

## Original article

# Beyond family influences: Admission to humanities departments at an elite university in China

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### Abstract:

Most of the current research on higher education admission and major selection in Western contexts emphasises the role of family capital. This paper, based on interviews of students at a prestigious university in China, reveals that family capital is not the key driver of studying humanities at elite universities. Beyond family influences, this study emphasises the Chinese public education system as a field offering standardised tests and good teachers, which enhance academic advancement while mitigating the effects of capital. In addition, students' recognition of the importance of learning, identification with the public education system, and academic interests in the humanities, contribute to the formation of a habitus conducive to competency in humanities admissions at top universities. Overall, this study enriches the understanding of elite higher education admission in China and calls for attention to public investment in promoting educational equity.

## 1. Introduction

The mechanisms driving educational inequality in elite higher education admission have attracted broad academic attention. Bourdieu emphasised the role of cultural capital from families in students' potential pathways to become academic elites and major selection (Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). The choice of humanities as a major is a typical case of admission to an elite university. Bourdieu (1996) particularly pointed out that choosing humanities subjects such as French and philosophy as majors seemingly results from individuals' undefinable knowledge and intellectual tastes that mirror their talents and gifts, but it is actually influenced by family education.

Voluminous existing studies have adopted Bourdieu's thinking toolkits to address higher education admission and major selection issues. Many researchers affirm some positive impacts of cultural capital on students' academic success (Kaufman and Gabler, 2004; Roksa & Potter, 2011). This

account suggests that the inclination towards humanities departments, which necessitates substantial cultural absorption, appears predominantly to stem from upbringing within the family context. Some researchers assert that students with a larger endowment of cultural capital are more inclined to opt for majors in the humanities rather than in the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) disciplines (Zimdars et al., 2009; Hu & Wu, 2019). Nonetheless, previous studies were mostly conducted in the Western contexts and may not well delineate the mechanism of elite higher education admission in other societies.

China provides an interesting context for exploring this issue. While the influence of family capital is undeniable, it may not be the most important force shaping students' academic prospects in China. Nowadays, public schools and universities constitute the main body of China's education system, and the National College Entrance Examination (NCEE) has been the primary approach for university admission (Ashraf, 2014).

China's education system values standardised tests instead of adopting subjective criteria. It does not encourage recommendation letters and individual interviews in the admission process, which are in favour of maintaining the upper class in some Western societies (Karabel, 2006). NCEE scores are adopted as the major criteria to enrol students, leaving little scope for manipulation and largely guaranteeing fair access to higher education (Wu, 2017). Students who score higher in NCEE have a higher chance of admission to a prestigious university and a wider range of subject options. The enrolment plan varies by province, depending on how universities distribute quotas to specific provinces based on a comprehensive analysis. Special admission policies are implemented to promote educational equity, including a stipulation that a certain proportion of students from poor or rural areas should be admitted to elite universities (Yan & Wu, 2020). Currently, many studies have examined China's higher education admission, focusing on the discourse of family capital (Chiang, 2018; Liu et al., 2019; Zhang & Wang, 2020). Culturally sensitive approaches are lacking here, including research into the more unique factors driving educational equity in China. There is also a lack of attention to selecting humanities as an undergraduate major, which could be a typical case for the examination of the narrative of capital.

Based on Bourdieu's notions—capital, field and habitus, this research aims to explore how Chinese students enter humanities departments at an elite university. While acknowledging the significance of family influence, it underscores the role of the Chinese public education system as a field that offers situational facilitators—teachers, and standardised tests—that particularly aid students without affluent capital and promote educational equity. It also affirms the effects of individual qualities that shape a habitus favourable for this public education system and elite higher education admission. Therefore, the study makes a significant contribution to the discourse on higher education admission and major selection by challenging the prevailing emphasis on family capital found in much of the existing research, particularly in Western contexts. It not only sheds light on the dynamic mechanisms of contemporary China's elite formation in the humanities field, but also echoes the discussions of educational equity from a specific socio-cultural context. More broadly, it advocates for increased public investment in order to enhance educational equity in China and beyond.

## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1 Educational equity

The study of elites is imperative if the mechanisms driving social injustice and inequality are to be identified in sociological research (Rahman Khan, 2011, 2012). Educational equity emphasises that all students, regardless of their socioeconomic background and geographic location, should have equal access to quality education and university admission opportunities. Admission to elite universities and choosing a major play crucial roles in social mobility. Students who gain access to prestigious institutions often have greater opportunities for networking, internships, and employment, which can help

break the cycle of poverty and reflect upward social mobility. It is therefore important to ensure that all students have the information, resources and support they need to access elite higher education.

The majors selected can significantly impact future career opportunities and income potential (Hu & Wu, 2019). Humanities programs remain highly specialised and non-vocational, often neglecting to equip students with practical skills sought by employers. Humanities graduates find it harder to compete for jobs compared to other disciplines, with lower starting salaries and greater difficulty in securing positions (Schneider & Sigelman, 2018). This phenomenon also suggests that students with affluent resources from family may be able to choose humanities as a major. Therefore, studies of admissions to elite universities, and particularly to humanities departments, can reveal the educational inequalities of a society.

### 2.2 Bourdieu's thinking toolkits: field, capital and habitus

Many studies on students' higher education admission fall within Bourdieu's discourse. Three concepts stand out in this discourse. The first one is capital. "Envisioned as consisting of the stock of resources a family possesses that can be consumed or invested to enhance the family's well-being and functioning" (Waithaka, 2014, p. 472), capital is supposed to be multifaceted in the form of economic, social, and cultural resources, as outlined by Bourdieu (1996). Second, the term field denotes the societal domains or spaces where objective relationships between different entities are established (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). It is characterised by its specific rules, power dynamics, and hierarchies. There are different fields in society, each with its own logic of practice (Dai & Hardy, 2023). Third, the notion habitus refers to the internalised dispositions, attitudes, and ways of thinking that individuals develop, which are fluid and modifiable. Influenced by the accumulation of capital and the social structures in which individuals are embedded, it can further shape individuals' perceptions, judgments, and behaviours (Bourdieu, 1980). Most studies stress the role of family capital, while few studies consider the incorporation of field and habitus with capital.

Previous studies have highlighted the impact of family capital on university admissions. Cultural capital was seen as the most direct form of capital influencing academic achievement. Bourdieu (1996) identified familiarity with the dominant culture as a means of attaining and accumulating cultural capital in order to gain the desired profits. Families with high cultural capital can provide opportunities, specialisation (i.e. breadth of options available) and support for children (Jayakumar & Page, 2021). As the operationalisation of cultural capital remains largely unexplained, there exist numerous interpretations including cultural attributes, resources, and activities. For instance, some researchers pointed out that cultural activities, including parental reading habits and beaux-arts participation, can facilitate students' school outcomes (Zimdars et al., 2009). Parents' cultural knowledge and attitudes, such as their interests in art (Kaufman and Gabler, 2004) and encouragement to children to participate in

cultural activities (Uerz et al., 2004), would help build their children's comparative strength in humanities subjects (Hu & Wu, 2019). Parents' involvement in educational activities would pass the cultural knowledge, attitudes, and skills to their children, which increases the children's likelihood of admission to top universities (Kaufman and Gabler, 2004). Parents' socioeconomic background, characterised by their income level, educational level, and occupational status, has also been used to represent the possession of cultural capital in data analysis (Sullivan, 2001).

Economic capital (Waithaka, 2014) and social capital (Bourdieu, 1996), both closely related to cultural capital, have been proposed as other critical forms of capital that influence students' university admission and major choices. Researchers have found that parents' high level of educational attainment (Liu, 2013) and high income (Sheng, 2017) could better secure students' matriculation in Chinese elite universities. Similarly, parents' high occupational status facilitates university applicants in the arts more than those in science (Zimdars et al., 2009). Social capital could act as a mediator of the relationship between cultural and economic capital and access to elite universities (Gao & Ng, 2017; Zhang & Wang, 2020). Some researchers even argued that the effects of social capital have more weight than economic and cultural capital in elite universities' matriculation (Zhang & Wang, 2020). However, over-emphasis on capital risks is over-deterministic and lacks consideration of agency and social change (Jenkins, 1992), typically when the effects of capital on students' elite higher education matriculation and major choices are not consistent.

In addition to capital, habitus plays an important role in students' academic development. Applying the concept to elite higher education matriculation, scholars have paid growing attention to a narrative of character-building, self-development, and personal efficacy. Kaufman and Gabler (2004) contended that in the United States, applicants' uniqueness plays a significant role in admission to elite colleges, the same as cultural capital does. Dar and Getz (2007) associated ability with capital to explain the degree subject selection in Israel, claiming that university students in education and, to a lesser extent, the humanities, had lower ability than those pursuing prestigious professions (i.e., medicine and law, or natural or social sciences). Perez-Adamson and Mercer (2016) have posited that a solid sense of self-efficacy was well developed among state school students who finally entered the University of Cambridge. The discussion of individual characteristics that are crucial for habitus formation reveals other possible interpretations of admission to humanities departments at elite universities.

### 3. China's case

China's public education system provides an interesting field that may present different mechanisms of students' admission to elite universities and subject selections. Existing literature contends that the competition for a place at an elite university in China depends on capital. Some researchers found that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are less likely to achieve high NCEE scores thus lower chances

to enter prestigious universities (Liu et al., 2019). Another study claims that NCEE can intensify educational inequality, especially caused by the disparity in educational development between urban and rural areas (Huang, 2020). However, a few studies have shown that capital may have limited functions in East Asian countries (Evans et al., 2010; Sheng, 2017). For example, Sheng (2017) has found that parental occupational status and family income have little impact on students' choices of degree subjects. Chiang (2018) has postulated that parental involvement produces limited effects on students' academic performance because elite parents also rely on public high schools and seldom participate in school activities. How parental resources contribute to children's academic outcomes remains undecided.

Exploring educational equity in different contexts is crucial, as views on students' opportunities for admission to elite universities and degree choices vary across societies. Within the Chinese socio-cultural landscape, profoundly shaped by Confucian ideals, the concept of educational equity is closely associated with students' abilities and efforts in securing access to prestigious universities and choosing their academic subjects (Opheim, 2004; Zhang, 2016). Some studies also reveal individual characteristics that are closely related to habitus formation and play an important role in academic development. Hu & Wu (2019) discovered that both self-efficacy and self-esteem can significantly mediate the relationship between cultural capital and majoring in broadly defined liberal arts fields when they studied China's university major selection. This relationship underscores how students' perceptions of their capabilities and worthiness in pursuing humanities disciplines can influence their admission processes to elite universities and major selection.

Therefore, this study seeks to provide a comprehensive reexamination of capital, habitus, and field to understand Chinese students' selection of humanities as majors at elite universities, potentially offering new insights into the relevance of Western theories in this context.

## 4. Methods

Qualitative research methods can provide rich and comprehensive descriptions of the interactive forces involved in the targeted process (Patton, 2015). By conducting qualitative research, specifically interviews and thematic analysis, this study can shed light on students' academic trajectories in terms of their university admission and subject selections through students' own narratives.

Data was collected primarily through semi-structured interviews which helped obtain crucial information in a short period and explore each participant's unique story. Purposive sampling was used to gain in-depth knowledge of specific cases that are critical to the purpose of the research (Patton, 2015). Previous discussions suggest the significant impact of accumulated family capital. Yet, the current exploratory study aims to gather insights into the extent to which family influences shape the decision to study humanities at elite universities, guiding the rationale for participant selection. Participants were from a prestigious university in China, known

for its high-ranking humanities programs. They confirmed their academic interests and have pursued a higher degree in the humanities field. Compared with current undergraduates at university, these graduates had ampler life and academic experiences to retrospect and reflect on their major choices. This indicates that they have a genuine interest in the humanities, with the opportunity to pursue other disciplines yet opting for humanities instead. Snowball sampling was also adopted to increase the possibility of inviting participants. The sample was as balanced as possible in terms of gender and department. Finally, 10 participants accepted interview invitations. Though the number of participants was relatively small, it allowed for a more intensive and detailed examination of each individual's experiences and perspectives. The interviewees' demographic information is shown in Table 1.

Ethical considerations were paramount throughout the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before interviews began. Confidentiality was maintained by anonymising participants' identities and securely storing data. Informed by Bourdieu's theory of capital, field and habitus, the participants were asked to answer open-ended questions and follow-up questions in semi-structured interviews. The questions asked about the students' pre-NCEE academic development to identify various factors that influenced their matriculation at the university and major selection. Participants were encouraged to share their stories freely, and care was taken to create a safe and respectful environment for open dialogue.

The data were analysed in three stages using both inductive analysis and deductive analysis. On the one hand, NVivo 14 was used to identify recurring and significant occurrences in order to better organise qualitative data (DCreswell & Poth, 2012). The themes that influence students' academic growth were labelled, such as the impact of cultural capital on students and the public education system. On the other hand, the concepts of capital, field, and habitus facilitate the identification of related materials and the discussion of the connoted discourses associated with pre-existing concepts. By doing so, the research aimed to construct a nuanced understanding of how various factors collectively influenced students' decisions to pursue humanities at an elite university.

## 5. Findings

### 5.1 Family influences on admission to humanities departments at elite universities

This section articulates how participants were endowed with capital and developed habitus for humanities competence in the family field. Families with abundant capital could help their children cultivate a habitus conducive to success in admission to an elite university and develop academic interests in the humanities early. While the findings largely confirm Bourdieu's articulation of the reproduction of elites (Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990), there are other findings that cannot be well explained by such a discourse.

Family serves as a critical field that offers various forms of capital. Students' family capital was assessed according to their parents' educational level and occupation, parental

involvement in students' study and families' cultural resources. Regional and urban-rural disparities exacerbated the effects of differences in capital possession (Liu, 2013). This research found that five of the ten interviewees (B, C, G, H, and J) had relatively rich family capital, characterised by parents' holding advanced degrees (bachelor or above), prestigious career status (e.g., engineers and university teachers) and active parental involvement to students' basic education. Four of the ten interviewees (A, D, F and I) had relatively mediocre capital, with lower educational level and social status of the parents and less parental involvement. Interview E was the most disadvantaged in terms of capital. He was the only participant from the rural area who spent his childhood in the countryside and whose family's income was still from agriculture work. Participants with rural backgrounds accounted for a small proportion of the total, which coincidentally corresponded with the low ratio of enrolment of rural students at their university when the interviewees were admitted.

Interviewees' early educational experiences showed that family capital contributed to their academic progress. For instance, interviewee J appreciated his father's efforts to instil a reading habit by purchasing and discussing certain books in the humanities and social sciences. He remembered his father used to "analyse the novel thoroughly, like the development of the characters in the novel... and interpret a few popular novels quite profoundly". Such discussion motivated him to read relevant books. He also claimed that a book called *The Big Questions*, as purchased by his father when he was a high school student, kindled his interest in philosophy and influenced his decision to pursue the major of philosophy. Similarly, interviewee B's maternal grandfather, who was "educated in a traditional private school", guided him to "read Confucius' *Analects* and practice calligraphy" when he was a pupil. The familial tastes and cultural preferences were passed down to B, encouraging him to "read the introductory work to the ancient canon, such as *Translation and Commentary of Confucius' Analects* as well as the *Introduction to Chinese Studies*" in his juvenile, developing an academic interest in Chinese literature during his high school years. Therefore, it could be said that family capital can shape students' interests in reading, including content selection, reading methods, and book taste in an early stage.

Such familial influences aligned students with the expectations and norms of the education system, thereby facilitating their academic performance at school. Students' cultural activities and broadened horizons can help them stand out for gaining bonus scores before NCEE. Interviewees F and J obtained bonus points through independent enrollment, while interviewee G received them for merit. These bonus points enhanced their prospects for admission to prestigious universities in China, particularly for G and J, who had relatively high family capital.

Further, family capital can shape students' habitus, including their values, interests, and dispositions, which influence their academic interests and performance in the humanities field. Families with abundant capital could intentionally enlarge their children's outlook through parental knowledge and attitudes. Students would then be more likely to be equipped

**Table 1.** Demographic Information of Interviewees.

	Gender	Department	University admission approach	Origin	Parental educational level		Parental occupation	Family capital
A	Male	Chinese Language and Literature	NCEE	Guizhou	Father	High school	Civil servant	Middle
					Mother	High school	Bank staff	
B	Male	Chinese Language and Literature	NCEE	Inner Mongolia	Father	Bachelor	Civil servant	High
					Mother	Bachelor	Bank staff	
C	Female	Chinese Language and Literature	NCEE	Hebei	Father	Bachelor	Civil servant	High
					Mother	Bachelor	Local university teacher	
D	Female	Chinese Language and Literature	NCEE	Jiangsu	Father	Military school	Military cadre	Middle
					Mother	Bachelor	Vocational senior high school teacher	
E	Male	History	NCEE	Jiangxi	Father	Primary school	Worker, peasant	Low
					Mother	Primary school	Worker, peasant	
F	Female	History	NCEE, Bonus scores from independent enrolment <sup>1</sup>	Beijing	Father	Junior college	State-owned company staff	Middle
					Mother	High school	Medical worker	
G	Female	History	NCEE, Bonus scores for merit students <sup>2</sup>	Beijing	Father	Bachelor	Military cadre	High
					Mother	Master	University teacher	
H	Male	Philosophy	NCEE	Gansu	Father	Bachelor	Engineer, businessman	High
					Mother	Bachelor	Pharmaceutical company lab personnel	
I	Female	Philosophy	NCEE	Shanxi	Father	Bachelor	Civil servant	Middle
					Mother	Bachelor	Kindergarten teacher	
J	Male	Philosophy	NCEE, Bonus scores from independent enrolment	Shanghai	Father	Master	Company manager	High
					Mother	Bachelor	Engineer	

Notes: <sup>1</sup>This suggests that additional scores based on students' performance in independent enrolment can be added to students' scores in NCEE to ensure their high probability of being admitted to a top university. Such policy often does not take interprovincial differences into consideration. <sup>2</sup>When the interviewees participated in the NCEE, the national policy selected provincial excellent students who performed well academically, morally, and physically, automatically adding 10 points to their NCEE scores.



with a knowledge repository in the humanities and gain a deeper understanding of a specific degree subject. For instance, interviewee G studied in Britain for one year because her mother went there as a visiting scholar when she was a middle school student.

Interviewees with high capital tended to develop their academic interests in the humanities earlier than other students. As the interviewees graduated from their bachelor's program, they could recall the approximate time of identifying their academic interests in the humanities and deciding to pursue higher degrees: B, C, G, J, and H formed their academic aspirations before the end of the first academic year of their bachelor program whereas I, D, F, A and E who have less capital confirmed their academic interests when they were senior university students.

However, family capital does not determine the academic success of interviewees in education systems. On the one hand, habitus shaped by the family may conflict with the demands of school. Some participants may feel their preferences were not aligned with their surroundings. For instance, interviewee J possessed a wealth of cultural capital, which aided his early growth of academic interests in humanities but also provided him with more diverse channels of obtaining knowledge. Then he held a different perspective on knowledge acquisition from his high school, which led to a growing conflict between his personal academic interests in humanities and the learning environment that emphasised science subjects more:

I used to read my own books, like literature, in class, even when I was in a very important class such as physics and chemistry. It made me very anxious at the time because I knew that such a situation would cause problems for my scores, but I really could not arouse my interest in studying science as my classmates did.

This tension remained unsolved until he declared philosophy as his future major and was able to ally his academic interests with preparations for tested humanities subjects in NCEE.

On the other hand, interviewees with medium and low family capital were also able to have a positive family cultural environment for habitus formation conducive to academic interest in the humanities. The parents of interviewees A, E, and F did not attend college, but they all expected their children to perform well academically and promoted their studies. As interviewee F commented, her parents provided "more discipline than detailed instructions", such as taking her to bookshops to establish a reading passion. Interviewee E, a student from a rural area, had a strong desire to learn from an early age and developed his academic aspiration during his university years, not much later than his peers from wealthier families. He provided one recollection of his family's education, indicating respect for knowledge and the desire to attend premier universities:

It is normal for parents to require their children to study diligently. My parents not only told me to go to a good university but also directly encouraged me to enter prestigious universities like Tsinghua University or Peking University. ... Their view and approach to

acquiring information are not as conservative as I had supposed.

Therefore, the discourse on capital falls short of adequately explaining the academic success of Chinese students from varied backgrounds, particularly students with middle and low family capital. While acknowledging family backgrounds as unavoidable and fundamental conditions (Hu & Kang, 2019), in the following sections, the study discussed other important mechanisms that promote students' admission to humanities departments at elite universities.

## 5.2 Beyond family influences

The interviewees indicated that the public education system is an important field, with standardised tests and good teachers, which facilitated their academic success in university admission. It provides affluent capital for students from a variety of backgrounds to prepare for the NCEE. To some extent, it could constrain the impacts of capital, allowing students from all backgrounds to have a relatively fair chance to attend top universities. Even the humanities, which appear to require the most capital, are not disproportionately weighted toward culturally wealthy families.

It is worth noticing that all the interviewees were beneficiaries of the standardised tests, which have fair competition rules, while forming a habitus adapted to such a field. Almost all the interviewees had been aware of the pursuit of academic excellence and had done well in examinations since they were in primary school. Interviewee F, who was precocious and rebellious as a child, was possibly an exception. Nonetheless, she realised that she needed to "focus more on the studies" as she entered middle school, which helped her catch up rapidly in examinations. Based on such recognition, as all interviewees have reported, they devoted an increasing amount of time to studying as they grew older. It could be said that participants' self-perceptions of the significance of learning facilitated their academic advancement. They all attended local elite high schools which attract students with high scores in the locally administered entrance examinations. The local elite high schools are public schools that are government-sponsored with capable teachers, advanced facilities, and good schooling environments, generally well preparing students for the NCEE.

As participants grew up, meeting their institutional educational requirements for NCEE, not necessarily driven by family capital, played an increasing role in gaining entry to elite universities and favoured humanities departments. All of them scored highly in their respective provinces, with little variation. Seven were admitted to their university solely based on NCEE scores while only three of the interviewees relied on the bonus scores. Interviewees A, B, C, and D all ranked top 10 in their province in the NCEE, as Chinese language and literature "required the highest score among humanities subjects". Hence, the standardised test subjected to stringent university admission procedures could undermine the impact of family capital on college enrolment to a large degree, encouraging students from diverse backgrounds to enter dream departments through their abilities and efforts.

Moreover, the interviewees acknowledged the importance

of good teachers in their pathways to humanities departments at elite universities. This was manifested firstly in the teachers' assistance in developing good study habits in students, thus laying a solid academic foundation for students' academic success. Interviewee A admired his Chinese high school teacher, who once assigned an essay with "no limits on the topic, the number of words, or the subject matter", but instead "allowed everyone to write whatever they wanted". "That time I got full marks for my essay," he recalled, "He was especially supportive of this type of writing and then helped me develop a habit of thinking and reflecting at all times." While E also expressed gratitude for one of his primary school teachers, the difference was that good teachers performed a more unique and important role in less-developed areas:

"The teacher was quite strict. He kept a tight rein on us. But I still respect him even now. In the rural area, it is not easy to find such a responsible teacher. He had a conscious awareness of developing the students' good study habits and taught them to practice good handwriting."

The interviewee E also recalled his interest and perseverance in reading books at an early age:

Once I took a chair on the side of the street to read books beside a bookstore. One of my middle school teachers came by and saw what I was doing, and she noticed that it was noisy in the street filled with people. She praised my behaviour when she went back to school because I managed to read books while sitting on the street.

Interviewee E was motivated to continue reading by the encouraging response, but he also reflected on his reading passion in everyday life: "Perhaps it was because I had nothing else to do when I was young in a small town that lacked recreational facilities." Despite growing up in a relatively poor environment, he seized limited cultural resources to build his competency and gain high marks in exams, leading to his entry to a local elite high school. Based on his expanded outlook and the recommendation of his history teacher, he "prioritised history books and purchased some notable historical works", opening the way for him to major in history. The tenacity and fortitude he exhibited in his academic growth also contributed to his competency in NCEE.

It is evident that some interviewees' teachers stimulated students' academic interest in humanities. Some interviewees' experiences showed that teachers' instruction was a direct channel for them to improve their aesthetic taste and analytical thinking while also increasing their academic interest in a particular subject. Interviewee F highlighted the distinctiveness of her history teacher:

His management style is much the same as that of the university. His class was very open. He provided many opinions framed by historical research, instead of ideologies in textbooks. He taught us to think about everything dialectically, to explore the fundamental causes of historical events, and to think outside the box.

She gained a broader perspective of history given the intellectual inspiration, which influenced her choice of history as her degree subject. Similarly, interviewee A highly spoke

of his Chinese teacher's excellent job of encouraging students to discuss literary works in class: "After I entered university, I realised that this high school teacher's guidance in a debate about ancient poems in class had inspired me to further explore Chinese ancient literature." Some humanities teachers were able to integrate humanistic values into their daily lives, encouraging students to obtain a deeper appreciation for humanities. For example, interviewee A recalled his Chinese high school teacher encouraged students to develop their own hobbies and do meaningful things. His interest in drama was inspired, allowing him to establish a drama club that quickly spread its influence to other classes and grades. He also remembered the teacher started a club that collected discarded bottles and cans at each classroom's entrance once a week, sorted them, sold them, and donated the proceeds to charity. Serving as role models for students, such humanities teachers led students to believe that "it is desirable to learn humanities knowledge and to be such a good person" as interviewee A stated.

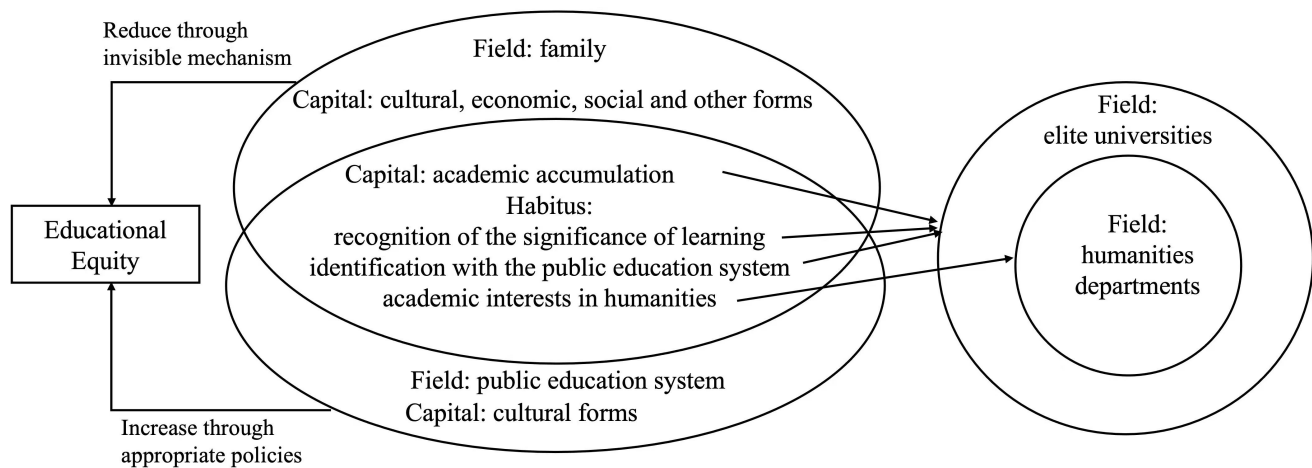
In such circumstances, the interviewees developed the habitus favourable to entering humanities departments in elite universities. They were highly motivated to study and developed their subject preference towards the humanities. Take interviewee H as an example. He recalled that his philosophical enlightenment occurred when he was a secondary school student: "At that time I was watching *The Matrix*..... I was quite shocked and started thinking about these philosophical issues. I've been discussing philosophy and I find it fascinating." He developed a sort of community with his like-minded friends at school, "all of whom were keen on philosophical and political discussion", and they often shared ideas on the way home. He appreciated such communication, which was helpful in cultivating his academic aspirations in philosophy. After several years of studying and exploring philosophy, he was very determined to choose philosophy as his subject at university.

## 6. Discussion and conclusion

Based on Boudieu's notions of capital, field and habitus, this study examined the mechanism of students' admission to humanities departments at elite universities in China. Through interviews, it confirms that affluent family capital is beneficial for students to enter elite universities and develop academic interests in the humanities. However, family capital can only explain part of the academic development of elite humanities students. China's public education system offers students a different field from Western contexts, with comparatively fair access to elite higher education. Meanwhile, the formation of students' habitus, including recognition of the importance of learning, identification with the public education system, and academic interests in the humanities, plays an important role. The findings can be visualised in Fig. 1

### 6.1 Theoretical contributions

As noted, this study has provided lively evidence of Chinese students' academic success bolstered by family capital. It is in line with previous studies (Kaufman and Gabler, 2004;



**Fig. 1.** Chinese Students' Admission to Humanities Departments at an Elite University.

Uerz et al., 2004; Gao & Ng, 2017), which suggest that higher capital can provide a more cultured atmosphere for students' intellectual progress and result in better academic achievement. Further, the study highlights that family capital can promote the early formation of academic interests in the humanities field, which gives them an advantage in considering a particular humanities subject as their future major. This confirms, to some extent, how cultural capital can unwittingly shape students' preference for humanities as a degree subject (Zimdars et al., 2009; Hu & Wu, 2019).

Building on, but departing from, the academic discourse on capital, this study highlights the interactions between capital, field and habitus, and in particular the importance of field and habitus. It emphasises the role of the public education system as an important field that not only facilitates students' intellectual growth (Cheng & Kang, 2016; Chiang, 2018; Li, 2019), but also undermines the impacts of family background on higher education admission (Liang et al., 2012; Wu, 2017). Familiarity with the dominant culture is a core content of cultural capital, but Bourdieu (1996) gives too much weight to the impacts of families rather than schools on the acquisition of cultural capital. A few researchers have pointed out schools' academic emphasis played a pivotal role in students' academic achievement (Hoy et al., 2006), providing capital to students from different family backgrounds. This study articulates that the public education system in China, centring on standardised tests, offers equal opportunities for students to acquire academic accumulation necessary for admission to elite universities. Training of students and the supply of talent to universities are managed by objective criteria, which restricts the impact of family capital. In this case, China's higher education admission procedures around NCEE provide a comparatively fair playing field for participants from different classes with diversified familial education (Wu, 2017). Good teachers in public elite high schools are especially important for students who lack adequate cultural capital in their early childhood.

Based on the joint influence of family and the public education system, students' habitus formation that is conducive to elite university admission can be highlighted: the

recognition of the importance of learning and identification with the public education system. Students with affluent capital may not strictly adhere to the education system due to more diverse channels of obtaining knowledge, which might lead to a failure to develop the competency that enhances their success in NCEE. Students with medium/low capital may face unfavourable environmental factors that cannot be altered, such as a lower social status and parents without a higher education background, yet they could still develop favourable competency and good personal predisposition from the field of the public education system. Existing studies have found that disadvantaged families in China can improve their children's academic performance by strategically converting their limited resources into some sort of cultural capital (Cheng & Kang, 2016) and social capital (Xie & Postiglione, 2016). The students from these families may have the ability and resources to modify their habitus and gain new cultural capital, which helps them build a more competitive portfolio (Wong & Liao, 2022).

Moreover, this study places significant emphasis on major selection within the humanities, a topic that has received limited attention (Hu, 2023; Hu & Wu, 2019). Previous literature indicates that the choice of humanities often exemplifies class reproduction, as affluent families with cultural capital typically support such decisions, even when they do not yield market advantages. This study stands out by revealing the intricate processes involved in selecting humanities as a major, viewing it as a typical case of re-examining the relationship between capital and major selection. Family capital may encourage an early interest in the humanities, but the education system in China exerts a more substantial impact, particularly through interactions with good teachers, especially for students with medium and low family capital. Students' intellectual and behavioural adjustment, including self-perception (Perez-Adamson and Mercer, 2016), may help them take advantage of their resources in China's education system, regardless of capital and family background. This also reflects a dynamic process of forming a habitus which favours students' development of academic interests in humanities and



leads them to choose humanities as a major.

## 6.2 Practical contributions

The study has the following suggestions for China's educational practices. At the institutional level, this study recommends the continuous enhancement of state investment in the public education system to facilitate educational equity in terms of students' access to elite universities. Policies and teaching resources that support public schools can comprehensively increase students' competency, which especially benefits students without rich capital. At the individual level, this study uncovers elite students' habitus that equips them with the required competency to enter humanities departments at a top university. In particular, disadvantaged students could intentionally identify with the institutional requirements, thereby transforming unfavourable conditions into such competency. However, it is worth noting that students' individuality may be affected by their behavioural adjustment strategy to reconcile habitus and the requirements of the field. Thus, while China's education system can limit the influence of capital, students' individuality should be given adequate attention in public schools.

## 6.3 Limitations

The study is not absent from limitations. First, the participant pool was quite limited. Therefore, the study did not seek to generalize its findings but aimed to enhance the global understanding of admissions to humanities programs in elite higher education in China. Future research should involve a larger participant group to offer a more comprehensive perspective. Second, the study considers only one elite university based in Beijing. Examinations of students' academic trajectories in other universities and/or cities will be helpful to portray a more thorough overview. Third, the participants are not current undergraduate students in the university due to the availability of participants and the emphasis on the formation of academic interests in humanities (which is seen as a kind of habitus in this study). Although the typicality of participants in the study enriched theoretical understanding, future studies about current or recently enrolled students are particularly welcome.

## 6.4 Conclusion

In conclusion, this study, grounded in Bourdieu's concepts of capital, field, and habitus, reveals that while affluent family capital facilitates admission to humanities programs in Chinese elite universities, it accounts for only a portion of students' academic success. The unique structure of China's public education system provides a relatively equitable field for access to elite institutions. Furthermore, the interplay between students' habitus and this field also fosters their academic interests in humanities. This research underscores the importance of understanding these dynamics in shaping educational equity. It encourages future research across different contexts, highlighting the need for public support for disadvantaged students' academic growth.

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## Conflict of interest

The author declares no competing interest.

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