

## Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

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The impact of social class and gender on the degrees of choice Chinese students have in choosing their PhD institution and subject

Xiaoyu Wen<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*UCL Institute of Education, London, United Kingdom*

**Research Domain:** Access and widening participation (AWP)

**Abstract:** China is experiencing a profound reform and rapid expansion for its PhD education system providing more chances for a wider population in recent years. However, this new massification is concerned to be accompanied by a deepening of social stratification and gender imbalance as well as the creation of new types of inequalities. The purpose of this study is to investigate the degrees of choice Chinese students possess during their PhD decision-making processes and the role of factors including social class and gender in forming these processes. In order to answer these questions, a three-stage theoretical model combining Bourdieu's concepts of capital, habitus and field with Amartya Sen's Capability Approach was put forward taking conversions between capital interaction, aspiration, capabilities and functioning into consideration. Hopefully this research can provide some novelty to the understanding of the interplay between structure and agency in production and reproduction of higher education inequalities.

**Paper: Introduction**

Radical changes can be found in Chinese social structure in recent years from a rigid hierarchy to a fluid and evolving society (Sheng, 2018). Under such circumstance, education is increasingly viewed as a significant indicator for classifying various social groups in Chinese transitional society (Collins, 2000). Acquiring an academic degree, especially a higher one like PhD, is considered as a ladder to more advantaged social status (Sheng, 2018).

Chinese government has put great efforts in widening participation in PhD education. Doctoral education, which was traditionally preserved for a tiny exemplary elite, is now under the course of massification (Servage, 2009). A dramatic rise for enrolled doctoral student had been witnessed from 12,917 in 1997 to 83,878 in 2017 (NSBC, 2017). Compared to other countries such as UK, this is a far more rapid increase. Meanwhile, although the proportion of female acquiring other types of higher education degree such as undergraduate or master has risen dramatically in recent years until it has

now overtaken that of male, PhD education is still male-dominated (HEDMOE, 2017). It seems that China is experiencing a profound reform and rapid expansion for its PhD system providing more chances for a wider population. However, it is necessary to problematize such comforting notions and note that the seemingly increased PhD education system is now accompanied by a deepening of social stratification and gender imbalance as well as the creation of new types of inequalities.

## **Literature Review**

Bourdieu has put forward concepts of capital, habitus and fields to explain the reproduction of social inequality. Some literatures have explored the impact of resources and status-specific norms and values on the perception of potential choices for students and argued that these choices are strongly structured by students' social class background and gender (Reay et al. 2005; Sheng, 2018). In contrast, Sen's CA offers a significant new focus on choice-relevant capabilities to interpret inequalities in this highly stratified world. In recent years, numerous scholars have pointed out that the CA should not be qualified as 'stand alone' application, it is better to complement the CA with other context-specific theories to understand inequalities and seek solutions for them through structure change rather than individual level interventions (Walker, 2006; Hart, 2013).

Although both Bourdieu and Sen have been used extensively in educational research, only a few of them are on topics related to higher education choice. There are even less researchers that employ the combined framework of Bourdieu and Sen. For example, Gokpinar and Reiss (2016) establish a two-stage theoretical model linking Bourdieu and Sen to seek the potentially important role of outside-school factors in the formation of high school students' science attitudes, aspiration and attainment. Keung (2015) integrated Bourdieu's social reproduction theory and Sen's CA to explore adolescents' post-secondary educational expectations in Hong Kong. The author believes this study is the first one that blending Bourdieu and Sen to understand students' PhD choice.

## **Research Questions**

In order to explore the role of social class and gender on Chinese students' degrees of PhD choices, this research will be guided by two main questions:

- What are the impact of factors such as social class and gender on Chinese students' degrees of PhD choices on institution and subject?
- According to Sen's (1992) perspective of inequality evaluation, what kinds of inequalities with respect to PhD choices are of interest in China?

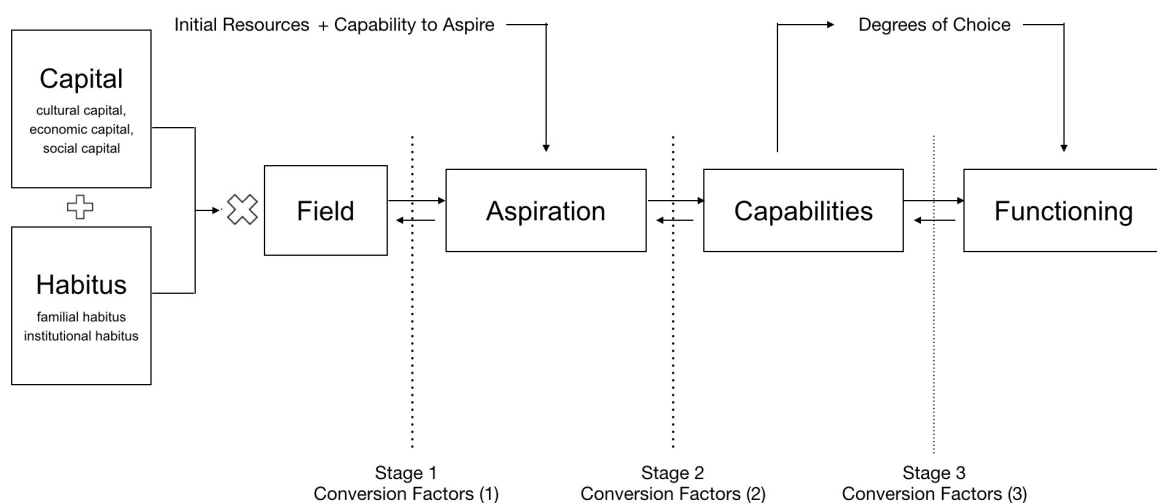
## **Methodologies**

To answer these research questions, a three-stage theoretical model considering two bodies of sociologically informed foundational theories was creatively developed. The theoretical model starts from unequal distribution and interaction of what was termed by Bourdieu as capital, habitus and field to explore to what extent does social class and gender difference impacts the provision of 'landscape' within family and school which facilitates or constrains students' attitude and aspirations towards PhD. Then, instead of focusing on resources, Sen's CA was introduced to the model.

According to Sen, it is significant to distinguish between resources (commodities), capabilities and functioning and have a comprehensive understanding of conversion processes between them. The possession of resources in itself cannot be considered as guarantees for the development of aspirations, capabilities or desired outcomes. It is crucial to learn how to deploy resources and be proficient and confident to do so in different fields. Finally relationships between choice-related capability (ability to achieve desired functionings) and choice related functionings (achieved outcomes) is emphasized in this model arguing that the development of students' choice-related capabilities can be a necessary viewpoint in evaluating higher education equality. According to Sen's CA, an individual's ability and freedom to live desired life are the key factors indicating his or her wellbeing. Therefore, this study concerns not only the actual choice that a person had made but also the degrees of choices the person had possessed during the decision-making process.

Bourdieu's theoretical framework could be combined with the CA 'with regard to the role of agency for structure change' (Abel & Frohlich, 2011: 1) to explain the mechanism behind the evidence that low initial resources resulted from disadvantaged background is associated with lower degrees of educational choices. Both social structure (conceptualized according to Bourdieu framework) and individual agency (conceptualized according to Sen's CA) is taken into consideration in this model recognizing the dualism between structure-based life chances and choice-based life conduct. The two theoretical frameworks concerning capital interaction and capabilities provides some novelty to the understanding of the interplay between structure and agency in production and reproduction of PhD choice inequalities.

Finally, a multiple case study will be conducted in future research to test the capacity of this theoretical framework in interpreting different types of students' experience. Through bringing to life the experiences and voices of students with different background and of their parents, the author hope that this research would shed light on the development of student' choice-related aspiration and capability.



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