

## When Choices Become Chances: Extending Boudon's Positional Theory to Understand University Choices in Contemporary China (0005)

Ye Liu

Bath Spa University, UK

Boudon's positional theory is of particular relevance to understanding social inequality during the expansion of higher education in the era of globalization. Boudon's positional theory is under-theorized and under-researched in the sociology of education. This paper will make a start by extending Boudon's theoretical standpoints to make sense of university choices in contemporary China in relation to social backgrounds, characteristics of higher education, and students' choice-making processes in relation to their cultural and social identity, the transitions to labour market, and their life opportunities in the era of uncertainty. Boudon argues social reproduction occurs through secondary effects whereby the impact of parental cultural capital is mediated by choices (rational or otherwise) which students themselves make about their educational careers and which, in turn, influence their future educational achievements (Boudon, 1974). An education system with multiple 'branching points', for instance, will allow more room for students' choices to impact on their ultimate achievements, thus increasing the 'space' for cultural capital to intensify the process of social reproduction.

The paper will use both quantitative and qualitative methods applied at different levels. The questionnaire survey, involving 2,425 undergraduates, investigates the effects of social origins on different choices. The 15 focus group interviews investigate, qualitatively, the strategies that students employ to navigate through the competition in their transition to higher education. For the quantitative analysis, I highlight the regression analysis of the main hypothesis concerning Boudon's secondary effect (Boudon, 1974). Boudon's thesis suggests that students from more privileged social and cultural backgrounds would be more confident in making educational choices and that they are more likely to over-estimate their academic performance and optimize their chances allowed by their performance. Therefore, a series of hypotheses can be formulated regarding the impact of socioeconomic backgrounds and socio-demographic characteristics on students' estimated chances. The regression analysis suggests that geographical inequality is the main stratifier in distributing educational opportunities, which is consistent with other studies on access to higher education in contemporary China (Liu, 2015, 2013; Tam and Jiang, 2015).

There are three main themes from the qualitative interview data. First, students relate their sociocultural backgrounds to the choices in institutions and fields of study in different ways. Students from privileged socioeconomic status and metropolitan areas tend to rely on their parents for the final approval of their choices; however, these choices are not always correspondent to their parental occupational status. Students from less affluent families or rural areas are much more independent with the decision-making. They are certainly not bound to their cultural identity and they seem to adapt to the metropolitan and university life styles well. This finding is contrary to the studies elsewhere which argue that working-class students find themselves lost in the transition when they make educational choices outside their cultural identity (Duru-Bellat, 2010). Second, students make choices in relation to employment opportunities rather than expected wages. Students from all backgrounds seem to gather information on employment prospects of a particular field of study

prior to filling in the choices of higher education; but they do not seem to be too calculating about the graduate wages by arguing that ‘the earning is a life-long process’ and that ‘job opportunities and prospects really matter’. The ‘employment rate’ (jiuyeliu) is the most frequently used word in the group interviews. This finding is contrary to studies elsewhere which find that students’ choices are largely motivated by an assessment of the earnings from a particular degree (Green and Zhu, 2010; Jerrim, 2011). Third, students from less affluent families and rural areas are very strategic in terms of navigating through the complicated ‘three-choice’ systems and maximizing their opportunities in the desired fields of study instead of choosing top-ranked universities. These students tend not to select elite universities even when their academic performance indicates they might be successful. This strategy will put them in a stronger and more competitive position with regard to the second-tier universities. They tend to choose the ‘popular’ fields of study with higher employability at the second-tier universities. In other words, these students sacrifice their elite opportunities in the most prestigious universities in order to secure a position in a field with higher labour market returns at a less known institution.

This paper has a number of conclusions both at the theoretical and contextual level. At the theoretical level, the modern cultural capital perspectives, namely, the Bourdieuan theory on cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1974, 1977, 1983; Bourdieu and Passeron [1977] 1990), do not seem to hold in the context of China. There is no sufficient evidence on the strong and persistent impact of embodied and objectified cultural capital on students’ chances in access to higher education. Boudon’s positional theory, which argues that social reproduction also occurs through secondary effects whereby the impact of parental cultural capital is mediated by students’ choices, makes more sense in higher education selection in China (Boudon, 1974). Students from more educated families tend to be bolder and more confident in predicting their chances in higher education than those from less educated families. The contextual features, including the geographic origin and the quality of schooling, play an important role of translating students’ academic performance into the chances in higher education.

## References

- Boudon, R. (1974) *Education, Opportunity and Social Inequality*. New York: Wiley.
- Bourdieu, P. (1974) ‘The School as a Conservative Force’. In: Eggleston, J. ed. *Contemporary Research in Sociology of Education*. London: Methuen: 32-46.
- Bourdieu, P. (1977) ‘Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction’. In Karabel, J. and Halsey, A. H. eds. *Power and Ideology in Education*. Oxford: Oxford University Press: 46-58.
- Bourdieu, P. (1983) ‘Forms of Capital.’ In Richardson, J. ed. *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*. New York, Greenwood: 241-258.
- Bourdieu, P. and J. C. Passeron, ([1977]1990) *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*. London: Sage Publications.
- Duru-Bellat, M. (2010) ‘Raymond Boudon ou la portée d'un certain « universalisme abstrait » dans l'analyse genrée des inégalités.’ In Chabaud-Rychter, D., Descoutures, V., Eleni Varikas, Devreux, A. M. eds. *Sous les sciences sociales, le genre*. Paris: La Decouvert: 165-176.

Green, F., and Y. Zhu (2010) 'Over Qualification, Job Dissatisfaction, and Increasing Dispersion in the Returns to Graduate Education.' *Oxford Economic Papers*, 62 (4): 740–763.

Jerrim, J. (2011) 'Do UK Higher Education Students Overestimate Their Starting Salary?' *Fiscal Studies*, 32 (4): 483–509.

Liu, Y. (2015) 'Geographical stratification and the role of the state in access to higher education in contemporary China'. *International Journal of Educational Development*, (44): 108-117.

Liu, Y. (2013) 'Meritocracy and the *Gaokao*: A survey study of higher education selection and socioeconomic participation in Anhui and Zhejiang.' *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 34 (5-6): 868-887.

Tam, T. and J. Jiang (2015) 'Divergent urban-rural trends in college attendance: state policy bias and structural exclusion in China.' *Sociology of Education*, 88(2):160-180.