as Bourdieu portrayed it, is largely characterized by the habitus of big business owners and professionals, albeit a nuanced division among them due to the divergent composition of economic capital and cultural capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977).

Perhaps due to the imprint of Bourdieu's analysis on the French education system and relatively consistent social regimes across Western countries, researchers tend to unwittily accept the imagined cultural stratification and presume that the dominant culture is somewhat structured by consistent privileged classes or groups. Empirical studies in Europe and North America often portray the dominant culture of HE as reflecting the affluent (upper-) middle class (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013; Jack, 2019; Karabel, 2006; Lehmann, 2014; Reay et al., 2009; Stephens et al., 2012). For instance, Karabel (2006) claimed that the admission processes to the Big Three remarkably privilege wealthy students, alumni children, and athletes even despite continuing meritocratic reforms. Similarly, Stevens (2007) argued that American elite liberal arts colleges "nevertheless favors the wealthy, well educated, and well connected" (p. 22). Armstrong and Hamilton (2013) showed that for many public universities in America, "the Party pathway" prevailing among affluent students has been "the most accessible, visible, and organizationally resourced pathway" of college life (p.24). In addition, a group of social psychologists argued that American universities are fundamentally structured according to and value the middle-class ways of being (Stephens et al., 2012). Beyond the US, it has been commonly described that the universities are so much imbued with a middle-class ethnos that HE is entirely perceived as a "middle-class field" (Bathmaker et al., 2016; Lehmann, 2014; Reay et al., 2009). However, this dominant culture is not universal and must be reconsidered in the context of Chinese society.

### Dominant culture of Chinese HE

There is a notable lack of systematic research on the dominant culture of the Chinese HE system. This gap may be due to researchers' tendency to treat cultural capital in a substantialist sense, focusing on its prescribed contents, such as degrees or cultural practices (Serre & Wagner, 2015). Very often, scholars make comparison across countries using the conventional proxies of cultural capital, without delving into what institutional characteristics in different countries and societies have changed the consecration of the dominant culture (Gaddis, 2013; Hu, 2021, 2023). References to the dominant culture in Chinese universities are limited to a few qualitative studies on the HE experiences of lower-SES

students. These studies suggest that urban middle-class manners, lifestyles, and dispositions dominate Chinese elite universities, causing lower-SES students to struggle (Qin & Li, 2014; Wang et al., 2023; Zheng, 2023a).

This view, which is consistent with Western literature, does have some merit, especially in the backdrop of rising income inequality between classes in recent decades. The market transition has profoundly changed the social stratification toward economic resources, as happened in Western capitalist societies (Lu, 2002). The past four decades have witnessed the rise of an urban middle class composed of market elites, while the status of the working class and peasants has deteriorated over the years (Lu, 2002, Lu, 2010). Dramatically increased inequalities across rural and urban areas, western and eastern regions, and social classes have been documented (Lu, 2002, Lu, 2010; Goodman, 2014). Unsurprisingly, class-based inequalities were heightened in the HE system (Li, 2010; Mok & Wu, 2016). A striking reality is that since 2000, the constituencies within elite universities have been largely classed, leaving little room for children of workers and peasants (Andreas, 2009; Liu, et al., 2009). As students from elite backgrounds increasingly converge at top universities, these campuses serve not only as an educational environment but also as cultural settings that reflect the preferences and interests of elite groups and individuals (Binder et al., 2016; Khan, 2011). In China, this trend has inadvertently shifted the cultural landscape of universities toward urban middle-class norms. This shift is evident in the prevailing culture of "studying abroad" at top universities, where a considerable number of students, typically considered the "best and brightest," opt for graduate studies overseas in prestigious universities, converting their spending power into a means of status distinction (Liu et al., 2009). On the other hand, this shift is also reflected in the pronounced self-perception of inferiority among rural students (Xie, 2022), vividly captured by the satirical term "small-town swot" (小镇做题家) on social media. Therefore, the dominant culture of Chinese universities might be endowed with contours of economic capital in the backdrop of heightened class inequality.

However, China foregrounds two features that pose serious questions to the presumption of a middle-class-oriented dominant culture. The first one concerns the distinct history of the communist revolution of contemporary China. It is well known that the socialist regime established by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1949 embraces Marxist egalitarianism as its ideology (Brown, 2012). An authoritarian Party-state was built on a state socialist planned economy, creating a new social order according to political membership (MacFarquhar and Fairbank, 1987). At the very top of the hierarchy was the "Red groups": revolutionary cadres, soldiers, workers, and poor peasants, while the dominated class consisted of the original elites: capitalists, rich peasants, and landlord (Li, 1997). Since then, "Redness," namely to show one's loyalty in terms of the CCP's socialist ideology, collectivist ethics, and allegiance to the power of the Party organization, has become a new social norm (Andreas, 2009, P.1). Under the "Red-over-Expert" power regime, the HE system was restructured to mainly serve political purposes (Cheng, 2012). Importantly, the market transition after Mao's death did not rule out the advantageous status of political elites (Nee & Cao, 1999). Instead, their redistributive power persisted throughout and was even amplified in this transition (Walder et al., 2000) and thus is likely to remain prominent in the dominant culture of today's universities.

The second feature concerns the restoration of the examination-oriented standardized HE system and the Party-state strong control over the system. After the death of Mao in 1976, the PRC's subsequent leaders reoriented the Party-state from class struggle toward economic development (MacFarquhar and Fairbank, 1987). The CCP's "Red-over-Expert" regime was replaced with a "technocracy," whereby the CCP was reshaped and ruled by a group of well-educated "Red and Expert" cadres (Andreas, 2009). With the historic shift

of the Party-state legitimacy from ideology-based to performance-based (Zhao, 2009), the social norms were largely updated by a promotion of the bold pursuit of individual success, and universities were increasingly pressured to cultivate talents to strengthen the nation in a global "knowledge economy" (Ma, 2019). The landmark event was the return of the National College Entrance Examination (gaokao), a standardized paper–pencil test that determines one's access to HE. Meanwhile, the Party-state's authoritarian control over HE persists down to the present (Perry, 2020), increasingly putting pressure on HE institutions to amplify their academic outcomes (De & Bao, 2019). Probably as a result, the HE system developed its own cultural norms that have long been embodied in the long-held civilizational focus on academic performance, which has been found to be relatively independent of family advantages in China, unlike in the West (Hu & Wu, 2021; Hu, et al., 2020).

To sum up, while the existing academic interpretations of the dominant culture within Chinese HE have been largely shaped by Western literature, the cultural map within Chinese universities seems far more complicated than generally depicted. This study aims to untangle it with a dual-phase, mixed-methods case study of two elite universities in China.

## Methodology

### Research design

Given China's vast territory and significant regional disparities, a single-university case study would be insufficient for generalizable claims. Thus, a dual-site case study was designed to enhance the rigor of our findings by identifying similar patterns across universities with different resources and student demographics. Two geographically distant Double First-Class universities were selected: one in the developed eastern region (EU) and one in the underdeveloped western region (WU) (see more details in Appendix 1). These two universities were intentionally chosen as two typical cases at opposite ends of the broad spectrum of top-tier universities with differing locational advantages. The elite universities in the developed eastern region, represented by EU in Shanghai, leverage the vibrant market economy and world-class metropolis to attract more children from elite families. This concentration of higher-SES students may profoundly influence the dominant culture on these campuses. However, this scenario may not necessarily extend to all Chinese elite universities. On the other hand, WU in Gansu province, representing elite universities in the less developed inland regions, enrolls a higher proportion of students from rural and central/western areas. The demographic composition may considerably influence the prevailing dominant culture as well. Accordingly, to arrive at conclusions that hold broader applicability, it is imperative to examine the dominant culture in at least two such distinct institutional contexts concurrently.

This study is designed in two phases, each addressing one research question, with ethical approval. Such a design is necessitated by the differing units of analysis pertinent to each question: institutions and individuals. While the experiences of individuals can be effectively captured through surveys, such structured methods are not appropriate for interpreting the dominant cultures of institutions. Therefore, qualitative research methods are necessitated in the first phase. Furthermore, given the state-centralized nature of university governance in China (Zhou, 2020), we argue that a comprehensive depiction of the dominant culture at elite Chinese universities requires simultaneous consideration of both the formal institutional culture and the informal culture among its members. This dual approach ensures a more holistic understanding of the cultural dynamics within these educational settings. While interviews are an effective way to

uncover the informal dominant culture shared among insiders, content analysis of role models' stories can offer more objective insights into the culture officially endorsed by the institution. As such, the two qualitative methods were combined in the first phase to answer the first question.

The first phase involves content analysis of award-winning seniors' narratives to examine formalized institutional dominant culture, followed by thematic analysis of 49 in-depth student interviews to interpret informal dominant culture. The data for the content analysis comes from the introductory narratives of Excellent Graduating Seniors (EGS) announced by EU and WU in recent years. Each year, EU and WU confer awards on their top 10 and 25 graduating seniors, respectively, after rigorous competition. These awards, the most prestigious for undergraduates, are celebrated in a ceremony, and the awardees' stories are widely shared through campus exhibitions, new media platforms, and official websites. Examining these narratives is crucial as they reflect the shared cultural schemas defining "excellence" within the university community (Lamont et al., 2000). Since these narratives are officially endorsed, they represent the traits of the "ideal" students according to the institution's standards. The study collected all the introductory narratives of the awardees available online, with a total of 102 narratives (from 2012 to 2021) in EU and 142 narratives (from 2015 to 2021) in WU. The data were complete for each year.

In-depth interviews were conducted with 30 final-year undergraduates from EU and 19 from WU between July 2018 and June 2020. Interviews lasted 3 hours on average. All the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. In the semi-structured interview, interviewees were first invited to narrate their life history with an instruction adapted from McAdams (2007). Questions were then probed to better understand the interviewee's perception of the culture milieu of university. See Appendix 2 for the interview protocol and Appendix 3 for participant profiles.

The second phase quantitatively tests the effects of each hypothesized component of the dominant culture on students' socio-cultural integration into the university, thereby consolidating the findings from the first phase. The data came from a survey conducted during March to July of 2020. All the juniors and final-year undergraduates enrolled in EU and WU were invited to participate in an anonymous online survey on university experiences. After excluding invalid responses, two final samples of 816 and 696 participants were acquired from WU and EU, respectively. Notably, students' social-cultural integration was assessed using a psychometrically validated scale, the Cultural Struggles Scale (CSS). The 8-item inventory encompasses a variety of the psychosocial challenges of being "cultural outsiders" at universities as shown in the literature (Zheng, 2023b). An example of a cultural struggle item is "It is difficult to have a common language with other students on some in-depth topics." See Appendix 4 for the scale items and an overview of the variables and measurements included in this study.

## Data analyses

Data analyses were divided into two phases as well. In the first phase, qualitative content analysis using *DivoMiner* was applied to the EGS narratives to identify the most salient evaluative criteria across universities. Following the procedures suggested by Philipp Mayring (2004), 30 merit subcategories were inductively identified and grouped into four main categories of excellence (see Appendix 5).[2] Because most narratives projected more than

[2] The coding scheme was inductively developed over several rounds of trail coding performed by the first author and the guest coder on part of the data from both sites. Several broad categories emerged from the first round, and additional codes were added to the initial scheme subsequently. The code categories were finalized after iterative waves of modification and testing.

one category, each narrative was coded twice: the first coding identified the primary category and the second coding identified the subsidiary category. To ensure reliability, the author and a trained coder independently coded a random subsample of 50% of the data from each university, with inter-coder reliability tested using Krippendorff's $\alpha$, achieving an overall $\alpha$ above 0.8 for both sites (Krippendorff, 2004). The two coders then worked through the entire dataset together, resolving any discrepancies through discussion. After that, a thematic analysis of the interview data was conducted to capture the latent cultural expectations toward university students using *NVivo 12*. Particularly focusing on the participants' experiences navigating the milieu of elite universities and perceptions of the university culture, open coding was followed by a second round of analytical coding (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Commonalities across institutions were highlighted to understand the underlying cultural norms prevailing in both sites.

In the second phase, a deductive quantitative analysis was conducted using the *SPSS 24* based on the survey data. *T*-tests and one-way ANOVA explored differences in experienced cultural struggles across key variables, and a four-step ordinary least squares (OLS) regression was conducted to further attest the three hypotheses under a controlled condition.

## Findings

### Dominant culture at elite Chinese universities: a three-fold model

The findings from both sites consistently show that the institutionalized standards of defining excellence (i.e., the formal dominant culture) were primarily performance-based, rewarding high academic and political performance regardless of one's social origins. China's featured examination-oriented institutional culture manifests itself here. However, the shared informal dominant culture leaves a place for the habitus of higher-SES groups.

#### "Red and Expert": the performance-based formal culture

All the 30 sub-categories of EGS's excellence can be grouped into the following four main categories: academic achievement, ideological and political performance, personal competence, and moral character. As shown in Table 1, the distribution of main categories is largely consistent between EU and WU. The formal, legitimated dominant culture of elite Chinese universities by no means merely reflects the value of the rich. Both universities promoted students with outstanding performance in either professional or political sense as their EGS, exactly in line with the "red and expert" standards advocated by the Party-state in the post-Mao era (Andreas, 2009). Overall, as shown below, *academic achievement* and *personal competence* represent the standards of "Expert," and *ideological/political performance* and *moral character* largely represent "Redness."

As shown in Fig. 1, *academic achievement* is consistently a top EGS category at both sites. Very often, academic performance was demonstrated at the foremost of the narrative, such as participation in a research team, getting the topmost GPA, academic publication, getting research grants, and so on. *Personal competence* is mainly related to well-trained non-academic skills and specialties, such as artistic specialties, athletic competence, and linguistic skills, leaving more room for market training and family economic capital. These competencies were less recognized at EU, probably because these competencies are commonly seen in EU students and the spotlight of publicity should move slightly toward

**Table 1** Frequencies of main categories of excellence

| Main category | EU ($N=102$) | | WU ($N=142$) | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 1st coding *N* | Weighted *N* | 1st coding *N* | Weighted *N* |
| Academic achievement | 50*** | 65.5*** | 46* | 62* |
| Ideological and political performance | 33* | 51* | 37 | 57.5 |
| Personal competence | 13** | 27** | 51** | 63.5* |
| Moral character | 6*** | 13.5*** | 8*** | 18*** |

The "1st coding *N*" represents the sum totals of the first coding, in which each narrative received only one code for its most salient category

The "Weighted *N*" represents the weighted sum totals by code rank. The weights were accounted for by the following formula: $w=1(f) + 0.5(s)$. The $w$ represents the weighted frequency for a given code, $f$ is the frequency of the first codes, and $s$ is the frequency of the second codes

*P*-values were derived using Poisson distribution around the mean, the frequency one could expect for each category if they were distributed randomly across all four categories. $^{*}P < 0.05$, $^{**}P < 0.01$, $^{***}P < 0.001$

"Redness" to ally with the state's overall ideology, according to a staff of the EU Office of Student Affairs.

As another cardinal category, *ideological and political performance* mainly includes experiences demonstrating one's devotion to the state and loyalty/engagement to the political regime. EGS of this category were mostly characterized as outstanding student cadres, which active participants followed in voluntary services and the social practice programs sponsored by the university's Youth League Committee, the official mass organization of the CCP. In addition, both universities spared a small proportion for *moral character*. This category shifted the emphasis from one's "doing" to one's "being." An awardee might not have achieved something competitive or held an important position, but their narrative explicitly mentioned how they embodied some valuable moral virtues. These virtues, unsurprisingly, largely reflected the ideology of "Core Socialist Values" (*shehui zhuyi hexin jiazhiguan*).[3] As shown in Fig. 1, it mainly included patriotism/community commitment, warmheartedness, and resilience/perseverance. Typical narratives included a rural student from a remote mountainous area who cared about their hometown and returned to contribute and a minority/poor/disabled student who kept moving forward and even helped others despite huge setbacks. Notably, this was the *only* category wherein the narratives indicated the awardee's socioeconomic origins, which typically were grassroots instead of well-off families.

Overall, the official evaluation criteria at both schools reflect a simultaneous focus on academic performance and political performance, a deliberate downplaying of family advantages, and even a greater celebration of grassroots' moral worths instead.

[3] This doctrine has been propagated nation-wide by the CPC since its 18th Party Congress in late 2012. The EGS narratives reflected the moral principles of the Core Socialist Values on the individual level: patriotism, dedication, integrity, and friendliness.

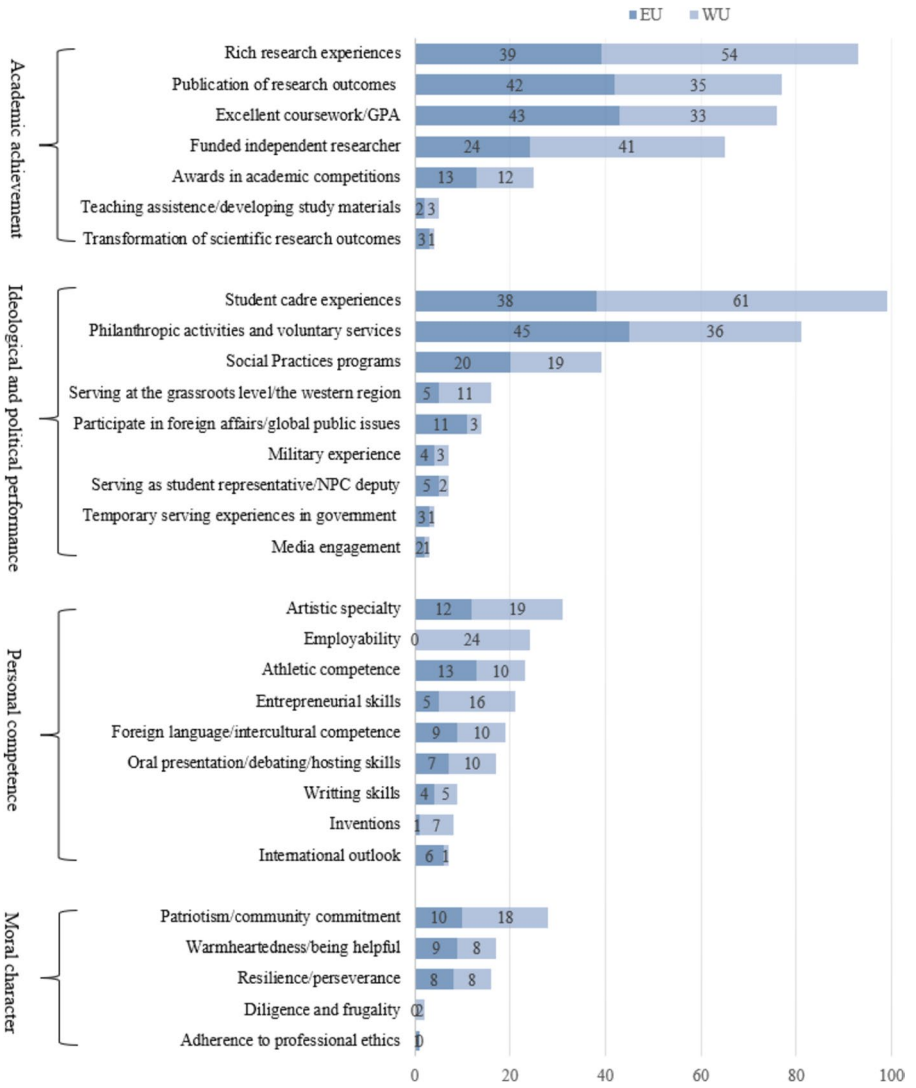


**Fig. 1** Frequencies of subcategories of excellence, by site

## The "other students": the SES-based informal culture

Although the formal university culture appears neutral, the informal culture normalizes the habitus of certain socioeconomic groups. This is evident in the hidden expectations, unwritten rules, and assumptions taken for granted by students. Beyond the pursuit of excellence, family advantage was a significant theme. While officially downplayed, its influence is keenly felt in everyday university life.

First, rural and working-class students were often shocked by the talents and lifestyles of the "other students"—their urban middle-class peers, particularly in EU. These "other students" were described as fashionable, sophisticated, and confident with university

challenges. They were typically fluent in multiple languages, socialized at expensive venues, and downplayed their designer clothes and electronics. Their cultural capital was subtly displayed, whether through interviews, public speaking, or casual references to philosophers and some overseas experiences. At both sites, attending graduate school at a prestigious overseas university is considered the most desirable path to take after undergraduate study. This study-abroad culture, as highlighted by Liu et al. (2022), is distinctly elitist and is orchestrated through a collective "consensus" among elite students, expensive study-abroad agencies, and alumni networks. These realities carried little surprise for interviewees from advantaged backgrounds. "They were all within my expectations. The university in my imagination should be like this," said Guo-dong, a Beijing student from a family of professionals. But for most students from the countryside, remote areas, or low-income families, just to name a few examples, it was all a sharp reminder of their "otherness" on the campus:

> All my roommates are all from rich families...They might spend thousands taking flights to South Korea or Hong Kong over the weekend to watch a concert… They go out to have dinners very often…But I can eat with that money for three days. (Ling, a migrant worker's daughter)
>
> I was assigned to Level One after taking the English Placement Test at the beginning of the first year. You know what? One of my classmates missed the test and was assigned to Level Two. [laughter] All three of the four people in my dorm were assigned to Advanced English (the highest level). (Qiang, a peasant's son)

The strong sense of "being othered" is more pronounced at EU, where there is a larger proportion of well-off students. However, even at WU, despite the greater absolute number of lower-SES students, they share with their EU counterparts a feeling that their naivety in navigating university life is perceived as inferior to the savvy of urban, eastern students. With the growing influence of neo-liberal forces on Chinese HE policies, students are implicitly expected to take full autonomy in navigating their college lives (Zheng, 2023a). This involves wisely arranging their 4 years, setting career goals early, and paving their own paths to graduation and employment. This "hidden curriculum" is taken for granted by urban middle-class students but is unfamiliar to lower-SES students (Lareau, 2015; Zheng, 2023a). Almost all the interviewed low-SES students made regretful mistakes in navigating university due to their limited cultural repertoire, such as being too late to make career choices or lacked a necessary understanding of some key matters (e.g., making GPAs, networking). The savvy and competencies of high-SES students were still recognized as legitimate. The quote below poignantly reflects the commonly experienced cultural inferiority of students from villages and small towns:

> Hard work is celebrated here (WU), but in fact professors still favor students with critical thinking. They are those from the southern, developed cities. When I talked to them, they knew far more than I did. It seemed that you have never thought of things in their ways, which surprised you. The gap was so big, as if we did not take the same gaokao. (Jun-jin, rural entrepreneur's son)

Taken together, the dominant culture in China's HE is simultaneously shaped by the CPC's performance-based ideology and the informal expectations of socioeconomically advantaged groups. It is a hybrid of three cultural ideals: a collectivist spirit supporting the Party, outstanding academic performance, and an urban middle-class lifestyle (see Fig. 2).

Three propositions can be drawn from this three-fold model of dominant culture, as shown in the central column of Fig. 2. Each form of dominant culture in HE is underpinned

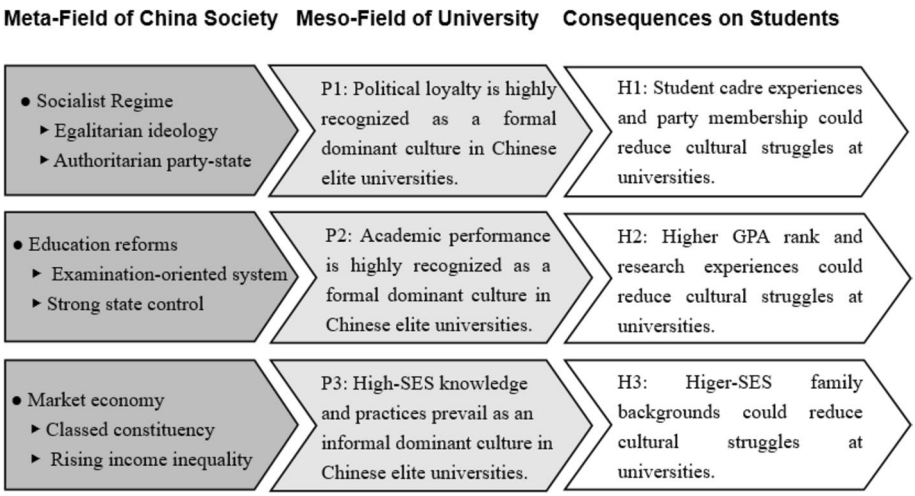


**Fig. 2** A three-fold model of the dominant culture in Chinese elite universities

by specific characteristics of what Bourdieu called the "meta-field"—the field of power (Swartz, 2012, p. 136), informing verifiable hypotheses about their impacts on individual cultural integration at universities. If this argument holds, we should expect that students with lower academic and political performance and lower SES backgrounds will face more cultural struggles. The following section presents a quantitative analysis of survey data from both sites to test these hypotheses.

## Predicting cultural struggles at elite Chinese universities

This section aims to answer the second research question by examining if the variations of experienced cultural struggles between different groups agree with the hypotheses shown in Fig. 2. Cultural struggles were measured using the overall score of the CSS, obtained by averaging the scores of eight items. Academic performance was proxied by students' GPA rank in the faculty and experience of doing research with professors, and political performance was captured by the Party membership of CCP and the experience of holding a leadership role in organizations on the faculty level or higher. Family SES backgrounds were operationalized as four variables: parents' occupational status, *hukou*, first/continuing generation status, and geographical region. In addition, the variations across the following demographic variables and important background variables were also considered: age, gender, only-child, high-school type, and study field (see detailed measures in Appendix 4).

Table 2 reports the results of a descriptive analysis, comparing means of CSS scores across the categorical variables. The statistical significances of the differences were estimated using *T*-tests (for binary variables) and one-way ANOVA (for multi-categorical variables).[4] As shown in Table 2, students with lower GPA ranks and no research experience

[4] Levene's tests of homogeneity of variances was performed, and post-hoc multiple comparison tests were applied using Scheffe tests for groups with equal variances and Games Howell tests for groups with unequal variances.

**Table 2** Means of cultural struggle scores by categorical variables

| Categorical variables | EU ($N=696$) | | | WU ($N=816$) | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *N* | *M* | *SD* | N | *M* | *SD* |
| ***Academic performance*** | | | | | | |
| GPA rank: top 30% | 325 | 2.53 | 0.87 | 399 | 2.32 | 0.89 |
| GPA rank: 30–50% | 168 | 2.89 | 0.87 | 184 | 2.58 | 0.84 |
| GPA rank: 50–70% | 144 | 2.94 | 0.86 | 147 | 2.57 | 0.85 |
| GPA rank: bottom 30% | 59 | 3.36*** | 0.91 | 86 | 3.06*** | 1.00 |
| Research experience: yes | 172 | 2.47 | 0.90 | 198 | 2.23 | 0.93 |
| Research experience: no | 524 | 2.87*** | 0.88 | 618 | 2.59*** | 0.89 |
| ***Political performance*** | | | | | | |
| Party membership: yes | 123 | 2.80 | 0.94 | 204 | 2.34 | 0.90 |
| Party membership: no | 573 | 2.77 | 0.90 | 612 | 2.56** | 0.93 |
| Student cadre: yes | 259 | 2.66 | 0.88 | 273 | 2.28 | 0.88 |
| Student cadre: no | 437 | 2.84** | 0.92 | 543 | 2.61*** | 0.90 |
| ***Family SES backgrounds*** | | | | | | |
| Parents' occupation: upper class | 305 | 2.69 | 0.91 | 169 | 2.43 | 0.89 |
| Parents' occupation: middle class | 212 | 2.77 | 0.89 | 183 | 2.43 | 0.97 |
| Parents' occupation: lower class | 179 | 2.90* | 0.90 | 464 | 2.56 | 0.89 |
| *Hukou*: rural | 166 | 2.90* | 0.91 | 441 | 2.59** | 0.93 |
| *Hukou*: urban | 530 | 2.73 | 0.90 | 375 | 2.40 | 0.87 |
| Continuing-generation student: yes | 334 | 2.66 | 0.92 | 129 | 2.37 | 0.88 |
| Continuing-generation student: no | 362 | 2.87** | 0.88 | 687 | 2.53† | 0.92 |
| Region: eastern provinces | 364 | 2.68 | 0.90 | 180 | 2.37 | 0.94 |
| Region:central provinces | 133 | 2.87 | 0.90 | 177 | 2.48 | 0.84 |
| Region: western provinces | 156 | 2.91* | 0.92 | 421 | 2.54 | 0.91 |
| Region: northeastern provinces | 42 | 2.77 | 0.89 | 38 | 2.83* | 1.04 |
| ***Covariates*** | | | | | | |
| Gender: male | 293 | 2.68 | 0.90 | 381 | 2.48 | 0.92 |
| Gender: female | 403 | 2.84* | 0.90 | 435 | 2.53 | 0.91 |
| Only child: yes | 443 | 2.74 | 0.89 | 260 | 2.42 | 0.92 |
| Only child: no | 253 | 2.83 | 0.93 | 556 | 2.54† | 0.90 |
| High school: provincial key school | 424 | 2.31 | 0.89 | 262 | 2.41 | 0.84 |
| High school: municipal key school | 126 | 2.96*** | 0.93 | 216 | 2.52 | 0.96 |
| High school: ordinary school | 146 | 2.92*** | 0.90 | 338 | 2.56 | 0.91 |
| Study field: sciences and engineering | 217 | 2.76 | 0.90 | 229 | 2.56 ** | 0.97 |
| Study field: humanity and social science | 366 | 2.84* | 0.88 | 315 | 2.60** | 0.84 |
| Study field: medicine and health science | 113 | 2.59 | 0.98 | 272 | 2.34 | 0.92 |

†$P<0.1$, *$P<0.05$, **$P<0.01$, ***$P<0.001$

reported more cultural struggles robustly on both sites. Likewise, those without any student cadre experience reported more cultural struggles on both sites. All four indicators of family SES backgrounds yielded significant differences in EU, while ruralness was associated with more cultural struggles in WU. These results were preliminary evidence supporting our hypotheses.

**Table 3** OLS regression results of predicting cultural struggles

| Explanatory variables | EU sample ($N=696$) | | | | | | | | WU sample ($N=816$) | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Model 1 | | Model 2 | | Model 3 | | Model 4 | | Model 5 | | Model 6 | | Model 7 | | Model 8 | |
| | *Beta* | *t* | *Beta* | *t* | *Beta* | *t* | *Beta* | *t* | *Beta* | *t* | *Beta* | *t* | *Beta* | *t* | *Beta* | *t* |
| ***Academic performance*** | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| GPA rank: top 30% | −0.41 | −6.10*** | | | | | −0.41 | −6.00*** | −0.38 | −6.63*** | | | | | −0.37 | −6.43*** |
| GPA rank: 30–50% | −0.22 | −3.54*** | | | | | −0.21 | −3.46** | −0.21 | −4.06*** | | | | | −0.21 | −4.08*** |
| GPA rank: 50–70% | −0.18 | −3.11** | | | | | −0.18 | −3.06** | −0.19 | −3.89*** | | | | | −0.20 | −4.04*** |
| Research experience: yes | −0.13 | −3.62*** | | | | | −0.12 | −3.35** | −0.09 | −2.74** | | | | | −0.08 | −2.22* |
| ***Political performance*** | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Party membership: yes | | | 0.03 | 0.79 | | | 0.06 | 1.56 | | | −0.05 | −1.49 | | | −0.01 | −0.10 |
| Student cadre: yes | | | −0.10 | −2.68** | | | −0.07 | −2.04* | | | −0.17 | −4.4*** | | | −0.15 | −4.32*** |
| ***Family SES backgrounds*** | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Parents' occupation: upper class | | | | | −0.03 | −0.40 | −0.04 | −0.64 | | | | | −0.01 | −0.03 | −0.00 | −0.05 |
| Parents' occupation: middle class | | | | | −0.02 | −0.32 | −0.02 | −0.46 | | | | | −0.02 | −0.62 | −0.01 | −0.29 |
| *Hukou*: urban | | | | | −0.02 | −0.42 | −0.00 | −0.07 | | | | | −0.10 | −2.28* | −0.09 | −1.98* |
| Continuing generation student: yes | | | | | −0.08 | −1.63 | −0.05 | −1.14 | | | | | −0.01 | −0.25 | −0.04 | −0.97 |
| Region: eastern provinces | | | −0.11 | −2.24 | −0.11 | −2.32* | −0.08 | −1.75† | | | −0.09 | −2.49* | −0.10 | −0.2.52* | −0.06 | −1.72† |
| Region:central provinces | | | −0.02 | −0.53 | −0.03 | −0.71 | 0.00 | 0.03 | | | −0.08 | −2.19* | −0.09 | −2.24* | −0.07 | −1.97* |
| Region: northeastern provinces | | | −0.03 | −0.80 | −0.04 | −0.88 | −0.01 | −0.26 | | | 0.053 | 1.51 | 0.06 | 1.57 | 0.04 | 1.22 |
| ***Covariates*** | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Age | −0.06 | −1.64 | −0.10 | −2.49* | −0.10 | −2.52* | −0.08 | −2.13* | −0.08 | −2.12* | −0.08 | −1.99* | −0.09 | −2.38* | −0.09 | −2.41* |
| Gender: female | 0.06 | 1.61* | 0.06 | 1.56 | 0.60 | 1.62 | 0.07 | 1.91† | 0.56 | 1.62 | 0.03 | 0.84 | 0.04 | 0.95 | 0.07 | 2.05* |
| Only child: yes | −0.01 | −0.13 | 0.01 | 0.17 | 0.04 | 0.846 | 0.03 | 0.65 | −0.08 | −2.12* | − 0.06 | −1.51 | − 0.03 | −0.74 | −0.01 | −0.35 |

**Table 3** (continued)

| Explanatory variables | EU sample ($N=696$) | | | | | | | | WU sample ($N=816$) | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Model 1 | | Model 2 | | Model 3 | | Model 4 | | Model 5 | | Model 6 | | Model 7 | | Model 8 | |
| | *Beta* | *t* | *Beta* | *t* | *Beta* | *t* | *Beta* | *t* | *Beta* | *t* | *Beta* | *t* | *Beta* | *t* | *Beta* | *t* |
| High school type: provincial key school | −0.11 | −2.26* | −0.14 | −2.89** | −0.11 | −2.10* | −0.07 | −1.39 | −0.08 | −2.07* | −0.08 | −1.95† | −0.07 | −1.83† | −0.01 | −1.01 |
| High school type: municipal key school | 0.02 | 0.46 | −0.01 | 0.26 | 0.03 | 0.53 | 0.04 | 0.87 | −0.03 | −0.78 | −0.04 | −0.94 | −0.03 | −0.71 | −0.02 | −0.58 |
| Study field: science and engineering | −0.04 | −0.98 | −0.04 | −0.92 | −0.03 | −0.81 | −0.04 | −0.99 | 0.07 | 0.19 | −0.02 | −0.49 | −0.01 | −0.35 | 0.01 | 0.365 |
| Study field: medicine and health science | −0.12 | −3.12** | −0.12 | −3.06** | −0.12 | −3.03** | −0.11 | −2.96** | −0.13 | −3.11** | −0.18 | −2.26*** | −0.16 | −3.67*** | −0.15 | −3.43*** |
| $R^2$ | 0.143 | | 0.067 | | 0.064 | | 0.155 | | 0.122 | | 0.089 | | 0.064 | | 0.152 | |
| Adjusted $R^2$ | 0.126 | | 0.028 | | 0.045 | | 0.130 | | 0.106 | | 0.075 | | 0.048 | | 0.130 | |
| Change in $R^2$ | 0.095 | | 0.024 | | 0.016 | | 0.107 | | 0.085 | | 0.052 | | 0.027 | | 0.115 | |
| *F* | 8.146*** | | 4.078*** | | 3.346*** | | 6.181*** | | 7.929*** | | 6.522*** | | 3.914*** | | 7.105*** | |

***$P<0.001$, **$P<0.01$, *$P<0.05$

Reference groups—GPA: bottom 30%; parents' occupation: lower-class; *hukou*: rural; region: western provinces; gender: male; only-child: no; high-school type: ordinary school; study field: humanity and social science

To further test the proposed three hypotheses, OLS regressions predicting cultural struggles were run with a hierarchical design: step 1 added academic performance to the first block, a baseline model that included only the covariates; step 2 added political performance to the baseline model; step 3 added family SES backgrounds to the baseline model; step 4 included added all the three groups of explanatory variables to the baseline model. See Table 3 for results.

As shown in Table 3, the baseline model predicting cultural struggles from the covariates accounted for significant variance with the EU sample, $F$ (7, 688) = 4.953, $P < 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.048$. The baseline model yielded very similar results with the WU sample, $F$ (7,808) = 4.418, $P < 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.037$. As predicted, the addition of academic performance significantly increased the variance accounted for in cultural struggles for both samples (Models 1 and 5), strongly supporting H1. Likewise, adding political performance increased the explained variance, though the changed value of $R^2$ differed across sites (Models 2 and 6), partly supporting H2. Note that the Party membership was not significant, but student cadre experience was consistently significant at both sites. Adding family SES background variables slightly increased the explained variance (Models 3 and 7). Parents' occupations and first-generation status bore no significance on both sites, but non-rural *hukou* and specific regions were associated with more cultural struggles, partly supporting H3. The final full models (Models 4 and 8) showed (at least marginal) significance in at least one indicator in each of the three groups of explanatory variables. These results suggest that each component of the three-fold model independently impacts students' integration into university life, though their influence varies in intensity. Academic and political performance carried most of the explanatory weight, while family SES background had a weaker impact, primarily influenced by hukou and region rather than occupational class and first-generation status, as seen in Western literature (e.g., Reay et al., 2009; Stuber, 2011). This is probably because the country has not yet developed a solidly stratified society (Hu, 2021).

## Discussion and concluding remarks

While Western literature usually portrays the dominant culture in HE as defined by the middle class, this study steps back to examine the dominant culture within elite Chinese universities through a mixed-methods case study of EU and WU, proposing a three-fold model. We contend that the unique socialist regime, the exam-oriented education system, and ongoing market reforms collectively shape the dominant culture in Chinese universities, which is created by multiple social powers rather than a single privileged group. Our findings reveal that this dominant culture is characterized by a combination of an emphasis on individual academic performance, loyalty to Communist Party ideology, and the significant influence of students from advantaged family backgrounds. Students who align with any of these three cultural ideals experience fewer integration challenges at elite universities. This study makes several key contributions.

First, this is the first study to systematically examine the dominant culture of Chinese elite universities, providing a novel approach to delineate the dominant culture of non-Western HE systems so as to better understand different groups' social-cultural HE experiences. It highlights the competing social forces in dictating the dominant culture of HE in a socialist country undergoing market transition. Our quantitative findings further confirmed that academic success and being student cadres significantly lower

students' cultural struggles even when controlling their SES backgrounds. This aligns with previous findings that high-achieving lower-SES students in China face fewer integration difficulties (Jin & Ball, 2019; Xie & Reay, 2020). This study provides a clearer explanation for these surprising findings by demonstrating that their academic achievements align them, at least partially, with the three-fold dominant culture.

Second, while previous research often focuses on high-achieving lower-SES students and seldom addresses low-achieving ones (e.g., Lehmann, 2014; Reay et al., 2009; Xie, 2022), our findings, for the first time, suggest that underachievers from disadvantaged family backgrounds are true "cultural outsiders" at universities and require more scholarly attention. According to the three-fold model, these students struggle the most because they do not align with any of the three cultural ideals, risking being labeled as *985 trash*, a term used by underachievers at elite Chinese universities to self-deprecatingly refer to themselves as waste. These students deserve more attention in future research.

Third, it shows that in a HE system dominated by an egalitarian ideology of an authoritarian ruler, the mechanism by which family SES transmits its advantages is more nuanced than in Western societies (e.g., Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013; Jack, 2019). This study reveals the shared categories and hierarchies created by the gatekeepers of elite Chinese universities for one's merit, unpacking the legitimate cultural repertoire that institutions deploy in student evaluations. The findings that academic and political performance are more strongly associated with cultural struggles than family background should not be seen as evidence of a "classless" society. Instead, they reveal the social power of the legitimate cultural repertoire of "Red and Expert," leading universities to value academic and political performance foremost. Familial advantages, therefore, should be transformed to be asserts of being "Red" or "Expert" to gain an edge. Such an education system appears meritocratic, but the real issue is the extent to which outstanding academic and political performance can be disassociated from family advantages. Sociologists have long recognized that performance is (at least partly) a product of SES backgrounds (Boudon, 1974), with evidence in contemporary China (Li, 2016). The association between performance and family SES may be the key arena where cultural capital plays a role in elite Chinese universities, deserving more scholarly attention.

Moreover, this study adds to the cultural capital studies in Eastern Asia societies (e.g., Byun et al., 2012; Hu & Wu, 2021), responding to the calls of reconsidering the nature of cultural capital and how it could come into play in Chinese HE system (Hu, 2023). It expands upon earlier works by highlighting the uniqueness of the dominant culture in Chinese HE, interrogating the "rules of the game" in the specific *field* to better understand the formation and functioning of cultural capital (Lareau et al., 2016). As Bourdieu stated, "capital does not exist and function except in relation to a field" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 101). He focused on European high-status culture because French schools rewarded it, whereas cultural capital can take different forms in Chinese contexts. Using internationally conventional indicators (e.g., high-status cultural activities participation), researchers even found that they are negatively correlated with getting ahead in the examination-oriented system of Korea and China (Byun et al., 2012; Hu & Wu, 2021). These surprising findings do not necessarily indicate that cultural capital does not work in East Asia; instead, it may simply be due to inappropriate proxies for it. Jumping out of the existing framework of Western societies, this study specifies the institutional standards and expectations that valorize cultural capital, building a clearer model to explain why some habitus can be cultural capital (Winzler, 2021). Our findings suggest that, in the highly examination-oriented education system of China, knowing how to be high achievers (both academically and

politically) and how to navigate universities with autonomy should be considered important cultural capital.

Despite its contributions, this study has limitations. The CSS, though psychometrically sound, simplifies the complex struggles of cultural outsiders in HE. More refined proxies are needed for better measurement. Additionally, the dataset lacks ethnicity information, which should be addressed in future research. Lastly, while the dual-site design enhances generalizability, caution is advised when interpreting the findings, and further research is needed for further validation.

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**Data availability** Suppoting data is available in HKU Data Respository upon request: Zheng, Yajun (2023). Supporting data for "Conceptualizing and Tracing Cultural Struggles of Lower-SES Students in Chinese Elite Universities". HKU Data Repository. Dataset. https://doi.org/10.25442/hku.23820198.v1.

## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The authors declare no competing interests.



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