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Privileged, Disadvantaged, or Both?: Comparing the Experiences of First-Generation and Continuing-Generation Chinese International Students at Elite US Colleges

By

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Abstract

Past studies have consistently demonstrated that first-generation college students in the US face structural disadvantages in navigating the college environment compared to their continuing-generation peers. However, international first-generation college students studying at US universities are rarely represented in the existing literature. This study aims to address this gap and diversify the scholarly discussion by examining the lived experiences of first-generation Chinese international students at elite US colleges in comparison to those of their Chinese international continuing-generation counterparts. Drawing on Bourdieu's theory and the concept of intersectionality, this research analyzes interview data from 10 first-generation and 10 continuing-generation Chinese international students at four elite US private research universities. The findings reveal that, unlike American domestic students, first-generation and continuing-generation Chinese international students generally share similar challenges and achievements in their college experiences due to the rise of the "capitalist class" during China's Reform and Opening-Up and the limited transferability of home-based parental capital across national borders. As a result, both groups similarly draw on the transnational capital they gained through elite K-12 schools to navigate the elite college environment. Despite these shared overall experiences, first-generation Chinese international students uniquely report intellectual disconnection from their parents and face distinct challenges shaped by China's regional inequality. Overall, these findings contribute to broadening the conversation on first-generation college students, expanding Bourdieu's theory into a transnational setting, and highlighting elite K-12 schools' role in facilitating transnational mobility and reproduction. This study encourages future researchers to explore how elite pre-college education influences global class structures and to reframe first-generation status as encompassing intersectional experiences shaped by the unique social contexts of different countries.

Comparing the Experiences of First-Generation and Continuing-Generation Chinese International Students at Elite US Colleges

INTRODUCTION

There has been a growing body of literature on first-generation college students (i.e., students for whom none of their immediate family members from previous generations had earned a 4-year college degree) since the early 2000s (see Nguyen & Nguyen 2018). Collectively, this research demonstrates that, compared to continuing-generation students (i.e., students with at least one immediate family member from previous generations who had earned a 4-year college degree or higher), first-generation college students are disadvantaged in navigating the college environment and face significant academic (Chang et al. 2020; Yee 2016), social (Evans et al. 2020; Santa-Ramirez 2022), and mental health challenges (Covarrubias, Romero, and Trivelli 2015; Landry 2022) during their college experiences.

However, while recent studies increasingly highlight the heterogeneity of first-generation students' college experience and improve the representation of racial/ethnic minority students in their discussions, limited attention has been paid to the college experience of first-generation international students from mainland China. An underrepresented group in the current literature, especially that focusing on elite US universities, first-generation Chinese international students may have unique experiences at US colleges given their international student status and China's distinctive economic and social development over the past half-century.

This research aims to address this gap by examining the lived experiences of first-generation Chinese international students at elite US colleges in comparison to those of their

continuing-generation Chinese international counterparts[1]. Specifically, it asks: (1) *How do first-generation Chinese international students experience elite US colleges compared to their continuing-generation Chinese international peers?* (2) *How does first-generation status intersect with other dimensions of these students' identities – such as class identity, international student status, and regional background– to shape their college experiences?*

To answer these questions, this research draws on in-depth interview data from 10 first-generation Chinese international undergraduate students and 10 continuing-generation Chinese international undergraduate students from four elite US private research universities. I analyze this data through the lens of Bourdieu's theory. I further employ the concept of intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989; Hankivsky 2014) – a perspective that investigates how overlapping social structures interact to create individuals' unique experiences – to illuminate other social identities[2] that affect students' trajectories through college experiences alongside first-generation status. In general, I argue that the experiences of first-generation Chinese international students at elite US colleges can only be understood within the broader social, economic, and historical context of mainland China from which these students emerge.

Specifically, I find that, for the most part, first-generation and continuing-generation Chinese international students share similar challenges and achievements in their college

[1] In this study, first-generation Chinese international students are defined as students for whom none of their immediate family members from previous generations (e.g., parents, grandparents) had earned a 4-year college degree in China or abroad. Continuing-generation Chinese international students are defined as those who have at least one immediate family member from previous generations (e.g. parents, grandparents) who had earned a 4-year college degree in China or abroad.

[2] Notably, while intersectional studies often center on gender, this research doesn't engage with gender analytically, as it didn't emerge as a significant factor shaping the respondents' college experiences.

experiences. While both groups encounter social isolation, career anxiety, and cultural differences as major challenges during college, most students exhibit sufficient institutional knowledge and are able to adjust themselves to navigate the elite college environment, regardless of their first-generation or continuing-generation status. The similar overall college experiences between the two groups can be attributed to two factors. First, the economic reform in late 20th-century China, which allowed first-generation Chinese international students' parents to join the "capitalist class" (Li 2010) – a core subclass within China's middle-class stratum that possesses significant economic capital (Bourdieu 1986) despite limited educational attainment – and purchase elite K-12 educational resources. Second, the limited transferability of home-based social and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986) across national borders, which restricts continuing-generation Chinese international students' parents from translating their social networks and cultural resources (e.g., knowledge, skills, dispositions) into their children's advantage in navigating elite US institutions. These factors thus distinguish first-generation and continuing-generation Chinese international students from their American counterparts; while the parental economic capital gained during the economic reform buffers first-generation Chinese international students against the common disadvantages facing many American first-generation college students, the limited transferability of home-based parental social and cultural capital deprives continuing-generation Chinese international students of the common advantages associated with US domestic continuing-generation students.

Hence, rather than relying on direct parental guidance, both first-generation and continuing-generation Chinese international students draw more on the academic, social, and cultural resources they obtained through elite, globally oriented K-12 schools to navigate the selective college environment, which then contributes to the common challenges and successes in their overall

college experiences. In this sense, the similar college experiences of the two groups represent a successful conversion of parental economic capital into transnational social and cultural capital[3]– namely, social ties and cultural assets (e.g., foreign language fluency, knowledge of foreign cultures) that transcend national borders and help individuals navigate social fields abroad (Nahapiet and Ghoshal 1998; Grineski 2011; Weiss 2005). As transmitters of this transnational capital, elite K-12 schools thus act as more powerful agents than the home in facilitating transnational mobility and social reproduction.

However, first-generation Chinese international students do report two distinct experiences compared to their continuing-generation Chinese international counterparts. First, first-generation Chinese international students are more likely to experience a sense of intellectual disconnection from their parents. This disconnection consequently influences their communication patterns with their parents and turns college into an intellectual refuge for them. Second, in the context of China's regional inequality, first-generation status intersects with regional identity to uniquely shape the college experiences of first-generation students from less well-resourced regions – that is, students from areas other than first-tier and new first-tier cities[4] in mainland China. Specifically, these students tend to perceive a mismatch in "habitus" (Bourdieu 1977, 1984) – the ingrained ways of thinking and acting that individuals acquire through socialization and experiences within a particular social environment – between elite colleges and their hometowns. The habitus mismatch then leads these students to experience the two environments as distinct worlds in terms of class-

[3] See Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) for more information on transnational social capital; see Weiss (2005) and Grineski (2011) for information on transnational cultural capital.

[4] See the "historical and social context" section and Appendix A for more information on first-tier and new first-tier cities.

based cultural practices, inducing a number of psychological responses that shape their self-perceptions and aspirations.

Overall, this research contributes to the scholarly discussion on first-generation college students by incorporating the insights of international students from mainland China, who comprised the largest international student population at US universities from 2009 to 2023 and the second-largest in 2023-2024 (Institute of International Education 2024). Foregrounding the intersectional nature of first-generation status to advance a nuanced understanding of first-generation Chinese international students, this study both extends and challenges common findings and assumptions in previous scholarship on first-generation college students. In doing so, this research encourages future scholars to broaden the conversation by highlighting the perspectives of international first-generation college students and to rethink first-generation status as encompassing intersectional and heterogeneous experiences uniquely shaped by the historical and sociocultural contexts of different countries. Furthermore, by integrating the concepts of capital, field, and habitus into the analysis, this study contributes to expanding Bourdieu's theory into a transnational context, underscoring both its potentialities and limitations in examining educational and social reproduction on a global scale. Lastly, in identifying elite K-12 schools as key conduits of transnational capital and mobility, this research further sheds light on the role of privileged, globally oriented education in shaping the world's class structures and stratification systems in the age of globalization.

LITERATURE REVIEW

First-Generation College Students' Experiences at US Universities

Despite inconsistencies in defining first-generation college students, past research consistently highlights that first-generation college students are systematically disadvantaged compared to their continuing-generation peers and face bureaucratic, academic, social, and mental health challenges in their college journeys. Specifically, studies suggest that compared to continuing-generation students, first-generation college students generally exhibit less institutional knowledge to navigate the complex administrative structures of universities (Osborne 2024), show lower academic achievement and persistence (Katrevich and Arruguete 2017; Longwell-Grice and Longwell-Grice 2021), and are less likely to engage in academic help-seeking behaviors (Chang et al. 2020; Hicks & Wood 2016; Truong 2016; Yee 2016). Research on first-generation college students' social engagement and integration reveals that while first-generation college students are actively involved in campus social activities (Evans et al. 2020; Ricks & Warren 2021; Truong 2016), they often experience a sense of alienation and a lack of fit in the higher education environment (Havlik et al. 2017; Nunn 2021; Osborne 2024; Santa-Ramirez 2022; Stebleton et al. 2014; Truong 2016). Moreover, although there is mixed evidence on whether mental health problems are more prevalent among FGCSs than among continuing-generation students (Gariott et al. 2021; Landry 2022; Ricks and Warren 2021; Smith and McLellan 2023; Stebleton et al. 2014), studies show that FGCSs may experience family-related stress unique to their first-generation status, which adds to their mental burdens and compromises their well-being and academic success (Covarrubias, Romero, and Trivelli 2015; Davis 2010; Landry 2022). Most previous studies attribute first-generation college students' challenges in navigating the college environment either to their lack of social and cultural capital compared to continuing-generation college students (Evans et al. 2020; Ricks and Warren 2021; Rosales et al. 2024; Truong 2016) or to a mismatch between the culture of their social origins (e.g., self-reliance and prioritizing others' needs) and the institutional culture of US higher

education (e.g., self-expression and autonomy) that negatively impacts their academic and social integration into American colleges (Chang et al. 2020; Nguyen and Nguyen 2020; Payne et al. 2018; Stephens et al. 2012; Tibbetts et al. 2018).

Increasing evidence suggests that first-generation college students are more likely to be low-income, non-native English speakers, and racial/ethnic minorities (Longwell-Grice and Longwell-Grice 2021; Redford and Hoyer 2017; Saenz et al. 2007). In response, recent scholars have begun critiquing the homogeneous characterization of first-generation college students in earlier studies and increasingly emphasized the heterogeneity in first-generation college students' college experiences (Davis 2010; Longwell-Grice and Longwell-Grice 2021; Nguyen and Nguyen 2018; Santa-Ramirez 2022). For instance, Longwell-Grice and Longwell-Grice (2021) critique that previous studies have commonly conflated first-generation college students with low-income and/or working-class students, thus overlooking the fact that first-generation college students come from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds and have distinct college experiences. In line with Anthony Jack's study (2019) about private elite high schools' contribution to a less challenging college experience for a group of low-income students, Osborne (2024) also finds that first-generation college students with prior educational experiences with selective schooling or external guidance from outside organizations feel more at ease navigating the academic, social, and bureaucratic demands of elite colleges.

In addition to varying socioeconomic backgrounds and levels of external support, a few other studies also indicate that first-generation college students' college experiences vary across different types of US higher education institutions (e.g., selective vs. less selective universities; four-year colleges vs. community colleges). Specifically, compared to first-generation students

attending other types of postsecondary institutions, first-generation students at highly selective colleges are found to develop a heightened awareness of class identity (Beattie 2018), experience a stronger sense of cultural mismatch (Wildhagen 2015), and demonstrate greater academic preparedness and interactive engagement strategies (i.e., student engagement strategies that emphasize the interactional dynamic between students and higher education institutions such as collaborative study and talking with faculty) (Yee 2016). A few studies also point out that first-generation and low-income students at elite colleges can experience identity crises as they feel pressured to "buy in" to the elite educational landscape (aka. upper-middle-class contexts) while staying connected to their low-resourced home communities (aka. low-income and working-class contexts) (Gable 2021; Osborne 2024; Truong 2016)

As heterogeneity becomes a growing focus in the research of first-generation college students, recent studies have increasingly employed intersectionality as a tool to examine first-generation students' college experience in relation to class (Gariott et al. 2021; Yee 2016), race (Change et al. 2020; Nunn 2021; Santa-Ramirez 2020), and gender (Truong 2016). However, while research on the college experience of first-generation college students from racial/ethnic minority groups is growing, Chinese students are largely left out of this conversation. Furthermore, samples in prior research consist almost exclusively of US citizens or immigrants who have lived and/or plan to live in America for a long time (Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice 2021). Mention is rarely made of the college experience of first-generation college students who are international students or whose caregivers had received college degrees in countries other than the US. By examining the experiences of first-generation Chinese international students at elite US universities, this study

seeks to fill these gaps and broaden the discussion on first-generation college students in US higher education.

Chinese International Students' Experiences at US Universities

Most prior studies suggest that Chinese international students face numerous challenges in their experiences and in adjusting to US universities. Specifically, scholars find that Chinese international students face considerable challenges in their collegiate adjustment, including acculturative stress, work-life imbalance, limited interactions with faculty, underutilization of campus services for academic and non-academic assistance, loss of social support system, employment opportunities, and a lack of sense of belonging (Chen and Zhou 2019; Chi 2020; Heng 2018; Leong 2015; Li 2016; Tung 2016; Yao 2018; Zhao 2018). Most studies attribute these challenges to factors such as language barriers (Chi 2020; Heng 2018; Leong 2015; Li 2016), cultural differences or cultural shock (Chi, 2020; Heng, 2018; Leong, 2015; Li 2016; Tung 2016), perceived racism (Yao 2018), and uncertainty about visa status (Yan and Berliner 2011). Among all the factors, cultural differences stand out as the most influential and persistent one. Specifically, studies have shown that Chinese international students often experience feelings of isolation due to the cultural distance (i.e., the degree of difference in cultural norms, values, and practices) between China and the US, which makes it difficult for them to forge social connections with American domestic peers in the new environment while losing ties with the home world (Bertram et al. 2014; Yan and Berliner 2011). Sociocultural challenges like this have been shown to compromise Chinese international students' mental health and hinder their academic and social integration into the US college environment (Chi 2020; Leong 2018; Yan and Berliner 2011).

While recognizing the importance of addressing the challenges described above, recent scholars have increasingly contested the deficit view of Chinese international students by highlighting their flexibility and agency in adjusting to the American educational and sociocultural contexts (Heng 2018, 2019; Yan 2017). For instance, in a longitudinal interview-based study, Heng (2018) found that many Chinese international students were able to overcome the sociocultural challenges they faced at US colleges through deliberate efforts, such as seeking support from the Chinese student community. Meanwhile, recent research has growingly emphasized the significance and necessity of studying Chinese international students as a heterogeneous group with diverse experiences (Heng 2018, 2019; Kim 2020). Specifically, some studies have found that Chinese international students' college experiences are influenced by a range of factors, including class (Garrison et al. 2023), years of study in US universities (with challenges gradually diminishing over time) (Heng 2019), and the types of high schools attended (e.g., traditional public schools in China vs. international high schools in China vs. American high schools) (Cheng and Yang 2019; Li 2019; Zhao 2018). Most of these factors influence Chinese international students' college experiences by mediating students' English proficiency and familiarity with the structure, rules, and expectations of American universities. For instance, Garrison et al. (2023:48) suggest that Chinese students from higher-class backgrounds tend to have higher English fluency, as they possess more economic resources to support their English learning within the Chinese language environment. Drawing on interviews with 18 undergraduate Chinese international students from three US universities, Heng (2019) reveals that first-year and second-year Chinese students face different challenges in college. In particular, first-year students struggle more with academic writing and classroom participation, while second-year students who have become more familiar with academic norms and expectations report fewer academic stressors but more concerns about

internships (Heng 2019:614). Several other studies further find that, compared to students who attended public schools in mainland China, Chinese students who attended international high schools or American high schools exhibit better adjustment to the US college environment due to their greater familiarity with the academic requirements of US education and greater confidence in their English abilities (Cheng and Yang 2019; Li 2019).

A limited number of studies have specifically addressed Chinese international undergraduate students' experience at elite US colleges. For example, in a study examining the experience of Chinese international undergraduate and graduate students at the University of Southern California (USC), Zhao (2018) found that undergraduate participants, in particular, reported having sufficient knowledge about American culture and experiencing a relatively smooth transition to life at USC. One possible explanation, Zhao (2018) argued, was that a large proportion of Chinese international undergraduate students at USC went to international high schools or international programs in China, which provided them with early exposure to US academic and societal culture and thus an advantage in college adjustment. Ma (2020) extends this argument, linking this advantage to students' socioeconomic characteristics. According to Ma (2020:91), the admission procedures and tuition fees of international high schools and international divisions within Chinese public high schools effectively preselect students whose families are privileged enough to support their college journeys in the U.S. with greater economic, academic, and cultural capital. Moreover, Ma (2020) discovered that Chinese international undergraduate students at highly selective institutions tend to have higher English proficiency and higher levels of parental

education (i.e., they tend to be continuing-generation college students)[5], which also helps with their navigation of elite college life. Together, these studies suggest that Chinese international students – particularly Chinese international undergraduate students – enrolling in elite US universities may have relatively smoother college transition and navigation experiences than those at less selective institutions due to their privileged socioeconomic status and early exposure to American academic and societal culture in prior educational experiences.

Notably, while prior studies provide valuable insights into the adaptation and experiences of Chinese international students at US universities, significant gaps remain in the existing literature. Specifically, research on Chinese international students' experiences in elite US higher education settings is notably limited. Furthermore, first-generation students have rarely been examined as a distinct subgroup within the Chinese international student population. Aiming to fill these gaps, this research contributes to enriching the data on the diverse experiences of Chinese international students, thereby fostering a more thorough and nuanced understanding of this student population in US higher education.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Bourdieu's Sociological Theories: Capital, Habitus, and Field

In this study, I employ Bourdieu's concepts of capital, habitus, and field to interpret and analyze the college experiences of first-generation and continuing-generation Chinese international

[5] In fact, Ma (2010) is the only scholar I've found to address first-generation status in studying Chinese international students in US higher education. Specifically, she finds that first-generation Chinese international undergraduate students are less likely to enroll in selective institutions than their continuing-generation Chinese international counterparts (Ma 2010:339). Notably, however, Ma doesn't provide a solid explanation for this pattern.

students. In examining individuals' navigation of and experiences in different social landscapes, Bourdieu (1986) identifies three forms of capital that shape people's social positions and access to opportunities: *economic capital* (i.e., financial resources, such as income and ownership), *social capital* (i.e., social connections, such as peer networks), and *cultural capital* (i.e., cultural assets acquired through socialization in embodied forms, such as knowledge, skills, and manners; in objectified forms, such as books and artworks; in institutionalized forms, such as education credentials and professional licenses).

The different forms of capital individuals possess are translated into dispositions and observable behaviors (e.g., educational aspirations, work ethics, hobbies, speech styles) guided by *habitus*, which refers to the ingrained ways of thinking and acting developed through one's past experience and social background (Bourdieu 1977, 1984; Edgerton and Roberts 2014). Typically, individuals acquire and develop capital and habitus through their family upbringing and social environment. For instance, people born into middle-class environments possess capital and habitus (e.g., greater financial stability, higher educational attainment, self-expression, sense of entitlement) that differ from those of working-class individuals (e.g., more financial limitations, less educational credentials, self-reliance, sense of constraint) (Calarco 2014; Stephens et al. 2012; Lareau 2015).

Importantly, the value of one's capital is not fixed but determined by specific *fields*, or the settings in which social agents and their social positions are located, such as workplaces and schools (Riley 2017). For example, elite higher education institutions in the US are found to value the capital possessed by the upper and middle classes (Osborne 2024; Stevens 2009). In navigating a field, people who possess capital and habitus valued and expected by that particular field would gain greater opportunities and advantages. For example, individuals developing habitus and capital in upper- and middle-class families may feel their displayed cultural knowledge and behaviors (e.g.,

self-expression, communication styles, familiarity with professional/academic jargon, networking etiquette) more aligned with those expected by elite educational institutions. This alignment then eases their navigation of the elite college field, leading to better educational outcomes and job prospects that maintain their social status. In this case, the acquisition of capital and habitus in the family environment serves to significantly reproduce the class structure. In fact, past studies have long recognized the home as the primary site of social class reproduction in the US, typically through the intergenerational transmission of family cultural and social capital (Calarco 2014; Horvat et al. 2003; Lareau 2002, 2015; Parcel and Hendrix 2014). For instance, Lareau (2002) shows that American middle-class parents transmit social and cultural capital – such as greater social exposure to professionals and the cultural skills to assertively negotiate with them – that help their children secure advantages in institutional settings and maintain class status over time.

As globalization garners increasing academic attention (see Carlson, Gerhards, and Hans 2016; Choi et al. 2024), recent scholarship has increasingly focused on applying Bourdieu's theory in international settings. Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998), for instance, investigate transnational social capital, revealing how social networks that span national borders constitute valuable resources that give individuals an advantage in their professional lives abroad. In a similar vein but with a different focus, Weiss (2005:708) examines transnational cultural capital among migrants, defining it as skills and educational qualifications that are "transnationally recognized" and demanded in global labor markets. Grineski (2011) further categorizes transnational cultural capital into linguistic (e.g., foreign language skills), attitudinal (e.g., ease in navigating a foreign setting), informational (e.g., knowledge of foreign cultures), and institutionalized (e.g., visas, passports, and certificates) assets that are valued and instrumental in facilitating one's goal attainment abroad. Building on these concepts, some scholars specifically direct their attention to international education and study-

abroad experiences at the secondary and post-secondary levels, which they find play a crucial role in individuals' development of transnational capital through immersion in foreign language and cultural environments (Carlson et al. 2016; Holvoet and Dewachter 2022).

In this study, I apply Bourdieu's concepts of capital, field, and habitus – with a specific focus on their functioning in family, school, and regional settings – to examine the college experiences of first-generation Chinese international students within a transnational context.

Intersectionality

In addition to Bourdieu's theories, I draw on an intersectional framework to derive a more nuanced understanding of first-generation Chinese international students' college experiences. The analytic lens of intersectionality emphasizes "an understanding of human beings as shaped by the interactions of different social locations (e.g., 'race'/ethnicity, Indigeneity, gender, sexuality, geography, age, disability/ability, migration status, religion)" within a context of interconnected and interdependent social structures (e.g., laws, policies, state governments, educational institutions) (Hankivsky 2014:2). First coined by Kimberle Crenshaw in 1989, intersectionality has been widely used in social scientific research over the past two decades to identify, examine, and critique how various social categories intersect to shape individuals' unique experiences of disadvantages and privileges (Hankivsky 2014). This study specifically explores how the interconnected systems of social categories – including first-generation identity, social class, international student status, and regional background – interact to produce the unique and heterogeneous experiences of first-generation Chinese international students.

HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL CONTEXT

Middle-Class Expansion, International Education, and Regional Inequality in Mainland China

The experiences of the studied cohort, who were born at the turn of the 21st century in mainland China, can only be understood within the broader context of China's economic and social transformations in the late 20th century.

Following the end of the Cultural Revolution[6] in 1976, China underwent significant social changes, especially in terms of its economic and educational landscapes. Economically, the Reform and Opening-Up policy launched in 1978 marked China's transition from a planned economy to a market-driven one, leading to a period of rapid economic growth (Bian 2002; Brandt and Rawski 2008). Throughout the 1980s and the 1990s, booming industries such as private business, real estate, and foreign trade created vast economic opportunities, particularly in Eastern coastal cities (Brandt and Rawski 2008; Chan 2010). Meanwhile, although the National College Entrance Exam (Gaokao) was finally reinstated in 1977 after ten years of educational disruption caused by the Cultural Revolution, university enrollment remained highly restrictive in China until the implementation of the Higher Education Expansion Policy in 1999, which increased admission rates and expanded university capacity to accommodate the massive backlog of students eager for higher education (Gu et al. 2018; Hannum 2008).

[6] The Cultural Revolution refers to a sociopolitical movement in China that took place from 1966 to 1976. Initiated by Mao Zedong, then Chairman of the Communist Party of China, the movement aimed to preserve Chinese communism by removing capitalist and traditional elements from Chinese society and promoting Maoist ideology (Kraus 2012). With intellectuals and teachers as two major targets of the purge, the movement seriously disrupted China's educational system, including the suspension of the National College Entrance Exam for ten years (Kraus 2012). For further details on the Cultural Revolution, please refer to Kraus's work (2012).

The changing social landscapes have given rise to several phenomena. The first is the rise of China's middle class. Facing limited college access alongside lucrative prospects provided by the economic reform, many individuals turned to entrepreneurship and private business as alternative mobility pathways, achieving financial success without formal higher education (Bian 2002; Yeoh 2010). These individuals then formed what Chunling Li – one of the most famous Chinese sociologists studying contemporary China's class structure – terms the "old middle class" and the "capitalist class," two subclasses of China's middle class that emerged only after the Reform and Opening-Up (Li 2010). Building her class classification on occupational and employment status, Li characterizes the old middle class as small employers, small business owners, and the self-employed who primarily work in the private sector, have accumulated some economic capital, and have generally low educational attainments (2010:143-148). The capitalist class, which refers to a subclass of China's rising middle class that possesses "[the] most economic capital and [the] least cultural capital," consists of private entrepreneurs with more than 20 employees who have acquired significant wealth despite low educational levels (Li 2010:148). In addition, Li describes two other subclasses: (1) the "marginal middle class," composed of low-wage white-collar and other workers with relatively high educational attainments, and (2) the "new middle class," which includes professionals, managers, and government officials who have attained high educational levels, hold most cultural capital, and are most likely to earn high incomes aside from the capitalist class (Li 2010:143-154). Together, these four subclasses give rise to a non-negligible yet heterogeneous middle class in China with varying levels of income, cultural backgrounds, and value systems (Li 2010:154).

Notably, one ramification of China's rising middle class is the expansion of international education since the 1990s. As previous studies point out, despite its varying values and backgrounds, the Chinese middle class shares with its global counterparts the same anxiety about their children's future in an increasingly intertwined global economy (Ong 1999; Tu 2022). This anxiety, in turn, leads many Chinese middle-class families to invest in high-quality and often overseas education in Western countries as a strategic move toward securing class status and their children's competitive edge (See Tu 2022; Waters 2005). The educational demand of the rising middle class, along with a series of policies in the 1990s that encouraged the establishment of non-public schools and allowed for more individualized school choices[7] (Tsang 2000), contributed to a growing market of international education institutions and programs available for Chinese local students [8] in mainland China. These projects encompass private international schools and international programs within private and public schools, which have grown in popularity among China's middle-class families (Jiang 2013) and prepare students for overseas studies through the provision of international curricula such as AP, A-Levels, and IBDP[9].

[7] See Tsang (2000) for more details on policy changes in Chinese education. Between 1949 and the early 1980s, the Chinese education system was highly centralized, with school attendance largely determined by the state. It was only after the Reform and Opening-Up that the centralized educational policy began to loosen. In 1993, the Chinese government issued the *Outline of Chinese Education Reform and Development*, which encouraged the establishment of non-public schools. Since then, more private schools have been founded in China, and Chinese families have had a wider variety of school choices.

[8] According to Hayden and Thompson (2013), traditional international schools are primarily set up to serve the children of expatriates and are thus open only to non-local or multinational students.

[9] AP refers to the Advanced Placement program in the US and Canada, which offers undergraduate university-level curricula and examinations for high school students. A-Levels refer to Advanced Level qualifications in the UK that provide subject-specific curricula for pre-university students. IBDP refers to the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme, which was founded in Switzerland and aims to serve students aged 16-19 in preparation for entry into universities worldwide. International schools and programs serving Chinese local students typically provide

In addition to the bourgeoning middle class and the accompanying expansion of international education, China's changing social landscape also results in large-scale migration that widens regional inequalities. As Eastern coastal cities offered the most promising economic prospects, the 1980s and 1990s also witnessed a wave of internal migration from rural to urban areas and from inland to coastal regions. This migration pattern deepened long-standing regional disparities in China, further concentrating human capital and resources in the coastal urban regions of the East (Cai 2018; Chan 2010; Yeoh 2010). The regional disparities of resource distribution are partially reflected in China's city tier system[10], an unofficial ranking of China's urban areas based on GDP and population size. The regional hierarchy measured by economic development in mainland China is thus as follows: the largest and wealthiest Tier 1 cities (i.e., Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen, and Guangzhou) at the top, lower-tiered cities spreading over in the middle, and rural areas concentrated in the West and Central regions at the bottom. In the recent decade, there has been an emerging category of new first-tier cities[11], which denotes urban areas that are increasingly

international curricula alongside Chinese national curriculum, or at least some elements of it, as required by the Chinese government (Jian 2023).

[10] See Appendix A for more information on China's city tier system. Note: Although city tiers are cited a lot in existing research on China, I had a difficult time finding scholarly resources that focus on examining and unpacking the city tier system, probably because it is not an official ranking recognized by the Chinese government. However, since my interviewees frequently referred to the concept of city tiers in their responses, and the city tier system appears to provide useful guidance on the patterns of my data, I decided to adopt this construct to help explain my findings. The material presented in Appendix A, published by a small mapping project group, is the best tool I have found so far that provides a broad yet rough overview of China's city tier system with reference to GDP and population size.

[11] According to the 2024 report published by Yicai Global, an English-language news service of Yicai Media Group in mainland China, the new first-tier cities now include: Chengdu, Hangzhou, Chongqing, Suzhou, Wuhan, Xi'an, Nanjing, Changsha, Tianjin, Zhengzhou, Dongguan, Wuxi, Ningbo, Qingdao, and Hefei. The China Integrated City Index 2022 (evaluated by environmental, social, and economic dimensions) published by the State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China in 2023 recognizes the first nine cities in the above list as quasi first-tier, meaning they have the highest potential to become first-tier cities in the future.

reaching the equivalent resource and urban development level as the four traditional first-tier cities (The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China 2023; Yicai Global 2024).

It is against this backdrop of economic, educational, and social transformations that the parents of the first-generation and continuing-generation Chinese international students in this study were born. Taking advantage of the economic reform, parents of first-generation Chinese international respondents were among those who were able to accumulate wealth without college degrees during the 1980s and the early 2000s. In fact, almost all first-generation respondents have at least one of their parents working as a private entrepreneur, placing most of these students' families in the "capitalist class." In contrast, parents of most continuing-generation respondents work in senior professional and managerial jobs, with a few working as entrepreneurs and university professors. According to Chunling Li's class classification, most of these students' families thus fall into the "new middle class." Notably, while Li notes a gap in cultural capital between the capitalist and the new middle classes, families of both first-generation and continuing-generation students in this study are financially stable and likely fall into the upper end of China's middle class in terms of household income (see the methods section for more details). Enabled by their parents' economic capital, almost all first-generation and continuing-generation respondents received their K-12 education in international programs in Chinese public or private schools, public or private schools in America, and private international schools across the world.

METHODS

Research Design and Data Collection

This exploratory study follows a qualitative design and employs a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to investigate the experience of first-generation Chinese international students at elite US colleges. I chose a qualitative study design given its strength in understanding "the meaning and experience dimensions of humans' lives and social worlds" (Fossey et al. 2016) and its flexibility in accommodating the exploratory questions asked in this study. I further adopted hermeneutic phenomenology as the methodological approach because it is concerned with people's lived experiences and seeks to examine the meanings individuals make of their lived experiences within specific sociocultural contexts (Ayton 2023; Creswell 2007; Dowling 2005), which aligns with this study's goals.

Following this reasoning, this research collects in-depth, semi-structured interviews and post-interview demographic surveys. The sample includes 10 first-generation and 10 continuing-generation Chinese international undergraduate students at four private research universities ranked among the top 20 in the *2025 US News & World Report Best National University Rankings*. All first-generation participants meet the criterion that none of their immediate family members from previous generations (i.e., parents, grandparents) had earned a four-year college degree or beyond in China or abroad. All continuing-generation participants meet the criterion that at least one of their immediate family members from previous generations (i.e., parents, grandparents) had earned a four-year college degree or beyond in China or abroad.

I conducted all interviews myself in person (n=9) and via Zoom (n=11) between December 2024 and February 2025. Interviews were conducted in a combination of English and Mandarin Chinese, with most conducted in Mandarin Chinese. Interviews lasted between one and three hours, with most lasting an hour and a half. All interviews were recorded via audio or video upon

respondents' verbal consent. Upon completing the interview, I asked each respondent to fill out an online Google survey to collect and confirm their demographic information, including year of study, majors, past and current affiliated institution(s), place of permanent residence, K-12 education characteristics, parental occupations and educational attainments, educational attainments of grandparents, and optional reporting of annual per capita household income.

The interviews consisted of four sections. I first invited respondents to briefly share their demographic background, including their year of study, major(s), places of permanent residence, and parental education and occupations. I then explored respondents' K-12 educational trajectories, asking bout the locations and types of schools they attended (e.g., private/public, international/non-international), curricula offered, academic requirements, language(s) of instruction, student demographics, and student competitiveness. Next, I delved into respondents' college experiences, focusing on their perceived academic preparedness, self-evaluated academic performance, social involvement and relationships within campus, cultural experiences, sense of belonging, professional development, and mental health. I also inquired about respondents' awareness and utilization of campus services in this section. Finally, I asked respondents about their perceptions of their first-generation/continuing-generation and other identities, as well as their relationships with their colleges and hometowns. Throughout the interviews, I also probed respondents' family relationships, parental expectations, parenting styles, and the support they received from their families in their educational journeys.

Sampling and Participant Recruitment

Given the exploratory nature of this study and the challenge of reaching the target population (i.e., first-generation Chinese international undergraduate students at elite US colleges), I recruited participants mainly through criterion sampling (n=17). Specifically, I disseminated recruitment flyers with specified participant eligibility criteria in the Chinese undergraduate student WeChat groups for each of the top 20 US private research universities. I chose such WeChat groups as the recruitment sites because they exist for every highly selective US university and exclusively host Chinese students admitted and enrolled there. These WeChat groups not only provide an efficient way to seek potential participants but also ensure their institutional affiliations. After volunteers expressed interest in participating in this study, I screened for their eligibility and scheduled interview appointments with eligible respondents. In addition to WeChat groups, I also posted recruitment flyers on RedNote to expand outreach but didn't successfully recruit eligible participants through this platform. Beyond criterion sampling, I employed snowball sampling (n=1) and convenience sampling (n=2)[12] for further recruitment, attempting to balance the gender ratio between participant groups. I stopped collecting data when additional interviews no longer contributed new insights and I felt I had reached theoretical saturation (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded using MAXQDA. Thematic analysis was conducted to identify recurring patterns and themes that reveal the meanings of participants'

[12] The two convenience samples consist of one high school friend and one college friend of mine, both of whom are male continuing-generation students. I reached out to these two respondents because, at the time, I needed more male-identified students for my continuing-generation group but was unable to recruit any through WeChat and RedNote.

narratives and experiences. I began by applying initial and descriptive coding (Saldaña 2016:102, 115) to capture the summative attributes and the topical elements of different segments of data. I also employed in vivo coding (Glaser and Strauss 1967) in this first initial round of coding to highlight quotes that struck me as insightful, revealing, and surprising for further grouping and analysis. I then applied emotion and values coding (Saldaña 2016: 124-131) in the second round to add another layer of codes with more analytic depth. Finally, I used pattern coding (Miles et al. 2014) to consolidate codes from previous rounds based on their similarities. After three rounds of coding, categories were developed for thematic analysis to uncover key insights into participants' experiences and meaning-making processes.

Participant Characteristics

Table 1 (see below) provides an overview of respondent characteristics. All respondents were born between 2000 and 2006. Of all the respondents, 13 are currently enrolled in a highly selective private university in the Midwest, 4 at a highly selective institution in the South, 2 at a highly selective institution on the East Coast, and 1 at another highly selective private university on the East Coast. Three first-generation respondents and one continuing-generation respondent had a transfer history in their college experiences. Except for one first-year continuing-generation respondent, all are second- to fourth-year undergraduate students. Among first-generation respondents, 6 identify as males and 4 identify as females. Among continuing-generation respondents, 5 identify as males, 4 identify as females, and 1 identifies as non-binary. Regarding hometowns, first-generation respondents come from diverse locations: 4 from first-tier cities, 2 from new first-tier cities, and 4 from second- to fifth-tier cities. Among continuing-generation

Table 1. Respondent Characteristics

Pseudonym	Current Institution	Gender	Home City (City Tier)	Year of Study	Financial Aid/Scholarship Status	Type of High School Attended	International Programs Offered	Father's Education and Current Occupation	Mother's Education and Current Occupation
First-Generation Respondents (n=10)									
Adam	Southern University	M	Jinan (Second-Tier)	Sophomore	No	International Program in Private School (Mainland)	A-Level Program	Associate/Entrepreneur	Associate/Freelancer
Anna	Eastern Univesity 1 (Transfer)	F	Shanghai (First-Tier)	Junior	No	Traditional Public School (Mainland)	N/A	High School/Engineer	High School/Business Manager
Daniel	Midwest University	M	Jingmen (Fifth-Tier)	Senior	No	Private Day School (US)	AP Program	Middle school/Entrepreneur	Associate/Freelancer
Emma	Midwest University	F	Zhenjiang (Third-Tier)	Junior	Yes/Empower Scholarship	Private Boarding School (US)	AP Program	College Attrition/Engineer	Associate/Self-Employed
Jade	Midwest University	F	Shanghai (First-Tier)	Sophomore	Yes/Odyssey Scholarship & Davis UWC Scholarship	Private International School (UK)	IB Program	N/A	College Dropout/Entrepreneur
Leo	Southern University	M	Shenzhen (First-Tier)	Sophomore	No	Public School (US) & Private International School (Mainland)	AP Program	High School/Entrepreneur	High School/Entrepreneur
Lucas	Midwest University	M	Huzhou (Third-Tier)	Junior	No	Private International School (Mainland)	IB Program	High School/Entrepreneur	High School/Business Manager
Matilda	Midwest University (Transfer)	F	Hangzhou (New First-Tier)	Junior	No	Private International School (Mainland)	A-Level Program	High School/Entrepreneur	High School/Entrepreneur
Michael	Midwest University	M	Beijing (First-Tier)	Junior	No	Traditional Public School (Mainland)	N/A	Middle School/Freelancer	High School/N/A
Tate	Eastern Univesity 2 (Transfer)	M	Tianjin (New First-Tier)	Sophomore	No	Private International School (Mainland) & Private School (US)	IB & AP Programs	Middle School/Entrepreneur	Middle School/Freelancer
Continuing-Generation Respondents (n=10)									
Andrew*	Southern University	M	Nanjing (New First-Tier)	Sophomore	No	International Program in Private School (Mainland)	AP Program	Associate/Business Manager	Associate/Business Professional
Catherine	Midwest University	NB*	Shanghai (First-Tier)	Junior	Yes/Davis UWC Scholarship	Private International School (Mainland)	IB Program	BA/Entrepreuneur	BA/Entrepreuneur
Claire	Midwest University	F	Shanghai (First-Tier)	Senior	No	International Program in Public School (Mainland)	AP Program	College Dropout/Entrepreneur	BA/Freelancer
David	Eastern Univesity 1	M	Guangzhou (First-Tier)	Sophomore	No	International Program in Public School (Mainland)	AP Program	Doctorate/Civil Servant	Doctorate/University Professor
Elizabeth	Midwest University	F	Shanghai (First-Tier)	Sophomore	No	Private International School (HK) & Private International School (Mainland)	IB Program	BA/Finance Professional	BA/Freelancer
Jayden	Midwest University	M	Shenzhen (First-Tier)	Senior	Yes/National Merit Scholarship & Pell Grant	Private Boarding School (US)	AP Program	MA/Business Manager	MA/Retired
Natalie	Midwest University	F	Guiyang (Second-Tier)	Freshman	Yes/Odyssey Scholarship & Davis UWC Scholarship	Private International School (HK)	IB Program	MA/Education Professional	BA/Sales Professional
Samantha	Midwest University (Transfer)	F	Shanghai (First-Tier)	Sophomore	No	International Program in Public School (Mainland) & Private International School (Mainland)	A-Level Program	MA/Business Manager	BA/Freelancer
Samuel	Southern University	M	Wuhan (New First-Tier)	Senior	No	Private International School (Mainland)	AP Program	MA/Business Manager	Doctorate/University Professor
Theodore	Midwest University	M	Shanghai (First-Tier)	Senior	No	Private Boarding School (US)	AP Program	MA/Finance Professional	BA/Freelancer

* Andrew is counted as a continuing-generation student because his grandparents obtained four-year college degrees in mainland China
* Traditional public schools refer to schools in mainland China that only provide the national curriculum
* BA refers to a bachelor's degree; MA refers to a master's degree
* NB in the gender column denotes non-binary

respondents, 7 come from first-tier cities, 2 from new first-tier cities, and 1 from a second-tier city. Nearly all participants had attended international programs within Chinese public or private schools, private international schools in China or abroad, or US public or private schools during their K-12 education. One of the two respondents who didn't attend any international educational programs had studied in Zambia and France from kindergarten to third grade. There is a clear distinction in parental occupation between the two groups. Specifically, while most parents of first-generation respondents work as entrepreneurs, most parents of continuing-generation respondents hold professional or managerial positions, with a few also working as entrepreneurs or university professors.

Importantly, all respondents, regardless of their first-generation or continuing-generation status, reported receiving strong financial support from their families. Most are full-paying students with family sponsorship and are debt-free. Among the four first-generation respondents who provided information on their estimated annual per capita household disposable income in the demographic survey, one reported an annual per capita household disposable income of more than 330,000 CNY (approx. 45,470 USD), two reported more than 250,000 CNY (approx. 34,448 USD), and one reported around 125,000 CNY (approx. 17,224 USD). Among the five continuing-generation respondents who offered this information[13], four reported an annual per capita household disposable income of more than 330,000 CNY (approx. 45,470 USD), and one reported

13 One fourth-year continuing-generation respondent, Jayden (see Table 1), has a peculiar and interesting financial situation. Enrolled as an international student from mainland China when he got admitted to his institution, Jayden obtained a green card recently and had successfully applied for the Federal Pell Grant, even though he reported – both to me in the survey and to FAFSA – an annual per capita household disposable income between 167,000 and 330,000 CNY (approx. 23,011 - 45,470 USD). Jayden suspected that his parents' divorced marital status and his mother's retirement might have contributed to this, but he himself also had no idea why he was eligible to receive the grant despite his family's stable financial situation.

between 167,000 and 330,000 CNY (approx. 23,011 - 45,470 USD). According to the 2022 annual per capita disposable income of urban households in China, published by the National Bureau of Statistics[14], the families of all reported respondents far exceed the threshold for high-income urban households, which have an annual per capita disposable income of around 107,224 CNY (approx. 14,775 USD). Based on this data, it is reasonable to infer that most first-generation and continuing-generation respondents come from families on the upper end of China's middle class in terms of income level.

Positionality

The overlap between my own identity and that of my respondents significantly influenced the research process. As a Chinese international student, I was able to establish rapport and build trust with both first-generation and continuing-generation respondents. Many participants indicated that the use of Mandarin Chinese during interviews contributed to a more relaxed and open exchange, allowing them to discuss their personal experiences more freely. Furthermore, my shared cultural background with my respondents offered me the cultural literacy to comprehend the historical and contextual references that emerged during the interviews. My position as a student at an elite institution also afforded me an insider understanding of the academic and cultural environments my respondents described, enabling me to empathize with their struggles and aspirations within this privileged academic context. Notably, my first-generation status helped bridge the distance

14 "The Middle Class in China - Growth, Policy, and Consumption." 2023. China Briefing News. See Appendix B for more information on the 2022 annual per capita disposable income of urban households in China published by the National Bureau of Statistics.

between myself and many first-generation respondents, particularly given the small population of first-generation Chinese international students at elite US institutions. In several cases, my disclosure of my own first-generation status appeared to make respondents more willing to reflect on their own experiences with first-generation identity. Additionally, as a first-generation student raised in China, I was able to relate to the cultural milieu and socioeconomic conditions that shaped the families of many first-generation respondents. Finally, although gender is not a primary analytic focus in this study, my identity as a female researcher may have influenced the dynamics of the interviews by making me appear more approachable in the eyes of some female respondents.

However, despite these shared identities, I recognize, in line with Song and Parker (1995), that researchers are always simultaneously insiders and outsiders to their participants' experiences. While my commonalities with the respondents facilitated rapport, they don't grant me an automatic or complete understanding of their experiences. For instance, having grown up in a new first-tier city, I didn't personally experience the feelings and thoughts described by many first-generation respondents from more resource-limited regions. Additionally, my background in attending a private international high school may have limited my understanding of the experiences of respondents who attended Chinese public high schools or US schools, which required me to ask for more detailed explanations of their K-12 schooling. As a student who has remained at a single institution throughout college, I might also lack firsthand insight into the motivations and emotional adjustments associated with transferring. Furthermore, my identity as a non-religious individual gives me limited exposure to religious groups and organizations, particularly those prevalent in the US, which some of my respondents mentioned in their interviews.

I am aware that my subjective positionality shapes how I approach my data. My reading of my respondents' narratives, for instance, is inevitably informed by my own lived experiences occupying a particular social and cultural position, living in a particular region in China, and studying in a particular institution in the US. I did, however, make deliberate efforts to approach my respondents with openness and humility, striving to avoid making assumptions about their experiences. Throughout this research, I have sought to remain reflexive, and have continually reflected on how my privileges and disadvantages along various dimensions might influence both my interpretation of the data and the conclusion I draw.

FINDINGS

Shared Experiences of First-Generation and Continuing-Generation Students

The findings of this research are separated into two main sections: (1) the shared college experiences of first-generation and continuing-generation Chinese international students and (2) the distinct college experiences of first-generation Chinese international students.

In this first section, I specifically examine the shared college experiences of first-generation and continuing-generation Chinese international students and the factors contributing to their similar experiences. I first show that overall, first-generation and continuing-generation respondents share similar challenges and achievements in their college experiences. Specifically, students from both groups report social isolation, career anxiety, and cultural differences as the major challenges they've encountered during college. Despite these challenges, most students

exhibit sufficient institutional knowledge and are able to adjust themselves to navigate the elite college environment, regardless of their first-generation or continuing-generation status.

I then illustrate that their shared overall experiences are attributable to two factors: (1) the economic reform in late 20th-century China, which allowed first-generation students' parents to acquire economic capital by joining the "capitalist class" and purchase elite K-12 educational resources, and (2) the limited transferability of home-based capital across national borders, which restricts continuing-generation respondents' parents from translating their social and cultural capital into their children's advantage in navigating elite US institutions. Specifically, while the parental economic capital gained during the economic reform buffers first-generation Chinese international respondents against the common disadvantages facing many American domestic first-generation college students, the limited transferability of home-based parental social and cultural capital deprives continuing-generation Chinese international respondents of the common advantages associated with their American domestic continuing-generation counterparts. As a result, both first-generation and continuing-generation respondents draw more on the academic, social, and cultural resources they obtained through elite, globally oriented K-12 schooling experiences than parental guidance to navigate the selective college environment, which then contributes to the common challenges and successes in their overall college experiences. In this sense, the similar college experiences of the two groups represent a successful conversion of parental economic capital into transnational capital via schooling, highlighting elite K-12 schools as more powerful agents than the home in facilitating transnational mobility and social reproduction.

Similar Achievements and Challenges

For the most part, first-generation and continuing-generation respondents appear to share similar challenges and achievements in their college experiences.

Regarding successes, about half of the respondents in each group reported a smooth college transition academically, socially, and culturally. Most of the remaining respondents were able to adapt well to the academic difficulty, workload, and requirements of their college, regardless of their first-generation or continuing-generation status. Furthermore, almost all of the respondents in the sample were able to successfully navigate the bureaucratic system and demands of elite universities, as shown in their knowledge about when, where, and how to seek and apply for institutional resources such as grants and accommodations.

In terms of challenges, respondents from both groups reported social isolation, career anxiety, and cultural differences as the major challenges they encountered during college.

Socially, first-generation and continuing-generation respondents were equally likely to describe a challenge in making friends – even Chinese ones – on campus. Some of them attributed such a challenge to the busy schedule they and their college peers had during college. Catherine, a third-year continuing-generation student at a highly selective university in the Midwest, described this feeling. Comparing her life at college with that in high school, she suggested that it became much more difficult to maintain relationships with other peers in college because social time became less available given everyone's busy schedule:

> I feel pretty lonely…I think…everyone is just so busy. For example, when I transitioned from high school to college, I found that having a meal with someone was something that needed to be scheduled on our calendars. Back in high school – since I lived in a boarding school – I could just knock on my neighbor's door and find someone to eat with. Social time was more readily available back then. But after coming to college, I found that hanging out with peers became something I had to plan in advance, and that felt kind of overwhelming…

Some others explained their feeling of social isolation as resulting from a change in the way people make friends at college. For instance, Leo, a second-year first-generation student in an elite university in the South, found it difficult to make friends with shared interests in college because the way people made friends became more goal-oriented:

> I feel like my social life became a lot less *vibrant* after coming to college...I feel like it's much harder to make friends now like I had in high school—those who shared the same interests and really clicked with me...Most of the time, it feels more like you seek out...certain people for a specific goal or purpose...So it can feel a bit lonely sometimes.

This feeling that people in college adopted a more goal-oriented approach to socializing was similarly expressed by David, a second-year continuing-generation student at a highly selective university on the East Coast. Feeling confused and frustrated about the fact that he wasn't able to have a single close friend at college, David wondered if it was because people may prioritize friendship that aligned with their academic or professional goals:

> I can say with absolute certainty that, since the start of college, I haven't made a single friend. Not even one. I spent my entire first year thinking about why this is the case. I consider myself a pretty easygoing and sociable person, like, I can talk about all sorts of topics with different kinds of people. But for some reason, I just haven't made any friends…It just feels like there's no one to connect with…(I feel like) a lot of people have really clear plans for themselves – like, "I want to do research, so I'm going to the lab," or "I want to work in finance, so I need to get an internship." Everyone has these super defined paths, and if you're not a part of their plan, it's really hard to be included in their lives. That's what it feels like.

It is noteworthy that the feeling of isolation described by these respondents may reflect a broader phenomenon that extends beyond international students on elite campuses. Following ninety-one domestic first-generation and thirty-five domestic continuing-generation students at two historically elite universities, Harvard and Georgetown, Gable (2021:103) found that many

participants in both groups reported difficulties forging meaningful friendships due to the colleges' competitive academic and extracurricular environment, where students were either "too busy" or "too work-oriented" to meaningfully connect with one another. While Gable's work appears to be one of the few academic studies that, albeit marginally, address the worrisome social scene at selective colleges, the competitive academic and social climate of these universities is not a new subject in prior research (Cooper and McGee 2017; Thornton 2025). This body of work thus raises the possibility that social isolation and loneliness, driven by packed schedules and a goal-oriented approach to socializing, may be more widespread among elite college students than previously explored and acknowledged in the literature.

In addition to social isolation, continuing-generation and first-generation respondents alike commonly experienced career anxiety due to peer pressure in the elite college environment. Specifically, some respondents in both groups felt stressed when seeing their peers having a clear plan about their future career path, while they struggled with which path to choose. Lucas, a third-year first-generation student, suggested that when entering college, he was surprised to find that many peers around him "had already settled their career paths, usually in relation to finance and computer science." This finding stressed him out for a while, as he came to college with the thought that he would still have time to explore his interests and future path. Similarly, Catherine from the continuing-generation group described her anxiety about not finding her "calling," something she felt like many of her peers had already found. Another third-year first-generation student who transferred from a private institution on the East Coast to a more selective university in the Midwest, Michael, also mentioned how peers and the pre-professional environment of his current school exerted pressure on him:

> [My current college] is one target of career agents like OSG (One Strategy Group)[15], which seeks to brainwash students here to go work in Investment Banking (IB). And I totally got brainwashed by them at the time. I became convinced that I had no future outside of IB – like, if I didn't go into IB, I wouldn't be able to do anything else. At the same time, I also felt a lot of peer pressure…I'm someone who's really sensitive to peer pressure. Even though I hate doing what everyone else is doing, I still feel forced to constantly think about whether I'm making the right choice by not following their path. So back then, I was obsessing over it every single day – Should I do it or not? Even though I didn't want to, I couldn't stop thinking about whether I should.

Similar to the reported sense of isolation, the career anxiety and related peer pressure described by the respondents here might not be exclusive to international students at elite colleges. Interviewing students and alumni at Harvard and Stanford universities, Binder, Davis, and Bloom (2015) find that extensive recruitment campaigns from high-status occupational sectors, along with the competitive campus climate, fuel many participants' anxiety and push them toward a narrow range of career fields, including finance, consulting, and the high-technology industry. Students constantly fear that failing to secure prestigious career paths means they are falling short of their peers and the expectations of success at their colleges (Binder, Davis, and Bloom 2015:32). Echoing these sentiments, the career-related concerns and peer pressure described by the respondents in this sample may thus indicate a broader pattern tied to the competitive and achievement-oriented culture of elite universities.

The challenge that came up most frequently for both first-generation and continuing-generation respondents was probably that related to the differences between Chinese and American cultures. While being aware of and even experiencing some of these differences in their globally oriented K-12 schooling, many respondents still felt uneasy about them. The most common

[15] OSG (One Strategy Group) is a career consulting firm that provides mentorship and curricula to guide students in launching careers at top-tier finance and consulting firms such as Goldman Sachs, McKinsey, Blackstone, and Bain Capital.

example these respondents gave was America's small talk culture, which involves casual conversations on non-controversial topics, such as the weather and social activities outside of work, that serve to establish bonds, typically between individuals who are not close to one another (Holmes 2000). For instance, Elizabeth, a second-year continuing-generation student who attended a culturally and racially diverse private international high school, expressed feeling uncomfortable with the small talk culture ever since she was in high school:

> For example, Americans have their own way of socializing… and I just don't really fit into that. Of course, I *can* do small talk, but I really don't like it…Like, if I come across someone's friend who I only met once before, I still have to say hi and ask how everything's going and all that…I just find it kind of annoying every time I have to engage in this kind of casual chit-chat.

Echoing Elizabeth's point, many respondents described small talk as unnecessary, awkward, tiring, and bothersome. This challenge with small talk may stem from differing sociocultural values about interpersonal relationships in China and the US. While focusing on the Australian context, Cui (2015) reveals that Chinese immigrants in Australia struggle with small talk in the workplace because Chinese and Anglo-Western cultures have different ways of managing relationships and interactions beyond the intimate social circle. Specifically, Cui (2015) notes that Anglo-Western culture tends to endorse more equally related and loosely connected interpersonal connections, where small talk serves to maintain friendliness among individuals across varying degrees of familiarity. In contrast, Chinese culture espouses a differential mode of association, which stratifies relationships by closeness and contributes to a lack of general contact beyond one's intimate circle (Cui 2015). As such, individuals raised in Chinese culture may find small talk uncomfortable and challenging, as it forces them to engage with people outside their close social groups in ways not typically expected in Chinese society.

In addition to the small talk culture, some respondents mentioned perceiving cultural differences in more serious matters, such as gun ownership and political sensitivity toward race. Catherine, for instance, described feeling "frustrated that [she] didn't feel safe walking back home from school in the evening" due to gun ownership, a concern she never had back in China. Another fourth-year continuing-generation student, Claire, noted that it was a challenge for her to understand the complexity and social construction of American politics and history, especially concerning the topic of race. As a Chinese person, Claire felt like she vaguely knew there was racism and a history of slavery in the US, but she didn't naturally carry with her the knowledge about all the nuances of these issues, which she felt "a lot of her American or American-born Chinese friends understand without needing to go through the theory."

Many respondents also found it challenging to make local friends because of the cultural distance – manifested in different cultural references and personal interests – between them and American domestic students. For example, Samantha, a second-year continuing-generation student, described how she often lacked knowledge of the television shows and party game rules mentioned by her American domestic peers, which limited her ability to develop close relationships with local students. First-generation student Lucas also talked about how the cultural distance in personal interests and lifestyles between China and America hindered his attempt to develop close friendships with local students and blend in with the American culture in the first two years of his college study:

> Like when I used to chat with my classmates, I might…come across an interesting video on Bilibili[16] and share it with them. But when you're abroad, topics like that just kind of disappear. If you want to integrate into the local social circles, you need shared topics of

[16] Bilibili is a video-sharing platform based in mainland China that hosts user-generated content, much like YouTube.

> interest and a shared lifestyle[17]. But obviously, I feel like what we share the most is academics, so our conversations tend to revolve around academic topics. We might also talk about cultural differences. But I feel like… if you're truly friends to one another, and all you ever talk about is cultural differences…it will be impossible for you to develop a deep and more meaningful understanding of each other.

Importantly, again, both first-generation and continuing-generation encountered these challenges at a similar rate. More significantly, both groups reported being able to adjust themselves in the face of these challenges using similar strategies, such as seeking support from high school networks or forming their core social circles with Chinese or students with international backgrounds who showed a better understanding of their experiences. While the adjustment process can sometimes appear involuntary and painful, students of both groups didn't report feeling that the challenges had hindered or would hinder them from completing their college studies. In general, therefore, the evidence suggested that both first-generation and continuing-generation Chinese international students were able to adapt to and navigate the elite college environment.

There is one exception, though. Matilda, a third-year first-generation transfer student who now studies in a highly selective institution in the Midwest, showed significant challenges in navigating the bureaucratic structure of elite US colleges, which in part resulted in her forced suspension from her current institution for two years. Exhibiting depressive symptoms since high school and officially diagnosed with depression upon her transfer, Matilda had a particularly serious struggle with her mental health when she first arrived at her current institution. The mental health issue thus impeded Matilda's ability to finish coursework, which eventually led her to

[17] The example here can be a bit vague, but past literature might help to illustrate the point Lucas was trying to make here: "international students who grew up in another culture usually possess different personal interests, sense of humor, daily routines, and perceptions on many things such as friendship, sexual relationships, and privacy concerns which will negatively influence their willingness and attempts to make close friends with domestic students" (Zhou and Zhang 2014: 13).

receive a suspension decision from the school. To Matilda, the suspension experience was deeply traumatic. “I felt like my blood froze when receiving the decision email from school,” she told me. “And I felt like that was literally the end of my life.” Saddened by her experience, I asked if she had tried to apply for any course accommodations, given that she had an official depression diagnosis and that her depressive symptoms had clearly hindered her daily routine. Matilda, however, seemed surprised by my question. “I didn’t know that my situation qualified me to apply for accommodations,” she looked at me confusedly. “I didn’t know much about the college policies here.” Matilda attributed this lack of institutional knowledge in part to her first-generation identity and in part to her transfer status, suggesting that she received no guidance from either her parents or college orientations. Unfortunately, however, while Matilda’s attribution might be reasonable to some extent, no other first-generation respondents in the sample described or showed a similar lack of institutional knowledge about elite US colleges, which makes first-generation status alone a less convincing cause of her traumatic experience. A more likely explanation for Matilda’s lack of institutional knowledge and suspension experience is her mental health challenge – which, as she described, led her to be self-absorbed and less attentive to the information of the outside world – with her first-generation status and the university’s limited guidance playing some roles in the process[18]. At least in this sample, Matilda’s challenge with navigating the bureaucratic system of the elite US college cannot be generalized to all first-generation Chinese international students.

[18] To clarify, this is not to blame Matilda for causing her own troubles. Matilda’s mental health challenge was caused by a combination of factors, including her traumatic experiences in a harsh middle school and her strained relationship with her father. No one should be blamed for having mental health struggles.

Reasons Behind Similar Experiences: Economic Reform, Limited Transferability of Home-Based Parental Capital, and Elite K-12 Education

Essentially, there are two factors that lay the foundation for the shared overall college experiences between first-generation and continuing-generation Chinese international students: (1) the economic reform in late 20th-century China, which allowed first-generation Chinese international students' parents to acquire economic capital by joining the "capitalist class" and purchase elite K-12 educational resources, and (2) the limited transferability of home-based capital across national borders, which restricts continuing-generation Chinese international students' parents from passing down their social and cultural capital to help their children navigate elite US institutions. These factors thus differentiate first-generation and continuing-generation Chinese international students from their American counterparts; while the parental economic capital gained during the economic reform buffers first-generation Chinese international students against the common disadvantages facing many American first-generation college students, the limited transferability of home-based parental social and cultural capital deprives continuing-generation Chinese international students of the common advantages associated with their US domestic counterparts.

As a result, rather than relying on direct guidance from their parents, both first-generation and continuing-generation respondents draw more on the academic, social, and cultural resources they obtained through elite, globally oriented K-12 schools to navigate the selective college environment, which then shapes the common challenges and successes in their college experiences. The similar college experiences of the two groups thus encapsulate a successful conversion of parental economic capital into transnational social and cultural capital – social and cultural capital that transcends national borders and helps individuals navigate social fields abroad – via schooling.

As such, elite K-12 schools emerge as more powerful agents than the home in facilitating transnational mobility and social reproduction.

The Economic Reform. Unlike many first-generation college students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds in the US, the first-generation respondents in this study all come from financially well-off families and mostly belong to the "capitalist class," thanks largely to the economic reform in late 20th-century China. Most of these respondents were keenly aware of their economic privilege, and many associated it with China's historical development over the past few decades. For instance, Jade, a second-year first-generation student at a highly selective university in the Midwest, described how she believed first-generation college students carried "different historical connotations" in China and the US, which prevented her from associating Chinese first-generation students with low socioeconomic backgrounds:

> When I hear first-gen Chinese international students, I assume their parents are both entrepreneurs, and…I don't know if it's accurate – probably not always – but this is like a very sort of easy association. Whereas when I hear…first-gen Americans… [it's] like if your parents didn't go to college, that's probably because you're from a lower socioeconomic background…Whereas in China, we had the Cultural Revolution and the stuff, and it's like a very standard thing for your parents to not have gone to college. It's like [noteworthy when you say], oh, both my parents went to this college. And it's like even more noteworthy that, like, oh, both my grandparents went to university…So it's like a very different assumption that I would make.

In fact, many first-generation respondents cited their parents' economic capital and the historical context behind it as key reasons why they didn't perceive their first-generation status as particularly salient or as having a significant influence on their college adjustment and overall experiences. A third-year first-generation respondent, Emma, articulated this perspective well:

> I definitely don't consider [first-generation identity] as salient or important because…there are many families in China that achieve financial stability without high educational

> attainments. Children from these families won't feel that much of a difference in their experience compared to continuing-generation students, as money can buy one power, high-quality educational resources, and exposure to more elite social groups. So in China…first-generation status can't quite categorize you.

As Emma and many other first-generation respondents pointed out, in mainland China, being a first-generation college student doesn't always entail structural disadvantage in accessing economic, social, and educational resources, unlike in the US. The educational trajectories of most first-generation respondents truthfully reflect this, as they largely attended elite and globally oriented K-12 schools, including international programs in Chinese public or private schools, private international schools in China or abroad, and public or private schools in the US. As this section will show shortly, these elite K-12 educational resources are key to these respondents' ability to navigate the selective college environment. And as shown in this particular subsection, the economic capital their parents gained during China's economic reform serves as the foundation upon which they are able to access those educational resources in the first place.

The Limited Transferability of Home-Based Parental Capital. While first-generation respondents don't confront the same economic disadvantages facing many of their American counterparts – thanks to the economic capital their parents accumulated during the economic reform – continuing-generation respondents also differ from their American continuing-generation peers in an important way. Specifically, in contrast to continuing-generation American students who can directly benefit from their parents' social and cultural capital, continuing-generation Chinese international respondents don't appear to receive the same advantage due to the limited transferability of their parents' social and cultural capital across national borders.

In a study examining Chinese urban upper-middle-class parents' decisions to send their children to American private secondary schools, Tu (2022:827) notes that the conversion of

parental capital between educational fields might be less smooth in a global setting, thus indicating a limit to the transferability of capital across national borders. This is essentially what happens to the continuing-generation Chinese international students and their parents. While parents of many domestic continuing-generation students in selective US universities had themselves navigated elite US institutions in the past and could therefore directly pass down related cultural knowledge and networking resources to their children (Evans et al. 2020; Ricks and Warren 2021; Rosales et al. 2024), parents of all continuing-generation Chinese international respondents in this sample received their college degrees in mainland China, and most of them lacked firsthand exposure to US higher education institutions. Given that Chinese and American higher education systems differ significantly in terms of their organizational structures (e.g., curriculum design, class format, funding sources, support programs, administrative system) (Feng 2024; Liu 2024), this lack of exposure can mean a huge gap in the cultural know-how required to navigate elite US colleges, such as networking etiquette in Western academia, strategy in class and major selection, and classroom norms and expectations. In addition to a general lack of cultural knowledge, most parents of continuing-generation respondents have their work and most social networks based in mainland China. This further limits their ability to provide direct network resources and professional advice to their children in navigating their college experience and future career paths, especially if their children plan to work outside of mainland China after graduation.

For instance, Claire, who planned to work in Hong Kong for a while immediately after graduation, described how her parents could not offer any academic or career resources during her time in college because they didn't know much about American society or the education system:

> During college, my parents haven't been very involved in my decision-making process because…my parents don't really know the situation in the US…I did complain to them

> when I was searching for jobs, but when it came to specific details, they just couldn't help much, nor did they insist on telling me what to do. [I] just complained and informed them [of my decisions].

The same applies to David, who, despite having a mother who works as a professor at a university in mainland China, describes navigating everything in college on his own:

> *Researcher*: Would you discuss your course selection with [your parents]?
> *David*: No, I handle it all by myself.
> *Researcher*: I see. Would they offer any advice or guidance on your daily life?
> *David*: No. No guidance, no advice. I have to figure out everything on my own…like, they couldn't really help or guide me, as they don't know the actual challenges I face in the US. So I feel like it would be difficult for them to give relevant advice.

For continuing-generation students who attended high schools in America, the experience of self-navigation could begin even earlier than college. Theodore, a fourth-year continuing-generation student who went to a private boarding high school on the East Coast, commented that his parents "could hardly have any input [into his educational experiences] and played more of a role as listeners since high school." Another fourth-year continuing-generation student, Jayden, who attended a private boarding high school in California, also reported navigating his high school and college experience independently. The most common thing his parents said to him during high school, Jayden added, was "we can no longer help you; you'll have to rely on yourself."

While most continuing-generation respondents described navigating college on their own due to their parents' lack of knowledge about American society and higher education, one continuing-generation respondent, Natalie, did report receiving direct academic support and guidance from her father during her college application and navigation. However, Natalie was only able to receive such parental support because her father works as a college counselor in a private study-abroad agency and is thus deeply familiar with American universities. In general, therefore,

the transnational context limits the transferability of home-based social and cultural capital across national borders, thus constraining most continuing-generation Chinese international respondents from receiving the same advantages that continuing-generation American students gain from having college-educated parents.

Elite K-12 Schooling as a Source of Transnational Capital. As illustrated above, the parental economic capital gained during the economic reform and the limited transferability of home-based parental social and cultural capital across national borders significantly distinguish first-generation and continuing-generation Chinese international students from their American domestic counterparts. As a result of this distinct positioning, first-generation and continuing-generation Chinese international respondents alike rely mostly on the academic, social, and cultural resources they obtained through elite, globally oriented K-12 schooling experiences – rather than parental guidance – to navigate the selective college environment. Using the transnational capital transmitted through these elite K-12 schools as the common reference point, first-generation and continuing-generation respondents in this sample thus share similar overall adjustment and navigation experiences at college.

For example, when asked whether they thought their K-12 schooling experiences prepared them well for college, most respondents suggested that the exposure to international curricula such as IBDP, AP, and A-Levels had familiarized them with the academic requirements of American universities and enhanced their academic preparedness to varying degrees. Majoring in child development and human and organizational development, first-generation student Leo described that the AP psychology course he took at his international high school provided the prerequisite knowledge that helped him navigate his major classes in college. Similarly, continuing-generation

student Elizabeth commented that her international high school's IB program, particularly its humanities and social sciences classes, had laid a solid foundation for her academic study at a prestigious university and contributed to a smooth academic transition:

> IB is a really reading- and writing-intensive program… At the time, I also chose many humanities and social sciences subjects – Chinese, English, History, and Economics – [so] I started engaging in intensive reading and writing early in high school… One example is the IB Extended Essay, which is essentially like a thesis. It's a fully developed paper of around 3,000 words, and I think it really helped improve my academic writing … So in a way, IB was helpful in preparing me for college by teaching me how to conduct research and write papers.

In addition to academic skills and preparedness, many respondents also suggested that their elite K-12 schools provided transnational social ties to support their college navigation. For instance, first-generation student Jade and continuing-generation student Natalie both described attending the same colleges as some of their high school friends, who constituted important sources of emotional connection and social support for them in an otherwise busy and stressful college environment. Another continuing-generation student, Samuel, also said that he has remained in touch with his high school AP computer science teacher, whom he would occasionally consult "if [he] encounter[s] problems with [his] computer science coursework and research."

Still other respondents discussed how their elite K-12 schools supported their college navigation by introducing them early to the cultural norms of American society more broadly and US colleges in particular. For instance, both attending American private high schools, first-generation students Emma and Daniel noted that their high school experiences helped familiarize them with the societal culture in America before entering college. According to Daniel, this included "getting to know how Americans think and socialize, and what cultural assumptions

Americans might have" about what is appropriate, what is valued, and how communication should unfold. As both Emma and Daniel concluded, this familiarity with the societal cultural norms in America offered them guidance in navigating the college environment.

Regarding US college culture specifically, continuing-generation student Jayden shared that his elite private high school in California exposed him early to the concept and expectations of college office hours (i.e., the scheduled times when faculty are available to meet with students outside of regular class time). Learning in high school how he should approach authority figures and what topics to bring up during these sessions, Jayden became a frequent office hour visitor and felt at ease communicating with his professors in college:

> I really love going to office hours [during college]. That impression definitely came from my experience in the American high school, where I first heard of this concept…During [my] K-9 education, office hours were usually meant only for correcting test mistakes or making up missed exams…Like, they always had a very specific purpose. I didn't know that "office hours" could mean that a professor would just sit there and be available for you to talk to, even casually…I remember [that in the first office hour at high school], I learned so much that I never would've learned in class because it was so personal…Honestly, if there's one thing my American high school experiences did to prepare me for the intellectual and academic life [at college], it was helping me develop the ability and confidence to go to office hours.

A few respondents' narratives further highlighted how privileged and globally oriented K-12 schooling contributed to their college navigation by socializing them into the embodied cultural dispositions aligned with elite academic fields. For example, when reflecting on how his K-12 international schooling prepared him for college, first-generation student Tate suggested that it helped him develop skills and personal qualities valued by selective US institutions:

> This sounds really cliché, but I think [my international school experience] set me up to be a really good critical thinker. If someone tells me a fact, I would keep asking where it came

> from, who made the fact, why people consider it a fact…In addition to analytic thinking and a global mindset and creativity, I think my international school experience also instilled in me a sort of attitude…or energy that dictates how I approach study or the world, really…It influenced my understanding of the world and made me really passionate, assertive, and aware of what I want.

Offering significant transnational social and cultural capital that can't be otherwise transmitted at home, the elite K-12 education – whether through international programs in Chinese public and private schools, private international schools in China or abroad, or public and private schools in the US – thus serves as a common reference point that both first-generation and continuing-generation respondents rely on during their adjustment to and navigation of elite universities. The common pre-college schooling experiences, in turn, explain why these two groups tend to share similar overall adjustment and navigation experiences in college.

Importantly, for first-generation respondents in particular, the transnational capital transmitted through elite and globally oriented K-12 education explains the absence of structural disadvantages during their college transition and navigation. This stands in stark contrast with previous findings on the college experiences of American domestic first-generation college students (see Nguyen & Nguyen 2018). In this sense, the educational resources – afforded by parental economic capital that could only be obtained in the specific historical context of China – function as a buffer that helps with these respondents' college navigation by mitigating the economic, academic, social, and cultural challenges commonly facing their American first-generation counterparts, many of whom come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

While these educational resources place first-generation Chinese international respondents in a distinct position from their American counterparts, the buffering effect of the elite K-12

schooling they experienced is not new to education researchers. In his work *The Privileged Poor*, Anthony Jack (2019) reveals how domestic low-income students attending elite private high schools in America (i.e., the privileged poor) were better familiarized with the social and cultural norms of elite institutions and thus had an easier time integrating into the elite college social life than low-income students attending under-resourced public schools (i.e., the doubly disadvantaged). Other scholars also hint at a similar buffering effect of elite international education. Examining Chinese international students' experience at the University of Southern California, Zhao (2018) found that compared to Chinese international graduate students, undergraduate students showed better adjustment to the elite college environment because they were more likely to have attended international high schools in China or international programs in Chinese public schools, which offered them early exposure to US academic and societal culture and thus an advantage in college transition. In alignment with these findings, the results of this research again highlight the role elite K-12 schooling plays in shaping the experiences of students, particularly those who have the potential to face structural disadvantages, in navigating the selective college environment.

In general, the similar college experiences and common pre-college education of both first-generation and continuing-generation respondents represent a successful conversion of parental economic capital into social and cultural capital via elite schooling, though this conversion functions in a compensatory manner for first-generation respondents in particular. In this transnational context, elite and globally oriented K-12 schools appear to play a more influential role than the home in transmitting social and cultural capital. This phenomenon contrasts with the US context, where the home serves as the primary site of capital transmission and class reproduction (Calarco 2014; Horvat et al. 2003; Lareau 2002, 2015; Parcel and Hendrix 2014).

Essentially, through these elite educational programs, both first-generation and continuing-generation Chinese international students join what Yin-lin Chiang (2022:3) and James Gee (2000:107) call a new generation of global elites, who share a set of practices and experiences across different parts of the world, surpass their parents whose social and cultural capital are more home-bounded, and seek new life possibilities through prestigious college education with their eyes on a global setting.

Distinct Experiences with First-Generation Identity

While first-generation and continuing-generation Chinese international students in general share common challenges and successes in their experiences at elite US colleges, there are experiences that are distinct to the first-generation group. This section unpacks these distinct experiences. I argue that, compared to their continuing-generation Chinese international counterparts, first-generation Chinese international students are more likely to experience a sense of intellectual disconnection from their parents. This disconnection consequently influences their communication patterns with their parents and turns college into an intellectual refuge for them. Furthermore, I illustrate that, within the broader context of China's regional inequality, first-generation status intersects with regional identity to uniquely shape the college experiences of first-generation Chinese international students from less well-resourced areas – that is, areas outside of first-tier and new first-tier cities. Perceiving a habitus mismatch between elite college and their hometown, these students are more likely to experience these two environments as distinct worlds in terms of class-based cultural practices – an experience that induces a number of psychological responses that in part shape their self-perceptions and aspirations.

Experiencing First-Generation Identity as Parental Intellectual Disconnection

A key difference between first-generation and continuing-generation respondents appears to be whether they feel intellectually understood by their parents. Compared to continuing-generation respondents, first-generation Chinese international students are significantly more likely to experience a sense of intellectual disconnection from their parents.

Specifically, within the continuing-generation group, all but one respondent reported that their parents would engage in intellectual conversations with them and could intellectually understand them to varying degrees. Catherine, for example, suggested that she and her parents would share and discuss their insights about the books they read with one another. During times when her parents couldn't entirely understand or agree with her, Catherine suggested that her parents would engage in heated but healthy debates with her as an alternative way to engage with her intellectual development. In a similar vein, Elizabeth recounted that while her parents may not fully grasp her ideas all the time, they were able to understand and engage with the debate and research topics she was interested in.

This, however, stands in stark contrast to the first-generation group. Among the nine first-generation respondents willing to discuss their relationships with their parents, six expressed feeling intellectually disconnected from their parents, whom they felt were completely absent from their intellectual growth. Three of them explicitly attributed this disconnection to their first-generation status and suggested that the gap was so large that it hindered their communication with their parents. Frustrated by the communication issue, these respondents then chose to shy away from sharing their academic and intellectual lives with their parents.

Michael, for instance, mentioned in this exchange his perceived intellectual disconnection with his parents. Perceiving he and his parents as inhabiting two different universes, Michael suggested that the disconnection had resulted in a complete communication failure between the two parties:

> *Michael*: What I talk about in school has nothing to do with what I talk about at home. We feel like two completely different worlds, my parents and I. I can't communicate with them at all – basically, they don't understand anything I say, intellectually speaking. As soon as the topics of our conversation go a bit abstract...(they don't get it). I wouldn't contact my parents throughout an entire year because they can't solve anything...and wouldn't relate. It's like when I say that "I have to write nine papers this quarter", people who have been to college would easily understand what it means.
> *Researcher*: So you feel like your parents' inability to understand you intellectually is related to their educational backgrounds, or in other words, your first-generation identity?
> *Michael*: Yes, definitely. That's the most obvious impact (of first-generation identity).

When asked about how he felt about this intellectual disconnection with his parents, he answered: "I think it doesn't matter much but...I don't know. I guess I might have had some hidden frustration about it during my childhood."

A philosophy major, Matilda encountered a similar situation and talked about her long-time confusion and bitterness over her parents' inability to understand her intellectual world:

> Being a first-generation student, I struggled with communicating with my parents for a long time before college. I would recommend books that I was reading to them, but I found that they couldn't appreciate the beauty I saw in those books. And I couldn't just push them to read those books or force them to understand my intellectual world. So now, I'm at a point where I don't expect anything from them. So...it's true that, for a long time, I was really bothered by [the communication issue with my parents]. I just couldn't understand why it is that you are my mother, and I your daughter, yet we can never understand each other.

The respondent who felt most strongly about the intellectual disconnection is probably Daniel, a fourth-year first-generation student double majoring in religious studies and East Asian languages and civilizations. Trying to reconcile the yearning for his parents' recognition and the guilt for being disappointed by his parents' inability to understand him, Daniel found himself in an emotional turmoil:

> I'd say [my parents] have all the willingness to emotionally support me, but they lack the capacity to do so. They lack this capacity because they grew up in a completely different environment from the one I did, so they couldn't relate to me. I've been constantly frustrated by this. Always. Even now. I feel like I'm unsatisfied with them because of it, but I keep criticizing myself for asking too much...Why is all this? I think...I think it might be a result of the difference in our educational backgrounds. Like, they are very good and supportive parents, but they are good and supportive in a distanced way; they can never see what I see. It made me feel isolated sometimes.

The feelings of confusion, frustration, disappointment, and isolation triggered by the intellectual disconnection eventually led Michael, Matilda, and Daniel to withdraw from sharing their academic and intellectual lives with their parents. Michael, for example, described how the perceived communication issues with his parents led him to turn to friends for support and intellectual conversations. Both Matilda and Daniel haven't told their parents about their chosen majors because they felt that their parents wouldn't understand or relate to their choices. As such, the experience of intellectual disconnection associated with these students' first-generation identity structures their communication patterns with their parents. Furthermore, it influences their relationships with their college, making the university the primary site where their intellectual activities take place. The college, therefore, becomes a shelter in which these students feel seen and intellectually understood.

Experiencing First-Generation Status at the Intersection with Regional Identity

In addition to creating a sense of intellectual disconnection across generations, first-generation identity also seems to interact with regional identity in ways that uniquely shape the experiences of certain groups of first-generation Chinese international students at elite US universities. Specifically, it appears that only first-generation respondents from less well-resourced regions (i.e., regions other than first-tier and new first-tier cities) tend to perceive and experience college and their hometown as two distinct worlds. This distinction is most evident in class culture – that is, the shared practices and behaviors characterizing the general class norms in these two environments.

For example, growing up in a third-tier city, Lucas suggested that he perceived his college and hometown as two different worlds in that "people at [his college] are part of the elite 'intellectual' class that is above mere middle class," whereas most people he encountered in his hometown "have low educational attainments, regardless of their differing wealth status."

This perceived distinction was echoed by Daniel, who was born and raised in a fifth-tier city in central China:

> Back at home, none of the people around me have high levels of education. The same goes for the people around my dad. I had never met anyone with overseas study experience. We come from a very small city, so you hardly ever have the chance to interact with the so-called "elites" of the previous generation. Everyone around us comes from a rural background and has obtained their current wealth through unconventional and raw means. This contrasts sharply with [my college], where most people come from highly educated families. And the mode of interaction here is just very different from that in [my hometown]. The assumptions people make in [my hometown], the way you interact with others, the way you smile, the way you express politeness ... all of these are vastly different from how things are done at [my college] and in the broader American cultural context in which [my college] is embedded.

Juxtaposing people he encountered in his hometown and students in his college, many of whom inherited a traditional "elite" status from their families, Daniel described perceiving a

distinction in the "modes of interaction," or cultural practices, between these two groups in relation to their educational backgrounds. Notably, in characterizing the elite college culture and the American culture in which his college is embedded as two interrelated yet separate spheres in contrast to his hometown, Daniel highlighted how he experienced this distinction in cultural practices not only in terms of sociocultural differences between China and the US – a common sentiment expressed by many respondents in this research and found among Chinese international students according to past literature – but also in terms of differences in class culture.

One example Daniel gave to illustrate these differences was speech style. While admitting that this might not be the most accurate way to describe his feelings, Daniel suggested that people in his hometown might speak in a more "casual" way, whereas those at his college tend to use a more "formal" tone[19]. "Like, I've learned during my time at college to speak in a way as if I were writing a paper," he commented. "But people in my hometown are not used to this way of communicating. If I talk to my peers back there in this way, they might feel like I'm being diplomatic or pretentious." The word choices here – "diplomatic" and "pretentious" – are revealing, as they imply social posturing and are often associated with professional or elite social settings. This association suggests that the distinction in speech styles that Daniel and his hometown peers perceived would be better interpreted as reflecting a class dynamic rather than a simple difference between Chinese and American cultures. In fact, the formal vs. casual division in speech styles has long been studied and interpreted as a marker of social class and prestige (Bourdieu 1991; Irvine 1985). Sociologist Melissa Osborne, who studied American domestic first-generation college students at elite US universities in her ethnographic work *Polished*, also hints at this class-based

[19] In this case, the comparison is made specifically in reference to speaking Mandarin.

difference, revealing that elite colleges often "polish" first-generation college students from disadvantaged backgrounds by changing their patterns of speech, preferences, and mannerisms in ways that are more aligned with those expected by middle- and upper-class cultures (Osborne 2024:99).

Notably, none of the students from first-tier and new first-tier cities reported perceiving distinctions in class-based cultural practices like these, regardless of their first-generation or continuing-generation status. This may be because these respondents are more likely to gain exposure to highly educated social circles and globalized elite culture in first-tier and new first-tier cities, where wealth, educational resources, and global connections have become highly concentrated since the Reform and Opening-Up. With exposure to these social circles and culture similar to those in highly selective US colleges, respondents in these areas thus experience less contrast between college and home in terms of class culture. This explanation is attested to by Anna, a first-generation student from Shanghai, who suggested that her college and hometown feel largely the same because people around her in Shanghai "mostly have experiences studying abroad or studying in '985' or '211' universities[20]." Another continuing-generation student from Shanghai, Samantha, also described how she had met people with different class statuses in Shanghai before, "including many that were from elite backgrounds," so social class didn't appear to be a major distinction between college and home to her.

This exposure to the globalized, highly educated elite culture found in first-tier and new first-tier cities is largely absent in less well-resourced regions, where people generally have lower educational attainments, fewer global connections, and a homogeneous but relatively lower average

[20] Projects 985 and 211 are the two major university classifications that represent China's top-tier higher education institutions.

socioeconomic status[21] (National Bureau of Statistics of China 2021). This social environment thus socializes people in these regions into a habitus – displayed in the speech style and other modes of interaction that Daniel and other respondents alike mentioned earlier – that differs significantly from the one cultivated in highly selective US universities and China's first-tier and new first-tier cities, where privileged social groups are more concentrated. What respondents from less resource-rich regions perceive as the difference in the class-based cultural practices can therefore be understood as stemming from a habitus mismatch – a mismatch between the habitus expected in the field of elite college and the habitus people in the field of their hometown are socialized into. Such a difference in expected habitus will remain as long as regional inequality persists in mainland China. Hence, students from less well-resourced regions would inevitably encounter differences in class culture between their college and hometown, despite the buffering effect of their elite K-12 schooling experiences.

Interestingly, however, continuing-generation students from less resource-rich regions seem to be more immune to perceiving the habitus mismatch between college and home. This is illustrated in the case of Natalie, a continuing-generation student coming from a second-tier city. While describing college and her hometown as distinct in sociocultural terms, Natalie didn't seem to be suggesting a class distinction between the two, and she perceived her family background as very similar to that of her college peers. It is likely because her immediate home environment, or the social groups she had regularly met back home, was composed of highly educated individuals due to the social capital of her college-going parents. As Natalie indicated, the people her parents

[21] See Appendices C, D, and E for more information on the average years of schooling for people aged 15 and above by region, international trade in goods by region, and the annual income levels of city type in mainland China published by the National Bureau of Statistics of China.

interacted with generally had high educational attainments. “Most of them are bachelors and masters, and some of them are PhD graduates and academics,” she added. “And I met and talked to them rather regularly, like I may meet them once or twice a week when returning home. And they talked about education a lot because my father works in an education-related industry.” Hence, due to her continuing-generation status, Natalie was able to get access to an immediate home environment that was characterized by individuals with high educational attainments and potentially elite backgrounds. This environment might have buffered her against perceiving the mismatch between elite college and the broader environment of her hometown.

Lacking both the exposure to the cosmopolitan elite environment of resource-rich cities and the buttress of continuing-generation status, first-generation respondents from less resource-rich regions are thus the only group to experience a stark distinction between elite college and their hometown in terms of class culture. It is therefore only when first-generation identity intersects with regional identity that regional disparities coupled with the misalignment between economic and cultural capital embodied by the capitalist class become palpable.

To clarify, college may not be the first time these first-generation respondents have experienced a class divide between their school and home environments. Attending elite secondary schools in China or abroad where students from wealthy, highly educated families were well represented, many of them acknowledged detecting the contrast in class culture during their K-12 experiences. Entering elite college spaces where “old money” global elites were even more concentrated than their oftentimes small secondary schools, these respondents therefore experienced the class cultural distinction between their college and home not so much as a shock that they perceived to be significantly affecting their college life, but more as an extended and heightened version of previously felt contrast that made the two worlds feel even further apart.

While the contrast between college and home might not be new for many of these students, it is not without any consequences for their college lives. As the following subsections will reveal, such contrast can evoke a range of psychological responses that play a role in shaping these students' self-perceptions and aspirations in distinct ways.

Sense of Inadequacy and Inferiority. For some first-generation students from resource-limited areas, the intersection of their first-generation status and regional background, along with their internalization of China's regional hierarchy through narratives circulated in their immediate environment, can occasionally produce a sense of inadequacy or inferiority that negatively affects their self-perception and, sometimes, social relationships in college.

Growing up in a small county town in a third-tier city, Emma described feeling inadequate when consciously comparing herself to her Chinese friends at college, who were born into wealthy, highly educated families that were either from "big" cities in China or had immigrated to the US in earlier years:

> I don't know why, but it seems like the friends around me at college all come from pretty privileged family backgrounds and... I sometimes feel that I'm not on the same level as them... I think, to some extent, this is a self-constructed [feeling]... And my mom also constantly reminds me that I shouldn't aspire too much because I have a "lower starting point" than them, or whatever. I think this might have affected my mindset, like I always feel like I'm not good enough.

As highlighted in this comment, the perceived difference in family backgrounds, mediated by Emma's internalization of her mother's narrative about her "low starting point" compared to other college peers, led her to feel inadequate, or "not on the same level" with her friends, in the elite college environment. While describing this feeling as more spontaneous than consistent, Emma also talked about how it led her to limit her aspirations and refuse her friends' kindness for

a while during college. Recognizing that such a feeling arose from her internationalization of externally imposed social hierarchy, Emma gradually learned to move beyond her self-perceived inadequacy and began exploring different avenues toward defining her future path.

Similarly, yet in a more extreme form, Matilda felt a sense of inferiority due to her first-generation identity plus "rustic" background. While coming from a leading new first-tier city, Matilda distinguished it from the city district she grew up in, which used to be a rural village before becoming integrated into the urban area. Surrounded by people of rural roots who contrasted sharply with the city kids she met in her early schooling in the central area of her home city, and hearing stories from her parents about her early childhood spent in a village setting, Matilda developed a sense of inferiority linked to her first-generation and "rustic" identities early in life. This perceived inferiority was significantly intensified after she transferred to her current university, where she felt her peers were all "smart, wealthy, continuing-generation students, raised in cities, and received international education from a young age." The overwhelming presence of high-achieving students from privileged backgrounds crushed the only source of Matilda's self-confidence – her excelling academic performance – and brought first-generation and "rustic" identities, the major sources of her perceived inferiority, to the forefront. This sense of inferiority, compounded by Matilda's traumatic experience in a harsh middle school that emphasized conformity, gave rise to her fear of authority, which inhibited her from interacting with professors during college:

> *Researcher*: Do you interact with professors a lot during college?
> *Matilda*: I'm still scared of people...I'm scared of both common people and authority.
> *Researcher*: So you don't interact with professors that much?
> *Matilda*: Not much. Not really.
> *Researcher*: How about office hours?
> *Matilda*: I'm really scared of attending office hours.

Noticeably, Matilda is the only one reporting fear of authority figures among all first-generation respondents, many of whom described approaching professors as a natural move for them. Such fear thus may not be generalized to the experiences of most first-generation Chinese international students at elite US colleges. However, Matilda's case still suggests the potential influence first-generation status might have on some first-generation Chinese international students' college experience when it interacts with their regional identities.

Sense of In-Betweenness. While Emma and Matilda expressed feelings of inferiority, other first-generation respondents from less well-resourced regions described a sense of in-betweenness when reflecting on their relationships with college and home, which they perceived to be simultaneously challenging and inspiring.

This sense of in-betweenness was clearly conveyed in a comment from Adam, who came from a second-tier city that, while remaining ahead of more resource-limited regions, still lagged behind leading new first-tier and first-tier cities in economic development:

> Oftentimes, I can feel that... it's not that I'm not part of the social class embodied by [my college], but it feels... it's like you are suddenly thrown into an elite environment, yet you're still in touch with people from your hometown... And this creates a bit of a barrier in my communication with [people from my hometown], while also making me feel a kind of information or knowledge gap between myself and the elite circle at my college.

As Adam highlighted here, his position between his college and home, or the elite and non-elite environments, sometimes leaves him feeling as though he doesn't fit into either world.

Daniel also described having a sense of in-betweenness, but in a different tone. For Daniel, who had prior experiences coping with the class culture contrast between US private day school and his hometown, the challenge of the perceived in-betweenness was less about issues of

belonging but more about maintaining his personal or home identity amidst the pull to assimilate into the elite culture at college:

> Every time I go back to China, I feel a strong sense of contrast – on one side, there is the world of [my college], and on the other, the world of [my hometown]. These are two completely different worlds. It can be difficult to navigate [both of them] and to find a balance – to preserve the integrity and independence of my personal identity. By integrity and independence, I mean not being completely absorbed into [the world of college] or losing my core ways of thinking and behaving. And this can be hard. I often feel disoriented after returning home. This feeling stems from a sense of exclusion, or alienation. I feel like I've changed a lot. I've returned to the place I grew up in, but now, I am completely different from all others in my surrounding.

The challenge of navigating the different worlds of college and home that Daniel describes doesn't come as new. Both Osborne (2024) and Gable (2021) in their studies of American domestic first-generation students' experiences at elite US colleges find that first-generation students can face a difficult balancing act and feel pressured to "buy in" to the elite culture at college without losing their home identities. The common challenge shared by Daniel and American domestic first-generation students thus reflects an essential theme in the experiences with elite colleges for first-generation students from across the world.

While the in-between position resulting from the interaction between their first-generation and regional identities presents challenges for Adam and Daniel in navigating the two worlds, they also view it as a unique opportunity for growth. Adam, for instance, saw it as a chance to broaden his horizons by gaining more information from his continuing-generation peers. On a different yet equally positive note, Daniel characterized his first-generation identity as an asset that enabled him to understand and connect with people from both privileged and disadvantaged communities:

> Like, I can sense that I have some street-smart qualities inside of me – something that continuing-generation students, especially those from families with a "purer" intellectual

> lineage, do not have. And this isn't something that can be cultivated, because if someone hasn't lived through those experiences, they simply won't have the seed for it. I think how being a first-generation student nourishes me... is that it gives me the ability to navigate different worlds. If I weren't a first-generation student, if I didn't have this identity, I wouldn't have cohered around everything I just mentioned – how it has enriched my life experiences and enabled me to interact with people from different worlds.

This "cultural straddling" skill (Carter 2006), or the ability to adapt to and navigate between two cultural environments, appears to be vital to Daniel's aspiration. Identifying himself as a cultural straddler, Daniel hopes to devote himself to rural development in mainland China after graduation.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This research aims to expand the scholarly discussion on first-generation college students by incorporating the insights of international undergraduate students from mainland China. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 10 first-generation Chinese international undergraduate students and 10 continuing-generation Chinese international undergraduate students from four elite US private research universities, I demonstrate how first-generation Chinese international students have both similar and distinct experiences at elite US colleges compared to their continuing-generation Chinese international counterparts. This similarity is in stark contrast to previous findings on American domestic students, which suggest that first-generation college students are systematically disadvantaged compared to their continuing-generation peers. Employing Bourdieu's theories and the concept of intersectionality, I further examine how first-generation status intersects with other dimensions of these students' identities – including class background, international student status, and regional identity – to shape their college experiences. In general, I

argue that the experiences of first-generation Chinese international students at elite US colleges can only be understood within the broader social, economic, and historical context of mainland China from which these students emerge.

The results show that overall, first-generation and continuing-generation Chinese international students share similar challenges and achievements in their college experiences. Specifically, students from both groups report social isolation, career anxiety, and cultural differences as major challenges they've encountered during college. Despite these challenges, most students in the sample exhibit sufficient institutional knowledge and are able to adjust themselves to navigate the elite college environment, regardless of their first-generation or continuing-generation status.

The common challenges and successes shared across the two groups can be attributed to two factors: (1) the economic reform in late 20th century China, which allowed first-generation Chinese international students' parents to join the "capitalist class" – a core subclass within China's middle-class stratum that possesses significant economic capital despite limited educational attainment – and purchase elite K-12 educational resources; and (2) the limited transferability of home-based capital across national borders, which restricts continuing-generation Chinese international students' parents from passing down their social and cultural capital to help their children navigate elite US institutions. These factors thus distinguish first-generation and continuing-generation Chinese international students from their American counterparts; while the parental economic capital gained during the economic reform buffers first-generation Chinese international students against the common disadvantages facing many American first-generation college students, the limited transferability of home-based parental social and cultural capital

deprives continuing-generation Chinese international students of the common advantages associated with US domestic continuing-generation students.

Hence, rather than relying on direct guidance from their parents, both first-generation and continuing-generation Chinese international students draw more on the academic, social, and cultural resources they gained through elite, globally oriented K-12 schooling experiences – whether in international programs in Chinese public or private schools, private international schools in China or abroad, or public or private schools in the US – to navigate the selective college environment. The common pre-college schooling experiences, in turn, explain why these two groups tend to share similar overall adjustment and navigation experiences in college. In a sense, this similarity captures a successful conversion of parental economic capital into transnational cultural and social capital – social ties and cultural assets that transcend national borders and help individuals navigate social fields abroad – via schooling. This conversion is unique in that, as elite K-12 schools assume parents' role in cultivating these international students' social and cultural capital, they emerge as more powerful agents than the home in facilitating transnational mobility and social reproduction. Significantly, this phenomenon contrasts with the US context, where the home functions as the primary site of capital transmission and class reproduction. As such, it highlights the growing institutional role of elite, globally oriented K-12 education in shaping global class structures.

However, first-generation identity still shapes the college experiences of first-generation Chinese international students in two distinct ways. First, compared to their continuing-generation Chinese international counterparts, first-generation Chinese international students are more likely to experience a sense of intellectual disconnection from their parents. This disconnection then leads

many first-generation students to shy away from sharing their academic lives with their parents, turning college into a shelter where they feel seen and intellectually understood. Second, in the context of China's regional inequality, first-generation status intersects with regional identity to uniquely shape the college experiences of first-generation Chinese international students from less well-resourced areas – that is, students from outside first-tier and new first-tier cities in mainland China. Lacking both the exposure to the cosmopolitan elite environment of resource-rich cities and the buffering effect of continuing-generation status, these students often perceive a habitus mismatch between elite college and their hometown, and experience the two as distinct worlds in terms of class-based cultural practices. The perceived contrast between the worlds can then induce a number of psychological responses – including senses of inadequacy, inferiority, and in-betweenness – that shape these students' self-perceptions and aspirations.

This research contributes to the theoretical literature on first-generation college students in several ways.

First, the study results extend and challenge parts of the findings in previous studies on first-generation college students. Specifically, the distinct college experiences of first-generation Chinese international students from less well-resourced regions align with past findings on American domestic first-generation college students at elite US colleges, who describe experiencing a habitus difference between college and home and feel pressured to assimilate into elite college culture while maintaining the authenticity of their personal/home identities (Gable 2021; Osborne 2024). As such, the current study extends the themes of habitus split and college-home identity conflict for first-generation students into an international context. Moreover, while this subset of first-generation Chinese international students still occupies a relatively privileged

position, the psychological strains they experience echo the hidden costs of social mobility described by Osborne (2024), who finds that socially mobile first-generation domestic students often unexpectedly face emotional distress, self-doubt, and social isolation from home communities in elite US colleges. Advancing Osborne's line of argument, this study thus highlights how transnational mobility via elite higher education can also carry hidden social and psychological consequences for certain international student populations. By revealing how these consequences are linked to China's regional disparities among Chinese international students, this study further illustrates how the costs of mobility for different student populations are deeply shaped by structural inequalities specific to their home countries and societies. These findings underscore the need for universities to reckon more seriously with the unseen toll of social mobility in a culturally responsive way.

Not only does this research add to past literature by extending prior findings on first-generation college students, but it also does so by challenging them. As discussed in the findings section, first-generation Chinese international students at elite US colleges don't appear to experience many of the challenges typically associated with first-generation status, as the economic capital their parents gained during China's economic reform buffers them against the structural disadvantages facing their American domestic first-generation counterparts. The unique educational experiences of first-generation Chinese international students thus challenge the common conflation of first-generation students with low-income and/or working-class students in many previous studies (see Longwell-Grice and Longwell-Grice 2021), underscoring that the meanings and impacts of first-generation identity are context-specific. Future researchers examining the college experiences of first-generation international students should therefore be

attuned to the specific historical, social, economic, and cultural context from which these students emerge.

Second, the research findings advance a more nuanced approach to understanding first-generation identity and its impacts on students' college experiences. Specifically, the intragroup difference in the college experience between first-generation Chinese international students from well-resourced cities and less resource-rich regions proves that first-generation college students are a heterogeneous population with diverse college experiences. The fact that this difference is associated not only with first-generation status but also with regional identity further illustrates that first-generation students' college experiences are intersectional and should always be examined in the interaction of multiple identities. Additionally, some first-generation respondents' perceptions of in-betweenness as an advantage – allowing them to acquire valuable skills such as cultural straddling – highlight the diverse and valuable cultural assets students bring with them into educational institutions, thus challenging a deficit view of first-generation college students. Together, these findings encourage future researchers to approach first-generation students and their college experiences as heterogeneous and intersectional from an asset-based perspective.

In addition to contributing to the literature on first-generation college students, this research expands Bourdieu's framework into a transnational context by highlighting how parental capital and elite K-12 schooling shape the college experiences of first-generation and continuing-generation Chinese international students. Specifically, the limited transferability of social and cultural capital – which deprives continuing-generation Chinese international students of the common advantages associated with their American domestic continuing-generation counterparts – illustrates that home-based social and cultural capital cannot easily transcend national borders, as

it is bounded not only by fields but also by the broader sociocultural contexts in which these fields are embedded. There are, however, forms of social and cultural capital that can transcend national borders and be converted from economic capital, as evidenced by the academic, social, and cultural resources acquired by first-generation and continuing-generation Chinese international students through elite K-12 schooling, which help them navigate the environment of selective US universities. In this sense, it is the privileged and globally oriented K-12 educational programs, rather than the home, that play the role of transmitting transnational social and cultural capital. In transmitting this capital, these educational programs function as key sites for producing a new generation of global elites, who connect with one another across different parts of the world with shared practices and experiences, surpass their parents whose social and cultural capital is more locally rooted, and seek life opportunities through prestigious college education on a global stage (Chiang 2022; Gee 2000). In line with this finding, interested researchers could further investigate how the transnational capital that international students develop might be different or similar in form across the types of elite and globally oriented K-12 schools they attend (e.g., international schools outside the host countries vs. boarding schools within the host countries). Moreover, future scholars examining educational mobility in international settings through Bourdieu's framework should pay close attention to the nuanced forms of capital different groups of students possess, the transferability of these capitals and the contexts in which they are valued, and the role of elite and globally oriented K-12 educational programs in shaping students' educational trajectories and experiences.

Lastly, the research findings connect to and adapt Anthony Jack's (2019) concepts of "the privileged poor" and "the doubly disadvantaged" in an interesting way. To start with, unlike

American domestic students, the differences between first-generation and continuing-generation Chinese international students at elite US colleges are quite nuanced, as both groups come from economically privileged backgrounds. If anything, the comparison between first-generation and continuing-generation Chinese international students at elite US universities may be better characterized as one between "the modestly privileged" (i.e., who possess economic capital but less home-based parental cultural capital) and "the doubly privileged" (i.e., who possess both economic and home-based parental cultural capital). Moreover, if we inquire into the intragroup difference within the first-generation Chinese international student population, we find a further deviation from the intragroup difference found within the American student population from disadvantaged backgrounds. Specifically, while "the privileged poor" and "the doubly disadvantaged" describe low-income students who differ in their college experiences due to different K-12 schooling experiences, first-generation Chinese international students attending elite US colleges are financially stable and differ in their college experiences along the lines of regional identity rather than pre-college education. In this case, first-generation Chinese international students from resource-rich regions at elite US colleges may be more accurately characterized as "the modestly privileged with a regional advantage." Future researchers could further explore the nuanced educational and life experiences of these different subgroups of Chinese international students.

Implications for Policy and Practice

This study informs higher education institutions of possible ways they could adapt their practices and support programs to better serve students with diverse and unique needs.

Specifically, in highlighting the hidden costs of social mobility, this research supports Osborne's (2024) call for universities to rethink and reframe their understanding of social mobility – not as a stationary economic goal measured in post-graduation income, but as an experiential process that shapes and reshapes individuals' identities and perspectives. For instance, for the first-generation respondents from resource-limited regions in particular, the costs of seeking international studies and transnational mobility mainly take the form of emotional and psychological strains, rather than a lack of institutional knowledge and resources. As such, the new framework of mobility prompts colleges to go beyond providing mere access to skills and knowledge for socially mobile individuals through traditional interventions (e.g., networking events, orientation programs, professional workshops) (Osborne 2024). Instead, institutions should consider building additional programs that directly address the impacts of social mobility and assist in students' identity management throughout their educational journeys. These programs could include one-on-one counseling sessions and peer cohort groups that help students process their mobility experiences, build connections, and narrate their feelings. Importantly, when designing these programs, universities should be mindful that individuals can simultaneously experience disadvantages and privileges across different dimensions, as affected by their intersectional identities. Moreover, they should recognize that these experiences are deeply embedded in the specific social and cultural milieus in which students were raised. Therefore, it is crucial that the new support initiatives provide culturally responsive care tailored to individual students' needs and backgrounds. It would be ideal if universities could hire culturally competent staff and staff from diverse cultural backgrounds for the new programs, so that they can better contextualize the struggles of socially mobile students and help them feel seen and supported in the campus environment.

Another particularly concerning finding of this study is the social isolation and career anxiety that respondents experience on elite campuses. As discussed earlier in the findings section, there is good reason to suspect that these challenges are not unique to international students but reflect broader patterns among students at elite colleges. For the pale social scene in particular, it is astonishing and perhaps even worrisome that not much literature has delved into this topic in the selective institutional environments. There definitely is a need for more studies that investigate the subjective feelings and experiences of elite college students regarding relationship and connection building. But besides research efforts, universities can also take concrete action to address the issues of student social isolation and career pressure. One way that is worth considering is to provide mental health services that specifically aim at managing career anxiety. Colleges can also sponsor "slow socializing" events that prioritize deep conversations and authentic connections over speed-networking activities. But more importantly, when everyone is "too busy" to admit they are lonely and afraid, which turns loneliness and anxiety into a silent epidemic, universities need to disrupt the silence that allows the problems to persist. Specifically, this requires institutions to acknowledge students' struggles – especially loneliness, which is less openly discussed than anxiety within the student and academic communities – as real and central. They can do this by encouraging faculty and staff to address the emotional side of college life during office hours or classroom check-ins, and by incorporating conversations about loneliness into orientation and advising programs. However, when doing this, institutions must be careful not to normalize loneliness and anxiety as natural and inevitable parts of student life at elite colleges. It therefore points to the need for elite universities to address the root causes of students' perceived social isolation and career anxiety – namely, the institutional culture of individual achievement and status attainment that fuels overpacked schedules, hyper-competition, and fear of failure. This means that

in addition to validating students' feelings, colleges would need to effect structural changes to promote rest and connections as core parts of college life, and adopt a broader definition of success that measures not by achievement and outcomes, but by relationships, meaning-making, and well-being. Transforming the institutional culture can be difficult, but it is the very challenge that elite universities must confront if they hope to cultivate not only high-achieving students but whole, connected, and fulfilled human beings.

Limitations

Despite its theoretical and practical contributions, this research has several limitations.

First, the small sample size and reliance on a volunteer sampling method may introduce selection bias and limited generalizability of the study results. Second, the research findings might not apply to first-generation and continuing-generation Chinese international students in other types of American higher education institutions (e.g., public research universities, liberal arts colleges) or schools with more accessible admissions. Third, as this study focuses on students from mainland China, its findings may not be generalized to first-generation international students from other countries.

In the future, researchers interested in studying first-generation international students can expand the discussion by examining students from American higher education institutions other than elite private research universities. Additionally, given this study's small sample size, future scholars could examine whether the intersectional effects of first-generation and regional identities apply to different and/or larger samples of first-generation Chinese international students.

Furthermore, future studies could explore whether continuing-generation Chinese international students acquire implicit forms of parental social and cultural capital beyond direct guidance and resources. Lastly, given the significant differences in the college experiences of American domestic and Chinese international first-generation students, it can be valuable for future researchers to further extend the scholarly discussion on first-generation college students into transnational contexts and examine the college experiences of international first-generation students from different sociocultural backgrounds.

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Appendix A:

China's City Tier System with Reference to GDP and Population Size (2024)

Source: https://landgeist.com/2024/08/27/chinas-city-tier-system/

Appendix B:

Annual Per Capita Disposable Income Quintile Distribution (2022)

Annual Per Capita Disposable Income Quintile Distribution, 2022			
Quintile (20%)	Total population	Urban population	Rural population
Low-income households	RMB 8,601	RMB 16,971	RMB 5,025
Lower-middle-income households	RMB 19,303	RMB 31,180	RMB 11,965
Middle-income households	RMB 30,598	RMB 44,283	RMB 17,451
Upper-middle-income households	RMB 47,397	RMB 61,724	RMB 24,646
High-income households	RMB 90,116	RMB 107,224	RMB 46,075

Note: Under the quintile income distribution, all surveyed households are arranged from low to high according to the per capita income level, and the averages are divided into five equal groups. Source: National Bureau of Statistics.

Source: https://www.china-briefing.com/news/china-middle-class-growth-policy-and-consumption/

Appendix C:

Average Years of Schooling for People Aged 15 and Above by Provincial Region (2020)

Region	2020
National	**9.91**
Beijing	12.64
Tianjin	11.29
Hebei	9.84
Shanxi	10.45
Inner Mongolia	10.08
Liaoning	10.34
Jilin	10.17
Heilongjiang	9.93
Shanghai	11.81
Jiangsu	10.21
Zhejiang	9.79
Anhui	9.35
Fujian	9.66
Jiangxi	9.70
Shandong	9.75
Henan	9.79
Hubei	10.02
Hunan	9.88
Guangdong	10.38
Guangxi	9.54
Hainan	10.10
Chongqing	9.80
Sichuan	9.24
Guizhou	8.75
Yunnan	8.82
Tibet	6.75
Shaanxi	10.26
Gansu	9.13
Qinghai	8.85
Ningxia	9.81
Xinjiang	10.11

Source: National Bureau of Statistics of China
https://www.stats.gov.cn/english/PressRelease/202105/t20210510_1817191.html

Appendix D:

International Trade in Goods by Provincial Region (2022)

(RMB 100 million)

Region	By Location of Importers/Exporters			By Location of Domestic Consumers/Producers		
	Total	Exports	Imports	Total	Exports	Imports
National Total	**418011.6**	**237411.5**	**180600.1**	**418011.6**	**237411.5**	**180600.1**
Beijing	36420.1	5884.2	30535.9	9662.9	2263.6	7399.4
Tianjin	8302.3	3729.1	4573.2	10928.1	3718.7	7209.4
Hebei	5500.7	3288.9	2211.8	9375.2	4909.3	4465.9
Shanxi	1831.3	1200.8	630.5	2119.1	1566.4	552.7
Inner Mongolia	1506.6	613.4	893.1	2185.0	797.8	1387.2
Liaoning	7900.9	3576.1	4324.8	10508.1	4289.2	6218.9
Jilin	1559.4	502.2	1057.2	1537.7	533.0	1004.7
Heilongjiang	2651.5	545.7	2105.8	2310.2	553.3	1757.0
Shanghai	41810.8	17101.5	24709.2	40100.1	13810.6	26289.4
Jiangsu	54218.2	34590.7	19627.5	59235.0	36096.4	23138.6
Zhejiang	46827.9	34333.3	12494.6	45483.4	33135.3	12348.2
Anhui	7528.7	4758.8	2769.9	7618.9	5196.6	2422.3
Fujian	19821.5	12141.2	7680.2	17745.3	11572.9	6172.4
Jiangxi	6624.8	5032.4	1592.5	6317.2	4648.9	1668.3
Shandong	32199.7	19239.0	12960.7	38792.8	20793.2	17999.6
Henan	8470.8	5201.0	3269.8	9378.0	5986.3	3391.8
Hubei	6128.3	4167.0	1961.3	6159.9	3938.9	2221.0
Hunan	7034.9	5144.9	1890.0	4652.4	3513.8	1138.6
Guangdong	83001.8	53265.8	29736.1	94803.8	58910.4	35893.4
Guangxi	6464.2	3587.3	2876.9	7096.3	2662.5	4433.9
Hainan	2005.1	721.9	1283.2	1839.5	569.9	1269.5
Chongqing	8102.8	5196.2	2906.6	6993.5	4654.7	2338.8
Sichuan	10044.3	6187.7	3856.6	10283.5	5958.0	4325.6
Guizhou	729.9	458.5	271.4	698.7	465.1	233.6
Yunnan	3244.0	1533.4	1710.5	3392.0	1635.3	1756.7
Tibet	46.1	43.1	2.9	23.9	22.6	1.3
Shaanxi	4754.6	2976.1	1778.5	4158.6	2730.5	1428.2
Gansu	567.9	119.9	448.1	641.7	188.3	453.4
Qinghai	40.5	24.0	16.4	43.1	38.1	5.0
Ningxia	214.6	161.0	53.5	385.6	307.9	77.7
Xinjiang	2457.5	2086.3	371.2	3542.0	1944.2	1597.8

Source: China Statistical Yearbook 2023, National Bureau of Statistics of China
https://www.stats.gov.cn/sj/ndsj/2023/indexeh.htm

Appendix E:

Annual Income Levels of City Type in Mainland China (2020)

First Tier Cities (4) *(Beijing, Guangzhou, Shanghai, Shenzhen)*					
City	**About**	**Population**	**Average Disposable Income (RMB)**	**Urban Disposable Income (RMB)**	**Rural Disposable Income (RMB)**
Municipalities					
Beijing	China's capital city and political centre	21.5 million	69,434	75,602	
Shanghai	China's financial centre	24.9 million	72,232	76,437	34,911
Regular Cities					
Guangzhou	Capital of Guangdong province	18.6 million		68,304	31,266
Shenzhen	China's tech centre that also borders Hong Kong First Chinese city to open up and pilot many of China's new reforms Home to companies such as Tencent, Huawei, DJI	17.6 million	64,878		

New First Tier Cities (15) *Municipalities, regional hubs, and important economic centres*					
City	**About**	**Population**	**Average Disposable Income (RMB)**	**Urban Disposable Income (RMB)**	**Rural Disposable Income (RMB)**
Municipalities					
Chongqing	China's largest municipality located next to Sichuan province	32 million	30,824	40,006	16,361
Tianjin	A municipality located next to Beijing with one of the largest ports in northern China	13.9 million	43,854	47,659	25,691
Provincial Capitals					
Changsha	Capital of Hunan province	10 million	51,478	57,971	34,754
Chengdu	Regional hub of China's southwest region	20.9 million	42,075	48,593	26,432
Hangzhou	Capital of Zhejiang province and China's e-commerce hub	11.9 million	61,879	68,666	38,700
Nanjing	Capital of Jiangsu province that has economic influence over neighbouring Anhui province due to the city's proximity	9.3 million	60,606	67,553	29,621
Shenyang	Capital of Liaoning province	9 million		47,413	19,598
Wuhan	Capital of Hubei province and regional hub of China's central region	12.3 million		50,362	24,057
Xi'an	Capital of Shaanxi province and regional hub of China's northwest region	12.9 million	35,783	43,713	15,749
Zhengzhou	Capital of Henan province	12.6 million	36,661	42,887	24,783
Regular Cities					
Dongguan	A city in Guangdong province with many migrated factories from Shenzhen	10.5 million	56,533	58,052	38,827
Foshan	A city in Guangdong province with many export-oriented factories	9.5 million	56,245	57,445	33,440
Ningbo	A city in Zhejiang province with a deep-water port and prosperous private sector companies	9.4 million	59,952	68,008	39,132
Qingdao	Most developed city in Shandong province that has significant trade relations with South Korea and Japan	10 million	47,156	55,905	23,656
Suzhou	A rich city in Jiangsu province with the highest industrial GDP in China (due to the large number of industrial parks that attracted many migrated tech companies and factories from Shanghai)	12.8 million	62,582	70,966	37,563

Second Tier (30) *Most provincial capitals and cities with large populations*					
City	**About**	**Population**	**Average Disposable Income (RMB)**	**Urban Disposable Income (RMB)**	**Rural Disposable Income (RMB)**
Provincial Capitals					
Changchun	Capital of Jilin province	9.1 million		40,001	16,636
Fuzhou	Capital of Fujian province	8.3 million	40,477	49,300	22,669
Guiyang	Capital of Guizhou province	6 million		40,305	18,674
Harbin	Capital of Heilongjiang province	10 million		39,791	19,631
Hefei	Capital of Anhui province City government known for making successful investments in and growing medium-sized businesses such as NIO and Jingdongfang (the world's largest manufacturer of LCD, OLED and flexible electronic displays)	9.4 million	41,619	48,283	24,282
Jinan	Capital of Shandong province	8.7 million	43,056	53,329	20,432
Kunming	Capital of Yunnan province	8.5 million	38,762	48,018	17,719
Lanzhou	Capital of Gansu province	4.4 million		40,152	14,652
Nanchang	Capital of Jiangxi province	6.3 million		46,796	20,921
Nanning	Capital of Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region	8.7 million	30,114	38,542	16,130
Shijiazhuang	Capital of Hebei province	11.2 million	30,955	40,247	16,947
Taiyuan	Capital of Shanxi province	5.3 million	35,473	38,329	19,655
Regular Cities					
Dalian	A port city in Liaoning province that is also a popular tourist destination	8 million	41,880	47,380	21,558
Jinhua	A city in Zhejiang province with many SMEs primarily focused on light industries	7 million	50,580	61,545	30,365
Wenzhou	A city in Zhejiang province known for its many merchants	9.6 million	54,025	63,481	32,428
Wuxi	A city in Jiangsu province with many industrial parks that hosts migrated factories from Shanghai	7.5 million	57,589	64,714	35,750
Xiamen	A coastal city in Fujian province with many tourist attraction sites	5.2 million	58,140	61,331	26,612
Xuzhou	A city in Zhejiang province with fewer SMEs and a less developed economy compared with other cities in the same province	9.1 million	31,166	37,523	21,229
Yantai	A coastal city in Shandong province with a large port and many heavy industry factories	7 million	39,306	49,434	22,305
Zhuhai	A city in Guangdong province that is part of the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macau Greater Bay Area; Thriving manufacturing industry focused on electronics	2 million	55,936	58,475	31,119

Third Tier (70) *Cities with (1) at least 1 million urban population (2) somewhat developed infrastructure (3) no economical or political significance (4) relatively low GDP*					
City	**About**		**Average Disposable Income (RMB)**	**Urban Disposable Income (RMB)**	**Rural Disposable Income (RMB)**
Provincial Capitals					
Haikou	Capital of Hainan province	2.9 million	35,025	40,049	17,405
Hohhot	Capital of Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region	3 million	39,230	49,789	20,489
Urumqi	Capital of Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region	4 million		42,770	22,827
Yinchuan	Capital of Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region	2 million		39,416	16,428
Regular Cities					
Chaozhou	A city in Guangdong province that many Southeast Asian Chinese of Teochew descent immigrated from	2.5 million	23,303		
Guilin	A popular tourism city in Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region	4.9 million	27,745	38,145	17,345
Luoyang	A city in Henan province that was one of China's four great ancient capitals				
Sanya	A popular tourism city in Hainan province	1 million	34,642	40,547	18,389
Shantou	A city in Guangdong province that many Southeast Asian Chinese of Teochew descent immigrated from	5.5 million	28,220	32,922	18,962
Zhumadian	A city in Henan province	7 million	30,835		

Fourth Tier (90) *Smaller cities that are still in the developing and urbanizing stage*					
City	**About**		**Average Disposable Income (RMB)**	**Urban Disposable Income (RMB)**	**Rural Disposable Income (RMB)**
Provincial Capitals					
Lhasa	Capital of Tibet Autonomous Region	1 million		43,640	18,268
Xining	Capital of Qinghai province	3 million	30,203	36,959	13,487
Regular Cities					
Dali	A popular tourism city in Yunnan province	0.7 million		38,435	13,645
Huangshan	A popular tourism city in Anhui province	1.5 million	27,916	38,726	18,311
Leshan	A popular tourism city in Sichuan province known for its UNESCO Heritage Leshan Giant Buddha	3.2 million		38,931	18,175
Luzhou	A city in Sichuan province known for its alcoholic beverages (particularly Luzhou Laojiao)	4.3 million	28,270	39,547	18,035
Xuchang	A city in Henan province that was the capital of the Wei kingdom under Cao Cao during The Three Kingdoms period	4.4 million	26,934	34,926	19,708

Fifth Tier (128) *Poorest cities in China's eastern coastal provinces or undeveloped cities in inland western China (note: most of China's richer, developed cities are situated along the eastern coast)*					
Lijiang	A popular tourism city in Yunnan province known for its UNESCO Heritage old-town	1.3 million		37,022	12,370
Pingliang	A city in Gansu province	2 million		31,096	9,756
Pu'er	A city in Yunnan province known for its tea	2.4 million		32,658	12,366
Sipsongpanna	An autonomous prefecture for the Dai ethnic group at the southmost part of Yunnan province; Popular tourism destination that borders Myanmar and Laos	1.3 million	22,960	33,147	15,463
NATIONAL AVERAGE ****Only includes data for mainland China (excludes Hong Kong SAR, Macau SAR, and Taiwan)****					
			Average Disposable Income (RMB)	**Urban Disposable Income (RMB)**	**Rural Disposable Income (RMB)**
			32,189	43,834	17,131

Data Source: National Bureau of Statistics of China

Source: National Bureau of Statistics of China
https://www.investorinsights.asia/china-city-classifications-and-income-factsheet