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The psycho-social implications of institutional hierarchy: an exploratory study into Chinese doctoral graduates' engagement in career planning for non-academic employment

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ABSTRACT

Within high-participation systems of higher education such as China, the value of degrees is divided between credentials offering relatively high positional value and those offering less value. With that, institutional hierarchy plays a significant role in shaping graduate employability. This paper illustrates the contrasting experiences of two Chinese female doctoral graduates from universities associated with distinct reputational statuses in planning and strategizing for post-graduation employment outside academia, with particular focus on the psycho-social implications of institutional hierarchy and its manifestation at an intimate level as emotionally-charged perceptions and practices. Drawing upon the extended conceptualization of habitus as the theoretical lens, the analysis illuminates that the internalized institutional hierarchy contains a set of emotional attachments aligned with the reputational statuses of graduates' own universities that are deposited in their habitus. Individual feeling, thinking and practices are thus connected, shaping graduates' perceptions of themselves as a graduate job seeker and their relative chances of success in the job competition, and the subsequent practices of planning and preparation for post-PhD careers.

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Introduction: global doctoral expansion and the Chinese context

Following the demand to increase the diffusion of high-level 'knowledge workers', constructing world-class universities and expanding higher education (HE) have been strategic priorities for many countries around the world (Burke et al., 2020). In light of this, the number of PhDs awarded by universities has also risen substantially over the past 20 years (Sarrico, 2022). The Chinese context shares a similar pattern. In response to national mandates, China has been consistently developing its doctoral education since the 1990s (Shen & Chen, 2018). Abundance of doctoral admission opportunities were produced, and the PhD population has grown steadily thereafter. The latest national statistics report a total of 82,320 doctorates graduated in 2022 (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2023), accounting for a 14.3% increase from the previous year.

With the global rise of PhDs, the progression from doctoral education to employment has become an emerging focus of concern. While a doctoral degree was traditionally viewed as the entrance ticket to academic professions (Clark, 1987), recent studies have documented a diversity of post-PhD career outcomes beyond academia due to changing educational and occupational conditions (McAlpine & Amundsen, 2016; Neumann & Tan, 2011; Wendler et al., 2012). Across major PhD-producing countries, a declining proportion of doctoral recipients staying within academia is observed (e.g. Norway: Kyvik & Olsen, 2012; Netherlands: van de Schoot et al., 2012; Germany: Hauss et al., 2015). This also includes China, where it is estimated that across all subject areas, the percentage of doctoral graduates

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occupying academic positions dropped from over 59% in 1995 to 29.9% in 2012 (Sun, 2014). The decline reflects a series of changes occurring within academia, with the major one being its limited capacity to absorb the rising PhD populations, as exemplified in the scarcity of tenured positions and increased use of fixed-term or temporary contracts in higher education institutions (HEIs) (Ackers & Oliver, 2007; Gu et al., 2018; Skakni et al., 2019). As a result, a considerable number of doctoral graduates are leaving the academy and pursuing non-academic careers upon completing their studies (Hayter & Parker, 2019; McAlpine et al., 2021; OECD, 2021). As shown in the collective data published by a group of Chinese research-oriented universities, nearly 50% of doctoral graduates have been working in industry and business sectors, government agencies and non-profit organizations since 2018 (Chen, 2021).

Although the shift for doctoral graduates to enter non-academic professions aligns with the agenda of knowledge-driven economy and is widely encouraged, the non-academic labour market has not kept pace with HE expansion (Brown & Hesketh, 2004). Doctoral graduates are likely to face an intensified positional competition where they are placed within a hierarchy of job seekers. With that, their employability is considered in relative terms. Furthermore, the graduate labour market is also characterized by structural disparities, including the long-standing inequalities relating to class (Bathmaker et al., 2013; Furlong & Catmel, 2005; Hebson, 2009), gender (Tomlinson et al., 2013; Bradley & Waller, 2018), and race and ethnicity (Rafferty, 2012; Sedghi, 2014) that have been widely discussed in the West. In China, however, institutional hierarchy appears as particularly salient in influencing graduate employability, owning to the state-led initiatives of institutional stratification that result in a small number of universities occupying the top echelon (e.g. Bao et al., 2016; Hartley & Jarvis, 2022; Sheng, 2017). Essentially, this suggests that doctoral graduates are not equally positioned in the labour market, and their routes into post-graduation employment are far more varied and complex.

With fewer structured routes to follow, doctoral graduates bear the responsibility to engage in strategic career planning and forge their own career trajectories. Despite its relevance under the current climate, this topic remains poorly explored. Drawing on the empirical case of China, this paper delves into this thematic exploration with findings from in-depth interviews with two female doctoral graduates from universities associated with distinct reputational statuses. The data are intentionally selected to illuminate the ways the two graduates plan and strategize for post-graduation employment and how this is complicated by institutional hierarchy. This thus marks a starting point to address the abovementioned thematic inquiry. By deploying an extended conceptualization of Bourdieu's notion of habitus as the theoretical lens, the analysis uncovers the emotional attachments to the internalized hierarchical differences in institutional reputations. With that, the paper aims to elucidate how institutional hierarchy manifests at an intimate level in the form of psycho-social dispositions that influence graduates' understandings of, preparations for, and progressions into their post-PhD employment.

Theoretical basis

This paper is inspired by Pierre Bourdieu's conceptual works, particularly his notion of habitus. Bourdieu's main conceptual tools of capital, habitus and field have proved useful in the context of HE to understand how individuals use their social origins and apply strategies of accumulating and converting different forms of capital to gain advantages (Bathmaker et al., 2013; Reay et al., 2001). This is also seen in studies touching upon graduate employability, both in the West (e.g. Brown et al., 2016; Tholen, 2015) and in China (e.g. Liu, 2016; Xu, 2021), in which his writings are applied to explain employment inequalities. Of these studies, Tomlinson (2017) conceived graduate employability as constitutive of the accumulation and deployment of a variety of interactive forms of capital. These are key resources conferring benefits and advantages onto graduates, covering 'a range of educational, social, cultural and psycho-social dimensions and are acquired through graduates' formal and informal experiences' (2017, p. 339). Apart from the well-established concepts of human, social and cultural capitals, this model also includes career identity and psychological capital. The former is defined as the level of personal investment a graduate makes towards the development of future career and employability (Tomlinson, 2017, p. 345), whereas the latter refers to a set of features that are relevant in navigating uncertainties and constraints (Fugate et al., 2004; Hartung & Cadaret, 2017; Tomlinson, 2017). The composition and volume of capital at one's disposal determine how graduates are positioned in the labour market.

While Tomlinson considered the psycho-social dimensions as capitals, another group of scholars located these in an extended understanding of habitus with particular emphasis on emotions and affect (e.g. Loveday, 2016; Lucey et al., 2003; Reay, 2015; Wetherell, 2015). The concept of habitus is previously described as a 'social subjectivity', meaning the thinking of individuals is structured according to the structure of their social surroundings. It is therefore a cognitive structure that is socially embedded. In her exploration of the links between feelings and habitus, Reay (2015, p. 22) argued that habitus enables links between individuals' inner emotional worlds and the external social and structural processes. A handful of studies examining university-to-work transitions and employment outcomes of students with middle-class and working-class backgrounds were engaged with this extended conceptualization of habitus (Abrahams, 2017; Burke et al., 2017, 2020), shedding light on the complex ways social class operates through emotions as displayed in the form of varying levels of confidence, security and sense of entitlement towards employment prospects. These emotional assets are part of what Reay (2005, p. 912) called 'the psychic landscape of social class'.

Although there is limited follow-up research on the psycho-social dimensions of class divisions, existing studies have exemplified that classed feelings are deposited inside individual bodies as a mental schemata of perception and appreciation (whose layered articulations compose the 'habitus'), through which we internally experience and make sense of the lived world (Wacquant, 2013, p. 275). This indicates that class identities are not only found in practices, but also visible in how individuals feel and think (Savage, 2000). By suggesting that social realities are produced through the mundane activities of sense-making, Bourdieu (1998) stressed that they do so according to the position one occupies in the structured space of affordances and constraints, with cognitive tools issued from that particular position as well. Therefore, this undergirds the correspondence between social structures and cognitive structures of individuals that connects feeling, thinking and practice (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

The analysis in this paper is informed by the above understandings of the psycho-social dimensions of classed experiences that become sedimented in the habitus. It provides a basis for understanding how the internalized structural divisions, such as institutional hierarchy, influence graduates' feelings, thinking, and practices in relation to post-PhD career planning. The focus on the large-scale and highly stratified Chinese HE system in this paper also creates a unique setting for unpacking the mediating role of institutional hierarchy. Hence, the extended conceptualization of habitus offers a useful lens for exploring the reproduction of institutional hierarchy on the individual level as emotionally-loaded views and practices. By closely examining the two graduates' experiences through this psycho-social framing, the analysis seeks to reveal the emotional attachments as induced by institutional hierarchy that influence graduates' perceptions of their own chances of success in the job competition. From here, it further elucidates how such psycho-social dispositions shape their strategies of career planning and preparation for post-graduation employment. In doing so, the paper attempts to uncover the psycho-social implications of institutional hierarchy on informing graduates' inner worlds and guiding their agentic movements in the outer world, beyond just differential access to opportunities.

Context: institutional stratifications in the Chinese HE system

Driven by the need to address the increasing pressure for the internationalization of HE as a result of the growing influence of globalization, China initiated a series of HE reforms since the 1990s. During these reforms, the concept of competition was introduced to the HE system (Mok, 2019).

With the intention to build globally competitive universities, the 'Project 211' was launched in 1995. It was aimed at raising the educational quality and research standards of approximately 100 Chinese comprehensive universities in preparation for the challenges of 21st century (L. Li, 2004). By investing in a few leading universities to support national development strategies, this marked the beginning of differentiation among the Chinese HEIs. Building on this, the state government embarked on the 'Project 985' in 1998 to establish a small number of research-intensive universities in the country with an international impact in the near future to enhance China's national competitiveness in the global knowledge market (Bao et al., 2016). It initially included 9 institutions in 1999 and later expanded to 39 universities in 2009, with the first 9 institutions forming the C9 League of China which is today dubbed as the Chinese Ivy League (J. Li & Xue, 2021).

Turning to 2017, the 211 and 985 classifications were replaced with a 'Double First-Class Construction scheme' to support the establishment of both world-class universities and leading disciplines by 2050 (MoE, 2017). All universities that were once involved in the previous projects are covered under the new scheme, with an institutional identity of Double First-Class university. The included universities are reviewed every five years and those demonstrating unsatisfactory performance will receive warnings to have this honourable status associated with distinguished institutional reputation to be removed. As of today, a total number of 147 universities are enlisted, representing approximately 4.88% of all HEIs in China (MoE, 2022). Within this high-status grouping, the C9 League universities continue to acquire an elite status for they consistently deliver remarkable achievements in both national and internationally arenas.

The institutional stratifications create significant differences in the perceived value of credentials. With that, graduates are ranked in the labour market not only at the individual level, but also based on the reputational value of their universities. Prior studies have shown that employers prefer hiring candidates from elite universities, perceiving them as possessing superior qualifications and skills (Binder et al., 2016; Rivera, 2011; van Zantan et al., 2015). This preference in turn perpetuates institutional hierarchy, wherein elite graduates seem to be moved to the front of the labour market queue. Similar findings are also evident in China, where employers demonstrate a strong bias towards hiring graduates from the C9 League universities, viewing their credentials as symbols of prestige and social honour (Hartog et al., 2010; H. Li et al., 2012).

Beyond the tangible benefits of higher starting salaries and easier access to employment opportunities, there is also a consensus across the literature that attending a prestigious university fosters a sense of superiority, confidence and entitled expectations around future employment prospects among graduates. Notably, it is discussed how the reputation of elite universities translates into a heightened sense of self-efficacy and entitlement for seeking high-status positions and job offers from elite firms (see Binder et al., 2016; H. Li et al., 2012). This points to the psycho-social dimensions with respect to institutional hierarchy, which have not been explicitly addressed in prior studies.

Methods

The data presented in this paper are taken from a larger and ongoing research project exploring the early career trajectories of Chinese Social Science and Humanities (SSH) doctoral graduates beyond academia[1]. As part of this research, the impact of graduates' social and educational positionings on their relative standings in the labour market and career possibilities will also be examined, with institutional hierarchy being one key facet of this broader exploration.

To avoid differences caused by the differentiated status of different academic disciplines within universities, only the doctoral graduates from comprehensive universities were targeted in this research project. In the Chinese context, a comprehensive university refers to one that offers study programmes across a wide array of fields that are more or less equally recognized without much differentiations in public reputation (Gu et al., 2018). All participants were pursuing non-academic careers right after completing their studies, with doctoral degrees being the highest educational attainment to be evaluated by the employers.

The main method of data collection involves in-depth interviews conducted in Chinese Mandarin. The interviews were arranged in the form of semi-structured conversations following an interview outline. The open-ended questions facilitated a free-form dialogue that allowed participants to share openly about their post-PhD career stories. The themes of interviews focused broadly on participants' perceptions of doctoral education, career aspirations, experiences of career preparation and progression into professional destinations, and the negotiation between constraints and opportunities that emerged along the way. Although emotions were not specifically addressed in the questions, they were brought up spontaneously by participants either explicitly or implicitly.

The following section presents the narratives of two female doctoral graduates derived from the interviews. They are of around the same age. The universities that they attended are located in the metropolitan city of Shanghai, but belong to different status groups. They both made the decisions to enter non-academic sectors while still doing their PhDs, though the decision was confirmed at different

stages of their respective doctoral journeys. Contrasting emotions were captured with regards to how they perceived themselves as a graduate job seeker and their own chances of success in the job competition in conjunction with the reputational status of their own universities. This in turn led to their varying strategies of planning and preparing for post-graduation employment.

In this paper, the use of data from only two interviews is intentionally designed to offer rich and detailed accounts of participants' experiences and perceptions (Patton, 2002). Essentially, the aim of this paper is to explore how graduates plan and strategize for their post-PhD careers, and how this is complicated by a distinct form of social division arising from the hierarchical structure of the Chinese HE system, drawing on the extended conceptualization of habitus as the theoretical lens. A small number of data is well-suited for this purpose by highlighting specific and illustrative examples that can bring the theoretical framing into life. The two graduates are strategically selected as their experiences illustrate contrasting, yet complementary, perspectives on how institutional hierarchy is reproduced on the individual level that affects their sense of what is possible to be and how to act upon those possibilities.

Both interviews were carried out in the form of online meetings in accordance with participants' preferences. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and translated verbatim manually. Any personal or identifiable information were pseudonymized to limit recognition. Table 1 shows the profiles of these two participants.

Table 1. Participant profiles.

Pseudonym	Age	Institutional status group	Field of study	Current work status
Li	31	Non-Double First-Class university	Sociology	Recruitment specialist in a leading high-tech firm
Han	32	C9 League university	Literature	Manuscript editor in a public publishing house

Thematic analysis was carried out to systematically interpret the data. The analysis started with close reading and re-reading of the two interview transcripts to develop a comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences and perceptions regarding how they plan and strategize for post-PhD career. Through constant comparisons across the two interview transcripts, institutional hierarchy was confirmed to have played a significant role in shaping the unfolding of participants' career experiences. This was thus followed by intensively exploring the sense-making and decision-making patterns that were informed by institutional hierarchy, and identifying emotions underpinning those patterns. As a way of member checking, the two participants were invited to review and validate the interpretations derived from their own interviews before proceeding to report the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this paper, participants' experiences are retold in reduced forms, accompanied by direct quotes. These narratives provide a window to examine individual intentions, evaluative judgments and complicating actions, as well as how participants make sense of these with themselves being the agents of their lives (Elliott, 2005; McAlpine, 2016).

Interview findings

Li's experience

Li completed her doctoral degree in June 2023. She is currently working as a recruitment specialist in a leading high-tech company in Shanghai.

Li embarked on her doctoral journey at the same university where she completed her previous degrees. She described it as 'just one of those normal universities that is not part of the Double First-Class group', stressing that while native Shanghainese might recognize it, those from other regions might not know it.

Li initially planned to stay within academia. She paid special attention to her university's recruitment webpage since the first semester to learn more about the requirements for her desired positions. As a general rule that applies to all public universities in China, the names and the highest educational attainments of successful candidates will be shown on the recruitment webpage for public comment before confirming the hiring decisions. Li noticed that most of the successful candidates graduated from elite universities that were 'obviously more prestigious than mine'. She soon realized that she might not have much advantage in securing an academic post and decided to look beyond academia.

Li has previously considered finding a summer internship to supplement the limited doctoral stipends. This, together with her interest of exploring the non-academic sectors, urged her to take the job search more seriously. She intentionally targeted high-status firms in Shanghai. As she explained:

> The local firms should be more familiar with my university in case this matters, … High-status firms are also more likely to provide structured and specialized trainings, and opportunities to be involved in their ongoing projects.

As she was not committed to any specific occupational role at that time, she carefully matched her disciplinary background and personal preference with job descriptions to find the best fits. Following several rounds of interviews, she accepted an offer from a leading real estate company to work as a recruitment assistant which she sensed the compatibility. Li described this internship as highly fruitful:

> I was placed under one of their project teams and worked closely with my mentor. The fact that I was personally involved in making the hiring plans for a graduate scheme allowed me to learn more about the hiring process and those hands-on techniques.

Li fitted in and got on well with her colleagues and mentor, who offered her the opportunity to return as an intern in the next holiday. Li was happy to stay in touch and she saw them as 'important connections that could be utilized to her own advantage later on'.

Li was well aware that the reputation of her own university and the fact that she was an academically-oriented doctoral graduate might make her a less desirable candidate in the job market. Urged by a sense of inadequacy and insecurity, Li believed that she must demonstrate other forms of distinctions to prove her worth. She viewed work-readiness as the key that would differentiate her from others. With that, she applied to another internship programme organized at a different firm. According to her:

> The previous internship opened the door for me to experience the world of work in non-academic settings and now I want to discover more, like different industries, organizational practices, and business cultures.

She continued to work in the area of recruitment because 'this is the area I want to keep digging' and she began to feel that 'this could be something for me after PhD'. At that particular point, Li was already engaging in a strategic career self-management. While in school, she progressed as planned to ensure that she could complete the doctoral degree on time. Outside of university, Li took part in high-status internships on a regular basis to strengthen her practical skills. While the pressure of balancing academic commitments and work duties was sometimes overwhelming, she knew that she was consistently accumulating different forms of capital that would eventually boost her chances of success in the job competition.

In the beginning of her final year, Li participated in campus recruitment events to seek for post-graduation opportunities. Her internship experiences offered glimpses into a possible career future and supported the development of a more focused career orientation. She was now able to envisage a more specific and perceivably viable career aspiration – 'I wish to become a professional in the area of recruitment, leading my own team and running my own project'. Although still feeling uncertain about her positioning in the job competition, Li believed that she has done everything she could think of to prepare for it. The social connections from previous internships were relegated as a safety net to be tapped on if she has received nothing via open applications. The entire job search process lasted for approximately 7 months until she accepted the offer from her current employer.

Looking back at this journey, Li believed that she has made a wise decision to engage in regular internship participations to build up her professional profile. These internships provided learning opportunities to get a sense of how the non-academic settings operate. She also managed to identify the kind of possible work roles outside academia. By the time she was taking part in campus recruitment, she has developed a more visible and viable career aspiration.

Han's experience

Han graduated from a C9 League university in 2022 and is employed as a manuscript editor at a publishing house in Shanghai.

She was offered the doctoral position by her master's thesis supervisor to participate in a new research project. As she completed the master's degree without a clear career orientation, she was happy to accept the offer so that she could have more time to decide what to do afterwards.

Han described herself as 'self-disciplined and hardworking"'. She concentrated fully on school matters with little engagement in extra-curricular activities or internships in her previous academic endeavours. This also continued through the first two years of her doctoral study, during which she was again wholeheartedly devoted to the research project. She was too busy to imagine herself occupying any kind of work roles at that moment. Despite this, she has a strong faith in the value of her elite credential. Han believed that her admission into the elite university was a 'bonus' that could grant her easier access to a wide range of employment opportunities, including those from elite firms. Hence, she was not that worried about her career prospects, though she was unsure what exactly she wanted to be.

Han started considering the possible career options towards the end of the third year. She learnt from a senior who was working on the same project that as an early career researcher, it was fairly common to move around a lot and change roles frequently due to the increasing precarity within academia. However, Han preferred 'something more stable without much changes'. This thus drove her to look into other options outside academia.

Similar to Li, Han also recognized the need to supplement her academic qualifications with practical experience in order to secure non-academic employment. Constrained by time, however, she could only plan for a short-term internship before proceeding to search for post-graduation employment. With most of her cards betted on the elite credential, Han was confident that this should be sufficient. She soon found an internship at a local podcast company to assist with content production. When asked why this particular offer, Han gave the following explanation:

> It's a start-up company and I was involved in script writing for this particular programme on current affairs and social events. I love writing so it seemed pretty manageable without having to learn new things. The work schedules were also quite flexible. I only had to come to office twice per week, the writing tasks could also be completed at home. It's a small team of people around my age, everyone seemed nice and easy to approach. As I was looking for a position that I could start immediately, so this seemed to be a good fit.

The internship lasted for two months after which Han returned to wrap up her dissertation. Like Li, Han also participated in campus recruitment and priorities were given to elite firms in her applications. Despite only having one internship experience, she was confident that her elite credential would move her forward in the labour market queue. However, the job seeking process was far less smooth than she expected. She was interested in writing, but her exposure to related jobs was limited. Some elite employers also considered her CV as 'too dull', though it attracted interest from start-ups and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), reflecting a mismatch between her expectations and realities. This led to a mixed feeling of relief and bitterness:

> … relieved in a sense that I wouldn't be unemployed, but obviously I had high hopes. I was so confident that things would go smoothly as I planned. It's like getting a slap in the face with this kind of result.

The mixed feelings also highlighted an emotional toll of having to recalibrate her career aspirations. Han was trapped in a dilemma of not knowing if she should just accept one of those non-elite offers or continue waiting for unknown outcomes from the remaining applications. Just when she was about to convince herself to lower expectations and choose from the existing offers, a turning point occurred. With the referral from her thesis supervisor, Han received a job offer from a publishing house to work as an assistant editor. Without hesitation, she accepted the offer and signed the contract. She described this offer as 'a high-quality offer that looks justified for a PhD holder' in terms of both the status of the firm and the nature of the job position.

While she was grateful to have received this offer, Han acknowledged the pitfalls of over-reliance on institutional reputation that conferred her a taken-for-granted sense of entitlement. It shielded her from making more comprehensive evaluations of herself as a graduate job seeker and the job market reality, which in turn led to a series of ill-judged choices.

Discussion

Within the narratives presented above, there are indications of emotions induced by institutional hierarchy and the different ways in which these emotions are apprehended and practiced in the unfolding of the two graduates' career experiences.

Li's experience is marked by continuous acquisition of additional capital. Graduating from a less prestigious university, she was acutely aware of her disadvantaged position in the job market. This awareness was accompanied by a sense of inadequacy and insecurity of not measuring up to other graduates from more prestigious universities, that were ingrained in her habitus. Her perception of a potential devaluation of her academic profile echoes Charlesworth's (2000) writing about his working-class respondents' sense of nothingness, where individuals feel their worth is undervalued. Informed by these emotional attachments, Li sensed the need to make up for her less prestigious credential by participating in high-status internships regularly to accumulate additional forms of capital. Apart from counteracting the perceived devaluation of her credential, these deliberate efforts also aimed to offset her feelings of insecurity and inadequacy. These strategic moves are reflective of Brown and Hesketh (2004) 'player tactics', where Li subscribed to every agentic effort she could access to optimize her chances of success in the competitive job market (Brown & Souto-Otero, 2020). The satisfaction derived from her internship experiences signifies moments of triumph and self-realization, during which her confidence was gradually enhanced and her professional identity was solidified. With that, Li became 'a fish in the water' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 127) from an early stage. She was acquainted with the unequal relations in the occupational landscape as a consequence of the reproduction of institutional hierarchy beyond the HE confines and the rules of job competition, knowing the essential steps she had to follow to become better positioned in the labour market queue. By the time she was involved in campus recruitment, in Bourdieusian terms, Li had developed a stronger 'feel for the game' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

In contrast, Han's elite educational background had imbued her with a sense of honour and entitlement. As construed by Bourdieu (1977), the sense of honour is embedded in the agent's very bodies in the form of mental dispositions, schemes of perception and thought. In this case, Han's strong faith in the value of her elite credential reflects a deeply internalized hierarchy, with the development of a set of norms, values and dispositions, i.e. habitus, in tune to the sense of honour attached to the elite status of her university. This entitled her to a seemingly justified feeling of claiming a sense of superiority. With that, Han positioned herself as a candidate who had a taken-for-granted advantage over others and was deserving of a more favourable position in the labour market queue. Besides, this sense of superiority also resulted in rather overweening career aspirations. This led her to underestimate the need to build up her professional profile. Upon receiving the feedback on her job applications, the mixed feelings of bitterness and relief reveal a dissonance with her emotional attachments of confidence and entitlement. Accepting an offer that is not 'justified for a PhD holder' is conflicting with her psychological dispositions, creating disturbances and a sense of un-belonging (Bourdieu, 1977). It is also a move that is potentially undermining the legitimation of her honoured status as an elite graduate and devaluing her successful academic self that she had long been proud of.

The experiences of Li and Han illustrate that the internalized hierarchical differences in institutional reputations contain strong emotional attachments, guiding their perceptions and actions. Li's strategic manoeuvring is driven by feelings of insecurity and inadequacy, compelling her to proactively accumulate additional capital to improve her labour market positioning. On the other hand, Han's confidence in her elite credential blinds her to the necessity of engaging in more comprehensive career planning and results in an emotional turmoil where her expectations are confronted by unanticipated realities. This contrast underscores the psycho-social dimensions of classed experiences, where institutional hierarchy is mediated in the form of emotionally-charged views and practices.

The evidence of emotional attachments is congruent with the extended conceptualization of habitus, which suggests that class identities are also manifested through feelings and thinking. In this paper, the emotional assets associated with the reputational status of graduates' universities not only inform their sense of place in the job market, but also guide their decision-making processes in terms of planning and strategizing for post-graduation employment.

It may be easy to follow Tomlinson's (2017) capital-based approach and understand these narratives as demonstrating how the psychological capital and career identity are mobilized in facilitating graduates' career planning processes. However, these narratives go further than this. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) once argued that while decision-making can be rational in times of crisis, for the most part it is based on the feeling of what seems right in a particular situation from a particular point of view. The

findings reported here suggest that institutional hierarchy is transfigured into emotional assets that are grounded in graduates' habitus (Loveday, 2016; Reay, 2015). With that, class distinctions are reproduced not only at the structural level (i.e. the perpetuation of institutional hierarchy into the occupational landscape), but also at a deeply personal level (i.e. the emotional attachments of confidence/entitlement versus insecurity/inadequacy). This allows us to better understand the subjective experiences of graduates, which are shaped not only by the broader social structures but also the emotional structures.

Conclusion

This paper provides insights into the ways doctoral graduates engage in career planning to prepare for post-graduation employment outside academia, with particular attention directed to the mediating role of institutional hierarchy within this work. Instead of continuing to expand the arrays of the concept of capital, this paper deliberately turns to the notion of habitus as the theoretical basis for exploring the manifestation of hierarchical differences at an intimate level.

In line with previous research that emphasizes the importance of graduates developing a clear appreciation for how the labour market operates and what kind of attributes, actions and attitudes are likely to be rewarded by employers (Burke et al., 2020; Pham et al., 2019), similar findings are also noted in the two narratives discussed in this paper. On top of that, this paper also captures a set of contrasting emotional attachments aligned with the reputational status of participants' respective universities. It is this interaction of institutional hierarchy and the psychological dispositions that leads to their varied approaches of planning and preparing for post-PhD careers. While studies on rational choice theory (e.g. Breen & Goldthorpe, 1997; Goldthorpe, 1998) posit to eliminate emotions from decision-making and fill the space with rational calculations, this paper shows the pervasive influence of emotions in graduates' self-perceptions and career planning practices.

As stated earlier, the data presented in this paper are drawn from a larger and ongoing research project. The narratives included here are merely pointers of the contrasting emotionally-loaded views and practices, which are consequences of the highly stratified Chinese HE system that result in participants' differing educational positionings. This means they represent just one of the many possible forms that can be identified from the larger doctoral population. Therefore, this paper is limited in such a way that it is an incomplete mapping, and one should be cautious in making any generalizations from these findings.

Nonetheless, the small amount of data allows for a more focused exploration of the psycho-social dimensions of institutional hierarchy. It contributes to an extended understanding of how institutional hierarchy is internalized as emotional responses that inform graduates' thinking and practices in accordance with their perceived sense of place in the labour market queue relative to others and what is possible for them to be. Theoretically, this paper offers fresh insights by applying the extended conceptualization of habitus in the context of post-PhD career to examine the influence of a distinct form of structural division on how graduates plan for their careers. Future research can continue from here and delve into further exploration with a larger sample and consider how the psycho-social dimensions of institutional hierarchy influence graduates' scope of career aspirations and strategies of enhancing individual relative standings in the labour market. In this paper, the selected participants are from the SSH field. It will also be fruitful to include a more diversified sample and account for the disciplinary differences to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of graduates' educational positionings and the resulting labour market positionings.

Note

1. The research receives ethical approval from the Ethics Committee (Humanities and Social Sciences Division) of University of Turku (Case Number TY/788/06.01.01/2023, received on 2023-10-26).

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