

Tackling rural-urban inequalities through educational mobilities: Rural-origin Chinese academics from impoverished backgrounds navigating higher education

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Abstract

Existing scholarship on marginalised academics are mostly western-based and concerned with inequalities caused by class, gender and/or racial and ethnic differences. This article adds to this literature by highlighting how inequalities caused by the urban-rural divide in China adversely impact on the academic trajectories of rural-origin academics from impoverished backgrounds. To mitigate such inequalities, the 26 interviewed academics drew on their academic capital to achieve institutional and geographic mobilities, both within and beyond China. Such educational mobilities further allowed these scholars to convert into and accumulate economic, social, cultural and symbolic capitals (after Bourdieu). Importantly, their rural-origins and disadvantaged positioning had cultivated in them a productive *habitus* that is characterised by hard work, perseverance and self-discipline. Such a habitus played a pivotal role in orchestrating their academic ascension and upward social mobility. However, despite these successes, this article also reveals these academics' perennial financial struggles in lifting their rural-based families out of poverty, and the exclusive nature of educational mobilities, which are manifestations of systemic structural inequalities caused by urban-biased policies.

Key words: rural, China, academics, mobilities, capital, habitus

Introduction

Academics of marginalised backgrounds

Extant literature that examines the experiences of ‘non-traditional’ appointees to the academy has focused on those of working-class and/or impoverished backgrounds (Lee 2017; Reay, 1997; Waterfield, Beagan, & Mohamed 2019), of women (Gonzales & Terosky 2019), as well as of ethnic and racial minorities backgrounds (Bhopal 2019; Bhopal, Brown, & Jackson 2016; Kim & Ng 2019). Typically, these marginalised academics experience exclusion and alienation: having to work twice as hard, getting less recognition at work, and finding it more difficult and taking longer to progress their academic careers. Their accounts often point unambiguously to structural inequalities based on the normalisation of experiences of white, middle-class males, while simultaneously stigmatising and relegating those of female, working-class, ethnic and racialised minorities.

To mitigate and survive such unequal conditions, these under-represented academics have utilised a suite of strategies. For instance, working-class academics are reported to suppress and magnify certain emotions strategically to manage their own and their middle-class colleagues’ anticipated responses to the stigmatisation of their class backgrounds (Brook & Michell 2012; Lee 2017). Working-class scholars, especially female academics, use boundary work to retain their working-class identities, underline their working-class work ethics, and reject common assumptions about their escaping of working-class roots (Reay, 1997; Waterfield et al. 2019). Some female scholars in the US also challenge linear career progression routes, reject dualism of distancing themselves from their professional work, and reject individualist practices and choose to work and progress with others (Gonzales & Terosky 2019). Some ethnic and racial minorities academics have had to migrate trans-nationally in order to access more inclusive academia elsewhere (e.g. from the UK to the US) (Bhopal et al. 2016); some others deploy ‘white sanctions’ by establishing connections with white colleagues in positions of power who act as ‘brokers’ or ‘mediators’ in endorsing and promoting their work (Miller 2016, 210). East Asian academics are found to strategically position themselves not as ‘victims’ of racial and ethnic inequalities, but as quiet ‘strangers’ who thrive with their ‘meritocratic excellence’ in the research-prioritised British academia (Kim & Ng 2019).

In a nutshell, this literature draws insights from the experiences of marginalised groups in western academia (e.g. the UK, the US, Canada and Australia). It has been shaped by an understanding about inequalities that is characterised by a binary between perspectives of white, middle-class males and those of their ‘non-traditional’ counterparts.

Little, however, is known about how inequalities operate in non-Western academia, and how marginalised groups in non-Western contexts struggle against inequalities. In this article, I will evoke of the case of Chinese academics from rural and impoverished backgrounds as an

attempt to redress this gap. I will point out the parallels and differences about how inequalities are experienced and tackled between these rural-origin Chinese academics and their western counterparts. I will highlight, in particular, how the rural-urban divide in China has pre-supposed the perpetually precarious economic situations of these rural-origin academics and how this fundamental positioning in society has oriented them towards employing institutional and geographic mobilities (both internal and cross-border) to accumulate and convert economic, social, cultural and symbolic capitals (Bourdieu 1986). I will demonstrate how their rural-origins and disadvantaged positioning had cultivated in them a productive *habitus* that is characterised by hard work, perseverance and self-discipline. Such a habitus played a pivotal role in orchestrating their academic ascension and upward social mobility.

In what follows, I will review literature on Chinese academics and pinpoint the lack of scholarly attention devoted to rural-origin academics, which is arguably stemmed from the rural-urban divide and its manifestations of inequalities in academia.

Chinese academics in the literature

The making of Chinese academics: familial vs institutional influences

Research on Chinese academics has been scarce. Cao's (1999) research on the social origins of 859 elected members of the Chinese Academy of Sciences argues that the production of Chinese elite scientists parallels literature in the West, in that these elite academics are mostly from middle-class professional families with higher-than-average parental education attainment levels. In a survey conducted in 2011, Yan (2017) observes that China's academia has been dominated by those from middle and upper-middle class backgrounds, thanks to their families' high-quality education investment since the early years. However, he highlights that as scholars progress along in their education, the influence of such familial advantages decreases and are gradually replaced by that of the higher education institutions (HEIs). Furthermore, while may be related to class-based culture and interest, the choice of becoming an academic is more to do with family economic conditions and unequal access to educational resources.

Fallen-behind remuneration and mounting financial pressure

More recently, research has focused on the less-than-desirable remuneration in China's academia and the mobility experiences of Chinese scholars. Regarding remuneration, Zhang et al.'s (2014) survey of 573 younger/early-career staff (under 35 years old, born in the late 1970s and 1980s) at 12 universities in Western and Central China reveals that a majority of younger staff are dissatisfied with their work because of lack of comparable financial income against

other professions. The reason identified was that China's higher education massification, which began in late 1990s, has pushed most HEIs to borrow money to build new campuses. In order to deal with substantial debts, HEIs have decided to sacrifice their staff welfare, especially their economic income. Over 60% of the surveyed younger staff suggested that they could not have any saving as a result of their low salaries being insufficient for supporting their young families and aging parents. The authors argue that the living conditions of such younger academics are barren and worrying, nearing the poverty line. In addition, over 70% of these younger academics are living in rented properties as they could not afford privately developed properties while the country has now prohibited HEIs from building staff accommodation.

In Beijing, Gao et al. (2015) surveyed 1409 younger/early-career staff members from 94 HEIs located in the capital city about their job satisfaction and found that these early-career academics were least satisfied with their economic income, among other satisfaction indicators including job stability, professional reputation and social status. This survey found that those who were single-children tended to have a higher degree of job satisfaction, which is an indirect indicator for this study as most of these rural-origin academics have at least one sibling (to be elaborated later). This survey similarly suggests that the exponential financial pressure that the surveyed participants had to face has become a major hindering factor for their survival and development.

The economic stress borne by younger academic staff is an important contextual factor for the current study as 21 out of the 26 of rural-origin academics were born in the 1970s and 1980s. They had experienced rampant expansion and marketisation of the higher education sector in China since late 1990s which led to degree inflation, introduction of tuition fees and abolishment of the job-assignment system (Liu 2014). Meanwhile, they were also struck by the national housing reform that began in the late 1990s and was in full swing to boost property prices, especially in bigger cities where most of the HEIs are located (Li, Wu, & Morgan 2015). These, coupled with the rapid economic development in other sectors of the society, further accentuated these younger academics' falling place in the economic and social hierarchy. All of these structural conditions had created a hostile economic environment for these younger academics born in the 1970s and 1980s.

Academic mobility experiences

Regarding mobility experiences of Chinese academics, Liu's (1997) research exposes the experiences of overseas Chinese scholars in the UK. Set in the 1990s, only about less than 20 years after the opening-up and reforming policies were implemented and when China's economy was still much less developed than Western countries, Liu finds that most Chinese

overseas scholars were preoccupied with making money through part-time jobs. To these travelling scholars, scholarship became a primary means to acquiring economic and social power. In a more recent study, Leung (2013) investigates the experiences of 64 Chinese scholars (all of postdoctoral positions or above) in Germany. Leung reveals that the transnational geographic mobility of Chinese scholars can be understood as a form of capital that can be accumulated and converted into other forms of capital, such as social, cultural, economic and symbolic resources. Despite this positive impact, Leung also pinpoints the hidden costs of such transnational mobility for younger scholars who were concerned about losing touch with the rapidly developing Chinese academia. Wang's (2019) research with 40 early-career Chinese academic returnees suggests that many of them have been caught in successive precarious employments, both during their overseas sojourns and after they have returned to China. However, both Leung's and Wang's research focuses on scholars who were of post-doctoral or above positions who engaged in transnational mobilities. It remains unclear how scholars earlier-on in their academic trajectories (such as from undergraduate to Master's, from Master's to PhD) experience different forms of mobilities, such as rural to urban, institutional, and cross-border mobilities.

Common among this nascent literature is that little attention has been devoted to the experiences of academics from rural and impoverished backgrounds. This is arguably to do with the under-representation of such academics in China's academia. In Cao's (1999, 998) aforementioned research, only 8.8% of these elite scientists were from families of farmers. Cao argues: 'the number of elites with a farming origin is not significant, considering China's historically agrarian population'. While these elite scientists are not representative of the wider population of academics working in China's HEIs, Yan's (2017) 2011 survey of ordinary HEIs' staff found that only 0.41 per cent are from families with fathers working as farmers and in poultry cultivation industries. Given that most academics currently working in China were born between 1960s and 1990s, a period during which China's rural population accounted for over 70% of its entire population (The World Bank 2018), such an under-representation of academics from rural and impoverished backgrounds demands more explanation and research.

Why study rural-origin academics from impoverished backgrounds? The rural-urban divide in China

Inequalities within China's academia can be argued to be closely related to its rural-urban divide, which has been sustained by urban-biased government policies (Xiang 2015). Such policies have categorised the Chinese population into agricultural and non-agricultural

residents, through the household registration system, *Hukou*. This foundational policy orientation is supported by a set of policies that give preferential treatments to urban populations in quality education, housing and health care (Li 2013). Regarding access to higher education, since HEIs mostly rely on financial supports of local governments, preferential admission quotas have been reserved for candidates from home provinces and cities. Since a predominant majority of HEIs in China are located in urban areas (Li 2013; Liu 2018), students from the countryside are structurally constrained in accessing higher education due to this quota system. Moreover, the complex university choice-making system at the juncture of *Gaokao*, the national college entrance exams, has been found to severely disadvantage rural candidates as they lack the requisite social and cultural resources to make strategic and informed choices (Liu 2018, 2). This has resulted in rural candidates clustering in less prestigious HEIs (i.e. non-key universities or vocational colleges) and majors (Li,2013, 830;. Liu 2018).

For those rural students who manage to get into elite universities against all these odds, due to lack of economic capital and their pre-occupation with taking up part time jobs to make up for inadequate material possession, they are found to be excluded from social activities and student organisations which could have enabled them to accumulate social capital for employment (Li 2013). These negative experiences have induced considerable stigma and lack of self-esteem, leading some to take a laid-back attitude towards the end of their undergraduate career (Cheng 2018; Li 2013).

Intriguingly, Xie (2016) and Liao (2016) find that some of these rural students instead focused on their academic studies, and achieved outstanding academic results, which to some extent became a source of pride and helped bolster their confidence in exploring new areas. However, it is unclear how these academically-inclined rural-origin students develop after their undergraduate studies. Additionally, since these existing studies focus on those who make it into elite universities, it remains little known what the experiences are like for those (i.e. the majority of rural students) who instead entered non-elite HEIs.

In view of this gap in literature, I will focus on the experiences of 26 rural-origin academics who not only finished their first degrees but excelled in postgraduate studies and managed to get permanent positions in academia. Over two thirds of these participants entered non-elite Chinese HEIs for undergraduate studies. I will seek to address this research question: What are their academic experiences like as individuals from rural and impoverished backgrounds and what strategies have they used to tackle structural barriers in progressing their career?

Bourdieu and non-traditional participants in higher education

To explore the experiences of these Chinese academics from rural and impoverished backgrounds, Bourdieu's concepts of capital and habitus are fitting tools to think with. When reflecting on his own ascension from a humble rural background to the height of the academic world, Bourdieu revealed that it was important to come to terms with 'what it means to have an academic mind—how such is created—and at the same time what was lost in acquiring it' (Bourdieu & Eagleton 1992, 117). His own struggles against the 'tensions and contradictions' arisen in reconciling his rural origin and the 'high academic consecration' have been epitomised in his depiction of 'a cleft habitus', as conveyed in his *Sketch for a Self-Analysis* (Bourdieu 2007 [2004], 100).

Bourdieu pinpoints the significance of the rural world in shaping his own dispositions (i.e. *habitus*, 'of permanent manners of being, seeing, acting and thinking' (Bourdieu 2002, 27)) that became pivotal in determining his subsequent practices when he ventured into the unfamiliar academic world in Paris. In his own academic trajectory, he worked hard to overcome his lack of resources which were deemed as valuable and preferable (i.e. *capital*, resources that could be accumulated, reproduced, and converted (Bourdieu 1986, 243)), such as the coveted Parisian accent. Specifically, he conceptualises economic capital which can be directly converted into money; cultural capital, which is convertible into economic capital, and has three forms: institutionalised, embodied and objectified; and social capital, which could be institutionalised in the form of a title of nobility (ibid.).

Bourdieu's own experiences have inspired scholars examining the experiences of non-traditional participants in higher education, both in the West and in China. Recently, Waterfield and colleagues (2019) explore the lived experiences of 11 Canadian academics who self-identified as from working-class or impoverished origins. They find that while these academics' economic capital increased as a result of their upward social mobility, their relative lack of cultural capital and their habitus often left them feeling like 'outsiders'. They also endured isolation, either forced or self-selected, in their professional lives, which adversely impacted on their accumulation of social capital. In the UK, when researching working-class academics' experiences, Skeggs (1997) articulates having the 'wrong capitals' in academia, of not wanting to get into it to 'get things right', but at the same time not being able to go back. This dilemma meant that working-class academics often end up blocking their own access to essential economic and cultural capitals as they would rather not deal with the people who have access to such resources. This seems to run contrary to the 'white sanctions' that ethnic and racial minorities academics in the UK employed (Miller 2016). However, it highlights the importance of key gatekeepers of social and cultural capital in academia which, as I will demonstrate, is

essential for accumulating social capital through education mobilities by these rural-origin academics.

Overall, while clearly elevated in economic capital acquisition (Reay 1997; Waterfield et al. 2019), these Western-based studies commonly articulate how the endorsed and normalised behaviour within academia that values typical middle-class cultural (e.g. manner of speech, sense of confidence) and social capital (e.g. connections accumulated through established family networks) are alienating for the ‘non-traditional’ appointees who lack such requisite capitals (Brook & Michell 2012; Lee 2017; Waterfield et al. 2019). Societal and institutional practices (e.g. racist hiring practices) (Bhopal 2019; Miller 2016) as well as familial expectations (Skeggs 1997) have also contributed to making these ‘non-traditional’ members feel that their dispositions (*habitus*) are not appropriate for the academy; many of them had difficulties reconciling their ascending academic trajectories with their gender, class and racial origins.

In China, *habitus* and capital have been employed to understand the experiences of rural-origin students admitted to elite HEIs. Researching the experiences of 30 rural-origin students at an elite institution in Beijing, Li (2013, 842) highlights how, due to a lack of economic, social and cultural capital, some of the rural students resorted to diligence, which was predisposed by their rural dispositions (i.e. *habitus*) and focused on accumulating their academic capital. She writes: ‘When other forms of capital seemed inaccessible, academic capital became the only form he could accumulate, and scholastic success the only route to change his disadvantaged position and rural identity’.

Drawing on data from a longitudinal survey of around 2,000 students and qualitative interviews with 80 such students, Xie (2016) similarly notes how rural students in elite universities have found partial conjuncture with the elite university milieu, i.e. academic success. He further demonstrates that academic success can become their important sources of further exploration and allow them to acquire newer cultural and social capitals. However, most did not do well in student organisations or social activities, and they tended to regard themselves as lacking in such capabilities (*habitus*). A direct result is that many of them completely disengaged and instead sought refuge in their academic studies, which according to Xie was a form of *habitus hysteresis* (a time lag of the *habitus* in relation to the changed environment).

Cheng’s (2016, 2018) study, which employs in-depth interviews and autobiographic writing accounts of around 30 rural students, similarly adopts capital as an analytic lens to understand these students as ‘upwardly mobile’ ‘class travellers’. Cheng pinpoints how the lack of economic capital has rendered these rural students at the margin of the university space, and

induced a sense of estrangement, making them strangers in the ivory tower. Despite this, Cheng argues that these rural-origin students have developed unique cultural orientations, as a result of their incorporation and integration into the urban higher education sphere, distinguishing them from rigid upholders of the so-called ‘rural culture’.

As for research on Chinese academics, Leung’s study (2013) of Chinese academics in Germany conceptualises geographic mobility as a form of capital and demonstrates how transnational mobility could be accumulated and converted into cultural, social, economic and *symbolic capital*, i.e. the form that different capitals take once they are recognised as legitimate in a specific context (Skeggs 1997, 128). Leung’s deployment of capital and capital conversion, as well as her use of geographic mobility as a form of capital lay solid theoretical and empirical grounds for using capital to interpret individual-level experiences of Chinese academics of rural-origin in this article, especially in analysing their various forms of institutional and geographic mobilities.

Overall, Bourdieu’s conceptual tools have enabled Western and Chinese scholars to research the experiences of non-traditional participants in higher education as cultural outsiders and to explore how their dispositional inclinations orient them towards certain, but not other, practices. These fruitful engagements will be taken up in the current article to unpack the experiences of rural-origin Chinese academics from impoverished backgrounds.

Methods

Data are based on in-depth interviews with 26 rural-origin academics conducted between July 2017 and July 2018. Participants were selected through the snowball sampling technique (Noy 2008). Since an individual’s rural status can change following their higher education moves to urban centres, which usually brought along a shift of their *hukou* status, I decided to identify rural-origin academics as those who had a rural *hukou* before they commenced their undergraduate studies. Participants were asked about their education experiences, with special focuses on whether and/or how their experiences of growing up in the countryside had impacted on their academic trajectories.

Lengths of interviews ranged from 45 to 100 minutes. Most interviews were conducted online with five interviews conducted face-to-face. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for thematic data analysis, performed on the qualitative data analysis software *Atlas.ti*. The language of interview was Putonghua. For purposes of confidentiality and anonymity, participants were each assigned a pseudonym. My home institution provided ethical approval prior to the start of this project.

Sample characteristics

As anticipated, most participants currently work in mainland China, with only four located in western countries and greater China areas (see Table 1). A good balance in gender has been achieved, with 15 male and 11 female participants. Regarding age groups, 13 were born in the 1980s, eight were born in the 1970s and four in the 1960s, and only one born in the 1990s.

<Insert Table 1>

Regarding socio-economic status, in all interviews I asked participants about their family income level, parental education and professional backgrounds, number of siblings and hometown economic situations. A majority (23) of participants had parents who were either full-time farmers, or a combination of part-time peasants and migrant workers. The remaining three had parents who worked in factories (at managerial positions) or state-owned enterprises. Five had illiterate parents, five had parents who had been to senior high school and the remaining 16 had parents with primary or junior high school qualifications. Most participants reported that their hometowns were poor and recalled difficulties in managing tuition fees for primary and secondary schooling. It could be argued that most participants are from the bottom strata of the Chinese rural society (Wang, Zhao, & Wang 2018).

As participants were recruited through snowball sampling, the variety of participants has been limited. For instance, most participants are from social science disciplinary backgrounds and are from the bottom strata of the rural society. These means that the generalisability of research findings from this data may be constrained as the experiences of those from other disciplinary backgrounds or higher social strata of rural areas are not included. However, as a small-scale qualitative study and one of the first attempts to investigate rural-origin individuals' experiences at post first-degree stages, I argue that findings from this study would serve as critical, initial insights for informing future research. Additionally, since most interviews were conducted online, it was less easy to capture the participants' real-time emotional and bodily hints. However, this was mitigated through multiple interviews with key participants and follow-up questions which allowed me to clarify understanding and ascertain the participants' situated social experience (Bryman 2004). As a rural-origin academic myself, I was able to quickly establish rapport with my participants, which facilitated emotional resonance and shared understanding throughout the inquiry process.

The lasting challenges of precarious economic positions

Growing up in poverty, primarily in economic, but also social and cultural senses, had engulfed much of these rural-origin academics' lives. Humiliation, shame and embarrassment were emotions most mentioned when recounting earlier schooling days:

One year, we could not gather enough money for tuition fee, so we went to borrow from our neighbours, but none of them agreed...and they even...demanded that we...kneel down to them...In the end we had to sell our pig prematurely to get some money. (Zhen, 1980s, male)

There were three children in my family...As I was the youngest, every time when the school year started, I had no tuition fee to hand in...I would sit on the steps of my house for hours, not wanting to go to school, because I was too ashamed. (Xun, 1980s, male)

It was in the early 1990s: both me and my brother were going to school. Peasants lived really harsh lives: farming taxes were high; so was education and health care cost. Every year my parents had to either borrow money or get loans, begging other people (Su, 1970s, female).

Economic precarity also affected some of their university choices. For instance, Jiao (1970s, male) recounted:

I could have applied to Peking or Tsinghua universities with my results, but I did not because they all required one year's military training, making the entire degree 5-year long. Instead I chose a second-tier one, because its tuition fee was cheaper...and there were food compensation and more than 30-yuan monthly allowance.

One year's military training meant an extra year's tuition fee and a year's delay in generating income. Instead, Jiao chose a more 'affordable' university with extra financial allowances. Only later did he realise that the lack of prestige (and consequently resources) of this chosen university placed him in an unfavourable place when looking for work. He revealed: 'when I was looking for work, I was not confident at all. It was extremely bumpy. I entered a poor company that closed down within a year'. The participants' accounts were fraught with uninformed understanding about HEIs and majors, which was a result of their lack of social connections, cultural understanding and economic confidence. There were participants who estimated their marks much lower than their actual marks (e.g. Zhen's case below), made 'wrong' choices for universities as their first choice, and ended up entering much less prestigious institutions (e.g. Chen's case below). There were also participants who chose to study in Normal universities (i.e. teacher training institutions) or Education Studies (e.g. Cang below) or pure science subjects (such as Pu, male, 1960s) because those did not charge or charge less tuition fees.

When I had my Gaokao...I knew nothing about universities. My parents could not help, even my class teacher did not know anything...After Gaokao, we had to estimate our marks and chose our university preferences. I ended up estimating about 50 marks lower than the actual marks...When I got the offer (from a non-elite HEI), I really struggled internally for a long time. (Zhen, 1980s, male)

I did well in Gaokao, far exceeding the threshold for key/first-tiered universities. In that year there was a newly established university in my home province that began to recruit undergraduate students. It ended up getting all the students who did not get into their first-choice institution—I was one of them because I chose an unrealistic university in Beijing. (Chen, 1980s, male)

Overall, although all 26 participants could have entered first-tiered universities based on their Gaokao results, only five managed to get into elite institutions. They unanimously reported a complete lack of understanding about the higher education system on the part of their parents. Their overwhelming concerns about the affordability of university, coupled with a lack of social and cultural capital to play the ‘game’ of university choice-making, had adversely subjected most of them to cluster in less prestigious institutions and majors. This finding partially echoes what Liu’s (2018, 14) research reveals about higher education choice-making of young Chinese. Based on accounts of 36 students from working-class and agricultural families, Liu found that ‘constrained by a lack of social capital and cultural resources’, these students ‘adopted risk-aversion strategies’ through sacrificing ‘their elite opportunities in the most prestigious universities in order to secure a position in a field with higher labor market returns at a less well-known institution’. While most rural-origin academics in this study similarly sacrificed their chances of entering elite universities, their utter lack of understanding about the game rules inclined them to stay oblivious to the potential ‘labour market returns’ of their chosen majors. Instead, they entered because of concerns about affordability (e.g. Cang), or lack of social and cultural capital to navigate the application process. As most participants in this study entered less prestigious institutions for their undergraduate studies, exploring their experiences and subsequent strategies to enter academia (to be illustrated later) thus redresses the lack of current scholarly attention on rural-origin students in non-elite institutions (Cheng 2016, 2018; Li 2013; Liao 2016; Xie 2016).

Precarious economic situations also continued to haunt their higher education journey, serving as a constant source of anxiety, leading to mental health issues. For example,

When I got a PhD offer...I was constantly thinking about the financial pressure. Pursuing a PhD meant that I could not make money...I got the first-class scholarship, around RMB12,000/per year...I gave part of this money to my family...Once, my father could not even afford to buy petrol to return home...I often have nightmares in which my father asks for more money, so I would cry, struggle and then wake up. I don’t know what to do, feeling quite helpless. (Meng, 1980s, female)

Meng’s experience was not uncommon; similar accounts were articulated by Su (born in 1970s), who revealed that when she was an undergraduate student in Beijing, her father often bragged about her achievement to her relatives and demanded remittance from her. This had resulted in her depression:

My father seemed to feel that I was becoming somebody by attending this prestigious university. He believed that I was able to repay the family...During my second and third years in university, I almost collapsed...At that time my family’s financial situation was really poor...and my father would write to tell me how difficult the family was, and say

things that were really frustrating, which gave me a lot of pressure...I was quite depressed...and all I wanted to do was to escape.

In the face of such economic difficulties, these academics commonly utilised their scholarly skills to generate extra income, most notably through scholarships (almost all had received scholarships) and part-time jobs. Zhen's account is typical:

When I was a first-year student, I had six to seven part-time jobs because my family did not have any money. I helped people to fix computers, did some private tutoring, sold computers, and distributed leaflets. However, I began to receive scholarships towards the end of my first year. After that I realised that being good at academic studies brought me much more money than doing part-time jobs.

In Meng's case, she even acted as a ghost writer through writing publishable academic articles:

A friend asked me to write an article to be published in a CSSCI¹ journal, for which I earned RMB7,000. As soon as I got that money, I sent around RMB 4,000-5,000 to my father...it was published under another person's name.

Generally, these rural-origin scholars converted their academic achievements and research skills, which can be considered as a form of self-cultivated, embodied cultural capital, into economic income for self-survival and family remittance. This allowed them to address the most urgent needs of their impoverished families during their student lives. This finding partially resonates with existing research on rural students in elite universities which emphasises that rural-origin students are confronted by lack of material access in university, which pushed them to partake in part-time jobs that concomitantly hindered their accumulation of social capital (Li 2013; Liao 2016; Xie 2016). In contrast, these rural-origin academics, although haunted by poverty at university, were able to deploy and convert their academic capital into economic capital. Such academic success and capability also appeared pivotal in the development of their subsequent academic career. However, as they ventured into their academic jobs, they continued to feel the brunt of economic poverty. For instance, Lian (1980s) revealed, rather painfully, about his financial plights:

My parents have invested so much in me, but I don't think I am doing enough to repay them...Now my father still has to work to support my mother, who helps take care of my baby. With my meagre salary, when can I buy my own property? I don't even dare to think about it. When can I buy a car and take my parents for sightseeing? I don't know.

A year and a half into his first lectureship in a tier-one city in southern China, Lian's low salary was further compounded by his responsibilities for supporting his young family and aging

¹ Chinese Social Sciences Citation Index (CSSCI) is an interdisciplinary citation program in China. Established in 2000, this citation database covers about 500 Chinese academic journals of humanities and social sciences. Now many leading Chinese universities use CSSCI as a basis for the evaluation of academic achievements and promotion.

parents, and for having no property in that big city, where property prices had skyrocketed over the past decades (Li et al. 2015). As rehearsed in the Introduction, the economic conditions of younger academics in China are dire in many cases, due to a host of factors such as the massification of higher education and the rising housing market (Gao et al. 2015; Zhang et al. 2014). However, what distinguished the economic plights of these rural-origin academics from their better-off urban-origin peers is the proportionate investment and sacrifices that their already impoverished families had to endure and the consequent sense of indebtedness sedimented within these academics: ‘My mother had invested a great ideal in me. She had to borrow money, and pay the debt, pay others’ favour (*renqing*)’. In order to support Lian’s higher education, his parents not only sacrificed their own material comfort, but also got into debts, both in monetary terms and socially (*renqing*, favours). Lian felt obliged to ‘*repaying the debt*’, a notion typically associated with upwardly mobile rural youth (Wang 2014). *Repaying the debt* thus became an obligation to sustain an unfinished family project.

Overall, the economic burdens are most keenly felt by those born in the 1980s (such as Lian, Ku, Xun and Meng) and for those in the 1970s (Chunpu). For those born in the 1960s (4/26), while they did not have such great pressure buying properties in the cities, they commonly shared that they had taken over much greater responsibilities of providing for their extended families who are still mostly based in the countryside. For instance, Xin (1960s, female) revealed:

For the most part, my parents are relying on me financially...My little brother is not doing well economically, he cannot support my parents, instead he relies on them. Sometimes I even support this brother financially.

Xin’s account is closely paralleled by Fen (1960s, male), also a professor:

To be honest though, there is still some burden, because for rural-origin individuals like our generation, we shoulder the responsibility of supporting our parents, which is still an issue. Sometimes this economic pressure makes me feel that I could not breathe...We are absolutely more burdened than our urban counterparts...I also have to support my four brothers who are all in the countryside.

In fact, such felt obligations to support the entire rural-based family, including both parents and siblings, has been common among participants from across different age groups. Su (1970s) and Kai (1980s, female) both spoke about using their scholarship money to support their younger siblings’ high school and university education. Su even used her savings from post-doctoral work to pay for her brother’s wedding. Except for Dan (1980s, female) whose younger sister also became an academic and works in a big city, Chen whose younger sisters both attended university and worked in the city, and Jiao (1970s, male) and Tan (1990s, male) who

were only-children, the remaining 23 participants all have siblings who are all still based in the countryside. As the only member of the family who has ‘made’ it outside in the urban centres, these rural-origin academics all felt a desperate need, consciously or not (i.e. habitus), of supporting and uplifting the entire rural family out of poverty while feeling paralysed for not being able to do so. To mitigate their economic poverty, these rural academics have developed notable social capital and acquired symbolic capital through their higher education mobilities, including rural to urban migration, lower-tiered to more prestigious institutional moves, and cross-border education mobilities.

Social, Cultural and Symbolic Capitals

Institutional Mobilities, Social and Symbolic Capitals

Capitalising on their outstanding academic results at undergraduate levels, these rural-origin academics all drew on institutional mobilities (which often coincided with inter-city, inter-provincial or cross-border geographic mobilities) to more prestigious HEIs for graduate studies, which accorded them added symbolic capital and enabled them to accumulate broader social network and connections. At Master’s level, all except five (who were already in first-tiered universities) moved institutions. At PhD level, all moved to institutions that were more prestigious than their undergraduate institutions, with 13 moving outside mainland China for their Master’s and/or PhD studies. To them, moving institutionally was a key step to achieving upward social mobility. Tian’s (1980s, female) account is typical in underlining the importance for rural-origin students from impoverished backgrounds to continue pursuing postgraduate studies in more prestigious institutions in order to become more competitive in the labour market:

If a student went to a not-so-prestigious university for undergraduate studies, he can only expect to get a job...in a company that is not doing very well, and there is no security...but if he pursues postgraduate studies in a really prestigious HEI like Fudan University, which can give him a platform, then after graduation he can get a better job...Unlike urbanites, even if they cannot get certain jobs, they at least have their families there to support them, for people like us, in order to climb upwards, education is the only way out...Even if we return to our hometowns, we do not have the social networks that classmates from the county seats possess...We may end up struggling at the bottom of the society all our lives. *We need this postgraduate qualification to open this new door.* (my emphasis)

Coming from an impoverished rural background meant that not only did these scholars need to deal with economic burdens, but the lack of social connections implied no other option to fall back on, unlike their urban and/or better-connected counterparts. Tian’s account speaks

volumes to the uneven economic developments across China due to differentiated incorporation into its reformed market economy. As Liu (1997, 103) aptly observes when analysing the experiences of Zhao villagers from north western China's Shaanxi province, the lived experiences of these deprived rural-origin individuals often inclined them to

see themselves as being “imprisoned” in a “bad” place. They tend to believe that the sources for change lie outside their own social and economic space, which is perceived as being controlled by external agents over which they have no direct control or influence.

As a result of such recognition, Liu (1997) emphasises that these rural environments which are ‘socioeconomically disfavored locations’ (ibid. 105) compelled villagers to explore outward through different strategies, one of which is educational mobility. These rural-origin academics’ fervent beliefs in the symbolic power of upward institutional movements has also been reinforced by unequal resources allocation and symbolic statuses that different tiered HEIs enjoy. According to Yang and Xie (2015), in an attempt to establish ‘a world-class higher education system’, China has concentrated resources to encourage its top-tier institutions to compete globally. Notably, China has implemented initiatives such as the 211 and 985 projects, which strategically provide much more substantial resources to a selected group of HEIs. This was followed in 2009 when nine top institutions banded together as the ‘C9 League’, modelled after the US’s Ivy League institutions. Together, these 9 HEIs ‘accounted for 3% of China’s researchers, received 10% of the nation’s research expenditure, and produced 20% of academic publications and 30% of total citations between 2001 and 2010’ (ibid. 67).

Students and graduates of these top-tiered institutions not only have much more resources to develop academically and socially, but also enjoy much higher recognition in the employment market (Liu 2014). As Cang articulated below, against the background of degree inflation, therefore, for these rural-origin scholars, acquiring higher academic qualifications from such more prestigious institutions became a critical means to cultivate the coveted symbolic capital that can open ‘new doors’ in the urban labour market. To this end, being resource-deprived otherwise, these rural-origin scholars resorted to drawing on their self-made and already possessed ‘capitals’:

Pursuing postgraduate studies can give us a higher qualification and at least more options...I have read too much of this. Poor students end up getting a very ordinary job, such as selling clothes. This is very common, and it is related to the degree devaluation phenomenon. They may have been such outstanding youth, but because of degree inflation, in the job market their university degree is worth nothing. They can only break the class confines through pursuing further studies, where they can rely more on their *dispositions, diligence, and self-discipline*. These are advantages that people from the bottom-strata families can make good use of. (My emphasis)

Many of these scholars found out that embodied and self-generated resources such as ‘dispositions, diligence and self-discipline’ as shaped by their rural upbringing, proved to be favoured and valued in postgraduate studies. Their rural habitus thus became a source of incredible strengths and resources to fulfil their upward mobility dreams. This finding echoes Cheng’s (2016, 2018) observation that his rural students (in elite institutions) had developed a ‘unique cultural orientation’ towards academic work by drawing on a host of rural-based strengths. It also demonstrates how rural-origin scholars continued to capitalise on their rural dispositions and academic skillsets acquired during undergraduate days to furnish their postgraduate academic endeavours, thus redressing extant literature’s lack of attention to the post-first-degree developments of rural students (Li 2013; Liao 2016; Xie 2016).

In addition to the symbolic value of postgraduate qualifications from more prestigious institutions, these rural-origin academics also developed extensive and useful social networks, unlike their Western counterparts who continue to experience isolation even as they become established faculty members (Lee 2017; Waterfield et al. 2019). Almost all participants narrated how their Master’s and PhD supervisors became their academic role models and key agents in facilitating their development of academic capabilities, perspectives and connections. Tian recounted how her Master’s supervisor devised a host of opportunities for her to cultivate connections with international scholars, facilitated her research activities, and continued to provide assistance even after she moved to another institution for her PhD studies.

Even after I came to study in X university, my Master’s supervisor...still gives me a lot of help. This is hard to come by. He is very kind to every single student...He never thinks you are not good enough, believing that his students are all the most outstanding. Once, I felt that my English was not good, but he did not think so. He believed that anybody can improve, and he provided all kinds of opportunities for us to receive foreign academic visitors, so we could act as translators and improve our English. He even paid for these activities. At that time, I wanted to collect data in Hangzhou city. He said, ‘fine, you can go’. Without his encouragement, I would not have been able to come to X university.

This supervisor’s belief in Tian not only boosted her academic confidence, but also compelled her to strive higher for entering an even more prestigious institution outside mainland China for PhD studies. Such recognition and sense of acceptance by the Master’s supervisor was also keenly felt by Cang, who confessed that her Master’s stage was a critical juncture that allowed her to feel ‘no longer ashamed’ of her rural origin:

At Master’s level, the differences between myself and my peers became smaller, because most of the well-off peers during undergraduate studies had gone abroad. Therefore, those who had stayed for Master’s studies were mostly from similar backgrounds as me. Even

those urbanites were from lower-income families. There were not many rich students in my class.

This aspect of graduate schools in China contrasts with what has been captured in Western literature, where marginalised individuals such as working-class and racialised graduate students often find fewer and fewer people of similar backgrounds as they progress through their postgraduate studies (Bhopal 2019; Brook & Michell 2012; Lee 2017; Waterfield et al. 2019). The differentiated higher education mobility scene in China where more affluent urbanites can afford to go abroad while the more deprived ones remain (Xu & Montgomery 2019), although unequal, curiously created such conducive spaces for these rural-origin academics to develop a sense of belonging. For Cang, her sense of ease with her humble backgrounds was further helped by her supervisor's accepting, almost self-critical and reflexive attitudes towards students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Although my supervisor was from a family of intellectuals and had never had any experiences living a rural life, he could understand our situation quite well...he was very good at putting himself in our shoes, a very kind person.

Other than substantial help from supervisors at Master's and PhD levels, some participants also felt thankful to their super-ordinates for recognising their talent, rewarding their hard work, and propelling their career. Jingpi (1960s), for instance, was extremely grateful to his Dean, who set an exemplary model of professionalism, as opposed to corruption, and became a main endorser of his work.

During 2000 and 2007, a period when I was promoted 3 or 4 times, it was also a time when social atmosphere was pretty bad. However, our Dean at the time did not accept a cigarette or a glass of wine from me. Yet he still gave me a great platform to develop my work. He was truly professional and had a noble mind. He was a great mentor and patron.

Jiao (1970s), Xun and Ku (both 1980s) similarly spoke highly of their previous Deans who gave them work and/or study opportunities and helped them develop academic networks. The roles of these Master's and PhD supervisors, as well as workplace super-ordinates who recognised, endorsed and promoted these rural-origin academics' work evoke what Miller (2016, 210) depicts in the British academia. He suggests that for racial minority academics, it is important to have 'white sanctions'. Such sanctions take place

where the skills and capabilities of a [racial minority] individual are, first, acknowledged and, second, endorsed/promoted by a white individual, who is positioned as a broker and/or mediator acting on behalf of or in the interests of the [minority] individual.

For these rural-origin scholars, their supervisors and workplace super-ordinates seemed to serve as such ‘brokers’ or ‘mediators’ who acknowledged, endorsed and promoted their work. Generally, these rural-origin academics developed their substantial social capitals by drawing on their own academic success, a form of ‘start-up’ capital (Ong 1999, 95), which enabled them to achieve upward institutional mobility in the first place. Concomitantly, they impressed their supervisors and workplace super-ordinates with their motivation, capability and stoicism (as orchestrated by their rural-shaped habitus), so much so that these significant individuals were happy to vouch for them and support their work. They also cultivated broader social connections through their supervisors’ and super-ordinates’ connections.

Importantly these rural-origin academics took great pride in such *self-made, honest* social capital, which was hard-earned, and was clearly different from nepotism. Zhen, for instance, was indignant about nepotist practices when looking for his first academic job.

There were seven or eight candidates. Some Deans came to the interview room to tell the interview panel that a special favour should be given to certain candidates, in front of everybody. I was so angry. (Did your supervisor not do the same for you?) He asked me if he needed to talk to the interview panel, but I said, ‘absolutely not. If you do, I will not join the interview’. I believe I could pass the interview without any help. I really hate those who abuse their power by getting favour from the interview panel, so why should I become one of them?

Stemmed from their own experiences of inequalities and injustice, these rural-origin academics appreciated meritocratic excellence and detested nepotist practices. This inclination draws a curious parallel to the East Asian academics in Kim and Ng’s (2019) study who conformed to the British academia by accentuating their ‘crafted skills’ and meritocratic excellence in research. It also reminded us of Skeggs’ (1997) aforementioned observation that some working-class academics decided to say no to certain opportunities, due to their unwillingness to engage with those people who were in positions of power to gatekeep social and cultural resources.

Cross-border Mobilities, Cultural and Symbolic Capitals

Institutional mobilities not only took place within China, but also beyond the boundaries of mainland China for some of these rural-origin academics. Among these 26 participants, three received their Master’s degrees from overseas (Jiao’s from Belgium and the UK, Tan’s from the UK and Qin’s from Singapore) and 13 received their PhDs from HEIs outside mainland China, including Hong Kong, the UK, North America, Belgium, Finland, and New Zealand (see Table 1). While most then secured academic employment in mainland China, three have

worked in or are now working in the US, the UK, Australia and Hong Kong. Their education and academic career mobilities, however, were often driven initially by a lack of opportunities in mainland China.

Several participants revealed failed attempts to pursue postgraduate studies in China prior to such moves. For instance, Jiao confided that he sat the National Postgraduate Entrance Exam twice but could not pass it. However, when he applied for a Master's programme in the UK, he not only got an offer but also a scholarship. This had boosted his confidence and provided him with the financial means to study overseas. A similar story was shared by Qin (1970s, female), who encountered an opportunity to study in Singapore with a full scholarship:

I had to pass an exam and the Singaporean university then selected candidates from across China. Since it was the Singaporean authorities that made the selection decision, instead of the Chinese authorities, I felt that it was perhaps fairer.

After Qin got her Master's degree from Singapore, she returned to work in China. However, when she attempted to apply for doctoral studies, she again encountered great difficulties. This time it was because suitable supervisors could not accept her due to too many other interested candidates. Qin reflected, 'I did not stand any chance because other candidates had been queuing for a longer time and you need *guanxi* [i.e. social connections] to get this sort of things. I did not have any'. In the end, Qin applied to an HEI in Hong Kong and got a full scholarship. In the highly competitive academia in China, scarce academic resources, such as postgraduate studies opportunities and scholarships, have been unevenly distributed (Yan 2017). While some of these rural-origin academics like Jiao and Qin could not compete due to their poverty in economic and social senses, their strategy to pursue postgraduate studies overseas had appeared effective. In their cross-border moves, their academic capital was recognised, not only through the offer of positions to study, but also through scholarship money (i.e. economic gain). Their academic qualifications from overseas universities were subsequently shown to be valuable in their respective academic careers, as evidenced by the fact that all these thirteen participants are now employed in top-tiered institutions in China or outside China. In Su's (1970s, female) case, her overseas study and work experience helped to secure her a decent pay package:

When I decided to come back to China, thanks to my work experiences overseas (postdoctoral work in Europe) and my achievements (PhD in Europe), I was selected for a Talent Scheme, which provided really good salary packages...not only did I get really handsome salaries, I was also given an Associate Professorship.

However, this also depended on the timing of their return. While Su returned to China in the early 2010s and obtained such good conditions, she acknowledged that things have changed a

lot over the past few years. Hence, for scholars who recently finished their PhDs and returned to China, their situation was worse off, such as the cases of Lian, Ku and Zhen. This could be explained through the phenomenon of Western-degree inflation as articulated by Tu and Nehring (2019) which rapidly reduces newer-returnees to much less desirable payment packages and work conditions. However, this study seems to differ from Leung's (2013, 320) finding about mobile Chinese scholars' experiences in Germany, where she notes that her participants were most concerned about losing the social contacts in China. None of the 13 participants who had acquired overseas postgraduate degrees had any difficulty looking for an academic job, either in China or overseas, which contrasts with the precarious employment trajectories that many of Wang's (2019) returnee Chinese academics had. This could be to do with their strong social capital developed at postgraduate levels. In fact, as evidenced through the account of Tian, her Master's supervisor still offers help to her to this day (i.e. after she has started her first academic job).

Intriguingly, when these participants moved across borders, their rurality was no longer a deficit. Instead, they started to experience and express a sense of pride, as Jiao confided:

Before I went to study in the UK, I had felt that coming from a rural background made me feel inferior (*zibei*). I would not volunteer the information that I was from the countryside. After I went to the UK, I gradually began to realise that my rural background turned out to be an advantage. My rural experience casted me in a positive light: they thought of me as special, i.e. my ways of thinking, stories, or sharing were different from other Chinese students, who were stereotypically thought of as from privileged and affluent backgrounds.

In a transnational milieu, Jiao realised that his rural background disrupted the stereotypical impressions that British people held of spoiled, privileged Chinese students. His rural identity accorded him a sense of distinction, by way of people's respect for his upward social mobility, and distinctive ways of thinking and behaving. His rurality was thus converted into cultural capital. Echoing Jiao, other participants variously discussed how they strategically revealed their rural backgrounds in their respective HEIs outside mainland China and were often received positively for their achievements and invoked curiosity about their experiences, serving as a form of cultural capital.

Overall, the cross-border mobilities of these 13 rural academics have not only allowed them to shun the fierce competition in Chinese academia, but also accorded them economic capital (e.g. scholarship money), cultural recognition and boosted their self-confidence, achieving a sense of transformation. The symbolic value of their overseas degrees was also effectively converted into recognised excellence through their sophisticated research skills, understanding of

international academic practices and desirable publication records. These all became important in enhancing their competitive edge in the academic labour market, whether in China or abroad.

Discussion and Conclusion

This article was set out to redress the gap in existing literature on ‘non-traditional’, marginalised appointees to academia, which is mostly western-based and where inequalities are predominantly analysed through the lenses of class, gender and race/ethnicity. It highlights our lack of understanding about how inequalities operate within academia in non-Western contexts. To this end, this article draws on the case of Chinese academics of rural and impoverished backgrounds to demonstrate how the striking rural-urban disparity and persistent unequal distribution of power and resources in social fields like higher education in China had shaped these disadvantaged appointees’ academic trajectories.

Theoretically, building on existing scholarship’s fruitful engagement with Bourdieusian notions of habitus and capital, this article employs habitus to depict how experiences of growing up in impoverished rural environments, which are ‘disfavored locations’ in China (Liu 1997, 105), has inclined these rural-origin academics to dispositions of hard work, discipline, and perseverance, attributes that were essential to the success of their graduate studies and scholarly work. Such habitus was also characterised by an acute sense of understanding about the unequal and differentiated access to resources and sociocultural advantages across different locations and institutions of China. This had further motivated a strong desire and determination to get out and move up through scholarly ascensions.

As such, this article underlines how the rural-urban divide in China has pre-disposed a perpetually precarious economic position for these rural-origin academics, and how this had instilled in them a desperate desire to not only uplift themselves, but also support their rural-based families out of poverty. Otherwise capital-deprived, these rural-origin scholars drew on their self-generated and accumulated academic capital, diligence and stoicism (habitus) to achieve institutional mobilities in tandem with geographic mobilities (including inter-city/provincial and cross-border mobilities). Such education mobilities further enabled them to acquire and convert economic, social, cultural and symbolic capital, which became pivotal in improving their positions in the academic labour market.

These findings underpin three unique contributions. First, this research brings forth the rural-urban divide as an important and new analytical lens (in addition to class, race/ethnicity and gender) to consider ‘non-traditional’ and marginalised appointees of academia. This lens advances our understanding on how social inequalities are (re)produced in Chinese academia

through highlighting the pivotal roles and complex inter-relations of education mobilities and capitals. Second, empirically, this research is among the first to investigate rural-origin individuals who could not make it into elite institutions for undergraduate studies and to trace their life and career trajectories post first-degree, thus redressing two major gaps in extant literature on rural students (Cheng 2016, 2018; Li 2013; Liao 2016; Xie, 2016). Third, conceptually, this research contributes new understanding 1) on the roles that different forms of capitals play in the life and career trajectories of these rural-origin academics and 2) on how different types of mobilities impact on their acquisition, accumulation and conversion of capitals, building on Leung (2013).

More specifically, literature in the West posits that marginalised academic appointees are notably disadvantaged due to their working-class (as opposed to middle-class) habitus and lack of social and cultural capital; however, these appointees usually show clearly improved economic status. In comparison, data in this study suggests that these rural-origin academics have relied heavily on the institutional social capital they cultivated through upward institutional mobility. This helped them make up for their initial lack of familial social capital and played critical roles in aiding their academic ascensions. Regarding cultural capital, these rural-origin academics' accounts demonstrated an initial lack of urbanised cultural understanding and bodily demeanour at the undergraduate stage, which echoes extant literature (e.g. Li 2013); however, they became very much urbanised during postgraduate studies, which had substantially reduced their cultural capital differences from their urban peers. More importantly, as they had chosen to enter academia, it appeared the cultural capital that was most valued was their scholarly capability in the academic field, which they continued to draw on and develop further from their already abundant academic capital accumulated from undergraduate stages (Liao 2016; Xie 2016). Such experiences seemed clearly different from their western counterparts who continue to suffer from a lack of middle-class embodied cultural capital, such as accents and ways of living (Reay 1997; Waterfield et al. 2019). Moreover, for those rural-origin academics who ventured outside mainland China, their acquired English language proficiency and ability to publish in English-language journals afforded them sought-after embodied cultural capital which placed them favourably in the hierarchy of the Chinese academia. The global HE hierarchy (Marginson 2008) has added an extra layer of symbolic capital to the institutionalised cultural capital of these scholars who owned foreign Master's and PhD degrees. In contrast, their Western counterparts are instead found to concentrate in newer, less prestigious institutions or graduate programmes (Brook and Mitchell 2012; Lee

2017; Reay 1997; Waterfield et al. 2019) which are not able to afford them similar levels of symbolic capital.

Intriguingly, despite these rural-origin academics' successful and somewhat rapid accumulation of institutional social capital and embodied cultural capital, their lack of economic capital persisted, which was a perpetuation from their earlier and undergraduate stages (Cheng 2016, 2018; Li 2013). This contrasts sharply with their Western counterparts who often achieve considerable improvement in their economic standing once they become faculty members (Lee 2017; Reay 1997; Waterfield et al. 2019). Such persistent economic poverty could be argued to be a unique consequence of the rural-urban divides in China. The rural-urban disparity and highly uneven resource-allocation systems in China, coupled with the country's urban-centred nature of higher education organisation, implies that it takes concerted familial efforts and cultivation of capitals (especially economic capital), rather than deficits, to survive the economic and material demands of urban life as academics (Bourdieu 1988; Cao 1999; Yan 2017). Admittedly, as they became securely employed faculty members, their economic standing had improved. However, to survive this urban 'jungle' against the broader background where remuneration for academics lag behind other professions (Gao et al. 2015; Li et al. 2015; Zhang et al. 2014), these rural-origin academics were often in a 'deficit' position wherein they not only had to pay for their own property acquisition (instead of inheriting from their parents), but also contributing financially to their rural-based, impoverished families. Rural-urban divides have subjected these rural-origin academics to a demand of exponentially higher financial outputs, when compared with their urban-peers of comparable academic calibre and research standing. This finding echoes Bourdieu's (1986, 252) initial conceptualisation, which is made even more relevant in relation to the inequalities that China's rural-urban disparity exacerbates:

economic capital is at the root of all the other types of capital and that these transformed, disguised forms of economic capital...produce their most specific effects only to the extent that they conceal...that fact that economic capital is...at the root of their effects.

The roles of educational mobilities: institutional and geographic

In the uneven and hierarchical spatial relations among rural and urban citizens in China, these rural-origin scholars have moved from being relatively 'imprisoned by their immobility' (Liu 1997,109) to becoming much more in charge of their own mobilities. This was achieved through a hard-earned, step by step process to achieve education mobilities in varied forms: rural to urban, lower-tier institutions to higher-tier institutions, relatively immobile to highly mobile.

These different forms of mobilities have diverse impacts on the rural-origin academics' accumulation of capitals. For the 13 scholars who achieved cross-border mobilities, they accumulated institutionalised and embodied cultural capital which concomitantly accorded them considerable symbolic capital in the academic labour market. In contrast, their inter-city/inter-provincial mobilities, which took place mainly at the undergraduate and Master's levels for all participants, served two functions. First, such internal mobilities allowed them to achieve rural-to-urban migration, leaving their rural habitats, beginning to get urbanised and tap in the better educational resources afforded by the urban-inclined policies. Second, since most participants clustered in non-elite universities for undergraduate studies, their upward institutional mobilities at postgraduate levels allowed them to acquire institutionalised cultural capital, which became recognised / misrecognised as of legitimate value in the competitive graduate labour markets. Such upward institutional mobilities also enabled many participants to establish institution-based social networks that became instrumental in bolstering their self-confidence (e.g. Cang) and facilitating their subsequent academic pursuits and job searches (e.g. Tian and Zhen).

While I distinguish the different impacts of internal (i.e. inter-city/provincial) versus cross-border/transnational mobilities, there are notable common impacts too. For instance, in both cases, these rural-origin academics enlarged their social networks, cultivated their confidence and achieved various degrees of self-transformation. For many participants, their different forms of internal or international mobilities 'are interlinked as constituted and constitutive assemblages (Xiang 2015, 1).

This nuanced understanding of the roles of mobilities and their impacts on and inter-links with capital accumulation for the rural-origin academics thus speaks and adds to Leung's (2013) conceptualisation of geographic mobility as a form of capital. Geographic mobility in this case could be extended to include not only transnational mobilities (i.e. Leung's case study), but also internal (inter-city/provincial) and institutional mobilities, made necessary by the rural-urban divide in China (Xu & Montgomery 2019). Additionally, while Leung has fruitfully pointed out how geographic mobility can be converted into social, cultural and economic capital, it is important to recognise that economic capital is at the root of all other forms of capital (Bourdieu 1986), which rings particularly true for these rural-origin academics whose economic poverty perpetuated throughout their entire academic journeys.

Policy implications

Drawing on major findings of this study, I argue that there are three aspects of implications for policymakers in China. First, as institutional mobilities from undergraduate to postgraduate stages are critical for rural-origin students to achieve upward social mobility and reach academic ascensions, it is advisable for both national and local governments to allocate resources for better supporting rural-origin students' applications for postgraduate degrees, especially in elite institutions. Such resources could take material forms, such as monetary support for exam preparation and attendance (e.g. joining oral exams and interviews); these resources could also manifest in inter-personal forms, including the setting up of a mentoring system in these students' home and target HEIs—within this system, potential supervisors and current postgraduate students can provide academic guidance and support to help these rural-origin students navigate the pivotal step of getting accepted into higher-tiered HEIs' postgraduate programmes. Meanwhile, during postgraduate admission processes, elite HEIs could devise positive discrimination policies towards rural-origin students (especially those from lower-tiered undergraduate institutions) to increase their likelihood of accessing prestigious postgraduate programmes.

Secondly, considering the noted nepotist practices during academic hiring and these rural-origin scholars' detestation of such practices both from the accounts of participants in this study and in the literature (Yan 2017), it might be worth considering the instituting of mechanisms against nepotism during such academic hiring processes. One way is to publicise clear recruitment criteria and establish an independent channel for complaints of and investigations into malpractices during academic hiring.

Thirdly, given that urban areas' high property prices have placed an exponential economic burden on the shoulders of rural-origin scholars from impoverished backgrounds, it might be worthwhile for national and local governments, as well as HEIs to provide means-tested staff housing to early career rural-origin academics. Moreover, considering these rural-origin academics' need to assist their largely rural-based families, zero-interest loans could be made available to help them deal with contingent economic demands.

These three suggestions are not meant to be exhaustive, but instead, intended as an indication of how more rural-friendly policies could be facilitated to ensure greater equity and social justice for rural-origin individuals from impoverished backgrounds. This can be relevant to non-Western contexts where rural-urban disparity looms large, such as countries in Africa and South America (Kapfudzaruwa, Kudo, Mfunne, Hansen, & Nyerere 2018; Tacoli 1998).

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