

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

After Admission: The Emotional Suffering of Students Enrolled Through the Rural Students Quota Plan in China's Elite Universities

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ABSTRACT

The Chinese government has implemented a series of special admission policies in recent years to promote higher education equity. One of the key approaches is the 'Rural Students Quota Plan', which requires elite universities to enrol a certain number of rural students from disadvantaged social and economic backgrounds each year. This study adopted qualitative methods to explore the experiences of these students, focusing on their emotional journeys after admission to elite universities. In this project, 32 rural students from R University were invited to participate in semi-structured interviews. After thematic analysis, this paper further focuses on the systematic presentation and in-depth analysis of ten of these Quota Plan students' university experiences to carefully delve into their emotional journeys while integrating the narratives of other participants as background data into the analysis. Drawing on Bourdieu's conceptual tools, this study highlights how emotional struggles such as the sense of feeling lost and inferior are shaped by external social structures and the elite university field. The study argues that as elite universities strive to enrol more rural students, mechanisms must be put in place to better support rural students in their adaptation and integration throughout the higher education process.

1 | Introduction

Since the expansion of university enrolment in China in 1999, opportunities to experience higher education have continued to increase, and more and more students are able to enter university (Wang 2010). However, when focusing on the family origins of those students who have gained access to higher education, it is found that students from families with better socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to study at these institutions, while students from poor rural families are underrepresented in elite universities (Chen 2012; Yin 2008). As early as 2006, Yang (2006) found that the proportion of rural students in China's elite universities had decreased significantly after 2000, and these students

were mainly diverted to the middle and bottom of China's higher education system—higher vocational colleges and general local colleges. This is because inequity in higher education in China has long been manifested as inequity between urban and rural areas. The dichotomous nature of urban and rural in China is reflected in the level of economic development, culture and the distribution of educational resources (Niu and Wan 2018). Thus, while overall access to higher education has improved significantly for all students, access to elite universities is increasingly unequal (Ma and Yang 2015). According to the research of Lu et al. (2016) at an elite university located in Beijing in 2009, rural students accounted for 11% of the total student body, while the population registered as rural residents accounted for 52%.

Globally, it is common for top universities to establish specific admission policies to address equity of enrolment, such as France's Zones d'Education Prioritaire (Philip 2012), India's Caste Reservation Policy (Dholakia 2005) and the 'university-led, law-regulated' (Clancy and Goastellec 2007) model of top US universities. Top universities in the United States have implemented affirmative action policies for minority students, such as African Americans, Latin Americans and Indigenous Peoples. However, China's elite universities use a 'government-led, university-implemented' model (Wang 2020). The 'Targeted Admissions Plan in Impoverished Areas' was implemented by the Ministry of Education (MOE) in 2012. Since then, a series of special admission policies, including the 'National Special Plan', 'Local Special Plan' and 'Rural Students Quota Plan', have been put into place, showing that the Chinese government is committed to enhancing disadvantaged students' access to elite universities, particularly those from rural areas and inland provinces.

Since the implementation of the special admission policy, an increasing number of underprivileged rural students have had the opportunity to enter elite universities, which has, to some extent, improved the equity of access to higher education in China. However, the fair distribution of enrolment opportunities is only one part of achieving equity in higher education. If these students have difficulty adapting and integrating into elite universities and making full use of their resources, the efforts to ensure equitable access to these institutions will also fall short (Zhu 2020). Thus, whether the students who enter elite universities through the special admission policies will have full access to the same educational and social-emotional experiences as their elite peers will be a key issue for future research on equity in higher education. This more nuanced definition of equity has yet to be explored (Niu and Wan 2018), including the question of whether the students admitted through these policies are likely to experience maladjustment, not only in academic performance but also in psychological and emotional ways.

Hence, this study examines the Quota Plan students' university experiences, something that has not received adequate attention in previous research. There are two main research questions: What are the educational experiences of the Quota Plan students in terms of academic performance, interpersonal interactions and participation in high-impact educational activities? How are the educational experiences of these students associated with their emotional state? By exploring the students' point of view, this paper attempts to reveal the challenges that Chinese universities face in pursuing the goal of 'more equitable and higher quality' education.

2 | Rural Students Quota Plan

In order to enable more poor rural students to enter elite universities, China's MOE implemented a separate enrolment plan for rural students, called the 'Rural Students Quota Plan' (hereafter referred to as Quota Plan), in 2014. The plan requires certain elite universities to ensure rural students make up no less than 2% of the current year's undergraduate enrolment (MOE 2014). By 2018, 95 universities had adopted the policy. According to the application conditions of the Quota Plan, students must meet the following requirements:

- They and their father or mother or legal guardian are registered in a rural area;
- They have had a registered residence in such an area for more than three consecutive years;
- They have had three consecutive years of enrolment in the county-level high school, where they are registered and actually attend.

These conditions enable the plan to more precisely compensate for the relative lack of higher education opportunities of rural students in disadvantaged and remote areas. In addition, universities require a certain level of achievement in high school, such as the need to be ranked in the top 1%, 3%, 5% or 10% of their school. On this basis, students who qualify to apply for the plan can either receive between 30 and 60 bonus points on their original college entrance exam score or opt for a lowering of the university's original admission cut-off by between 0 and 20 points, depending on the students' performance in the written examination and the interview organised by the university.

In general, students enrolled in the Quota Plan are rural students with top academic performance from high schools in remote, impoverished areas, often populated by ethnic minorities. From the perspective of family socio-economic status, these students have the dual vulnerable status of rural origin and familial economic disadvantage. From the perspective of academic performance, these students are the absolute top students in their high schools, with accompanying characteristics such as perseverance and hard work; however, they are still 'compensated' in terms of their test scores in order to enter elite universities. Thus, we cannot ignore the possible gap in academic performance or the psychological burden of receiving 'special treatment'. These characteristics distinguish the Quota Plan students from other students and can help us better understand the university experience of this group, including the academic and emotional obstacles they face while studying at university.

3 | Literature Review

Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and field have been widely used in research on rural students in elite Chinese universities (Xie 2016). As Bourdieu (1984) argued, a field can be conceived as a social space with a system of positions. It defines the structure of the social setting in which habitus operates; habitus, as 'embodied social structure' (Bourdieu 1984, 467), mediates position and position-taking within the field. When migrating across social borders, agents are likely to experience misalignments between habitus and field, which, according to Bourdieu, is termed the hysteresis effect (Hardy 2014). Bourdieu further referred to the hysteresis effect as 'the structural lag between opportunities and the dispositions to grasp them' (Bourdieu 1977, 83), accompanied by varying degrees of emotional suffering (Bourdieu 2000). According to Chen (2022), the hysteresis effect is a useful theoretical tool to understand the academic and cultural disjuncture experienced by rural students as they move through the layers of structural constraints from rural villages to the field of university. Thus, in order to further our understanding of the educational experiences of rural students in elite

universities, we must consider the hysteresis effect of the habitus of these students, recognising the emotional suffering they experience in this process (Chen 2022).

In recent years, a growing body of international research has focused on the emotional experiences of first-in-family students and students from disadvantaged backgrounds at elite universities (Watson et al. 2009; Lehmann 2012; Reay 2018; Lehmann 2021). Researchers found that students from working-class families are more likely to face class stigma (Granfield 1991), experience uneasiness and unfamiliarity and pay a significant emotional price to adapt to elite environments (Reay, Crozier, and Clayton 2010). According to previous studies, the cultural mismatch experienced by working-class students in elite universities can increase their stress (Stephens et al. 2012) and heighten their sense of isolation (Aries 2008). This can lead to a fractured habitus and 'painfully fragmented self', ultimately weakening their academic performance and willpower (Pascarella and Terenzini 2005) and even driving them to drop out of campus life (Bergerson 2007). Aries and Seider (2005) compared the academic experiences of students from low-income families at elite and state universities in the United States. They reported that significant differences in wealth among students at elite universities compared to state universities heightened students' class consciousness and led to stronger feelings of intimidation, discomfort, inadequacy, exclusion and powerlessness among low-income students.

The long-standing urban-rural dual structure in China has continuously influenced rural students. They generally encounter structural challenges regarding socio-economic status and educational resources, particularly in comparison to their urban counterparts. This situation bears some commonalities to the experiences of working-class students in Western contexts (Wen et al. 2023). In terms of China's social context, scholars have explored the emotional traits of students who move from rural areas into elite urban universities. Cheng (2018) reported that along with the process of climbing up the educational ladder, students from rural families are subject to a series of complex emotional experiences, including shame about self, guilt about family and anxiety about success, all of which are tightly entwined with their rural background. Chen (2022) also found that rural students were confronted with a rural-urban disjuncture and academic disjuncture when entering urban universities. The lack of metropolitan knowledge and the cultural and geographic distancing they experience result in a strong sense of alienation and incapacity. According to Xie (2016), who examined rural students' sense of inferiority, rural students must break free from their initial class culture upon entering university and acquire a perceived upper-middle-class identity, as a way to integrate into the 'mainstream culture'. This cultural transformation leads to certain negative emotional experiences, such as low self-esteem. This finding reveals that emotional suffering is related to being looked down upon by the class culture from which the student originates.

However, little research has focused on rural students' adjustment and integration on campus after admittance into elite universities through special admission policies (Yan and Wu 2020). Xiong and Yang (2018) used a mixed-method analysis to examine

how Quota Plan students adapt to the academic expectations of elite universities, showing that there is a considerable gap in the academic performance of these and other students. Cui, Wu, and Wang (2019) further noted that the disadvantaged status of Quota Plan students' family backgrounds continued to impact their academic performance and their financial considerations. However, these studies have mainly focused on examining the academic accomplishments of Quota Plan students, lacking consideration of other aspects of their educational experience (e.g., emotional responses). In terms of methods, these studies have generally applied quantitative methods, with limited exploration of the subjective experiences of this group of students. Therefore, this study aims to contribute to the field by investigating in depth the unique experiences of Quota Plan students in elite universities. Moreover, we hope to inform the further development of compensatory admissions policies to better support and accommodate Quota Plan students throughout their higher education experience.

4 | Research Method

The study was conducted at R University. R University is a comprehensive research university in Beijing with a focus on humanities and social sciences and is a well-known 'double first-class'¹ university in China. Before the MOE launched the policy to promote, it took the lead in launching the Rural Students Quota Plan in 2012 and has developed its own special admissions system, known as the 'Dream Plan'. The plan admits around 80 Quota Plan students each year and has been in operation for 11 consecutive years. The 'Dream Plan' requires students to meet a GPA ranking of the top 5% of their high school, in principle, in addition to the requirements regarding students' family origin in the Rural Students Quota Plan. Candidates qualified for the plan will be admitted according to their college entrance exam score (including policy bonus points) from highest to lowest.

In this study, a qualitative research methodology was employed. Previous studies adopting mixed method or quantitative method provide a very useful investigation of rural students' general experiences in elite universities, including academic performance, educational outcomes, etc. (Xiong and Yang 2018; Cui, Wu, and Wang 2019). We utilised the qualitative approach in this study to generate rich narratives on participants' subjective experiences, in particular, their inner emotional struggles. With participants' consent, the data collection in this research follows the ethical guidance of the British Educational Research Association (BERA 2018) and attentively respects the benefits and rights of all participants. We used snowballing method to reach potential participants, as the Quota Plan students' identities were confidential. A total of 32 students were contacted, and a small number of urban students, administrators and teachers were included in this larger project for the purpose of data triangulation (Denzin 1970). We first conducted an exploratory study with open-ended interviews to allow participants to independently recount their experiences during university and share events that triggered strong emotional reactions. This open-ended interview was done before conducting formal in-depth interviews. We then conducted semi-structured interviews to understand the experiences and emotions of Quota Plan students in three

main areas of university life—academic learning, interpersonal interaction and student activities—and made some necessary alterations and additions to the interview questions. Our sample questions included ‘How was your university experience so far? How does the status of being a Quota Plan Student impact on your campus life (if any)? How did you feel about your interactions with your peers on campus? etc.’ The interview data were gathered through notes and audio recordings, and a typical session lasted two hours. After the formal interviews, we conducted a second-round interview with some participants to supplement some data in key themes. In total, we carried out 72.5 h interviews.

This article focuses on the systematic presentation and in-depth analysis of ten of these Quota Plan students’ university experience to carefully delve into their emotional journeys while integrating the narratives of other participants as background data into the analysis (Seawright and Gerring 2008). These ten cases, which differ in gender, year of study, major and place of origin (see Table 1), reflect the key study themes that appeared across the dataset. We used the MaxQDA2022 to store and code the interview data, generating a thematic coding structure by developing parent codes, codes and subcodes to demonstrate the logics embedded in key themes. When coding these interview data in English, we attempted to preserve the original meaning of the interviewees as much as possible. All students’ names are denoted by pseudonyms in order to safeguard the interviewees’ privacy.

5 | Findings

In this section, we present a thorough analysis of the experiences and feelings of Quota Plan students at an elite university, adopting Bourdieu’s conceptual tools. We found that participants experienced varying degrees of maladjustment and distress as a

result of the habitus–field disconnect brought on by their mobility from remote and underdeveloped rural areas to elite universities in the city. This resulted in a variety of manifestations of the hysteresis effect and emotional suffering in areas such as academics, interpersonal interactions and high-impact educational activities.

5.1 | The Loss of Academic Advantage

All students enrolled in the Quota Plan are the top academic performers in their high schools; they earned their spots at university by virtue of their outstanding academic performance. In a high school setting where good grades were the key to success, their outstanding academic performance helped them to win honour and gain self-esteem and confidence. However, when they were admitted to an elite university through entrance scores that were lower than the norm and placed among a more elite group, their academic status abruptly became precarious and their self-worth faltered. Academic performance, which was previously a point of pride and self-identification, suddenly evoked strong negative emotional experiences.

5.1.1 | Confusion Caused by Insufficient Academic Preparation

Academic readiness is the adaptation of a learner’s prior knowledge, abilities or psychological development to new learning; as a pre-university trait, it has a significant impact on a student’s future academic development (Ma and Zhu 2014). According to this study’s findings, Quota Plan students felt less prepared for their university studies than their peers throughout their freshman year; the word ‘confused’ was used frequently to describe their feelings at this time.

TABLE 1 | Demographic profile of participants.

Number	Pseudonym	Gender	Place of origin	Major	Year of study
1	Chen	Male	Sichuan (western region)	Agricultural and Forestry Economic Management	Second year
2	Zhao	Male	Sichuan (western region)	Agricultural and Forestry Economic Management	Third year
3	Li	Female	Anhui (eastern region)	History	Third year
4	Song	Female	Sichuan (western region)	Chinese Language and Literature	Second year
5	Liu	Male	Shandong (eastern region)	Agricultural and Forestry Economic Management	Third year
6	Wu	Male	Sichuan (western region)	Archaeology	Fourth year
7	Zhang	Female	Henan (central region)	Chinese Language and Literature	Second year
8	Tan	Male	Henan (central region)	Philosophy	Fourth year
9	Hu	Female	Shandong (eastern region)	Statistics	Third year
10	Wang	Female	Heilongjiang (northeastern region)	Journalism	Fourth year

Most of the university students were interested in literature from a young age, and it was clear that they had read a lot of books before university and their literary skills were far superior to mine. I was admitted [to this university] accidentally, so I couldn't compare [with them], and it was difficult to make up for my literary disadvantage in a short time. I thought my future was bleak. (Song, second year)

In terms of course content, as Song from the Humanities Experimental Class felt, her education before university did not allow her to acquire adequate 'literary' knowledge, and this huge gap in knowledge and ability with other students seriously hindered her chances of catching up to and surpassing other students in her studies. Some studies also point out that the more selective elite universities are, the more in-depth and difficult their curricula are, and the more specific knowledge and competencies are presumed to be available to all students; this can be viewed as a 'matching effect' between students' academic preparation and the academic requirements of elite universities (Fischer and Massey 2007). Song's recognition of the importance of high-level knowledge reveals the manifestations of the valued urban (middle-class) dispositions in the field of the university (Chen 2023). Song attributed her academic unpreparedness to her own lack of 'literary knowledge' rather than recognising the significant urban-rural gap in basic education. We consider that Song's narratives of receiving 'accidental admittance' to this university demonstrate, to a certain extent, the idea of 'impostor syndrome' (Clance and Imes 1978), a concept that can help elucidate how students from disadvantaged backgrounds process structural inequality and the emotional labour required to overcome such constraints.

In addition to the challenging course content, Quota Plan students reported being uneasy at first with the university's teaching model. As a result, they tended to be 'silent participants' in the classroom.

I never spoke up, and whenever the teacher asked a question, I hid my face in my desk because I was so nervous that my mind went blank. To be honest, I was terrified of the teacher, and I always thought she was 'mysterious' and 'authoritative.' (Liu, third year)

Liu's feelings in the classroom reflect the different ideas and methods in the education he received before and after entering university. 'Reversing examination-oriented education' has been the policy goal of China's basic education reform for nearly 20 years; however, this objective is difficult for rural high schools (Zhou 2022). Teachers in this setting still use the 'cramming' teaching method and reinforce the notion that the teacher is the ultimate authority and that following instruction is the only way to achieve excellent grades (Cheng 2018). Therefore, Quota Plan students who completed their education in rural high schools are used to listening passively in class and have difficulty adapting to a teaching model that

requires active participation and critical thinking. It can be argued that the rules of the game in the elite university field are mismatched with those in rural education. This leaves the Quota Plan students, who were the 'best adapted to the previous state of the game' (Bourdieu 2000, 161) as the top students in their high schools, to face academic disjuncture (Chen 2022, 2023) and the resulting confusion.

5.1.2 | Fear of Falling Behind in the Rankings

According to the special admission policy of R University, all students who qualify for admission should be ranked in the top 5% of their high schools; thus, it can be said that these Quota Plan students are the top students in their high schools. However, compared to students admitted through the standard enrolment process, they have reduced admissions scores. The anxiety, stress and frustration caused by this relative change in position result in a lingering sense of fear, which manifests in shared emotional suffering for this group.

I was admitted with a reduced score, so I felt a lot of pressure in my freshman year. I studied really hard and went to the library every day. I was relieved after I won the first place in the final exam. In fact, my goal is not to be number one, I just hope I won't be left too far. (Liu, third year)

Like Liu, many Quota Plan students pay close attention to their 'policy beneficiary' status when they first enter university. They frequently engage in almost ascetic diligence in order to maintain or restore their advantageous position (Cheng 2018). However, this steadfastness usually comes with an emotional cost, and the distress caused by the fear of falling behind is difficult to manage. Despite this, not all Quota Plan students are as successful as Liu in catching up. Song expressed her strong sense of frustration with falling from the top to the bottom of the list:

At first, the frustration was intense. I grew up as the best student in my class, but when I got to university, I discovered that even though I worked very hard, my grades were only on an average level. I discovered that I was no longer the best and had to accept that I was not as good as others. (Song, second year)

Although elite universities provide some compensation for access for disadvantaged students, the system, from admissions to talent training, teaching programmes and examination and evaluation, still largely follows the logic of selection based on merit. Studies have found that the function of meritocratic selection in universities is a factor that contributes to the psychological barriers faced by low-income students, creating negative stereotypes of their own abilities (Darnon, Dompnier, and Marijn Poortvliet 2012; Batruch, Autin, and Butera 2017). When some of the students interviewed failed in their efforts to maintain academic excellence in the first semester after enrolment, they were more likely to resort to denial of their own abilities and

experience a sense of inferiority; these negative emotions often had the effect of further reducing their academic motivation and self-efficacy. Thus, we suggest that the logic of meritocratic selection at elite universities is involved in the production of negative affective experiences for Quota Plan students, potentially deepening their disadvantaged status in the form of emotional suffering.

5.2 | The Burden of Interpersonal Interaction in Social Mobility

In this section, we utilise participants' interview data to demonstrate how establishing new relationships in the novel field results in emotional burden when students start their upward social mobility journey at the elite university.

5.2.1 | Sense of Marginality in Peer Interaction

Habitus is 'the way society becomes deposited in persons in the form of lasting dispositions, or trained capacities and structured propensities to think, feel and act in determinant ways' (Wacquant 2005, 316). Therefore, it includes our common sense or practical knowledge, mostly taken for granted, about how to think and act, which shapes a variety of practices ranging from the trivial and mundane—how to walk, eat and talk—to decorous ways of acting, consistent with one's social status and class (Houston and Swords 2022). In this study, we found that Quota Plan students often perceive a certain degree of marginalisation in their interaction with peers, due to the drastic differences in living habits and consumption practices; however, they were still surrounded by the fear of 'being identified' in their relationship with others.

I felt inferior in my freshman year because my Mandarin was not good and I was afraid that people would think I was strange. Then I started to practice secretly, but some words still don't come out well, so I paid attention to saying less of these words. (Zhao, third year)

My roommates all have a lot of brand-name clothing, but I don't. I think it's unnecessary to waste money on it. They used to invite me to buy it together, and I would refuse it, embarrassingly. Gradually, they stopped inviting me. (Zhang, second year)

The above two excerpts from participants' interviews demonstrate how one's accent and clothes perform as socio-economic classifiers in daily interactions. Zhao was from Yibin, Sichuan Province, and his dialect made him stand out among his standard Mandarin-speaking classmates, who came from all over the country, but seem to have no hometown. Zhang described her embarrassment regarding fashion and image. She lacked (access to) resources to help her develop certain strategies to navigate this field. She explained that she disagrees with the concept of extravagant and wasteful consumption and draws a distinction between herself and 'them' by criticising the

dominant class's values and behaviours, but she is involuntarily embarrassed when she refuses. As Bourdieu noted, taste is not only the main bearer of personal identity but also of social ties, through which people position themselves and are positioned by others (Longhurst, Bourdieu, and Moore 1986). When exposed to urban norms, the students adopted views of the 'rural group' in order to differentiate themselves and, to some extent, in submittance to the symbolic order of the social world (Chen 2022). This perceived mismatch of accent and clothing style deepened their sense of inferiority and alienation from urban peers, hindering the establishment and maintenance of emotional connections with others.

The 'cost' of interacting with some people is high, such as going to high-end restaurants to eat expensive food. If I spend more money, I will be heartbroken, but I will also feel guilty for wasting the family's money; if I don't go, I will feel embarrassed... I naturally shield myself from some people because there is too big a gap between our interactions. (Song, second year)

The significant gap in economic capital is a challenge for Quota Plan students when establishing friendship with urban peers. Young people's possession of economic capital can enable/limit them to access certain style or identity constructions (Archer, Halsall, and Hollingworth 2007; Du Gay 1997). In this research, some participants expressed their aspirations to transcend such style segregation. They tended to seek acceptance and recognition from peers through participating in social activities, but at the same time, they were unable to avoid the guilt they felt when 'wasting the family's money'. According to Annette Lareau (2011), who studied the consumption patterns of children from families of varying socio-economic status, children from working-class and poor families are aware of what their families can afford to buy, and they are often caught up in the shame and helplessness of not being able to satisfy their wants and needs due to their financial limitations. When they try to integrate into the lifestyle of the middle and upper classes, the sense of powerlessness caused by their limited economic capital and the guilt of betraying their 'class loyalty' (Ryan and Sackrey 1984) emerges and becomes a burden in their friendship with peers. Similarly, in this study, participants often report suffering from betraying their rural family and parents, due to the enduring impacts of filial piety. Filial piety is an important moral concept and cultural norm in Chinese social milieu, especially in the rural context, where offsprings would be expected to earn money as early as possible to support their parents, rather than consuming their parents' money earned from labour work. Compared to most rural children of the same age who have already worked to earn money for their families, some participants consider themselves as 'wasting the family's money', which inevitably leads themselves to more emotional suffering in this regard.

5.2.2 | Apprehension of Teacher–Student Interaction

Teacher–student interaction is a crucial component of interpersonal communication in university, as students frequently collaborate with tutors, lecturers and faculty members. Drawing upon participants' interviews, we found that the interaction

between Quota Plan students and educators in routine activities mostly stays at an academic level and rarely involves emotional communication.

Each of us is assigned a tutor, but I rarely communicate with him. I always have the impression that teachers have a certain distance and authority, and to be honest, I'm quite afraid of my tutor. I think I'm too bad, and I'm very nervous to see him. (Tan, fourth year)

Generated from the rigorous field of rural schooling, we found that most Quota Plan students in this research tend to regard their tutors as 'respectful and distant' rather than someone with whom they could communicate equally. Tan's impression of university educators entails 'a certain distance and authority'. Lareau's (2011) research reveals that children raised in the collaborative parenting model of middle-class families tend to have a certain sense of superiority in school and engage in more equitable interactions with authority figures, while children raised in the natural growth model of working-class families experience a formative sense of alienation, mistrust and apprehension with regard to the educational system. In this research, we consider that the parenting pattern of rural children is closer to the natural growth pattern. Due to a lack of school-approved cultural capital, rural families tend to educate their children to submit to the authority of teachers (Xie et al. 2018). Thus, when these rural students enter university, it is difficult for them to alter their fear of teachers' authority. This estranged teacher-student relationship hinders teachers from recognising students' needs and offering supports such as career development and extracurricular activities (Hu and Li 2014), which has a negative impact on their university experience.

5.3 | 'Implicit Exclusion' in the Participation of High-Impact Educational Activities

The concept of 'high-impact' educational practices was introduced by Kuh (2008). This refers to activities that students autonomously choose and participate in outside the classroom; they require students to invest a great deal of time and energy, actively interact with others, continuously reflect on the experience and apply their knowledge in practice. Many studies have shown that students' active participation in high-impact educational activities during university is conducive to positive educational outcomes (Pascarella and Terenzini 2005). Based on research conducted in Chinese 'Project 985' institutions, the China College Student Survey (CCSS) group at Tsinghua University identified six types of high-impact educational activities in Chinese universities, including overseas study, internship and social practice, social service, and extracurricular language learning (Wen, Chu, and Shi 2014). This study investigates the experiences of Quota Plan students who engage in high-impact educational practices.

5.3.1 | Sense of Inferiority Caused by One-Sided Development

In elementary education in China, academic performance is the core of students' school life and is the only way for individuals to

obtain respect and recognition (Cheng and Kang 2016). However, upon entering university, participants in this study found academic performance and grades were no longer viewed as the be-all and end-all of school life; instead, participation in social and cultural activities like sporting events and dance competitions was encouraged and celebrated. We suggest that this mobility across social borders can lead to cultural misalignment of Quota Plan students, resulting in emotional conflicts and contradictions. Experiences in previous cultural situations affected their attitude towards and expression of the novel situation and even led to disorientation.

I found that many students around me have talents, and they are eligible to win awards in various competitions. In this regard, I often feel a little inferior, because I really cannot do anything other than study. I'm too 'rubbish'. (Tan, fourth year)

Tan's usage of the word 'rubbish' belittles his value and demonstrates his limited sense of worth in the field of versatile university culture. In Bourdieu's opinion, the cultivation of a speciality is essentially an expression of cultural capital. Children from advantaged families are exposed to the behaviours and artistic tastes of the upper class during their childhood, and their cultural capital is transmitted in this unconscious way (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). At the same time, parents from the advantaged class are more focused on and capable of nurturing their children's strengths later in life, making them more visible in university extracurricular activities. For the Quota Plan students, their disadvantaged family background resulted not only in a lack of support in their academic development but also an absence of cultivation of cultural talents and expertise. Therefore, some Quota Plan students hold on tightly to academic performance as a way of conquering their sense of failure in social and cultural activities (Cheng and Kang 2016). However, from the participants' narratives, we found that academic excellence could not fully compensate for the sense of inferiority aroused by the lack of valued cultural capital in the novel field.

In addition, as an important element of high-impact educational participation, social activities can bring certain advantages to students, such as new social networks, accolades and an impressive resume (Xie 2016). After their freshman year, several participants decided to leave the Student Union, considering that they lacked the leadership qualities necessary to compete for the leader position.

My roommate from Beijing is the class president. She can speak eloquently in any situation. I can't, and my speech will be incoherent in crowded places, so I don't dare to run in large-scale election campaigns. (Song, second year)

In some larger and more standardised student unions and associations at Chinese universities, the appointment and rotation of members are usually done through public competitions, particularly for some important management positions. Some Quota Plan students in this research gave up competing for such

leading roles, as they considered themselves lacking in the necessary skills to be a leader. While a lack of knowledge and skills is indeed one of the barriers to participation in these activities, another crucial obstacle is the partial opposition association that rural students construct between their identity and their competence in social activities (Xie 2016). Confronted with the perceived dominant norms in the university, they tend to fashion themselves as incompetent; they gradually accept that they are not capable of competing for 'leadership' positions and that academic study is the only suitable course for them. The absence of broader activities and the excessive focus on learning lead to low self-esteem and one-sided development of these students.

5.3.2 | Sense of Loss Caused by Financial Constraints

In this research, participants mentioned that universities offer a variety of opportunities and resources to facilitate student development and prepare students for future careers and further studies, such as foreign language options, second-degree programmes and international exchange opportunities. Ideally, Quota Plan students would take advantage of these valuable opportunities and learning resources to accumulate culture capital and catch up with the pace of university life. However, from interview data, we found that most of these activities entail considerable economic costs, making them inaccessible in the face of financial pressures. It can be seen that the acquisition of cultural capital from elite universities also requires the conversion of economic capital (Bourdieu 1984).

The most regrettable thing in university is not being able to go abroad. I simply could not afford the cost of international exchange programs; the competition of publicly funded opportunities was too fierce. (Wang, fourth year)

Quota plan students continue to struggle with financial limitations that put expensive English courses or international exchange programmes out of reach. According to research by Ingram, Abrahams, and Beedell (2012), the social opportunities of working-class students in the United Kingdom are inextricably related to their financial constraints. The Quota Plan students in this study also discussed their experiences of working part time to help ease their financial burden, including working as personal tutors and interpreters; their busy schedules were a distinctive aspect of their university experience. However, work experience is not a straightforward route to acquiring valuable capital, in contrast to high-status activities like joining international exchange programmes. Zhang regretted that by working part time to cover living costs, he had actually sacrificed crucial academic time: 'I learned nothing useful from those part-time jobs, and I really wasted a lot of time'. Zhang considered part-time work to have a negative effect on his educational outcome, which echoes existing research on students in similar vulnerable situations (Pascarella et al. 2004). Thus, we suggest that Quota Plan students' disadvantaged position in terms of economic capital not only excludes them from various experiences at school but also causes them to miss opportunities to accumulate certain cultural capital valued in university and future working scenarios, leading to a lasting sense of helplessness, regret and loss.

6 | Discussion and Conclusions

Drawing on Bourdieu's conceptual tools of habitus and field, this study focuses on the emotional experiences of Quota Plan students at an elite university and discusses the reasons for these students' varying degrees of emotional distress in terms of academic performance, interpersonal interactions and participation in high-impact educational activities. This article provides a critical perspective for understanding the portrait of this group of students as 'policy beneficiaries' in higher education. Participants in the study generally reported emotional challenges, including a mismatch between the old habitus and new field in their social lives, as well as the dilemma of having exceptional Quota Plan status. Specifically, this included a sense of confusion and fear caused by the insufficient preparation for university life and academic study, a sense of marginality and apprehension caused by difficulty in social engagement and a sense of inferiority and 'missing out' caused by the lack of participation in high-impact educational activities.

Based on the experiences of the students we interviewed, we propose that the Quota Plan students in elite universities are generally in a disadvantaged position and are likely to feel a sense of 'misfit' with the urban university. It is generally believed that rural students at elite universities are confident in their academic performance, as they are selected through the college entrance examination and their scores prove that they are as academically capable as others. They can use their mastery of academic achievement to maintain their status as winners, realising a 'continuum' of habitus to cope with the disconnect between their old habitus and the elite field (Xie 2016; Postiglione et al. 2017). However, unlike the general image of rural university students in previous studies, Quota Plan students have their own unique characteristics. For them, the 'score reduction' applied in the process of enrolment has a significant dissipating effect on their academic confidence; thus, the self-worth built on this confidence falters. The previously impeccable academic performance of these students becomes an aspect that triggers worry and inadequacy when entering university. This reminds us to be aware of the differences within the rural university student group; especially, we suggest that attention should be paid to the dually disadvantageous position of Quota Plan students, comprised of their family's social and economic background and the potential learning difficulties encountered in the university.

In this paper, we hope to not only further the understanding of the subjective experiences of rural students at elite universities but also encourage reflections on the compensatory strategies in higher education and provide a basis for achieving the policy objective of a more equitable higher education. For the top universities that have established special admission policies to address equity of enrolment, there is an urgent need to examine whether they have also provided these disadvantaged students with an equitable educational experience. Measures such as providing scholarships and grants, targeted developmental counselling and services, and a more inclusive and friendly campus culture, can enable these students to fully utilise the educational resources of elite universities and enjoy a comprehensive and enriching university experience. Admittedly, the analysis of the case remains underdeveloped—partly as a result of the limitations of space and data. What we are trying to

do is an exploratory work, hoping to trigger further discussions on equity of higher education. In the future, we will continue to explore the relationship between special-access status, and educational and emotional experiences.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Research data are not shared.

Endnotes

¹ The construction of world-class universities and first-class disciplines (double first-class) is an innovative strategy made by the Chinese government to improve the quality of China's higher education, speed up the development of disciplines with distinctive strengths and enhance the international influence of Chinese universities.

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