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The Neo-conservative Habitus and the Higher Education Choices

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Abstract: Illuminated by Bourdieu's writing on neoliberalism as a new type of conservative ideology, this paper explains how neoliberal domination in contemporary China's society is often realised through reviving the older conservative forces, such as groupthinking, gender stereotypes, pedagogic and familial authoritarianism. The paper illustrates this social phenomenon with the higher education choice-making of seven Chinese students. The findings are represented in three themes: the groupthought higher education choice; the familial authoritarian higher education choice; and the gendered higher education choice. In conclusion, the paper proposes that contemporary China's society is in neo-conservative construction and a neo-conservative habitus functions as a new mechanism that neoliberalism dominates Chinese people.

Keywords: neoliberalism, groupthinking, gender stereotypes, higher education choice, pedagogic and familial authoritarianism, a neo-conservative habitus

1. Introduction

Since the 1978 transition to a market economy, China's society is drawn increasingly into neoliberal governance. Illuminated by Bourdieu's idea that neoliberalism is a new type of conservative ideology ^[5], I explained how neoliberal domination in contemporary China's society is often realised through reviving the older conservative forces including groupthinking, gender stereotypes, pedagogic and familial authoritarianism. I illustrated these social phenomena with the higher education choice-making of my research participants. Within Chinese school education system, young people and their families experience twice higher education choice-making. One is to choose taking either

the science track or the arts track. The other is to choose discipline and degree subjects when applying for entering university.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study is informed by two theoretical frameworks. One is the writings of neoliberalism by Bourdieu ^[5] and Harvey ^[20]. Bourdieu ^[14] writes that neoliberalism is "an ideological offensive, a mode of domination that seeks to create uncertainty, anxiety and fear on the side of labour to guarantee its compliance" (p.214). Resonating Bourdieu's idea, Harvey ^[20] writes that capital accumulation in neoliberal regimes is realised through dispossessing the security of employment. Both arguments have strong echoes in China's higher



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education reforms.

In China, the transition to a market-led higher education was completed through two stages of reforms. The first stage reforms (1980s - early 1990s) introduced the tuition fees and assigned the universities' priority as serving the economy. Within the discourse of knowledge economy, disciplinary knowledge is measured by its application to make economic profits. The second stage reforms (late 1990s – 2010) introduced a new funding system which allocates the funding according to the enrolment size of a university. This results in the rapid expansion of enrollments across the universities and dramatic increase in tuition fees. A graduate labour market has been set up, which transfers the government's responsibility for graduate job assignment to the individual 'choice' ^{[28] [35] [44]}. The over-supply of the graduate to the labour market led to the inflation of higher education credentials. Higher education has been taken for granted as a precarious investment with high costs and uncertain returns.

The other theoretical framework which informs this study is Bourdieu's theory of habitus ^{[9] [10]}. Bourdieu ^[9] writes that social domination is realised through structuring internally as a habitus. Habitus, as "the system of dispositions" (p.52), generates the thoughts, feelings, speeches, and actions which are homogeneous to the dominant social structures. Habitus^[10] is predisposed to "consecrate" (p. 242) the dominant social structure, perceiving it as "a sign of importance" (p. 242). As such, habitus reproduces social domination by transfiguring the power relation into a sense relation. Neoliberal domination in China's society is reproduced

in a final sense through internalising as the habituses, one of which this study found is a neo-conservative habitus.

3. Ethical Consideration

The study was approved by the City University (pseudonym) human interviewees ethics committee on 04-06-2015 for three years. The recruitment of the interviewees was conducted through an email request in November of 2015. The request was sent by the University Graduate Centre to all international Chinese doctoral students who were undertaking the PhD study at the University. Seven potential participants expressed interest in taking part in the study. The Interviewee Information Sheet and the Consent Form in both Chinese and English language were sent to the potential participants via the emails. Specific times and venues were arranged according to the preferences of the participants for expressing any concerns and requests for additional information, and for signing the Consent Forms.

4. The Participants, Data Collection and Trustworthiness

Seven participants were from four disciplines, aging from 20s to 30s. All participants completed their former formal education in China. Six of them were the recipients of the China Doctoral Research Scholarships (CDRS) and one was the recipient of the New Zealand China Doctoral Research Scholarships (NZCDRS). The participants' profile was referred to **Table 1**.

Table 1. The Profile of the Participants ($n = 7$)

Pseudonym	Gender	Age & Marital Status	Discipline	Length of PhD Study in the first interview	Enrolment Status	Pre-enrolment Status
Zhao	Male	20s Single	Biometrics	30 months (final-stage)	Recipient of CDRS	Graduate with master's degree
Hong	Female	30s Married	Linguistics	24 months (middle-stage)	Recipient of CDRS	University lecturer
Ying	Female	30s Married	Education	42 months (final-stage)	Recipient of CDRS	Senior high school teacher
Mei	Female	30s Single	Education	23 months (middle-stage)	Recipient of NZCDRS	University lecturer
Juan	Female	20s Single	Literature	52 months (final-stage)	Recipient of CDRS	Graduate with master's degree
Ming	Male	20s Single	Pharmacology	36 months (middle-stage)	Recipient of CDRS	Graduate with master's degree
Feng	Male	30s Married	Education	38 months (final-stage)	Recipient of CDRS	University lecturer

CDRS: China Doctoral Research Scholarships

NZCDRS: New Zealand China Doctoral Research Scholarships

UADS: University of Auckland Doctoral Scholarships

The data were collected through a semi-structured in-depth interview with each participant separately. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes using a narrative approach. All interviews were audio-taped and transcribed. Then, the transcripts were provided to the participants for assessing the accuracy and for raising any concerns and/or clarification before the data analysis. The interviews were conducted in either Mandarin or English according to each participant's preference. The researcher translated the Chinese quotations into English. When translating the quotations, the researcher tried to keep their original Chinese flavour while expressing their meanings in English as precisely as possible. The conversational language was used in the translations.

5. Data Analysis

Thematic content analysis is used to elicit and categorise the data. The selection of quotations is based on how they exemplify the intended theme^[38]. The analysis focuses on exploring the participants' "most personal difficulties, ...most subjective tensions and contradictions" in their narratives, which "frequently articulate the deepest structures of the social world and their contradictions"^[6] (p. 511). Their educational trajectory was understood as a "unique manner of travelling through social space, where the dispositions of the habitus are expressed"^[8] (p. 258). Situated within the neoliberal education in contemporary China, the educational trajectory of my interviewees reflects a "collective history"^[33] (p. 129) of Chinese young people "engaged in the same field"^[11] (p. 304). The analysis of their educational trajectory was intended to "elucidate the invisible weightiness" of neoliberal structures against which they "lived and narrated"^[2] (p. 4). The findings were represented in three themes: the groupthought higher education choice; the familial authoritarian higher education choice; and the gendered higher education choice.

6. Findings and Discussion

6.1. The Groupthought Higher Education Choice

"Groupthinking" is a way of thinking "laid down and aggregated through time", therefore considered "superior to that of the few"^[30] (p. 27) and hence taken for granted as the principle of practice. One of the interviewees, Zhao, talked about the choice-making of

civil engineering.

Researcher: *What discipline did you apply for?*

Zhao: *I applied for civil engineering.*

Researcher: *Are you interested in it?*

Zhao: *Not at all.*

Researcher: *Then why did you apply to study in this discipline?*

Zhao: *If I study civil engineering it is easy to find a job after graduation. There were civil construction sites everywhere in China. I often heard of those working on construction sites made a big fortune.*

Zhao was from a working-class family, where his parents are the migrant workers. Zhao's disciplinary choice was made on the perception of choosing "the most marketable"^[32] (p. 521) subject. However, this choice was not made upon the rational calculation but the thinking of the people around him. When neoliberalism is reinforced by the groupthinking, its oppression is doubled. Zhao suppressed his intrinsic interest in history and took the science track as Zhao said, *'I am interested in history, but I took the science track. My academic performance in physics was very poor. I never passed the exams.'* Zhao's poor performance in physics failed him in studying civil engineering. Zhao said, *'I felt very depressed knowing that I failed to get into the applied university to study civil engineering'.*

Another interviewee, Feng, was from a low-income rural family. His subject choice was also the groupthinking of the people around him. Feng said,

I often heard those who study in the arts work comfortably in offices and those study in the sciences work hard on construction sites after graduation. I was raised in the countryside, seeing my parents labouring all day in fields. I did not want to make a living as they did. So, I chose the arts track.

Feng took for granted that going to university is to secure a comfortable life after graduation. However, his choice of arts was not made upon the rational calculation but the thinking of his group.

6.2. The Familial Authoritarian Higher Education Choice

The Chinese familial authoritarianism originates from Confucian filial piety, a series of "culturally defined intergenerational authority relationships", including

authoritarian submission, authoritarian aggression, and conventionalism^[22] (p. 349). This familial authority can be extended or shifted from parents to grandparents, relatives, and the elder sons or daughters of a family.

Familial authority is often used by Chinese parents to control their child's higher education choice-making. Ming, one of the interviewees, is the only child in the family due to the 'one-child' policy adopted in urban China between 1980 and 2015. His family is a typical patriarchal middle-class one, where his father has the absolute familial authority. Ming said, *'I applied to study medicine. My father wanted me to be a doctor'*. Ming's 'choice' of medicine was a total submission to his father's will. This 'choice' suppressed Ming's intrinsic interest in mechanics and led to the lasting depression. Ming said, *'I felt bored with those medical terminologies. I am not really interested in medicine'*. Although the middle-class families can mobilise all forms of capital to reach a choice which benefits them most, their higher education choice-making is not "smooth nor unproblematic", but as "conflictual and painful"^[39] (p. 145) as that of working-class families. Across classes, the higher education choice of Chinese families is not a choice of freedom and intrinsic interest, but a 'choice' locked by economic and social chains.

Another interviewee, Ying, talked about her choice-making, *'My mum wanted me to take the science track because she wanted me to enter the university where she was working. It is a university of science and technology. My mum wanted me to lecture at her university after graduation'*. Ying's family is a matriarchal middle-class family where her mother possesses absolute authority over Ying's higher education choice-making. Neoliberalism dominates Chinese young people and their families through generating a sense of precarious job opportunity. Dominated by this sense, Ying's mother controlled her university and disciplinary 'choice', which is supposed to be as secured as possible of a stable and prestigious job.

The working-class parents often shift their familial authority over their child's higher education choice-making to a relative or an elder child who has already succeeded in entering university. Feng's elder sister studied English language at college and became an English teacher in a senior high school in his hometown

after graduation. Naturally, the familial authority over his subject choice-making is shifted from his parents to his elder sister.

Feng: *My elder sister studied English in college. After graduation, she began to teach English in the senior high school in my hometown. So, I chose to study English..*

Researcher: *Did you consult the class teacher?*

Feng: *The class teacher was usually unwilling to give any specific advice. He suggested that we make our own choice.*

Governed by the neoliberal rationale of individual choice and self-responsibility, both schools and school-teachers are quick to shift the responsibility for guiding students in higher education choice-making. The complexity of filling in the application form disadvantaged most working-class families, in particular rural working-class families. Young people from these families usually have to fill in the application forms by themselves without the assistance from those 'in the know'. Feng's sole subject 'choice' of English greatly reduced his chance of entering a prestigious university. Feng said, *'I was offered a place by a university which was newly upgraded from a college'*.

6.3. The Gendered Higher Education Choice

Xu^[46] found that there is a significant gender disparity in the distribution of Chinese undergraduate students by subject. Sheng^[40] found that the gender stereotype is salient in degree subject choice-making of Chinese undergraduates and predicted that a "strongly gender differentiated" (p. 235) tendency will continue in Chinese universities over a long period of time. My study found that the gendered subject choice-making is often the result of neoliberal domination which reinforced by the gendered familial/pedagogic authoritarianism.

6.4. The Gendered Familial Authoritarian Choice

The gendered career expectations remain dominant in contemporary China's society. For example, it is far more socially acceptable for females than males to work as language teachers. As a result, language subjects have always been perceived as feminine subjects. Girls have always greatly outnumbered boys in studying languages in Chinese universities^[40].

One of the research participants, Mei, talked about

her subject choice of English,

I was interested in medicine. But my parents suggested to me that I study English. They said studying medicine was too hard for girls. Being a girl, I did not have to study too hard and studying English and becoming an English teacher was more suitable for girls than studying medicine and becoming a doctor.

Mei's subject 'choice' of English was the result of the gendered familial authoritarianism, which suppressed her intrinsic interest in medicine.

Hong was from a rural working-class family where the familial authority over her subject choice-making shifted from her parents to her uncle who had been to university. Hong said, *'My uncle suggested to me that I study English. He said that it is easy for girls studying English to find a job, especially a job teaching English'*. The neoliberal perception of securing a job reinforced by the gendered familial authoritarianism resulted in Hong's taken-for-granted 'choice' to study English.

6.5. The Gendered Pedagogic Authoritarian Higher Education Choice

The Chinese pedagogic authoritarianism sources from the Confucian tradition of the pedagogical relationship – a relationship in which teachers possess absolute 'pedagogic authority' ^[9] over students. Gender stereotypes interact with the pedagogic authoritarianism to reinforce neoliberal domination over Hong's choice of arts track. Hong said,

I was interested in science and performed better in the science subjects at school than I did in arts subjects. But the class teacher told us that for girls it would be easier to find a job if they studied the arts rather than studying the sciences. So, I chose to take the arts track.

Echoing Hong's choice of arts, Ying's decision to take the arts track was strongly influenced by the gendered belief of her class teacher. Ying said, *'When I was in junior high school, the class teacher often reminded us that girls who studied the sciences would lag behind boys in an advanced stage even though girls may perform better in the initial stages'*. The teacher's belief that there was a disparity of academic achievement between girls and boys in studying science subjects led to that Ying gradually distanced herself from science subjects.

7. Scholarly Significance of the Study

This study has drawn on the following arguments. China's marketisation of the higher education is in effect a form of "symbolic inculcation" ^[5] (p. 29) through which neoliberalism realises its domination over Chinese young people. The belief that the purpose of entering university is to secure a job, a stable income, a comfortable life, and individual and familial upward mobility dominates the higher education choice-making across classes. This domination is often realised through reviving the older conservative forces. Over time, a neo-conservative force is formed and internalised as a collective habitus, which I call a neo-conservative habitus. The neo-conservative habitus functions as a new mode of neoliberal domination over contemporary China's society. Numerous studies found the higher education choice-making as a rational process ^[29] ^[41]. My study suggests an alternative process. The functioning of the neo-conservative habitus suggests that the higher education choice-making of Chinese young people and their families is more 'dispositional' than 'rational'. The 'choices' made are the expressions of both class dispositions and market dispositions.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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