

# The Tension Between Chinese Peasants' Family Capital Reproduction Strategies and Massification in Higher Education

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This paper is focused on the tension between Chinese peasants' family capital reproduction strategies and the existing higher education system. Under an institutionalised urban-rural segregation, most rural residents are not entitled to some of the basic social welfare guarantees available to urban residents, such as pensions. As a preparation for the future of their children as well as for themselves, peasants have a strong urge to invest in their children's higher education as their family capital reproduction strategy. However, higher education institutions, without sufficient funding from the government, have to increase enrolment size and charge high tuition fees. Increase in the cost of higher education has strongly impacted on the family economy of rural residents, and the rapid expansion of the system has resulted in an employment crisis for college graduates. Bourdieu's theory of capital reproduction will be applied in the analysis of several cases of rural parents and their children who have participated in higher education. The research eventually leads to the conclusion that, under urban-rural segregation, Chinese peasants are compelled to convert their limited economic capital into academic capital, while the reversibility of this capital conversion is hardly objectively guaranteed.

**Keywords:** higher education; peasants; urban-rural segregation; capital reproduction

## Introduction

### Research Background and Rationale

This paper focuses on Chinese peasants' family capital reproduction strategies and the tension between them and the existing higher education system. The research background is as follows: In 1999 the Chinese government, giving up on its former policy which restricted the size of the higher education system, initiated the process of massification and at the same time drastically increased tuition fees as a means of addressing and counteracting the financial crisis the country was experiencing at the time (Li, 2003, Part 4).<sup>1</sup> From 1998 to 2014, the annual enrolment rate to the national tertiary education system has increased from 1.08 million to 6.98 million (The Central People's Government of the PRC, 2005; Xiong, 2014). This policy has had tremendous impact on the peasantry. Many peasant parents have invested all their resources in the college education of their children (Bradsher, 2013). On the other hand, the employment market has not

seen a corresponding improvement that could help to accommodate the large population of college graduates. Consequently, many rural students have failed to realise their families' dreams. Some are unemployed,<sup>2</sup> and nearly 15 million of them have become what is often referred to as *off-farm workers*,<sup>3</sup> or peasants who have to quit farming and migrate to urban areas (Worker's Daily, 2013, paragraph 1).

The employment crisis for college graduates means that many peasants invest in their children's higher education as their family capital reproduction strategy but fail to realise their goals. Some families are even bordering

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<sup>1</sup> Li was the vice premier of the State Council of the PRC between 1998 and 2003, in charge of education.

<sup>2</sup> In 2013, 35 per cent of the graduates at the undergraduate level signed work contracts; 32 per cent of those who graduated from polytechnics signed work contracts (Lu. Zhang 2013).

<sup>3</sup> Currently, several terms are used to designate the same group, such as "migrant workers", "peasant workers", "farmer-turned workers". "Off-farm workers" is the term the researcher finds to be less misleading.

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on bankruptcy. Even with this disturbing tendency, many parents continue to invest in their children's higher education. Peasants' investment in higher education, an endeavour that appears to be pursued blindly, is related to their difficult situation. The driving force of economic growth in China comes from the large population of off-farm workers, a group that is aging. Most peasants and off-farm workers are engaged in manual work, and many find themselves unfit for the demanding labour when they approach the age of 50 and beyond. Those who are incapable of manual work will have to depend on their children for financial support. Now, more than 40 per cent of off-farm workers are over 40 years of age, compared to 30 per cent in 2008, while the proportion of off-farm workers who are covered by pension insurance is less than one sixth (Harney, 2015). The laws regulating employer duties were not properly respected or complied with, as many entrepreneurs did not pay for off-farm workers' pension insurance. As a result, among those who are over 50 years of age, a population of over 36 million, even fewer have pension insurance. According to a survey carried out in an important rural labour export district, only one out of every 19 off-farm workers over 50 years of age has been given "basic pension insurance for employees" by his or her former employer. The few who have this insurance can receive a pension of 700 *yuan* a month after July 2013. The remaining 18 are entitled to a "new rural social pension insurance" after they turn 60 years of age, which amounts to 80 *yuan* a month. Consequently, they have to depend on their children to cope with their financial burdens (Qiu & Yu, 2013). Up until the present time, China has not established a national insurance system. According to related government regulations, off-farm workers who migrate from one province to another are entitled to apply for an inter-provincial transfer of their pension insurance, but they are only allowed to transfer 12 per cent of the overall funds that their former employers paid for them to the new province (Gov. doc., 2009). Now that off-farm workers often migrate between provinces, even those who are covered by insurance policies often find it difficult to receive a substantial pension.

An underlying factor relating to the peasants' economic difficulties, is an extra-economic policy imposed by the government, what in fact amounts to an institutionalised urban-rural segregation (Gov. doc., 1953; PRC doc., 1958). In this

system, more than 70 per cent of the population is registered as permanent rural residents (China Youth Daily, November 05, 2013), a status passed down from parents to children. Moreover, a vast majority of rural residents are not entitled to some of the basic social welfare guarantees available to urban residents, such as pensions. Since income from agriculture is low, and sometimes peasants are even unable to retrieve their investment in farming production, a large proportion of the rural population has to migrate to urban areas and become off-farm workers. Most of the young and middle-aged people in this group live and work in the city all year round, but it is very difficult for them to obtain the status of permanent urban residents. The large cities with a high number of off-farm-worker inhabitants especially impose severe restrictions on the influx of outsiders, and the central government has formulated policies to legitimise the various excluding regulations imposed by the local authorities (Gov. doc., 2014, No. 25). The Chinese peasants would desperately like to change their status, but they have only a limited number of ways of doing so. A very small number of rural residents who are financially well-off may change their status after they have invested in enterprises or bought houses of a considerable size in urban areas. But for most of them, acquiring a higher education and then being formally employed in the city might appear to be a more realistic plan.

In researching this process it is found that Bourdieu's field theory is applicable: first, a key notion in this theory is that an educational institution may function as an instrument of social class reproduction; second, Bourdieu pays attention to the relationship between education and other societal areas. Concepts related to *capital reproduction* may especially help to interpret how Chinese peasants have failed when they have chosen to invest in higher education. Bourdieu (1996) labels the school system as one of the institutionalised mechanisms of capital reproduction, capable of converting a given form of capital into another form currently in use in another field. Capital holders adopt different strategies and are rewarded with different returns, depending on various factors, including the volume and structure of their capital, the distance between

them and the appropriate information, and the degree to which their social success depends on their academic success (p. 276-7). It is important to note that a precondition for this capital reproduction is that the *convertibility* of the different types of capital is guaranteed, and the *reversibility* of this capital conversion should be objectively guaranteed, otherwise, investment in education would be meaningless (1986, p. 248, 253).

### Research Question

Using Bourdieu's capital reproduction theory, the research question is formulated as follows:

What are the motivations of the Chinese peasants who invest in their children's higher education as their family capital reproduction strategies, especially when rural college graduates can easily be victims of the employment crisis?

### Research Methodology

This paper is built on the researcher's doctoral thesis, which is an important reference. Part of the data material in this paper comes from government documents, as well as formally published books, newspapers and journals. The internet is another important source of information. This paper refers to articles published on the internet, and the web has also served as a channel through which the researcher has had access to government documents and formal publications.

The internet is immensely large and difficult for the authorities to control where the populace can voice their interests, ideas and concerns. On the other hand, government documents and official media reveal the steps the authorities are taking in this area. In this research, attention is focused on both information resources, with the intention of providing a balanced perspective on the issue. The data obtained from the research will be presented in the section below and will be interpreted and discussed according to Bourdieu's theory of capital reproduction.

The focus of this study is the relationship between higher education and the peasant family economy. Other issues, such as government policies related to peasants, economics and education are referred to as background information.

## Results

### Peasants' Family Strategies

Given that most peasants are engaged in heavy physical labour and have a low income, and most important, do not have a guaranteed pension, if their children continue along the same life course, they will be unable to properly support their parents in their old age. In other words, peasants not only have the responsibility to support their families and children, but are also concerned about their own prospects when they join the ranks of the elderly. Faced with such a difficult situation, the peasants are likely to be attracted by the idea of investing in higher education, an endeavour that might benefit both their children and themselves. As one peasant observes, "Without higher education, the only difference for the children in the future is between being peasants or off-farm workers" (Ye & He, 2010). With higher education qualifications, the peasants' children may have better income and may improve their family conditions. More importantly, under the urban-rural segregation system, government policies grant considerable privileges to holders of tertiary education qualifications when they apply for permanent urban status.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, although the peasants have to endure hardships, they invest all they have in their children's higher education, as the following examples show:

*Example 1.* For eight years in a row, Tianzhong Lan migrated from the south to the north of the country to work in the mining industry. Each year before leaving home he would make a will. In 2010, he and another 15 workmates were diagnosed as suffering from pneumoconiosis. They did not receive their compensation of 73 thousand *yuan* until June 2013. He has refused to spend the money on his medical treatment, but would rather build a fund for his children's education. "I have to accept this unfortunate fact, but I do not

<sup>4</sup> Non-local residents who apply for a permanent residence permit in many cities need to accumulate enough "credits" before their cases are considered, and tertiary education qualification holders may earn more credits. The specifications may vary from city to city and from time to time. In Guangzhou, for example, the required minimum credit is 85; an undergraduate qualification/junior middle school qualification brings to the holder 60/5 credits respectively (Gov. doc., 2010).

regret exchanging my life for my children's opportunity to go to college. At least they may lead a different life", he says (Y. Zhang, 2013).

*Example 2.* Yebing Wu, a miner, works almost every weekday, making \$500 a month. He has only one goal: to support his daughter's education. Every year from May to July his wife works in orchards every day from morning until night; the rest of the year, she works in department stores. All their money goes to their daughter's education (Bradsher, 2013).

*Example 3.* Under a bridge in a southern city, Hui Xu (pseudonym), 76 years old, has just sold seven kilograms of waste to a recycling agency in return for four *yuan*. Xu's only near kin in the world is his 21-year-old son, a college student studying in Beijing. His son rarely returns home during the winter and summer vacations in order to save money. "I don't let him know that I'm picking garbage", he says. "I can't let him know this. If his education is interrupted because of this, his future will be ruined" (Tan, 2013).

*Example 4.* A 56-year-old construction worker used to work as a miner. He has supported three children in their pursuit of a higher education. Now that all his children have graduated, he works in construction, a trade that is less dangerous but pays less. Now that most of the debt that he borrowed for his children's education has been repaid, he "only" has a debt of several thousand *yuan*. He is reluctant to reveal the fact that he is the father of college students as he is afraid that his low status might degrade his children (Shao, 2012).

In 2008, on interviewing 50 rural students, the researcher learned that most of their families spent the major part of their annual income on their children's education and some families were even in debt. In rural areas in general, only one out of a dozen children have managed to make their way to tertiary education institutions (Dong, 2015, p. 124). Their parents are not likely to be well-informed about the situation on campuses. Especially in elite universities, where academically excellent students gather, their children who give them pride and hope may be categorised as mediocre and as belonging to a disadvantaged group. Their hope for their children's success may in fact put immense pressure on the shoulders of their children. Cases of rural student suicides have become a serious problem on campuses (Learning.SOHU.com, 2010). Rural parents who fail to anticipate the tremendous difficulties that

their children will have to try to deal with are in fact putting their faith into a system of false hope.

### **The Situation of Higher Education in China**

Higher education in China used to be part of the planned economy. The government controlled the entire process, from the enrolment of new students to the assignment of formal job positions to graduates. With funding entirely covered by governments at different levels, students admitted to universities and colleges enjoyed free education as well as free medical care. Access to higher education meant being upgraded in status and guaranteed financial comfort; for rural youths, it was one of the few routes to the city. Therefore, the National College Entrance Examination has had a strong influence on Chinese society (Dong, 2015, p. 152), and it has greatly shaped the perception peasants have of higher education.

However, insufficient government support for education has been a long-term problem. In 1993, the government promised to allocate four per cent of its GDP to education, but the promise was not realised until 2012 (Lujing Zhang, 2011). Although the vast majority of colleges and universities come under the responsibility of the public sector, the proportion of government funding in the total investment in general higher education is decreasing year by year. To illustrate this, from 1994 to 2001, government input dropped from 82.17 per cent to 54.98 per cent (Yanwei Liu & Hu, 2005). This drop in government funding for education has been compensated for by collecting student tuition fees. Institutions affiliated with local governments especially tend to depend on student tuition fees as well as government allocations. Government allocations make up about 50 per cent of the total funding for higher education (Wu, 2010). By 2000, education tuition has reached 59.5 per cent of the GNP per capita (Yi Liu & F. Zhang, 2004). A study in 2005 revealed that higher education tuition fees increased 20 times over a ten-year period, and the cost of education was the most important cause that impoverished urban and rural residents (C. Zhang, 2008). The rapid expansion of the undergraduate sector has resulted in an employment crisis for college graduates. In 2013, for instance, there were

more than seven million graduates (Gov. doc., 2012), which is far more than the economic system can accommodate (Lu Zhang, 2013), and at this point in time, nearly 15 million of the rural college graduates are in the off-farm workforce (Worker's Daily, 2013, paragraph 1). The income of those who are formally employed also tends to decrease. In some trades, the initial salary is even less than for off-farm workers (Wang, 2012). As a means to alleviate the pressure on the employment market, the enrolment rate of Master's and Doctoral degree students has also increased dramatically. According to the Ministry of Education, in 2011 there were 271,262 PhD candidates and 50,289 PhD graduates. In 2012, it was anticipated that there would be nearly 300,000 PhD candidates and nearly 60,000 PhD graduates (International Finance News, 2013). Many of these graduates cannot find positions relevant to their education. This is in fact a further blow to those who have put their hopes into higher education.

### The Dilemma of Rural Students

Because of their previous perception of higher education and, most important of all, because of their difficult situation, the peasants continue to support their children's pursuit of tertiary education, even though employment prospects are unfavourable. Moreover, peasants living in the isolated rural environments are unfamiliar with school affairs. Teaching staff in rural schools tend to be poorly informed about the university curriculum and employment prospects. As a result, most rural students are more or less blind when it comes to their choices of schools and subjects. Nevertheless, behind this blindness lies the solitary goal: the urge to rise out of the village and be admitted to a school, whatever the cost. In this case, they would choose schools and majors of less prestige and with less competition in relation to their urban peers. Therefore, it is not without reason that rural students tend to accumulate at non-elite campuses (Dong, 2015, p. 147).

These non-elite universities enrol a high proportion of poor students and at the same time are insufficiently funded. It is therefore difficult for such institutions to provide aid for the adequate support of poor students. Those students who are fully or primarily dependent on family funds are heavily burdened financially and psychologically (Dong, 2015, p. 137). In fact, education begins to weigh heavily on peasant family finances right

from elementary school. Since many rural homes are not close to schools,<sup>5</sup> their families have to spend extra funds for compulsory education, for example on board and lodging, other life necessities and travel fees. Some parents even have to rent houses near schools so they take care of their children. By the time they are admitted to higher education institutions, the family funds have already been depleted. The parents have to go into debt to continue to support their children. The parents, in turn, tend to put pressure on their children, as is shown in the following examples:

*Example 5.* My brother and I, like many of the children born in the 1980s, have been through the period when education expense is at its highest from primary to tertiary education. In order to support our education, my family, even the whole extended family, have devoted all they have; my parents, in particular, are completely exhausted. My brother and I have been assigned the mission of changing the life of the whole extended family. My ambition is the same as that of my parents. My goal is to recover the cost of my education after my graduation, and to reward my whole extended family; even my marriage arrangement is supposed to improve the situation of my extended family (He, 2015).

*Example 6.* Wei Xu said: "My parents are simple workers. Their only wish is that I can find a satisfactory job. They believe that a good mastery of knowledge will necessarily lead to good reward, and will improve our lives" (Xin, 2013).

*Example 7.* The daughter was embarrassed that her student life consumed half of all the family income. She was considering quitting her education and finding a job. "Every time my daughter calls home, she would say that she wants to quit", the mother said. "I tell her, 'you must continue your studies, so you can support us when we are old.' But she says that she is under such great pressure that she does not want to consider these responsibilities" (Bradsher, 2013).

*Example 8.* Wei Liu was a typical poor rural student in a non-elite institution: although she

<sup>5</sup> In the twelve years between 1997 and 2009, half of the primary schools in rural China were shut down, with 64 rural primary schools disappearing each day (China Youth Daily, 2011).

excelled at her studies and was once granted a state scholarship, her family was in debt and her younger brother discontinued his education to save money. Only half a year before graduation, she lost all hope about her employment prospects and chose suicide (Jingdong, 2009).

*Example 9.* Xuhai Qin, PhD degree holder, graduated from an elite university. He was disappointed that, in this world, academic knowledge turned out to be worthless, while money, power and social relations were held to be important. Unable to find a job, he chose suicide, leaving behind his mother who for some time had to pick garbage to support his education. He left a suicide note to his mother, in which he says, "My poor mother: It breaks my heart to part with you forever ... I cannot return what you have given to me ... I cannot keep the promise that I made. I am sorry! I am sorry!" (Shu, 2010, 31).

Many of the rural students arrived at university with confidence. But from this initial state they have fallen financially and morally into debt. In the end, disillusionment about the future may be the last straw and they see no way out. While the students in Examples 8 and 9 chose a drastic way out of their agony and guilt, their experiences are not unique (Dong, 2015, p. 149).

### Discussion

The system of urban-rural segregation has not only seriously impeded the economic and social development of rural areas in China, it has also reshaped the mentality and behaviour of the Chinese peasants. Over the past few decades, the identity of peasants in most cases has been symbolised by poverty and vulnerability. Consequently, peasants have developed a new tendency to uproot themselves from their ancestors' villages, as they are even more seriously impoverished (Dong, 2015, p. 159). On the other hand, as most are manual labourers and members of the lower social strata, they do not have access to urban status, which guarantees welfare benefits. Therefore, the peasants tend to have a strong urge to transform their current capital into a new, more profitable form of capital before they have become physically worn out. Peasants are not likely to possess significant economic and social capital, nor are they likely to have access to sufficient information, so they only have limited alternatives when they want to make investments. In their attempts to deal with this disadvantage, the peasants find that in addition to

their physical capital, they have one more resource they can develop: the talent of their children (Dong, 2015, p. 160). Their investment in higher education is what Bourdieu refers to as family capital reproduction strategy.

Even though families which invest in higher education face the real danger of going bankrupt, higher education offers promise for peasants who do not want their children to repeat their own hard lives. Young people qualified for tertiary education have at least the potential to obtain urban status and formal employment in the city, thus providing some guarantees for their parents. Even though it is increasingly hard to realise such hopes owing to the employment crisis for college students, peasants who have very few alternatives still see higher education as the key to escaping their difficult situation. According to Bourdieu (1996), the strategies of those who invest in education are largely defined by the volume and structure of their capital, as well as the degree to which their social success depends on their academic success (p. 276-7). The fact that Chinese peasants manifest a continued enthusiasm for higher education indicates that they are poor in social and economic capital, and that almost all their hopes lie in the academic success of their children. As illustrated by the above-mentioned examples, many parents have suffered a great deal. Some risked their lives working in small mines under atrocious working conditions. Some elderly parents even begged or picked through garbage, and were reluctant to reveal the truth to their children, or to admit that their children were college students because they did not want to detrimentally affect their children's reputation or academic careers. Chinese peasants have invested all they have in their children's higher education regardless the cost; this is a capital reproduction strategy they have developed in a state of desperation, based on rational cost-benefit choices (Dong, 2015, p. 161). Such a rational choice, however, is full of potential bitterness and humiliation.

Bourdieu's (1996) research indicates that various types of educational institutions will reward different agents with differential returns (p. 277). Other researchers also confirm that various kinds of institutions could lead to future income and class positions that

are enormously different (Calhoun, 2000, 49-50; Scott, 1998, 111; Philip Brown, 1995). Such an assumption is not new to many advantaged families in urban areas. For many urban students, the identity of being a college student is no longer the marker of success.<sup>6</sup> The focus has shifted to employment prospects, and the competition is over admittance to elite and renowned institutions. However, it is not easy for many peasants to understand the relationships between the multiple categories of disciplines and institutions,<sup>7</sup> nor do they fully comprehend the significance of the differences between the categories. As most rural students are admitted to non-elite institutions, they will be more vulnerable when turning to the labour market in a time of employment crisis. Often, they will not have good insight into the overall situation until they have witnessed specific examples that they can then reflect on (Dong, 2015, p. 162). Bourdieu (1996) terms this phenomenon as "structural hysteresis of the categories of perception and appreciation", and this structural delay will be greater when one is more distanced from the necessary information (p. 219). Peasants are distanced from updated information by the mechanism of urban-rural segregation. Moreover, since the rural students' ultimate goal is to uproot themselves from the village, they tend to choose institutions and majors of less prestige and with less competition in the market, even if such choices may mean they are wasting their talents. Their strategies are in fact, as Bourdieu (1996) puts it, "strategies of despair" (p. 220). Therefore, when these peasants convert their economic capital to academic capital, the exchange rate is bound to be low.

As Bourdieu (1996) points out, what ultimately allows an academic qualification to acquire its full value in economic and social return is mainly the social capital or even economic capital. Especially when entering into the workforce, inherited social capital, rather than the criteria for academic selection, begins to gain in force (p. 168, 276). In the employment market, poor rural students

apparently belong to the disadvantaged group, for academic capital is their most important capital. Worse still, Chinese economic development heavily depends on labour-intensive industries which mostly recruit workers with low educational levels, leaving little room for college graduates (Dong, 2015, p. 176). As a result, the peasants have been through the following process: they do not want their children to continue along their own life course and therefore invest in their children's higher education at any cost in order to bring about change. When their children cannot find a job after graduation, the families are reduced to debt or even brought to the brink of bankruptcy, reducing their living conditions so they are even worse than other peasants. And even when their children have found jobs, the income may be so low that the family economy cannot be brought back to a balanced position. In other words, in a process through which they try to reconvert their academic capital to economic capital, the profit is low, or their attempts may even be in vain. As one rural student comments, "We never have had doubt about the importance of education. When we get on this track, we find that the cost is much, much more than the return" (He, 2015). This comment on the harsh reality that many Chinese peasants are faced with vividly illustrates Bourdieu's theory of reproduction.

## Conclusion

In a country where there is a surplus of manual labourers and no guarantee of their basic rights, Chinese peasants acquire economic capital through the exchange of their physical labour, but the profits they gain from this are so modest that it is difficult for them to survive. Therefore, they invest in their children's talents, trying to convert their limited economic capital into their children's academic capital by sending them to higher education institutions. They hope that in the future they may profit by reconvert the academic capital into economic capital. Unfortunately, the objective of the state initiated massification in higher education was openly declared as a way of improving the state economy (Li, 2003, Part 4). Rarely has the government introduced measures to improve the employment market to

<sup>6</sup> In most provinces, tertiary education institutions admit 80 per cent of the senior-middle-school graduates (Ministry of Education 2012). On the other hand, 60 per cent of the rural children have been eliminated from the education system before the senior-middle-school stage (Han, 2009).

<sup>7</sup> The Chinese higher education system is an enormous and highly stratified hierarchy. Refer to Xie (2011, 37-38).

accommodate the large population of college graduates. Against such a macro background, peasants are, so to speak, seduced, or rather compelled to convert their limited economic capital into academic capital. For the peasants, the convertibility of the different types of capital is very limited, while the reversibility of this capital conversion is hardly objectively guaranteed. Therefore, higher education as an instrument of capital reproduction fails to function effectively for

many peasant families. However, the peasants, compelled by urban-rural segregation, continue to invest in higher education even when the threat of a serious employment crisis is lurking behind graduation day. They are, so to speak, continuing with what Bourdieu (1996) refers to as "strategies of despair" (p. 220).

### Acknowledgements

My warmest thanks go to Professor Magnus Haavelsrud of Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU), who supervises my research and gives timely help and guidance, and to Mr. Tony Jenkins, who very kindly edited my language.

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