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From the Massification of Education to 'Postgraduate Examination Fever': Pathways of Reproduction in the Credential Competition

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Abstract. In order to mitigate the supply pressures in the labor market following large-scale unemployment caused by the reform of state-owned enterprises and the Asian financial crisis in the 1990s, the Chinese government has introduced the higher education expansion policy. The expansion policy facilitates the transformation of the education system from elitist education to mass education, and the number of undergraduates also sharply increased in the short-term. However, this policy does not resolve the inequality of higher education opportunity. Rather, it resulted in the growing popularity of postgraduate education. By adopting documentary research, this essay will explore how the massification of higher education and the increasing popularity of postgraduate education reproduce the inequality between Chinese undergraduates. The research shows that the massification of higher education has contributed to the emergence of the 'postgraduate examination fever' through stratification of the educational credentials, the labor market transition and the changes of employers' screening standards. On this basis, the difference between family cultural capital and social capital lead to the unequal access to postgraduate education for students from different socioeconomic status. The National Postgraduate Entrance Examination misrecognizes structural constraints as differences in students' abilities, rationalizing the reproduction of educational inequality. Therefore, this essay will argue that the massification of higher education converts the differences in socio-economic status into the disparities within educational institutions and the stratification of the educational credentials, and affects undergraduates' access to postgraduate education by employers' screening standards and labor market transformation, thereby using personal defects to conceals the structural inequality in the educational systems.

Keywords: massification of higher education, postgraduate education, cultural reproduction, symbolic violence

1. Introduction

The higher education system in China has transformed from elitist education to mass education, since the implementation of the expansion policy. Instead of alleviating educational inequality, this policy has exacerbated young people's employment challenges. The existing research analyzes the

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influences of the massification of higher education towards institutional stratification, the motivation to enroll for postgraduate education and employment pressure, and the correlation between family capital and educational opportunity [1-3]. However, few studies have examined the massification of tertiary education, the unemployment of undergraduates, and the 'postgraduate examination fever' as a full pathway of reproduction, by drawing on Bourdieu's cultural reproduction theory as the theoretical framework. This essay regards the full pathway of reproduction in the credential competition as the research topic, and adopts documentary research to explore how the massification of tertiary education and the postgraduate examination fever reproduce the educational inequality between Chinese undergraduates, by institutional stratification, labor market transformation, capital disparities and misrecognition. The significance of this essay lies in analyzing the structural inequalities concealed behind the discourse of "fair competition" and "merit-based selection". It provides theoretical support for promoting fairness in higher education policy and the postgraduate education system. If the existing system refuses to make adjustments, structural inequality will persist as competition for postgraduate education intensifies, and ultimately result in the class solidification.

2. The formation of the postgraduate examination fever

2.1. The massification of higher education and institutional stratification

The massification of tertiary education persists the educational inequality through institutional stratification. By increasing opportunities for access to higher education for those under-represented groups, the expansion policy introduced by the Chinese government in1999 has contributed to the transformation of the higher education system from elitist education to mass education [4-6]. During the period 1995 to 2017, China's GTER rose from 7.2% to 45.7% [7]. Nevertheless, the expansion of higher education opportunities primarily relies on establishing lower-tier institutions as a complement to elite institutions and further expanding their enrolment, which means the expansion policy is insufficient to reduce educational inequalities [6, 8, 9]. China's elite institutions include Project 985 and Project 211 universities, and the non-elite institutions consist of four-year universities established before 1999, the newly founded four-year universities, and three-year vocational colleges [1]. Elite universities receive policy support and public funding, and have an advantage in faculty resources, teaching facilities, and university prestige, compared to the non-elite universities [1, 4, 9]. For instance, 96% of national laboratories are located in elite institutions, and the number of papers included in SCI, ISTP, and EI has increased 94% in the same period [10, 11]. This means that the non-elite institutions are marginalized within the education system, which reinforces educational inequality [12]. In effect, students' access to different universities are to a great extent influenced by family socioeconomic status. Xie and Wang's research shows that students whose parents are state and social managers are 18 times as likely to enter elite universities than those parents are unemployed and partially employed from urban and rural areas [13]. In other words, students from the advantaged groups are more likely to enter the higher-tier universities [4], which aligning with Lucas' Effectively Maintained Inequality (EMI) theory, namely the privileged groups will maintain their advantages in terms of educational quality when the quantitative differences nearly disappear [14]. In this sense, by institutionalized selection, the massification of tertiary education persists the enrollment patterns decided by SES, thereby rationalizing the social class segregation [4]. Therefore, instead of resolving inequality, the massification converts the difference between the access to higher education to the institutional stratification indeed.

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2.2. The dilemma of Chinese graduates

The transformation of the labour market and employers' screening standards are the main reasons undergraduates sit for the postgraduate entrance examination. Before the expansion, graduates were allocated jobs by state with stable job security, while with the transition from the planned to market-oriented system in China, graduates are responsible for their own job research in the labor market [3, 15]. On this basis, the growing number of graduates exacerbates the demand-supply imbalance of the labor market, resulting in their unemployment [15, 16]. According to the National Bureau of Statistics of China, the youth unemployment rate has reached 21.3 percent in 2023 [15]. Meanwhile, employers' screening criteria are no longer simply whether applicants hold credentials, but the institutional hierarchy, further exacerbating graduate unemployment. In this context, students graduated from the elite universities not only have more job opportunities than those from non-elites colleges, but their salaries are also significantly higher than the latter [17]. For example, graduates from Project 985 universities have an average starting salary of 4607 yuan [18]. This is because the credentials of elite universities signal ability to employers, namely their students are more capable than lower cost institutions, regardless they are able to provide higher quality education than non-elite colleges [19]. Under these circumstances, enrolling in the PG examination becomes the main pathway for some undergraduates to pursue higher social status and stay ahead of the competition [2, 5]. During 1999-2023, the number of participants in the PG entrance examination increased from 320000 to 4740000 [15]. This dramatic rise in candidate numbers illustrates that a master's degree has become "the new bachelor's degree", a prerequisite for entering the labour market [2, 20]. Therefore, the PG examination fever is the result of the transition of the labor market and the employers' screening standards.

3. The advantage of cultural reproduction theory

Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction argues that the education system shapes power structures and symbolic relations across socioeconomic groups by reproducing the class-based distribution of cultural capital [21]. Because credential competition amid the massification of higher education is essentially a matter of reproduction, the theoretical framework of cultural reproduction can illuminate how structural inequality is reproduced within the postgraduate examination system. The strength of this theory is that it situated the likelihood of participating the PG examination within a broader inequality context, and focusing on the negative impacts caused by structural constraint, instead of attributing it to the difference in students' ability.

4. The influence of capital disparities towards PG examination's opportunities

Cultural capital and social capital jointly shape the inequality of undergraduates' opportunities to PG examination. According to Bourdieu's definition, cultural capital is a capital which regards individuals personally spending time on investing, and acquires through long-term practices [22]. Once embodied capital is formed, it incorporates external cultural resources into a durable bodily and mental disposition, namely the habitus [22]. As an acquired system which adjusts to its special conditions, habitus has shaped individuals' behavior and cognition [23]. In the context of PG examination, students' decision on PG can reflect their habitus, due to the social class will influence parents' parenting styles [3, 24]. Specifically, parents possessing higher education credentials are more likely to be involved in children's development, such as passing on to their children with their own experiences from PGEE or provide direct advice for children's decisions on the subject of PG

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education [25]. During this process, parents' high educational expectation towards their children will lead them to internalize the higher qualification as an inevitable choice [3, 22, 24]. In contrast, parents from disadvantaged groups can only provide the emotional support to their children, rather than the practical advice related to PG education, due to their low levels of educational attainment [24, 25]. In this sense, students' educational choices are the product of cultural capital in the process of intergenerational transmission [3]. On this basis, disparities in social capital further reinforce inequalities in access to the postgraduate entrance examination. Bourdieu defines social capital as the aggregate of the actual or potential resources that individuals can obtain from a stable and durable social network [22]. This network provides support with collective-owned capital for each of its members to entitle them with credit [22]. During the process of PGEE, underprivileged students rely more on non-family social relationships to access information associated with PG examination , such as senior students and teachers, compared to students from high SES families [24]. Since most of the students from low SES background are less likely to have a personal computer, their parents also lack the experience of using the internet for information searching [25]. Meanwhile, the disadvantaged family's social network is characterized as a homogeneous class, and it is impossible for them to have friends in powerful positions or access to the non-public available reference books and past papers [24, 26]. Under this circumstance, students from low SES families are more likely to face the challenge of the inequality of the distribution of information resources related to PG examination [25]. Consequently, the cultural and social capital reinforce the correlation between the PGEE opportunities and SES, thereby reproduce the educational inequality.

5. The misrecognition and symbolic violence in credential competition

However, structural inequalities within credential competition are often interpreted as differences in individual ability. The uniform examination schedule, entry requirement, and marking criteria has created a seemingly fair competitive environment [27]. This means that students can become postgraduate students as long as they put in the effort and fulfill the requirement [25]. In this process, 'merit-based selection' is considered as a 'doxa', that is, "a set of fundamental beliefs which does not even need to be asserted in the form of an explicit, self-conscious dogma" [27, 28]. Under the influence of doxa, students tend to regard lowered their aspirations of educational institutions as personal strategic choices, instead of recognizing the negative impacts of the unequal distribution of capital towards individuals [27], and this process is defined by Bourdieu and Wacquant as 'misrecognition' [29]. When students misrecognize the structural constraint as individual agency, they participate in their own domination, and then facilitate the operation of symbolic violence [27, 30]. Symbolic violence legitimizes the unequal opportunities of education caused by SES as the differences of student ability, which conceals the reinforcing role of the PGEE system towards the inequality of SES.

6. Discussion: the limitations of cultural reproduction theory

Although Bourdieu's theoretical framework provides an effective lens for examining access to postgraduate entrance examination opportunities amid the massification of higher education, its emphases on structural factors also limit the analysis of individuals agency and social change. More precisely, the cultural reproduction theory argues that social change only be expected from the small segment of population, such as visionaries or sociologists, rather than ordinary people, who have no choice but to be reproduced within prevailing power relations and social structures, since their insufficient of reflexivity [31]. This theoretical framework is often criticized for determination,

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namely underestimating the likelihood of individuals to overcome structural constraints [31]. Liu's research illustrates that, for instance, the non-family social network is beneficial to underprivileged students to compensate for their lack of cultural capital [24]. Disadvantaged students can succeed in the postgraduate entrance examination by building ties with teachers through referrals from senior students, thereby mitigating inequalities in information resources [24]. In this sense, Bourdieu's theoretical framework has an advantage in analyzing the impacts of social structure with respect to the power relations and SES reproduction, rather than the possibility of individual agency towards social structure. Although the cultural reproduction theory is insufficient to explain the individual agency, it does not deny or exclude agency. This is because Bourdieu considers the 'habitus' as a structure that is not only shaped by social structure and class, but shaping individuals' practices [32]. Thus, legitimate criticism of Bourdieu's theory should focus on the insufficient discussion on agency, instead of misinterpreting it as a deterministic tendency.

7. Conclusion

Drawing on Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction as the theoretical framework, this study employs the concepts of cultural capital, social capital, habitus, misrecognition and symbolic violence to examine how the massification of higher education and the "postgraduate examination fever" reproduce inequalities among Chinese undergraduates. This research argues that the massification of tertiary education converts the SES differences into the disparities in educational institutions and educational credentials, and influence undergraduates' access to postgraduate education through employers' screening standards and labor market transition, thereby legitimize the disparities of capital into personal ability. This research may overemphasize the role that structural inequalities play in the educational system, thus ignoring the possibility of underprivileged groups to succeed in PGEE by individual efforts and accumulate non-family social capital actively to overcome the structural constraint. Meanwhile, the limitations also reflect that all the arguments are based on the analysis of the existing research with limited discussion of how the symbolic violence influences students from different SES to lower aspirations of educational institutions. For example, the aspiration of institutions is lowered from Project 985 to Project 211, or from Project 211 to non-elite four-year universities. In this field, the future research directions can focus on the impacts of the PGEE system's reform (namely, some of the universities stop to offer the academic degrees of postgraduates, and enlarge the scale of professional degrees of postgraduates) towards the fairness of higher education.

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