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The role of institutional reputation in mediating post-PhD careers. The case of Chinese elite universities

Sangge Qi , Ulpukka Isopahkala-Bouret  and Hanna Nori 

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ABSTRACT

Amid rising doctoral populations and growing diversification in post-PhD careers beyond academia, the disproportionate increase in employment opportunities for doctorate holders has created heightened pressures on doctoral graduates to improve their relative employability. This is particularly pronounced in high-participation higher education systems such as China, where post-graduation competition is complicated by the reputational status of institutions attended. Drawing on interviews with Chinese Social Science and Humanities doctoral graduates associated with distinct institutional affiliations of C9 and non-C9 League universities, this paper explores the mediating role of institutional reputation in graduates' negotiations of labor market positionings. Building on the concept of institutional habitus, the analysis illustrates how institutional reputation is constructed and internalized such that it operates as both a structural and emotional mediator, shaping the ways graduates position themselves within the labor market queue and their strategic responses to positional competition.

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Introduction

The global expansion of doctoral education has intensified scholarly interest in post-PhD employment, particularly the growing diversification of doctoral career destinations beyond academia (McAlpine 2016; Sarrico 2022). While doctoral graduates are highly encouraged to pursue non-academic paths, they often face an increasingly congested labor market characterized by credential inflation and intense positional competition, where graduate employability 'not only depend[s] on fulfilling the requirements of a specific job, but also on how one stands relative to others within a hierarchy of job seekers' (Brown, Hesketh, and Williams 2003, 10). In such settings, doctoral graduates are ranked based on both individual and institutional competitiveness in comparison to others (Isopahkala-Bouret and Tholen 2023).

This phenomenon is particularly pronounced in leading degree-producing countries such as China (Mok 2016), where state-led higher education (HE) expansion has created

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a hierarchical structure that stratifies higher education institutions (HEIs) into different tiers of reputational status, exerting considerable influence over employment outcomes (Li et al. 2012). As such, positional competition in China exposes doctoral graduates to uneven labor market opportunities and constraints (Shen et al. 2018). This compels them to strategically leverage capitals recognized within this competitive framework, including their educational credentials, to create advantages over others (Brown, Hesketh, and Williams 2003; Tholen 2017).

Against this backdrop, a pertinent yet understudied subject concerns how doctoral graduates navigate the competitive terrain, acting ‘in ways that lead others to ascribe to them the identity of being a person worthy of being employed’ (Holmes 2013, 549). Based on interviews with Chinese doctoral graduates from Social Science and Humanities (SSH) fields, this paper explores the omission with a particular focus on the mediating role of institutional reputation within this. While most research on institutional reputation and employment prospects concerns undergraduates (e.g. Donnelly and Gamsu 2019; Wakeling and Savage 2015), this paper extends the discussion to the doctoral level. Specifically, we ask how institutional reputation shapes the ways graduates define and re-define – or negotiate – their labor market positionings. Despite the non-vocational nature of SSH disciplines that often entails greater uncertainty outside academia, doctoral graduates in these fields appear relatively underrepresented across literature compared to those in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) or other professional disciplines. Therefore, this paper revolves around SSH graduates to illuminate their experiences of navigating the non-academic job competition.

Drawing on the concept of institutional habitus – broadly defined as the collective dispositions, practices and values embedded within institutions that influence individual dispositions and actions (Reay, David, and Ball 2001) – this paper examines how institutional reputation is constituted and embodied in graduates’ reactions to their relative labor market positionings. The findings illustrate graduates’ perceptions of opportunities and constraints, interpretations of individual competitiveness, and labor market strategies, as differentially structured by their universities’ reputational statuses. Beyond operating at the structural level, we argue that institutional reputation also functions as an emotional anchor embedded within graduates’ self-positionings and strategic responses to unequal labor market standings, reflecting how reputational differences are interpreted, internalized and reproduced. With that, this paper provides fresh insights into how institutional reputation is lived, felt and managed that shape post-PhD careers.

Beyond academia: the evolving career pathways of doctoral graduates

Doctoral graduates have long been valued for their specialized knowledge and research expertise, which are deemed essential for driving innovation in the global knowledge economy. While doctoral education was traditionally synonymous with academic careers, a global trend of rising proportions of doctoral graduates leaving academia has been documented in recent years (McAlpine 2016; Acker and Haque 2017; S. Chen 2021). This is largely attributed to the dearth of tenured positions and increased use of fixed-term and temporary contracts that are observed across countries, institutions and disciplines (Skakni et al. 2019). Besides, the increasing pressures associated with doctoral study – including extensive publishing requirements, grant applications, and teaching responsibilities – disproportionately affect those lacking financial means to withstand prolonged academic

precarity (Nori et al. 2025). Consequently, many turn to private sectors, government services, non-profit organizations and even entrepreneurship upon graduation (Hancock, Hughes, and Walsh 2017). Notably, female doctoral graduates appear more likely to leave academia, citing work-family conflicts, gender-biased evaluations, and limited access to mentorships as factors driving their decisions (Murgia and Poggio 2018).

Despite policy efforts promoting diversification in post-PhD careers beyond academia, graduates' shift into non-academic contexts continues to present challenges and remains inconsistently accessible. Fundamentally, the growing number of doctoral graduates has not been matched by a proportionate increase in high-skilled job opportunities, resulting in a surplus of highly qualified individuals vying for limited expert-level positions (Suomi et al. 2020). Meanwhile, universities continue to structure doctoral programmes largely around academic trajectories (Gu, Levin, and Luo 2018), providing minimal support for non-academic paths. Research reports that numerous doctoral graduates feel underprepared for employment outside academia, mostly due to insufficient career guidance, professional development and networking opportunities during doctoral studies (Hancock 2023). In relation to this, significant variations arise between different fields of study. Benefitting from more practice-oriented training, STEM graduates typically find a wider range of industry positions that closely align with their technical expertise (Hwang 2024). In contrast, SSH doctorate holders usually encounter less straightforward transitions in finding positions that directly utilize their subject specialisms (Hancock 2023).

These obstacles are accompanied by complex psychological turmoil. The rising instability in securing academic employment, coupled with more stringent performance expectations, has led to heightened stress and anxiety about their professional futures that make the prospect of transitioning into new career avenues more daunting (Deem, 2020). On top of this, the dominant institutional culture often views leaving academia as a failure rather than acknowledging it as a legitimate and valuable career choice, thus creating further psychological burden in pursuit of alternative career paths (Kis et al. 2022).

Moreover, the transition to non-academic careers is further perplexed by structural inequalities, particularly those related to social class. Research indicates that doctoral graduates from privileged backgrounds benefit from greater access to professional networks, financial stability and institutional support, all of which enhance career mobility, especially in gaining entry into elite firms (Wakeling and Laurison 2017). Conversely, financial constraints and a lack of relevant capitals may push those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds toward stable, well-compensated employment, foregoing personal preference in making career decisions (Nori, Peura, and Jauhiainen 2020). However, alternative findings also note that the influence of family background weakens at the doctoral level, with academic environment and peer networks gaining more prominence in shaping career trajectories (Breitenbach et al. 2019; Nori, Peura, and Jauhiainen 2020). Essentially, these competing findings highlight the highly varied nature of doctoral career transitions beyond academia.

Institutional habitus and institutional reputation

This paper deploys the concept of institutional habitus (Reay, David, and Ball 2001) to analyze the mediating role of institutional reputation in graduates' negotiations of labor market positionings. The overall construct is grounded in Bourdieu's conceptual triad of field, capital and habitus, which fundamentally concerns how power relations and hierarchical systems perpetuate advantages for privileged groups while constraining others

(Bourdieu and Passeron 1990). In the context of this paper, the non-academic labor market represents the field, where positional competition unfolds and graduates occupy different positions defined by the symbolic value of their capital relative to others. Their credentials – a dominant source of institutionalized cultural capital – carry different values, with certain types being more rewarded than others following the shared logics of institutional hierarchy that act as the field-specific doxa (Brown, Hesketh, and Williams 2003; Isopahkala-Bouret and Tholen 2023).

Defined as a system of dispositions formed through accumulated learning and social encounters, habitus operates as both structured and a structuring structure that shapes individual perceptions, appreciations and actions (Bourdieu 1990). It generates a practical sense of one's place within the hierarchy, reflecting an internalized understanding of field configurations and regularities. Reay (2015) suggested that emotions are integral to habitus, influencing how individuals experience and respond to external environments. Depending on circumstances, habitus enables both transformative and constrained courses of action (Bourdieu 1993).

Derived from Bourdieusian conceptualization of habitus, institutional habitus highlights the role of institutions in shaping individual dispositions and actions. Reay, David, and Ball (2001) applied this concept to examine the contextual effects of institutions on students' HE choices, defining it as the set of predispositions, taken-for-granted expectations, and schemes of perceptions underpinning an institution. Owing to its collective nature evolved over time, institutional habitus demonstrates less fluidity than individual habitus (Reay, David, and Ball 2001). Prior research has operationalized it through three major dimensions: educational status, organizational practices and expressive order (e.g. Reay, David, and Ball 2001; Tarabini, Curran, and Fontdevila 2017). These dimensions reflect distinct but interconnected mechanisms through which institutional influence is exerted to mold individual trajectories.

Educational status typically encompasses an institution's structural characteristics that signal and reproduce its principles and standards, including the composition of student body and types of curriculum offered (Ho, Tse, and Sum 2020; Reay, David, and Ball 2001). These features serve as distinguishing markers that establish and communicate differences between institutions (Reay 2004). Organizational practices concern the everyday routines and decision-making processes through which institutional norms and expectations are enacted, such as resource allocations, admission procedures or assessment methods (Oliver and Kettley 2010). These are not neutral technical practices, but representing the ways institutional actors embed their strategic logics and collective priorities into the fabric of institutional life to systematically shape how individuals and groups experience it (Emirbayer and Johnson 2008; Thornton and Ocasio 2008). Exemplified through rituals, symbols and architectural design (Poromaa 2017), expressive order draws attention to the representational aspects of institutional values and beliefs that are actively comprehended and embodied to cultivate a sense of belonging, identity and alignment (Lizardo 2004). While these dimensions delineate different entry points for understanding institutional influence, they jointly constitute a comprehensive framework for examining institutional environments and the ways in which they are internalized that influence individual perceptions, interpretations and actions. With that, these dimensions provide guiding references on the application of institutional habitus as an analytical framework for understanding how institutional dynamics shape graduates' perceptions of and reactions to the labor market hierarchy. Their theoretical definitions are summarized in Table 1, which also succinctly indicates how these dimensions can be measured in analyzing institutional effects.

Table 1. Dimensions of institutional habitus.

Dimension	Definition
Educational status	Institutional elements that reflect institutional stratification and distinction (Reay 2004)
Organizational practices	Structured mechanisms through which institutions operationalize their collective dispositions to shape individual and collective capacities for action, perception and interpretation (Emirbayer and Johnson 2008; Thornton and Ocasio 2008)
Expressive order	Symbolic system through which institutional structures and individual subjectivities intersect, shaping how individuals perceive and respond to institutional contexts (Lizardo 2004)

In this paper, institutional reputation is approached as a concrete manifestation of institutional habitus. Following Weberian theorization (Weber 1978), institutional reputation represents a symbolic status recognition rooted in an order of shared beliefs and values that differentiates institutional standings within HE system. It is established over time and remains relatively stable, carrying an embedded narrative of an institution's success and legitimacy that signify its symbolic capitals accumulated through historical, cultural and academic achievements (Brewer and Zhao 2010). Coined as educational positioning, Isopahkala-Bouret and Tholen (2023) conceived institutional reputation as a key facet of relative employability, wherein graduates are ranked in the labor market not only at the individual level but also at the institutional level. While employers recruit from a range of universities, graduates from more prestigious universities tend to have greater chances through credentialist social closure (Tholen 2017). Beyond affecting material outcomes, Stich (2012) characterized institutional reputation as something deeply felt such that graduates view themselves through the lens of their institutions' reputational status. In other words, institutional reputation fosters shared identities among those who have experienced it, creating distinct emotional states through which graduates interpret their self-worths and opportunities (Ho, Tse, and Sum 2020; Qi 2024).

Building on these insights, this paper employs the three dimensions of institutional habitus to unfold the mediating role of institutional reputation on graduates' negotiations of labor market positionings. The findings illustrate these dimensions' specific manifestations within the context of this study, shedding light on how graduates' perceptions of institutional reputation inform their labor market positionings and guide their subsequent responses to differently delimited spaces of possibles.

Context: the Chinese HE system and stratifications

Since the 1990s, the Chinese government has introduced a series of HE reforms aimed at expanding university enrollment and elevating institutional competitiveness in the global HE marketplace (Mok 2019). National initiatives, including Project 211 in 1995, Project 985 in 1998, and the more recent Double First-Class Construction project in 2017, were implemented to improve a select group of universities' global standings through additional funding and supportive policies (Zhao and You 2021). A highly bifurcated HE system was established through these reforms.

The Double First-Class Construction project marks a new phase in Chinese HE development, incorporating universities from earlier initiatives into a unified classifying framework. Currently, a total number of 147 universities are enlisted in this project, representing approximately 4.88% of all HEIs in China (MoE 2022). These universities are bestowed a designation of 'Double First-Class university', which legitimizes their high-prestige status.

This particularly benefits institutions relying primarily on provincial or municipal funding, and those previously excluded from former initiatives. Inclusion in the Double First-Class project grants these institutions increased access to central government resources, bolstering their capacity to attract more talent and pursue further development.

While sharing the high-prestige status, stratification persists within this group. Universities located in major economic hubs tend to be favored in key urban recruitment policies (Xu and Ma 2023). This points to broader regional-economic imbalances in China, where institutions outside national economic centers are more susceptible to this geographical inequality. A distinct sub-group stands out that transcends this bias. Nine of China's leading universities – including the globally renowned Peking University and Tsinghua University – formed the C9 League in 2009, which is often dubbed as the 'Chinese Ivy League' (Hartley and Jarvis 2022). These universities have received disproportionately large amounts of government funding since the beginning of HE reforms in pursuit of global elite status (Allen 2017). Over the years, funding privileges have enabled them to improve global rankings substantially and set them apart from other Double First-Class universities, placing them on a 'a path towards unassailable long-term preeminence' (Hartley and Jarvis 2022, 1548). With that, C9 League universities are positioned at the apex of Chinese HE hierarchy, enjoying far-reaching recognition across different regions and sectors.

The Chinese HE admissions operate on meritocratic principles, with all universities basing enrollment maximally on academic achievements (Liu 2013). This applies to doctoral admissions as well, where applicants are evaluated through academic records, standardized exams and interview performance. Owing to their long-standing reputations, C9 League universities attract a nationwide pool of students that allows them to remain exclusively selective for high-performing candidates even amid HE expansion (Zhao and Mok 2024). Admission to these universities is widely regarded as a marker of academic distinction that frequently translates into high-profile careers, as evidenced by the disproportionate representation of their alumni across economic, social and political spheres (Ou and Zhao 2022).

Therefore, though the Double First-Class group is broadly recognized as high-status, C9 League universities stand as distinctively elite among them with distinguished achievement, selectiveness and competitiveness. Employers demonstrate a consistent preference for graduates from these institutions, associating their credentials with superior skills and professionalism (Hartog, Sun, and Ding 2010). This preference often leads to recruitment priorities and higher compensation packages for these candidates (Li et al. 2024), allowing the C9 League to reinforce its dominance at the top of HE hierarchy. As such, institutional reputation functions as a rubric determining capital valuation on which university credentials carry greater value and which group of graduates holds an edge in the labor market.

Similar to Western studies that indicate the weakening influence of socioeconomic background on doctoral careers, research in China suggests that academic merit gradually outweighs socioeconomic factors through educational progression and upon reaching the highest educational level, class privilege such as family resources and inherited capitals becomes less pivotal in affecting employment outcomes (Shen et al. 2018; Shen and Horta 2024). Yet, institutional reputation continues to differentiate graduates even at the doctoral

level, with those from less renowned universities facing greater unemployment risks, irrespective of their career choices of academia or enterprise (Shen et al. 2018). Thus, this underlines the persisting significance of institutional reputation as a status criterion in the Chinese labor market.

Method

This study is part of a larger research project exploring Chinese SSH doctoral graduates' early career trajectories beyond academia. The data source comprises semi-structured interviews with 15 doctorate holders who have entered non-academic sectors after graduation. All participants completed their degrees at Double First-Class universities located in first-tier cities, which feature a high concentration of HEIs and wide arrays of job opportunities.

Participants were recruited with the support of career offices and alumni at selected university settings, complemented by open invitations disseminated through institutional platforms and snowballing via referrals from initial participants and professional networks. To minimize variations caused by disciplinary hierarchies, recruitment focused on graduates from comprehensive universities that offer diverse study programmes without marked differentiations in public reputations (Gu, Levin, and Luo 2018).

The sample included nine female and six male graduates aged between 30 and 35 years old, completing full-time research degree programmes in SSH fields within four to five years. While in SSH, a variety of majors was taken such that shared experiences within this unified disciplinary domain were captured. Participants' socioeconomic backgrounds were noted through *hukou* (household registration status), a fundamental social marker in China that denotes their registered place of origin as either rural or urban (L. Chen and Tian 2023). Although *hukou* appears less relevant at HE levels, it shapes early educational opportunities which may affect later outcomes. Urban *hukou* holders normally have easier access to quality primary and secondary schooling that better prepares them for university admissions (Zhang 2018). Importantly, *hukou* shapes classed experiences primarily by structuring access to resources instead of directly determining wage attainment or job placement, meaning it does not fully capture the complexity of class heterogeneity. Rural *hukou* holders also include individuals with HE degrees and professional qualifications, albeit in smaller proportions compared to urban *hukou* holders (Xiao and Bian 2018). Notably, unlike Western conceptualizations of social class that often suggest the possibility of intergenerational mobility achieved through HE, the Chinese *hukou* is a relatively fixed status that remains unchanged even after obtaining HE qualifications, unless formally converted through specific policy channels (Zhang 2018). Therefore, rather than a definitive measure of social class background, *hukou* in this study represents a broad indicator of participants' early structural conditions that signal their differing access to educational resources prior to doctoral study. This approach corresponds to existing research that highlights the waning influence of socioeconomic factors in affecting doctoral careers in China (Shen et al. 2018), thus enabling this paper to concentrate on analyzing institutional effects in exploring Chinese doctoral graduates' navigation of post-graduation trajectories. Table 2 provides participant profiles.

Table 2. Participant profiles.

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Hukou	Institutional group	Major	University location
Hu	35	F	Urban	C9	Sociology	Shanghai
Xin	32	F	Urban	C9	Educational Sciences	Beijing
Ruan	32	M	Urban	C9	Political Science	Beijing
Yang	33	M	Rural	C9	Communication Studies	Shanghai
Cheng	32	F	Urban	C9	English Literature	Beijing
Liu	31	F	Rural	C9	Media and Communication	Hangzhou
Hong	33	M	Urban	C9	Anthropology	Shanghai
Su	33	F	Urban	Non-C9	Linguistics	Shenzhen
Lin	33	M	Urban	Non-C9	Educational Sciences	Shenzhen
Yu	32	M	Urban	Non-C9	Anthropology	Shanghai
Wen	30	F	Urban	Non-C9	Sociology	Shenzhen
Lu	32	F	Urban	Non-C9	Sociology	Shanghai
Zhang	34	M	Urban	Non-C9	Public Management	Shenzhen
An	35	F	Rural	Non-C9	History	Ningbo
Han	32	F	Urban	Non-C9	Social Work	Ningbo

Interviews covered broadly participants' educational trajectories, career planning, and experiences of post-graduation job search. Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 min and was audio-recorded with participants' consent. This paper focuses specifically on discussions concerning the influence of institutional reputation and graduates' preparations for the job competition. Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim manually. To ensure confidentiality, each participant was assigned a pseudonym and personal identifiers have been appropriately anonymized. While all interviews were conducted in Chinese Mandarin, the quotes presented in the findings have been translated into English, with careful consideration of both literal accuracy and contextual meaning.

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke (2006) reflexive thematic analysis procedures, which emphasize researchers' reflection on and engagement with theory, data and interpretations (2020). Analysis began with detailed transcript readings to identify relevant data segments. Preliminary coding (by the first author) focused on participants' perceptions of institutional reputation, their labor market positionings, and how they were preparing for entry into the domestic labor market. Both deductive and inductive approaches were applied, coding for pre-identified dimensions of institutional habitus while also noting other emergent codes. Next, grouping of codes into the actual themes (by all three authors) proceeded through refining, abstracting and re-organizing of the data. Meanwhile, the initial themes were adjusted, expanded and renamed to better reflect the relationships among codes and the overarching thematic patterns that were shared across the interviews (Braun and Clarke 2021). At that point, a clear divide was identified between graduates from C9 and non-C9 League universities, underscoring the significance of institutional reputation in shaping how they perceived and responded to the labor market hierarchy.

The final thematic map captured the differences in perceptions, emotions and practices between the two institutional groups. Aligning with the conceptual framing of the three dimensions of institutional habitus (see Table 1), the thematic map was refined into the following table that encapsulates the nuances through which institutional reputation operates as the mediating mechanism in doctoral graduates' labor market positionings.

Table 3. Institutional reputation as the mediating mechanism in labor market positioning.

Dimension	Manifestation
Educational status	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • History of academic excellence • Quality of educational provision • Academic student composition • Geographical scope of recognizability
Organizational practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Admission selectivity • Academic rigor and curriculum • Extra-credentia activities • Career guidance and support
Expressive order	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Graduate identity • Perceptions of relative competitiveness • Emotional attachments

Findings

This section presents the differences between C9 and non-C9 League doctoral graduates as shaped by the distinct institutional reputations, focusing mainly on graduates' perceptions of institutional reputation, self-positionings in the labor market queue, and their strategic responses to hierarchical standings. Organized into two sub-sections by institutional group, the findings demonstrate how graduates' interpretations of their own universities' reputational status informed the symbolic value assigned to their credentials and the emotional orientations associated with their perceived labor market standings, which in turn guided their preparations for entering the labor market competition. The components outlined in Table 3 are reflected through these demonstrations, revealing how institutional reputation operates on the structural level by regulating labor market opportunities and constraints, and on the personal level as internalized dispositions that modulate individual habitus.

C9 league doctoral graduates: institutional reputation as a marker of outstanding competitiveness

A strong sense of pride was articulated when C9 League graduates described the reputational status of their universities, reflecting a habitus closely aligned with their elite institutional affiliations and cultivated through socialization (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990). They often highlighted the legacies of academic excellence in both national and international domains as central to their universities' nationwide recognizability. This was well maintained by merit-based, exclusively selective admission thresholds that ensured the student cohorts were continuously made up of highly talented candidates. Xin, a 32-year-old female graduate with an urban background, recalled that institutional reputation set the tone for how she was perceived by peers and employers:

When I mentioned where I've studied, I could see people's eyes light up ... It's one of the best universities and getting in takes real effort ... I remember one time in an internship interview, the HR manager immediately associated my credential with a certain level of competence ... as if the university's reputation became a proxy for my ability. (Xin, F, 32, Educational Sciences)

For Xin and others, the instant validation from external parties reinforced their sense of belonging to an elite academic community that naturalized their status as exceptional. Meanwhile, the quality of educational provision was brought up as further grounds for institutional distinctions. Xin pointed out that teaching excellence and high-quality

academic standards at C9 League universities were warranted to prepare students for both academic and professional success:

... there are better teaching resources, like professors with strong backgrounds and activities designed to help us excel. Simply put, they offer more and better. (Xin, F, 32, Educational Sciences)

Having majored in the highly demanding subject of Political Science, Ruan stressed that graduating from a C9 League university provided an immediate assurance of academic rigor that was directly convertible into professional readiness:

Coming from [redacted], people can immediately tell that we've gone through hardcore training that makes us productive and capable, basically ready to be hired. (Ruan, M, 32, Political Science)

The intensive curriculum – a product of institutional pedagogical standards – cemented the idea that they were indeed better than those from non-C9 League institutions. Collectively, these dynamics framed C9 League universities as highly distinguished providers of high-quality education, crafting a possible career future marked by strong employability prospects. This was echoed strongly by Hu, a Sociology graduate, who – despite admitting the challenge of aligning academic training with specific occupational roles – described her university's reputational status as 'a badge of honor' conferring tangible advantages in post-graduation trajectories.

These graduates saw institutional reputation as a powerful facilitator in the labor market competition, providing an implicit guarantee of their credentials' value and pre-qualifying them for a wide range of opportunities. Such recognition was believed to take effect across the country, as supported by the nationwide acknowledgement of C9 League universities' distinctively elite status. Hence, Xin concluded that affiliation with C9 League universities functioned as both a 'shortcut' to gaining employers' preference, and a 'bonus' granting her a clear edge over others outside this elite group. Endowed with the reputational attributes, their elite credentials were construed as a symbolic capital with strong signaling effects in the graduate labor market (Bourdieu 1986).

In line with this, these graduates perceived themselves as high-achieving candidates with a positional advantage in the labor market queue. The perceived positional advantage was legitimized by the field-specific doxa, wherein credentials obtained from C9 League universities are widely considered more valuable (Li et al. 2024). As Xin put it: 'Employers know the quality we bring, because some universities are just more widely known than others'. They aspired to join elite firms, feeling rightful to assume a favorable basis in securing these opportunities. Such self-positionings were imbued with a profound sense of confidence and entitlement, which were induced through the internalization of their institutions' highly distinguished status and the largely promising future it implied.

However, the perceived positional advantage was mobilized differently in their preparations for post-graduation job search. Some counted primarily on their elite credentials, seeing it as an effective indicator of individual capability. These individuals prioritized academic commitments during doctoral studies, considering extra-credential activities such as internships supplementary rather than imperative. If pursued, the choice of internships was mostly driven by convenience, as exemplified by Ruan's participation in a brief internship near campus with flexible schedules and limited responsibilities:

... the purpose of doing this internship was to include something non-academic in the CV ... my credential was the main weapon, and the internship was just something different added to the CV. (Ruan, M, 32, Political Science)

This mindset was shared by Hu, who opted out of internships entirely throughout the doctoral journey, believing her elite credential would 'eliminate many competitors'. This again illustrates the internalization of the field's logic dictating that elite credentials carry enough symbolic weight to yield greater chances of success in the labor market competition without the need for further capital conversion. With that, this credential-focused approach was intended to fully leverage the reputational value of their elite credentials, which were deemed as a sufficiently convincing marker of individual competitiveness. Internships were thus relegated as merely optional add-ons to institutional distinctions that had already moved them to the front of the labor market queue.

While subscribing to this logic, other graduates from this institutional group nonetheless supplemented their elite credentials with strategically selected internships to solidify their positional advantage. Informed by her peers about the fluidity of labor market positionings, Cheng described this as a defensive approach against competitive pressures:

Having a degree from [redacted] was indeed an advantage, but I wanted to keep this by doing something else to make sure that others couldn't catch up easily. It was like adding a protective layer to this advantage. (Cheng, F, 32 English Literature)

These individuals pursued longer-term internships that offered ample opportunities for mentoring, networking and industry exposure. Cheng referred to such experiences as 'icing on the cake', that was, a means to further optimize her labor market positioning and facilitate a smoother transition into corporate settings. Here, internships functioned as more than CV fillers but as meaningful enhancements to institutional distinctions to maintain and maximize positional advantage. In doing so, these graduates positioned themselves as all-rounded candidates who were well-prepared to succeed in the job competition.

The strategic variations imply how the distinctively elite status of C9 League institutions and the resultant dominant labor market positionings inherently afforded this group of graduates flexibility to choose whether or not to acquire extra-credential capitals and what types of activities they were willing to engage with. Rooted in the internalized confidence and entitlement that were deposited within their habitus, the broader space of opportunities envisioned through the lens of their perceivably privileged institutional affiliations has enabled them to navigate the labor market competition on their own terms, thus shaping their decisions about how much additional effort was needed.

Non-C9 league doctoral graduates: recognizability within geographical boundaries

Across their interviews, non-C9 League graduates constantly used the C9 League as the reference group for comparison. It was emphasized that their institutions were comparable to C9 League universities in terms of educational quality and academic rigor. While acknowledging that the admission thresholds were not as exclusively selective, these graduates insisted that it did not undermine the value of their credentials. Having completed both his master's and doctoral degrees at the same university, Lin asserted:

We've gone through the same kind of rigorous training. We may not be as selective as them, but that doesn't mean our education is inferior. We also have good professors and rich academic resources. (Lin, M, 33, Educational Sciences)

Inclusion in the Double First-Class project was frequently cited as proof of excellence to support their claims, as Su – who had done extensive research on her university prior to the doctoral application – argued:

Being part of the Double First-Class project means its performance and outputs have met certain standards. It also means the university is officially recognized as one of the best in China. (Su, F, 33 Linguistics)

Despite seeing themselves as equally qualified, these graduates remained concerned about their universities' reach of recognizability. It was feared that outside the universities' geographical locations, employers might devalue their credentials due to unfamiliarity. Su perceived this as directly affecting her labor market competitiveness:

Although [redacted] is a Double First-Class university, it doesn't have the same nationwide reputation as [redacted – a C9 League university] ... I had a feeling that my profile might not stand out much when applying for jobs elsewhere. (Su, F, 33, Linguistics)

A clear distinction was thus drawn on the geographical scope of institutional recognizability, with impact on the relevance of their credentials as a symbolic capital to be leveraged in the labor market competition (Bourdieu 1986). While formally classified as high-status, these graduates were aware that their universities' reputational status might be constrained in a way that they could not measure up to the C9 League's immediate recognizability. Hence, they were agitated that their credentials might be valued at a discount when displaced beyond local contexts. Han expressed an explicit insecurity about being overshadowed by the elite counterparts, which added to the pressures linked to her desire of entering the highly competitive government sector:

I was second-guessing the value of my credential. I also got anxious imagining that employers might pass over my CV because they were not familiar with the name, unlike those top institutions ... I knew I was qualified, but I couldn't shake off the insecurity. (Han, F, 32, Social Work)

Consequently, these graduates perceived themselves as second-tier candidates with relatively poor chances to stand out when competing against the elite counterparts. This reflected a habitus loaded with an internalized sense of inadequacy, that was, a sense of being funneled into less visible positions in the labor market hierarchy and exposed to constricted employability prospects within specific regions. This, together with their insecurity, urged them to seek compensatory measures to re-assert their competitiveness.

One such strategy focused on building local employability profiles by participating in internships organized within the universities' geographical locations, such that the symbolic value of their credentials could be retained. Lin described this as acting within a 'safe zone', where his university would be more immediately recognized:

Even with this internship, I still felt unsure if it was enough to mitigate the reputational differences and make me a stronger candidate to compete with those from more prestigious universities on a level field ... I would have better chances if staying here, this made me feel more secure. (Lin, M, 33, Educational Sciences)

Those who adopted this approach depicted the local job market as a low-risk environment, in which their high-status credentials could be mobilized more effectively. In doing so, they deliberately restricted their post-graduation job search within local contexts, where they perceived themselves to be more visibly positioned and holding greater chances to stand out. This can be understood as an effort of adjusting to perceivably delimited space of possibles, where these individuals were circumscribed by an internalized framework that rendered some possibilities inconceivable, others improbable and only a bounded range acceptable (Reay 2004). Although this narrowed the choices of employment opportunities, they were convinced that the local contexts would provide more predictable returns, allowing them to avoid the potential risk of credential devaluation and imagine a more attainable career future with minimal uncertainty. As such, it provided a buffer against their internalized inadequacy and insecurity.

Conversely, other graduates attempted to progressively catch up with their elite counterparts. They undertook several internships, starting locally and later seeking positions beyond the immediate boundaries. Zhang, graduating from a non-C9 League university in Shenzhen, described this progression:

I started with a three-month internship at the regional office of a public charity organization in Shenzhen ... I wanted to see if I could push further and most importantly, whether my profile had become more competitive ... So, I applied to [redacted], one of the biggest NGOs in China, it was their headquarter in Beijing, and got in. (Zhang, M, 34, Public Management)

Zhang's experience illustrates an intentional move to expand the perceivably constricted employability beyond his university's geographical location. The cross-regional accumulation of practical experiences allowed these individuals to develop cumulative advantages, thereby gradually boosting their competitiveness to compete across different geographical regions. Apart from internships, such cumulative advantages were also acquired through skill-building outside graduates' disciplinary training. Lu, a Sociology graduate who registered for a fee-based statistics course, explained how this broadened her career options:

When I was doing the internship as a product manager, my mentor was surprised that I knew statistics. He then assigned me additional tasks requiring SPSS to analyze and report data ... I realized how much employers would value this. I thought it might become my advantage as I knew something else beyond my disciplinary expertise. (Lu, F, 32, Sociology)

The strategic layering of different forms of extra-credential capital can be characterized as expansionist efforts, where graduates reached for different avenues – physically through cross-regional internships and intellectually through skill-building – to compensate for the positional disadvantage caused by the perceivably constrained institutional reputations. These were considered essential to mitigate positional differences within the labor market hierarchy, thereby counteracting their embodied sense of insecurity and inadequacy as much as possible. Through such efforts, these graduates sought to reconfigure their habitus by deriving a considerable level of confidence coupled with reasonable expectations to succeed when competing against their elite counterparts. Regardless of non-C9 League graduates' choice of strategy, they were essentially framed by the field logic, wherein the influence of institutional hierarchy was apparent such that their resulting subordinate positions in the labor market queue were recognized and accepted (Bourdieu 1990).

Discussion

This study explicates how institutional reputation shapes Chinese SSH doctoral graduates' labor market positionings. By conceiving institutional reputation as a concrete manifestation of institutional habitus, we employ institutional habitus as the analytical lens through which graduates' perceptions of institutional profiles and their strategies for navigating post-graduation competition are interpreted. In this framing, the mediating role of institutional reputation unfolds through the dimensions of educational status, organizational practices and expressive order (see Table 3), which elucidate on what basis institutional hierarchy is constructed and in what forms they are embodied and enacted in practice.

As shown in the findings, educational status and organizational practices manifest through graduates' perceptions of institutional dynamics that define the logics of institutional hierarchy, with implications on the extent of labor market advantages conferred. While C9 League graduates cited various components that collectively established their universities' distinctively elite status and the resultant favorable employability prospects, non-C9 League graduates identified geographical scope of recognizability as the primary element constraining institutional reputation and individual competitiveness. These perceptions are subjectively constructed, meaning they do not necessarily equate to the actual performance metrics (Ma 2022). Yet, they were internalized, with graduates sorting themselves into different status groups and aligning their labor market positionings with the perceived reputational statuses of their universities. This sorting and alignment, where expressive order manifests, demonstrate how the internalized hierarchy regulates graduates' sense of place in the labor market queue, substantiating Bourdieu's assertion that individuals define themselves as the established order defines them (1984, 471). The resulting configurations mirror the dynamics of positional competition in high-participation HE systems, where graduate employability concerns not only individual merits but also the institutions attended (Isopahkala-Bouret and Tholen 2023).

Institutional reputation operates both as an objective structure framing graduates' perceptions of labor market opportunities and constraints, and as an embodied emotional structure issuing contrasting feelings (i.e. confidence and entitlement among C9 League graduates versus insecurity and inadequacy within non-C9 League group). These emotions reflect graduates' internalized positional (dis)advantage associated with their institutional affiliations, informing the extent to which they could rely on the reputational value of their credentials and guiding their preparations for post-graduation competition. Here, emotions appear to function as a bridge between internalized reflections of structural positionings and strategic responses. They concomitantly register the differentiated effects that institutional hierarchy brings into play – whether experienced as facilitating by C9 League graduates or as constraining for non-C9 League graduates – in shaping graduates' perceptions of their relative labor market positionings, while also motivating actions within or against these conditions. This empirically strengthens Reay's (2015) proposition about emotions being integral to habitus by showing how emotions are simultaneously structured by hierarchical structure and structuring individual perceptions and actions. In this sense, these are psycho-social dispositions that constitute a key component of habitus formation, embodying the internalized institutional hierarchy that underpins graduates' self-positionings in the labor market and their strategic orientations to unequal standings. This mirrors previous psycho-social analyses of class identities that highlight the affective dimensions

of classed experiences as central to identity formations and social positionings (e.g. Ingram 2018; Reay 2015; Savage, Bagnall, and Longhurst 2001). In the present case, the structural division of institutional hierarchy is similarly manifested through such affective aspects. Therefore, the contrasting emotions captured in this study are both products of institutional hierarchy and resources – or constraints – for navigating the competitive labor market. They reflect graduates' doxic acceptance of institutional hierarchy as a legitimate 'rule of the game' determining how the labor market queue is arranged, thereby validating Bourdieu's thesis that 'the structures of the field become the structures of habitus' (1990, 190).

The dimension of expressive order thus serves as the key interface where institutional reputation becomes ingrained within individual habitus. While educational status and organizational practices reveal the nature of reputational disparities between C9 and non-C9 League universities, it is through internalization that these disparities are embedded in graduates' habitus that shape their perceptions of differently delimited spaces of possibles, expectations of outcomes, and strategies of navigating the positional differences. By approaching institutional reputation as a concrete manifestation of institutional habitus, this paper extends previous understandings of the structural framing of institutional habitus and its influence on how individual habitus is structured and acted out in stratified settings (Reay, David, and Ball 2001; Tarabini, Curran, and Fontdevila 2017). In particular, our analysis illuminates how this influence is exhibited in ways that connect graduates' thinking, feelings and practices together, underscoring the psycho-social processes through which institutional reputation is lived, felt and managed that shape post-PhD careers.

A significant finding concerns the varying strategies adopted by graduates from the same institutional groups. On one hand, this can be attributed to pragmatic considerations involving structural conditions shaped by institutional hierarchy and personal characteristics (e.g. age, gender, financial means, etc.). As Lee (2021) noted, individual variables work in tandem with institutional habitus to create personalized frameworks of what graduates perceive as available or appropriate career pathways, thus explaining why graduates from the same institutions may envision different possibilities and act accordingly. Additionally, this paper suggests that variances in emotional intensity may also play a part, with some experiencing the emotions attached to their institutional affiliations more strongly than others. This in turn feeds into differentiated choices of strategies, reflecting varying capacity of individual habitus to generate transformative or constrained actions (Archer 2007). While it is beyond this paper's scope to quantify emotional intensity, C9 League graduates who relied solely on their elite credentials appeared to display greater confidence that deterred engagement in extra-credential activities, whereas those supplementing their elite credentials with strategically selected internships might have shared this confidence to a lesser extent, driving them to distinguish themselves further. Similarly, non-C9 League graduates who focused on building local employability profiles seemed to grapple with heightened insecurity, while others pursuing expansionist efforts might have felt less inadequate, demonstrating greater capacity to subvert reputational constraints. This reinforces that emotions are not mere byproducts of internalized hierarchy, but constitute the very substance of habitus that shapes individual trajectories.

Notably, graduates have rarely mentioned socioeconomic backgrounds in their reflections. Institutional reputation was consistently foregrounded as the dominant influence on post-graduation competition. Congruent with existing research indicating that academic merit gradually outweighs socioeconomic factors in impacting Chinese doctoral graduates'

careers (Shen et al. 2018), this paper argues that institutional reputation emerged as the most relevant and salient stratified order that these graduates have experienced, felt and navigated at the time of preparing their entry into the non-academic labor market. It demonstrates how institutional reputation operates as a more visible – but not exclusive – axis of differentiation within broader social class dynamics, perpetuating social disparities by legitimizing class divisions through merit-based HE selection system.

While this paper provides insights into the structural and emotional conditions of the mediating effects of institutional reputation on doctoral graduates' negotiations of labor market positionings, it also reveals critical limitations. Theoretically, the urban-rural divide created through Chinese hukou and inequalities in geographical distribution of institutional reputation imply that social disparities may still act implicitly than graduates themselves articulated, thus providing fertile ground for further examination. Having acknowledged the insufficiency of hukou as a class indicator earlier, future research could include additional measures – such as parental education and household income – to more comprehensively reflect class dynamics in the Chinese context, thereby better disentangling the interplay between institutional reputation and social class. Methodologically, this paper's focus on broad SSH fields may have disregarded nuances between specific major subjects. This, alongside the relatively small sample size, suggests that our findings are not fully representative of the larger Chinese doctoral populations. Participants were drawn exclusively from universities in first-tier cities, which are well-developed urban settings. This might have overlooked the experiences of graduates from universities in less affluent regions, where institutional backgrounds and individual characteristics carry different implications. Therefore, this calls for future research to incorporate the geographical, institutional and disciplinary variations for a more inclusive representation of the mediating role of institutional reputation in post-PhD careers.

Finally, both C9 and non-C9 League doctoral graduates reported insufficient institutional support in preparing for non-academic careers. The extra-credential activities noted in the findings were also entirely self-sourced. This underscores the need for these high-prestige universities to reconfigure their career support systems for doctoral candidates, ensuring that accessible resources and actionable guidance are in place for addressing the differentiated challenges emerging from their varying socioeconomic, institutional and disciplinary backgrounds. By bridging the gap between institutional reputation and institutional responsibility, universities can reshape the rules of positional competition, thus alleviating graduates' anxieties about their professional futures and empowering them to navigate the competitive occupational landscape with less uncertainty.

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Ethical approval

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