

Mobility without Legitimacy? Affective Reproduction and the Limits of Inclusion in Elite Higher Education

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Abstract

Rural first-generation students in China are often celebrated as evidence of educational mobility, yet entry into elite universities does not necessarily ensure recognition or belonging. Drawing on Bourdieu's field theory and Ahmed's concept of affective economies, this article develops the concept of affective reproduction to explain how classed hierarchies are stabilised through affective legitimacy—tacit norms of confidence, composure, and cosmopolitan aspiration treated as markers of merit. Affective reproduction refers to the reproduction of inequality through the institutional normalisation of particular emotional dispositions as signs of competence and belonging. Based on semi-structured interviews with 26 rural first-generation undergraduates at a Double First-Class university, the study shows how habitus–field disjuncture—a mismatch between socially formed dispositions and institutional expectations—is experienced through hesitation, self-surveillance, and emotional labour. While some students gradually recalibrate or strategically adapt, others report persistent fatigue or selective resistance. The findings reframe belonging as an affectively governed institutional process and highlight the limits of access-centred accounts of educational mobility.

Keywords: affective reproduction; affective legitimacy; student belonging; rural first-generation students; elite higher education



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Introduction

Rural first-generation university students in China are frequently celebrated as embodiments of educational mobility. Their admission to elite universities is widely framed as evidence that meritocratic selection and higher education expansion have opened pathways for historically marginalised populations. Within dominant public discourse, access to prestigious institutions signifies transformation: a decisive movement from structural disadvantage to opportunity. In this narrative, inclusion is equated with change.

Yet access does not necessarily translate into full recognition, legitimacy, or belonging within stratified institutional spaces. Entry into elite higher education may confer formal membership while leaving intact the implicit norms that regulate who appears naturally entitled to occupy such spaces. If educational transformation is assessed solely through expanded participation, more subtle forms of inequality risk remaining analytically invisible. This study begins from a different premise: that inequality within elite higher education may persist not only through differential access to resources, but through the affective regulation of legitimacy.

Over the past decade, scholarship on student belonging has expanded considerably (Crawford et al. 2024; Strayhorn 2012). However, much of this research conceptualises belonging primarily as an individual-level psychological construct associated with adjustment, persistence, and well-being (Santelices 2026; Tinto 1994). While such approaches illuminate important aspects of student experience, they risk individualising what may in fact be structurally patterned dynamics. Research on working-class and first-generation students in elite universities demonstrates that feelings of “not belonging” are socially produced and institutionally embedded rather than individually generated (Jack 2019; Reay, Crozier, and Clayton 2009; Stephens et al. 2012). Nevertheless, even within this critical tradition, analyses often foreground disparities in cultural capital without fully theorising how institutional environments render particular emotional dispositions legitimate and others deficient.

This question acquires particular salience in the Chinese context. Despite rapid expansion, higher education remains sharply stratified. State-sponsored excellence initiatives have institutionalised a hierarchical system in which symbolic, academic, and labour-market capital is concentrated in a limited number of universities (Zha 2020; Zheng and Postiglione 2025). Admission to such institutions represents entry into a field saturated with accumulated prestige and historically sedimented norms. For rural students, the transition into elite universities has been shown to involve not only resource constraints but also classed struggles over legitimacy, voice, and embodied comfort in elite spaces (Li 2013; Xie and Reay 2020). Rural students who are the first in their families to attend university often navigate this transition with limited inherited cultural capital and uneven access to elite-oriented social networks (Li et al. 2024; Xie and Liu 2026). Yet existing research in China has largely emphasised academic

preparation or psychological stress, offering limited analysis of how institutional cultures regulate belonging through affective expectations.

To address this gap, this study shifts the analytical focus from individual adaptation to institutional affective governance. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's theory of field, habitus, and cultural capital, elite universities can be understood as classed social fields in which particular dispositions, linguistic styles, and forms of embodied confidence are legitimised and misrecognised as merit (Bourdieu 1984, 1986; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). Habitus is understood here as a system of durable and transposable dispositions acquired through prior socialisation that shapes what feels natural, possible, and appropriate within a given social world (Bourdieu 1990). Students whose socialisation aligns with dominant middle-class norms often experience these expectations as self-evident. By contrast, rural first-generation students may encounter a disjuncture between their embodied habitus and the taken-for-granted rules of the elite academic field, producing forms of uncertainty and self-surveillance (Lehmann 2014; McLaughlin 2026). In the Chinese case, this disjuncture has been theorised as a form of hysteresis and emotional suffering emerging at the intersection of rural–urban inequalities and elite institutional cultures (Chen 2022).

However, while Bourdieusian analyses of reproduction powerfully illuminate capital disparities and symbolic misrecognition, they tend to foreground structural distribution over the affective processes through which inequality becomes experientially legitimate. Cultural hierarchies persist not only because capital is unevenly distributed, but because dominant dispositions come to feel natural, appropriate, and deserved within institutional life. Inequality is stabilised when emotional alignment with institutional norms is interpreted as evidence of competence rather than as the effect of prior socialisation.

To illuminate this dimension, this study also draws on Sara Ahmed's theorisation of affective economies and the politics of belonging (Ahmed 2004, 2014). Ahmed conceptualises emotions not as private states but as relational forces that circulate within spaces and attach to bodies, shaping boundaries between those who appear “at home” and those who appear out of place. Within elite universities, belonging is not merely achieved through academic success; it is regulated through subtle affective cues that signal confidence, ease, entitlement, and naturalness. Recent research on first-generation students highlights how emotional self-doubt and constrained entitlement are socially produced within elite environments rather than arising from individual deficiency (Boliver et al. 2025; Lin-Januszewski 2026; Phillips et al. 2020).

By integrating field theory with affect theory, this article advances a central theoretical claim: Elite universities sustain classed inequalities not only through the distribution and recognition of cultural capital, but through affective reproduction—the stabilisation of hierarchy via the institutionalisation of affective legitimacy. In this article, affective reproduction refers to the process by which institutional environments normalise

particular emotional dispositions and styles of self-presentation as legitimate signs of competence, merit, and belonging, thereby reproducing social hierarchy at the level of feeling and recognition. Affective legitimacy refers to the socially recognised alignment between embodied emotional dispositions and dominant evaluative norms. When particular affective styles—such as assured self-presentation, articulate participation, or cosmopolitan aspiration—are normalised as neutral markers of excellence, structural disparities are reframed as personal dispositions. Emotional misalignment is internalised as self-doubt, thereby reinforcing hierarchical stability without overt exclusion.

This perspective reframes upward mobility as a contradictory process. Access to elite institutions may expand educational opportunity while simultaneously intensifying affective marginality. Students may gain formal inclusion yet remain positioned at the edges of emotional legitimacy. Expanded access alone, therefore, does not dismantle stratified regimes of belonging; it may instead reconfigure inequality in more subtle, affectively mediated forms.

Against this backdrop, this study addresses the following research questions. How do rural first-generation students experience and articulate habitus-field disjuncture within an elite university context? How are classed hierarchies affectively regulated and rendered legitimate through institutional practices and hidden curricula in everyday university life? How do students negotiate the contradictions between institutional mobility and affective marginality in their pursuit of upward mobility?

By engaging these questions, this article makes three contributions. First, it extends Bourdieusian analyses of educational inequality by specifying affective reproduction as a mechanism through which classed hierarchies are stabilised within elite institutions. Second, it reconceptualises student belonging as an institutional and political phenomenon rather than solely a psychological state. Third, it contributes to debates on education and transformation by interrogating whether inclusion alone constitutes meaningful change when the emotional grammar of legitimacy remains intact.

Rather than assuming that expanded access equates to transformation, this study examines how regimes of belonging are structured, normalised, and potentially reconfigured within elite universities. In doing so, it foregrounds a central tension in contemporary higher education: Institutions celebrated as engines of mobility may simultaneously reproduce hierarchy through the subtle governance of affect. Understanding education as change requires attention not only to who enters elite spaces, but to whose ways of being are recognised as legitimate once inside.

Theoretical Framework

Elite Universities as Classed Fields

Pierre Bourdieu's theory of field, capital, and habitus provides a foundational framework for analysing inequality within formally meritocratic institutions (Bourdieu 1984, 1986, 1990). A field is a structured social arena governed by historically constituted logics of value, recognition, and competition. Elite universities can be understood as classed fields in which particular forms of cultural capital are legitimised and misrecognised as neutral indicators of merit (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977).

Within such fields, embodied dispositions—modes of speech, intellectual style, aesthetic orientation, self-presentation, and confidence—operate as tacit markers of competence. In Bourdieu's framework, these patterned ways of perceiving, feeling, and acting are organised through habitus: a durable yet revisable set of embodied dispositions sedimented through past social conditions and carried into new settings (Bourdieu 1990). Crucially, these dispositions are rarely recognised as classed; instead, they appear natural, effortless, and deserved. The institutional field converts historically accumulated advantages into apparently individual attributes.

Students whose prior socialisation aligns with dominant middle-class norms often experience institutional expectations as intuitive. Their participation appears spontaneous rather than rehearsed, their confidence organic rather than cultivated. By contrast, rural first-generation students may encounter habitus-field disjuncture, a misalignment between embodied dispositions and institutional expectations (Lehmann 2014; Reay, Crozier, and Clayton 2009). This disjuncture is not merely cognitive. It is lived affectively through hesitation, self-monitoring, guarded speech, or uncertainty about entitlement. Empirical work in China has shown how rural students' entry into elite universities can reveal precisely these classed and spatially patterned experiences of embodied mismatch (Chen 2022; Li 2013).

Bourdieuian analyses powerfully illuminate how cultural reproduction operates through differential access to capital and through processes of symbolic misrecognition. However, while symbolic violence explains how domination is naturalised, it tends to focus on the misrecognition of structural arbitrariness rather than on the affective processes through which particular dispositions come to feel self-evidently legitimate in everyday institutional interaction. To examine how hierarchy becomes emotionally persuasive, a complementary theoretical lens is required.

Affective Regulation and the Politics of Belonging

To theorise this dimension, this study draws on Sara Ahmed's account of affective economies and the politics of belonging (Ahmed 2004, 2014). Ahmed conceptualises emotions not as private psychological states but as relational forces that circulate within spaces, attach to bodies, and delineate boundaries between insiders and outsiders.

Emotions move through institutions, accumulating value and orienting subjects towards particular norms.

From this perspective, belonging is not simply achieved through performance or achievement; it is governed through affective alignment. Certain emotional styles—ease, entitlement, articulated ambition, cosmopolitan aspiration—are recognised as appropriate within elite institutional spaces. Others—hesitation, ambivalence, guarded participation—may be subtly marked as lacking confidence or drive.

Affective regulation thus operates through everyday practices: classroom interaction patterns, evaluation criteria, scholarship interviews, peer conversations, and institutional narratives of excellence. These practices do not explicitly exclude; rather, they privilege particular affective orientations as evidence of competence. Emotional comportment becomes an evaluative criterion.

This study introduces the concept of affective legitimacy to describe the socially sanctioned correspondence between embodied emotional dispositions and dominant institutional norms. Affective legitimacy is not an individual trait; it is a relational status conferred through recognition. Students whose affective style aligns with institutional expectations are more readily interpreted as capable and deserving. Those whose affective expressions diverge may experience subtle doubt regarding their legitimacy.

In the Chinese context, where examination-based meritocracy is deeply institutionalised and elite universities are symbolically linked to national excellence (Zheng and Postiglione 2025), affective legitimacy is intertwined with disciplined confidence, fluency in self-articulation, and forward-looking ambition. Meritocratic ideology intensifies the internalisation of affective norms, as emotional misalignment is readily reframed as insufficient self-improvement rather than structural difference (Zha 2020).

From Cultural Reproduction to Affective Reproduction

By integrating Bourdieu's field theory with affect theory, this study advances the concept of affective reproduction. Affective reproduction does not replace cultural reproduction; rather, it specifies the affective mechanisms through which cultural hierarchies are stabilised within institutional life. More specifically, affective reproduction refers to the reproduction of social hierarchy through the normalisation of particular affective dispositions—such as ease, confidence, composure, and aspirational fluency—as if they were neutral signs of merit rather than socially patterned effects of prior socialisation.

Cultural reproduction explains how inequalities persist through unequal distribution of capital and the institutionalisation of dominant dispositions (Bourdieu 1986). Symbolic violence explains how these hierarchies are misrecognised as legitimate. Cultural mismatch research demonstrates how institutional norms privilege middle-class independence over interdependent orientations (Phillips et al. 2020; Stephens et al.

2012). Affective reproduction is distinct from, though closely related to, symbolic violence and cultural mismatch. Symbolic violence explains how arbitrary hierarchies are misrecognised as legitimate, while cultural mismatch explains how institutional norms privilege some classed orientations over others. Affective reproduction adds a further dimension by specifying how these hierarchies are stabilised through feeling: through the institutional recognition of confidence, ease, composure, and aspirational fluency as signs of competence and belonging. Its analytical focus is not only on what students know, possess, or misrecognise, but on how they come to feel more or less legitimate within institutional spaces. In this sense, affective reproduction names the affective mechanism through which symbolic violence is experienced and cultural mismatch is internalised.

Affective reproduction builds on these insights but shifts analytical emphasis from the distribution of valued resources alone to the emotional conditions under which recognition and legitimacy are conferred. It foregrounds how emotional alignment with institutional norms becomes a tacit condition of recognition. Hierarchy persists not only because capital is unevenly distributed, nor only because arbitrariness is misrecognised, but because particular affective styles are institutionalised as natural markers of merit.

This process may be analytically conceptualised as follows. First, elite universities operate as classed fields structured by historically accumulated capital. Second, dominant forms of cultural capital are institutionalised and presented as neutral standards of excellence. Third, these standards are accompanied by affective norms that define how competence should be embodied and expressed. Fourth, emotional misalignment is interpreted as personal inadequacy rather than as structural divergence, thereby reinforcing hierarchical stability. In this sense, affective reproduction clarifies how inequality becomes experientially legitimate. Whereas symbolic violence emphasises cognitive misrecognition, affective reproduction highlights emotional internalisation. Students do not simply misunderstand the arbitrariness of norms; they feel misaligned within them. Emotional discomfort becomes self-doubt, and self-doubt becomes a mechanism of stabilisation.

Importantly, affective reproduction is neither total nor deterministic. Habitus is durable but not immutable (Bourdieu 1990). Students may acquire forms of affective alignment over time, strategically adapt expressive styles, or construct supportive peer networks that partially buffer disjuncture. Affective legitimacy can be negotiated, mimicked, or selectively resisted. This mediation underscores that reproduction operates as a structured tendency rather than an automatic outcome, including within Chinese elite universities where “successful” rural students may still experience hidden injuries tied to embodied transformation (Xie and Reay 2020).

Analytical Implications for the Present Study

This integrated framework guides the empirical analysis in three interrelated ways. First, it directs attention to embodied experiences of habitus–field disjuncture—moments of

hesitation, silence, guarded participation, or uncertainty regarding entitlement. These experiences are analysed not as psychological deficits but as relational indicators of affective misalignment within a classed field.

Second, it foregrounds institutional mechanisms of affective regulation. Rather than treating belonging as an individual feeling, the analysis examines how classroom practices, evaluation systems, peer cultures, and symbolic narratives of excellence institutionalise affective legitimacy.

Third, it examines processes of negotiation, recalibration, and selective resistance. By analysing how students adapt to, appropriate, or distance themselves from dominant affective norms, the study captures both the stabilisation and the limits of affective reproduction. The integrated framework developed above is summarised in Figure 1. Rather than presenting reproduction as a purely structural mechanism, the model highlights affective legitimacy as the mediating process through which institutional norms become experientially internalised. In doing so, it clarifies how belonging is governed not only through access to capital, but through the emotional grammar of recognition.

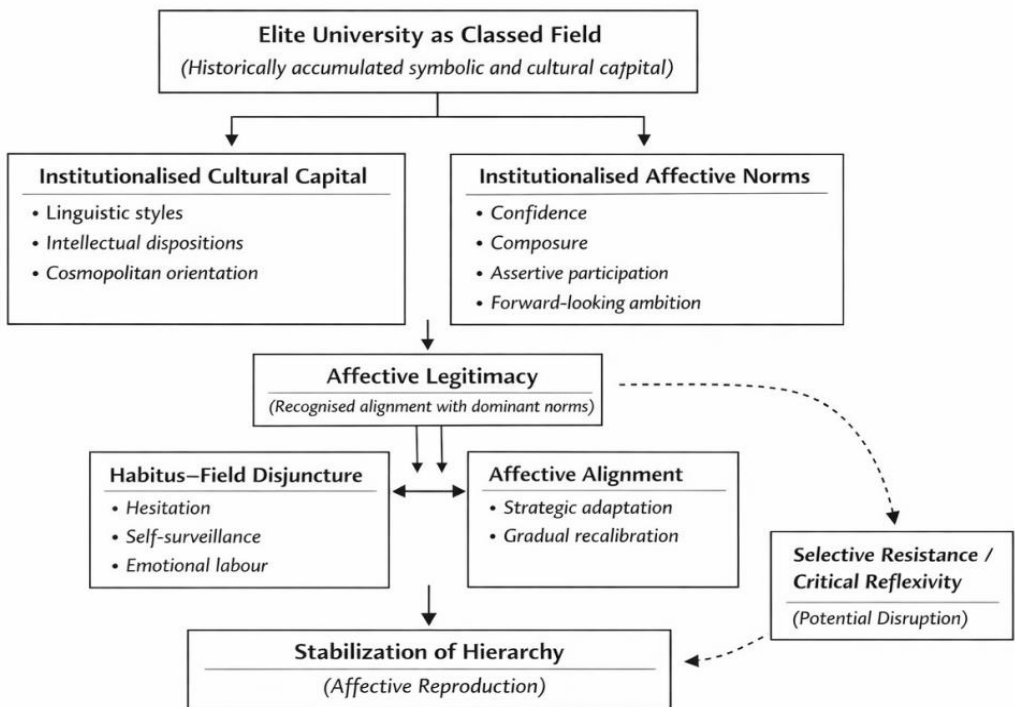


Figure 1: Affective reproduction model in elite higher education

Through this framework, belonging is conceptualised not as a personal outcome but as a politically structured and affectively governed status. Elite higher education emerges

not only as a site of opportunity but as a terrain where classed hierarchies are reproduced through the subtle organisation of emotional legitimacy.

Methodology

Research Design and Theoretical Orientation

This study adopts a qualitative research design to examine how affective reproduction operates within an elite Chinese university. The design is theory-informed but not deductively imposed. Rather than treating theoretical constructs as rigid categories, the study employs them as sensitising concepts that guide attention while allowing empirical narratives to complicate and refine analytical assumptions.

Three interrelated constructs—habitus-field disjuncture, affective legitimacy, and affective reproduction—structured the analytical orientation. Rather than redefining these concepts, the methodology operationalised them as sensitising categories for identifying moments of embodied misalignment, affective recognition, and institutional normalisation in participants' narratives.

Interview questions were designed to elicit concrete situations rather than abstract evaluations. Participants were invited to recount specific classroom discussions, scholarship interviews, peer interactions, and transitional moments during their first year. This episodic approach enabled attention to bodily reactions, emotional vocabularies, and interpretive frameworks through which students understood their experiences. Although the interview guide was theoretically informed, participants were encouraged to define problems in their own terms. Several narratives—particularly those describing minimal disjuncture or deliberate resistance—prompted analytical refinement during the coding process.

The aim of the study is analytical generalisation. Rather than claiming representativeness, it seeks to illuminate mechanisms of affective governance that may be transferable to similarly stratified higher education contexts.

Research Context and Participants

The research was conducted at a comprehensive public university designated under China's "Double First-Class" initiative. As a nationally recognised elite institution, the university commands symbolic capital, research funding, and competitive prestige. Institutional discourse emphasises excellence, leadership, and global competitiveness. These narratives shape not only academic standards but also implicit affective expectations regarding confidence, ambition, and cosmopolitan orientation.

Participants were rural first-generation undergraduate students. For the purposes of this study, "rural first-generation" refers to students who completed secondary schooling in officially designated rural areas and whose parents did not attend university. This dual

criterion ensures both geographic and intergenerational dimensions of structural positioning.

A purposive sampling strategy was used to capture variation across gender, discipline, and year of study. Recruitment occurred through student networks, including rural-background student associations, peer referrals, and informal contacts across departments. Initial invitations were circulated through student WeChat groups and personal networks, and participants contacted the researcher voluntarily. Three students who initially expressed interest did not proceed to interview, mainly because of scheduling conflicts or discomfort discussing family background. To avoid over-reliance on a single network, recruitment was conducted in several rounds and deliberately sought variation across humanities, social sciences, STEM disciplines, and undergraduate year groups. Particular attention was paid to including both first-year students, who were closer to the transition experience, and senior students, who could reflect on recalibration over time.

The final sample includes students who reported sustained disjuncture, gradual recalibration, minimal discomfort, and selective resistance. This heterogeneity allows examination of affective reproduction as mediated rather than uniform.

Table 1: Participant characteristics

Pseudonym	Gender	Year	Discipline	Rural Region	Parental Education	Family Occupation
Li Wei	F	Y1	Literature	Southwest	Primary school	Farmer
Zhang Hao	M	Y2	Engineering	Northwest	Middle school	Migrant worker
Chen Yu	F	Y3	Economics	Central	Primary school	Farmer
Wang Jun	M	Y4	Computer Science	Southwest	Middle school	Self-employed
Liu Fang	F	Y2	Sociology	Northeast	Primary school	Factory worker
He Ming	M	Y1	Physics	Central	Middle school	Farmer
Xu Lin	F	Y3	Law	Southwest	Primary school	Farmer
Zhou Kai	M	Y2	Finance	Northwest	Middle school	Construction worker
Deng Rui	F	Y4	Education	Central	Primary school	Farmer
Sun Tao	M	Y3	Chemistry	Southwest	Middle school	Migrant worker
Gao Li	F	Y1	Journalism	Northwest	Primary school	Farmer
Lin Qiang	M	Y2	Mathematics	Central	Middle school	Farmer
Hu Jing	F	Y4	Management	Northeast	Primary school	Shop owner
Ma Chao	M	Y3	Philosophy	Southwest	Middle school	Farmer
Peng Yue	F	Y2	Biology	Central	Primary school	Factory worker
Yan Bo	M	Y1	Engineering	Northwest	Middle school	Farmer
Tang Yue	F	Y3	International Relations	East	Primary school	Farmer
Qiao Rui	M	Y4	Mechanical Engineering	Central	Middle school	Technician
Luo Xin	F	Y2	Psychology	Southwest	Primary school	Farmer
Cai Jun	M	Y3	Data Science	Northwest	Middle school	Shop owner
Mei Lin	F	Y1	History	Central	Primary school	Farmer
Guo Han	M	Y4	Chemistry	Northeast	Middle school	Farmer
Bai Ning	F	Y2	Public Administration	Southwest	Primary school	Factory worker
Wei Chen	M	Y3	Software Engineering	Central	Middle school	Migrant worker
Ren Jie	F	Y4	Education	Northwest	Primary school	Farmer
Xu Hao	M	Y2	Economics	Southwest	Middle school	Farmer

The sample includes 13 female and 13 male students across humanities, social sciences, and STEM fields. Participants represent all undergraduate years, allowing examination

of temporal recalibration. Variation in parental occupation and secondary schooling trajectories introduces differences in prior exposure to elite-oriented cultural capital.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews lasting between 60 and 90 minutes. Interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese in private campus settings to ensure confidentiality and participant comfort. All interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent and transcribed verbatim.

The interview protocol encouraged narrative depth. Participants were asked to describe their first weeks on campus, classroom participation experiences, interactions with peers perceived as “naturally confident”, and encounters with institutional evaluation processes such as scholarship applications or exchange programmes. Follow-up questions probed emotional reactions, bodily sensations, and interpretive frames. Particular attention was given to moments of hesitation, confidence, embarrassment, or pride.

Interviews were transcribed in Chinese. Excerpts selected for publication were translated into English with careful attention to preserving affective nuance. Where culturally specific expressions carried layered meanings, contextual interpretation informed translation decisions. Translation was reviewed to ensure semantic accuracy while maintaining narrative flow.

Analytical Procedure

Data analysis followed an iterative, multi-stage process. In the first stage, open coding identified recurring experiential patterns related to hesitation, silence, speech confidence, evaluation, aspiration, and perceptions of excellence. Coding remained close to participants’ language to retain experiential texture. To enhance coding transparency, coding combined inductive and theory-informed procedures. Initial codes included participants’ own terms such as “not daring to speak”, “looking confident”, “being afraid of sounding rural”, and “performing confidence”. These were later grouped into focused codes such as embodied hesitation, affective self-monitoring, institutional recognition, strategic alignment, and structural critique. Negative or deviant cases, such as students reporting minimal disjuncture, technical confidence, or explicit resistance to dominant norms, were coded separately and used to refine rather than simply confirm the concept of affective reproduction.

In the second stage, focused coding organised patterns into broader analytic categories corresponding to embodied disjuncture, institutional affective regulation, and negotiated alignment. Constant comparison across cases allowed identification of both convergence and divergence. Cases that did not fit emerging patterns were examined closely to refine conceptual boundaries.

In the third stage, interpretive analysis examined how these dimensions interacted over time. Attention was given to temporal trajectories, disciplinary variation, and prior schooling experiences. Rather than assuming a linear pathway from disjuncture to adaptation, analysis explored how institutional norms, peer interactions, and self-interpretations co-produced experiences of legitimacy or marginality.

Qualitative data analysis software was used to manage transcripts and ensure transparency in coding decisions. Analytical memos documented theoretical reflections, emergent tensions, and moments where empirical material challenged initial assumptions. Peer debriefing with two qualitative researchers provided critical feedback on thematic organisation and interpretive claims.

This iterative process strengthened conceptual clarity while preserving empirical complexity.

Reflexivity, Ethics, and Limitations

Given the study's focus on classed experience within an elite institution, reflexivity was central to the research process. As a researcher affiliated with an elite university, I, the primary researcher, remained attentive to potential asymmetries in authority and perception during interviews. Participants may have interpreted my institutional position as proximate to evaluative power, which could influence narrative framing. Reflexive memos were maintained throughout data collection and analysis to document assumptions, emotional responses, and interpretive shifts.

Ethical approval was obtained in accordance with institutional guidelines. Participants provided informed consent and were assured confidentiality. Pseudonyms and broad regional identifiers are used to protect anonymity.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, interview-based research privileges articulated experience and may not capture unspoken affective dynamics embedded in everyday interaction. Second, as a single-site study, findings reflect a specific configuration of elite institutional culture. Third, although the sample size was expanded to capture variation, qualitative analysis cannot claim representativeness.

Nevertheless, by combining theoretical clarity with empirical heterogeneity, the study offers analytically transferable insights into how affective governance may operate within stratified higher education systems.

Findings

Embodied Disjuncture: Entering the Elite Field

For many participants, entry into the elite university was not marked by academic incapacity but by heightened emotional vigilance. Disjuncture emerged through subtle moments of self-awareness rather than explicit exclusion. Students repeatedly described

early classroom experiences as situations in which they monitored not what they knew, but how they appeared.

Li Wei, a first-year literature student, recalled her first seminar discussion in a small, discussion-based class. When invited to comment, several classmates spoke fluently, referencing international authors and theoretical debates beyond the assigned reading. She described silently rehearsing her contribution:

I kept thinking whether my explanation sounded advanced enough. It wasn't that I didn't understand the text. I just felt unsure if the way I spoke fit the atmosphere. Everyone else seemed so natural. By the time I decided it was acceptable to speak, the topic had already changed.

Her hesitation was not rooted in intellectual deficiency but in uncertainty regarding expressive legitimacy. The classroom atmosphere did not explicitly exclude her; rather, it generated an affective comparison through which others appeared at ease while she experienced guardedness.

Similarly, Zhang Hao, a second-year engineering student, described awareness of his rural accent during group presentations:

When I presented, I suddenly became conscious of my pronunciation. I started slowing down and choosing words more carefully. I was thinking about how I sounded more than about what I was saying.

In this account, speech rhythm and accent became sites of embodied scrutiny. The disjuncture was felt physically—through pacing, tone, and hesitation—illustrating how habitus becomes visible to the self within a new field.

However, disjuncture was not uniform. Hu Jing, a fourth-year management student who had attended a highly competitive provincial high school, described a comparatively smooth transition. She acknowledged initial stress but did not experience profound illegitimacy. Her prior exposure to competitive speaking environments had normalised assertive participation. For her, elite expectations were demanding but familiar.

Temporal variation was also significant. Several senior students reported that early hesitation gradually diminished. Repetition reduced emotional vigilance. Deng Rui reflected that by her third year she no longer mentally rehearsed each sentence before speaking. Disjuncture, therefore, appeared most acute during transitional periods and mediated by prior institutional exposure.

Embodied disjuncture thus operated along a continuum. It was patterned yet uneven, shaped by schooling histories, discipline, and accumulated familiarity with elite norms.

Institutional Affective Regulation: Producing the “Natural” Student

Participants consistently described implicit expectations regarding how a “naturally excellent” student should feel and appear. These expectations were rarely articulated explicitly, yet were inferred from patterns of recognition and reward.

Chen Yu, a third-year economics student, described a seminar discussion in which a classmate confidently critiqued a theory using international case studies. The professor praised not only the analytical point but the student’s “mature perspective”. Chen Yu later reflected:

I had similar thoughts, but I didn’t mention international examples. When the professor praised him, I realised that being “global” and speaking confidently seemed to matter as much as the idea itself.

Recognition, in this instance, attached not only to content but to style. Articulated confidence and cosmopolitan reference functioned as tacit markers of intellectual authority.

Institutional evaluation processes further reinforced these norms. Tang Yue recounted preparing for a scholarship interview:

A mentor told me to present my rural background as a story of resilience and leadership. I understood it was strategic. But I also felt I was being guided to tell my story in a confident, forward-looking way. It wasn’t enough to have good grades. You had to show vision.

Confidence and aspiration were framed as inseparable from merit. The evaluation context implicitly required emotional composure and self-assured projection of future ambition.

Peer interactions similarly reproduced affective expectations. Luo Xin described informal conversations in which classmates discussed overseas internships and multinational firms:

When they talked about long-term plans so clearly, I felt less decisive. I started wondering if not having a clear plan meant I wasn’t competitive enough.

Here, uncertainty was internalised as personal deficiency rather than recognised as uneven access to prior exposure or networks.

Disciplinary variation slightly mediated these dynamics. Some STEM students indicated that laboratory competence was evaluated more through technical output than verbal fluency. Yet even in laboratory settings, leadership and visibility were associated with assertive speech. Emotional composure retained symbolic value.

Institutional narratives of excellence—visible in official speeches and promotional materials—emphasised global competitiveness and visionary leadership. Participants rarely questioned these narratives. Instead, they interpreted discomfort as motivation for self-improvement. Through everyday practices, affective legitimacy became institutionalised as a tacit criterion of belonging.

Negotiating Alignment: Adaptation and Emotional Labour

Faced with these expectations, participants adopted varied strategies. Many described deliberate efforts to cultivate confidence.

Zhou Kai, a second-year finance student, recounted imposing a rule on himself to speak at least once in every seminar:

At first it felt forced. I would prepare one comment in advance just so I wouldn't stay silent. After a while, it became more natural. But in the beginning, it was definitely intentional.

Through repetition, expressive confidence became partially habitual. Adaptation, however, required sustained effort.

Gao Li described the emotional fatigue of constant self-monitoring:

After presentations I felt exhausted, not because of the content, but because I kept thinking about my tone, posture, whether I looked confident. It felt like performing.

This account highlights the labour involved in acquiring affective legitimacy. Alignment was achieved not automatically but through disciplined performance.

Some students adopted selective alignment. Wei Chen described adjusting his expressive style in formal evaluations while remaining reserved in informal contexts. Rather than full internalisation, this strategy reflected situational calibration.

Peer solidarity provided temporary relief. Bai Ning described gatherings with other rural-background students:

When we are together, I don't think about how I sound. I can speak more casually. It feels relaxed.

Such spaces did not dismantle institutional standards but reduced the intensity of vigilance. Adaptation ranged from gradual internalisation to strategic performance. Affective reproduction operated through effort, repetition, and emotional discipline, rather than through explicit coercion.

Disruptions and Limits of Affective Reproduction

Not all participants internalised institutional norms. Several articulated critical distance. Ma Chao, a philosophy student, questioned the equation between confidence and competence:

Sometimes the most outspoken students are not the most thoughtful. I don't think speaking loudly makes ideas better. I don't want to change completely just to fit that style.

His stance represented selective resistance. Although he recognised potential disadvantages, he reframed legitimacy in intellectual rather than performative terms.

Mei Lin explicitly attributed discomfort to structural hierarchy:

Elite universities were shaped by urban middle-class culture. If I feel out of place sometimes, maybe it says more about the institution than about me.

Such structural framing resisted emotional internalisation. Although rare, these narratives reveal that affective reproduction is not total.

Other participants reported minimal disjuncture due to prior exposure to competitive environments. Qiao Rui, who had participated in national science competitions, described confidence rooted in technical mastery. His trajectory suggests that institutional capital accumulated prior to university can significantly buffer affective misalignment. These cases complicate a one-directional account of affective reproduction. Hu Jing and Qiao Rui did not experience elite norms as entirely alien because earlier schooling and competition experience had already familiarised them with forms of assertive participation and technical self-confidence. Their trajectories suggest that rural first-generation status does not automatically produce affective marginality; rather, marginality depends on the relation between prior institutional exposure and the specific affective demands of the university field. Similarly, Ma Chao and Mei Lin show that students may recognise dominant affective norms without fully internalising them. They understood the institutional value of confidence and visibility, but questioned whether these should define intellectual worth. These deviant cases are important because they clarify that affective reproduction operates as a patterned tendency rather than a uniform outcome.

These divergent cases underscore the mediated character of affective reproduction. Emotional internalisation was common but not inevitable. Prior schooling, disciplinary culture, reflexive awareness, and peer networks shaped trajectories differently.

Overall, the findings suggest that elite higher education simultaneously enables mobility and reproduces subtle classed distinctions through affective regulation. Inclusion expands access to resources and credentials, yet emotional legitimacy remains unevenly

distributed. Affective reproduction operates through everyday recognition rather than overt exclusion, rendering hierarchy experiential and often self-regulated. At the same time, its operation is contingent and occasionally disrupted, revealing the possibility—however fragile—of alternative modes of belonging.

Discussion

Re-specifying Reproduction: From Capital to Affective Legitimacy

This study set out to examine how rural first-generation students experience belonging within an elite Chinese university and to explore how inequality may persist despite formal inclusion. The findings extend established analyses of cultural reproduction by foregrounding affective legitimacy as a stabilising mechanism of hierarchy.

Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction demonstrates how dominant groups institutionalise particular forms of capital and misrecognise them as neutral merit (Bourdieu 1984, 1986; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). Research on working-class and first-generation students has further shown how such misrecognition generates symbolic violence and internalised doubt (Lehmann 2014; Reay, Crozier, and Clayton 2009). The present findings align with this tradition insofar as participants frequently interpreted hesitation and uncertainty as personal shortcomings rather than structural divergence.

However, the analysis suggests that reproduction operates not only through capital distribution or symbolic misrecognition but also through the institutionalisation of affective legitimacy. Confidence, composure, cosmopolitan fluency, and forward-looking ambition functioned as tacit evaluative standards. These emotional dispositions were not simply correlated with competence; they were treated as visible evidence of competence. When affective alignment becomes conflated with ability, inequality is rendered experientially persuasive.

Cultural mismatch scholarship similarly highlights how institutional norms privilege middle-class independence and self-expression (Phillips et al. 2020; Stephens et al. 2012). Yet the present study underscores that mismatch is not solely cognitive or normative; it is affectively embodied. Disjuncture was experienced through hesitation, bodily self-monitoring, and emotional fatigue. Affective reproduction therefore specifies the emotional dimension through which institutional norms become naturalised. It does not replace symbolic violence but clarifies how misrecognition is lived and felt in everyday interaction.

In this sense, affective reproduction explains why expanded access alone may not dismantle hierarchy. When emotional comportment is institutionalised as a criterion of recognition, inequality persists even in the absence of overt exclusion.

Mediation, Variation, and the Limits of Determinism

At the same time, the findings complicate deterministic readings of reproduction theory. Although many participants reported early disjuncture, trajectories were uneven. Students with prior exposure to competitive schooling environments often transitioned more smoothly, and several senior students described gradual recalibration over time.

Bourdieu (1990) emphasises that habitus is durable but not immutable. The data support this view. Through repetition and strategic adaptation, some participants partially acquired affective alignment. However, this alignment frequently involved sustained emotional labour, echoing Jack's (2019) account of disadvantaged students navigating elite institutions. Adaptation was effortful rather than effortless.

Moreover, a minority of participants articulated resistance or structural critique. Rather than internalising inadequacy, they questioned the equation of confidence with competence. These voices reveal that affective reproduction is mediated rather than automatic. It operates as a patterned tendency shaped by prior schooling, disciplinary culture, peer networks, and reflexive awareness. This is consistent with research on rural students in Chinese elite universities showing that “successful” adaptation may coexist with hidden injuries and persistent affective costs (Xie and Reay 2020).

This mediated character is analytically significant. It suggests that hierarchy is stabilised not by total domination but by uneven internalisation. Emotional legitimacy is differentially accessible, negotiated, and occasionally contested. Reproduction thus remains contingent and historically situated rather than inevitable.

Affective Governance in a Meritocratic Field

The Chinese context sharpens these insights. Elite universities operate within a deeply institutionalised meritocratic narrative, in which examination performance is widely interpreted as legitimate evidence of individual effort. Admission itself signals achievement. In such a context, overt exclusion is less visible, yet affective stratification persists.

Participants frequently framed discomfort as a personal challenge requiring self-improvement rather than structural critique. This internalisation reflects how meritocratic ideology can intensify affective governance. When institutional hierarchies are publicly justified through competitive selection, emotional misalignment is readily reinterpreted as insufficient confidence or preparation.

National excellence initiatives further concentrate symbolic capital within a limited number of institutions (Zheng and Postiglione 2025). These universities are not merely educational spaces but sites of national prestige. Within such fields, emotional composure and visionary ambition become intertwined with narratives of global

competitiveness. The regulation of affect is therefore embedded in broader discourses of excellence and national development.

While patterns of cultural mismatch have been documented in Western contexts (Reay, Crozier, and Clayton 2009; Stephens et al. 2012), the Chinese case illustrates how institutionalised meritocracy can render affective regulation particularly subtle. Hierarchy is not enforced through explicit exclusion but through the normalisation of specific emotional grammars of legitimacy (Chen 2022; Zha 2020). The single-site design also requires attention to institutional specificity. The university examined here is a highly selective Double First-Class institution with strong official narratives of excellence, global competitiveness, and leadership. These features may intensify the association between affective legitimacy and cosmopolitan confidence. The emphasis on international orientation, scholarship competition, and elite peer comparison may therefore be particularly pronounced in this institutional context. At the same time, the mechanisms identified here are not unique to this university. Other elite Chinese universities organised around similar hierarchies of prestige, meritocratic selection, and global aspiration may reproduce comparable affective expectations, although their specific forms are likely to vary by institutional history, region, discipline, and student composition. The findings should therefore be understood as analytically transferable rather than statistically generalisable.

Education as Change: Reconfiguring the Emotional Grammar of Legitimacy

The findings raise critical questions for understanding education as change. Elite higher education undeniably expands access to resources, credentials, and social networks. For rural first-generation students, admission represents substantial structural mobility. Yet inclusion does not automatically transform the affective criteria through which legitimacy is conferred.

When confidence, polished self-presentation, and cosmopolitan aspiration are tacitly equated with merit, belonging remains conditional. Access may widen while the emotional grammar of recognition remains narrow. In such cases, education can simultaneously enable mobility and reproduce hierarchy.

Educational transformation, therefore, cannot be measured solely by participation rates. It must also involve reconfiguration of evaluative norms. If institutions recognise multiple modes of participation, decouple expressive style from competence, and explicitly address the hidden curriculum of affect, the stabilising effects of affective reproduction may be mitigated. Such shifts would not eliminate structural inequality, but they could reduce the extent to which belonging is governed by historically dominant emotional dispositions.

The analysis suggests that meaningful change requires attention not only to redistribution of opportunity but to redistribution of legitimacy. Elite institutions that

celebrate diversity in demographic terms must also interrogate the affective standards embedded in evaluation practices, classroom interaction, and leadership selection.

Elite inclusion without affective reconfiguration risks producing a new phase of stratification: one in which mobility is achieved but legitimacy remains emotionally policed. By foregrounding affective reproduction, this study contributes to debates on education and transformation by highlighting how subtle forms of governance may persist within formally inclusive systems.

Conclusion

This study has argued that stratification within elite higher education persists not only through unequal distribution of cultural capital, but through the institutionalisation of affective legitimacy. By foregrounding the emotional dimensions of recognition, it advances the concept of affective reproduction to specify how hierarchy is stabilised within formally meritocratic institutions. In doing so, the analysis shifts attention from what students possess to how they are recognised, and from access alone to the conditions under which belonging becomes legitimate.

The findings suggest that elite universities operate not merely as academic fields but as affectively regulated spaces. Particular modes of speech, confidence, composure, and aspiration are tacitly normalised as evidence of competence. When such dispositions are misrecognised as natural rather than socially patterned, inequality becomes experientially persuasive. Emotional misalignment is internalised as self-doubt rather than interpreted as structural divergence. Through this process, hierarchy is reproduced without overt exclusion.

By extending reproduction theory into the affective domain, the study contributes to ongoing debates about the limits of meritocracy. Admission to elite institutions may expand opportunity, yet it does not necessarily transform the emotional grammar through which legitimacy is conferred. The Chinese context illustrates how deeply institutionalised meritocratic narratives can intensify this dynamic. When academic success is publicly celebrated as evidence of individual effort, affective misalignment is particularly likely to be interpreted as a personal shortcoming. Thus, mobility and marginality may coexist within the same institutional space.

Importantly, affective reproduction was neither total nor deterministic. Variation across participants demonstrates that trajectories are mediated by prior schooling, disciplinary culture, peer networks, and reflexive awareness. Some students recalibrated over time; others adopted strategic alignment or articulated selective resistance. These divergences underscore that hierarchy is stabilised through uneven internalisation rather than absolute domination. Such mediation leaves open the possibility—however limited—of alternative modes of belonging.

The implications for understanding education as change are significant. Educational expansion and widening participation represent important structural shifts. Yet transformation cannot be equated solely with entry into elite spaces. If emotional alignment with historically dominant norms remains a tacit criterion of legitimacy, inclusion may reproduce subtle forms of stratification. Meaningful change therefore requires not only redistribution of opportunity, but interrogation of the affective standards embedded in institutional evaluation, pedagogy, and leadership narratives.

Reconfiguring legitimacy entails recognising multiple expressive styles, decoupling confidence from competence, and rendering visible the hidden curriculum of affect. Such interventions would not eliminate structural inequality, but they could reduce the extent to which belonging is governed by narrow emotional expectations. In practical terms, universities could diversify classroom participation norms by recognising written, small-group, and reflective forms of contribution alongside confident public speech. Mentoring programmes could make the hidden curriculum of elite academic life explicit without treating rural first-generation students as deficient. Scholarship and leadership interviews could also be redesigned to avoid equating polished self-presentation, cosmopolitan fluency, or linear ambition with merit.

Future research might extend this analysis across institutional tiers, disciplinary fields, and national contexts. Comparative studies could examine whether affective legitimacy operates differently in less stratified systems or in institutions with alternative pedagogical cultures. Longitudinal research would further clarify whether emotional recalibration leads to durable transformation or merely to adaptive performance. Additionally, integrating observational methods could deepen understanding of how affective norms are enacted in everyday interaction.

Ultimately, recognising the affective architecture of stratification does not diminish the transformative potential of education. Rather, it clarifies the conditions under which transformation may occur. If elite inclusion is to function as meaningful social change, institutions must confront not only structural inequities but also the emotional regimes through which legitimacy is organised. Education as change depends not solely on widening access, but on reshaping the affective terms of belonging.

Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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