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Geography-mediated institutionalised cultural capital: regional inequalities in graduate employment

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates how regional inequalities shape the employment seeking experiences and behaviour of graduates by drawing on the case of Chinese Master's graduates under COVID19. Based on interviews with graduates who chose to work as the 'targeted selected graduates' (TSG) of *University A*, located in the underdeveloped regions of North-western China, we show how their employment seeking was jointly impacted by three different but inter-related fields, the national economic, higher education, and graduate employment fields. These students were situated in a unique juncture across these fields; while their elite credentials from *University A* qualified them for these elite TSG programmes, they were disadvantaged by being excluded from TSG recruitments at economically developed regions. Importantly, we highlight that institutionalised cultural capital in the form of academic credentials from elite HEIs does not work in a 'straightforward' manner, but it has to be considered in conjunction with the geo-economic locations of their HEIs. We, therefore, propose the notion of 'geography-mediated institutionalised cultural capital' to capture this significant but under-theorised aspect of the graduate employment scene. This conceptual innovation enlightens the analysis of regional differences in different countries by considering how official or unofficial regional authorities' interventions shape graduate employment.

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Introduction

Social inequalities within the graduate labour market have drawn increasing scholarly attention across the globe (Liu 2021; Wakeling and Savage 2015). Within this work, the mediating roles, either mitigating or exacerbating, that higher education (HE hereafter) plays have been repeatedly emphasised. Traditionally, credentials acquired through HE (i.e. institutionalised cultural capital, after Bourdieu 1986) have given graduates the added positional advantage that can be translated into better chances in entering desirable professions and gaining a higher earning potential. However, this scenario only holds true when HE credentials are in scarcity. Where there is 'credential inflation', i.e. the number of graduates possessing similar HE credentials increases significantly, competitions for entering the labour market become more fierce; consequently newer and/or alternative forms of mediating mechanism will come into play to increase the 'distinction' of certain graduates, but not others. However, due to different national and local contexts, what these mechanisms are and how they exert impacts may vary significantly across countries. Therefore, Brown et al. (2016) have

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advocated for a need to account for 'comparative differences in the social structure of competition and ideological shifts . . . in different national contexts' (191). They especially argue for a new research agenda that 'focused on the changing relationship between family, education, employment and rewards, in the (re)production of unequal life-chances and life-experiences' (195).

With such a view, drawing on the empirical case of China, in this article we critically examine the idea of 'academic qualifications as the dominant source of institutionalised cultural capital'. We argue that amid highly uneven regional developments in China (Hamnett, Hua, and Bingjie 2019), the 'conversion rate' (Bourdieu 1986, 248) of institutionalised cultural capital (such as an elite university degree) within the labour market has to be considered in conjunction with regional inequalities, higher education institutional rankings and local governments' recruitment protectionism. Particularly, we will demonstrate how geographic and regional uneven developments and inequalities get perpetuated by a suite of local-protectionist policies in the graduate employment field, thus further disadvantaging the graduates from less developed, poorer regions of China, despite their elite university qualifications. By bringing geographic and regional inequalities into this equilibrium, we will show how one's elite academic qualifications may be 'devalued' if their degree awarding higher education institution (HEI) is located in the 'wrong' region. In this context, the relationship between education, employment and rewards has to be inter-locked with geographic and regional considerations. We will base these on in-depth interview and focus-group data collected from an elite university in the underdeveloped regions of China.

Theoretically, we will argue that it is important to broaden our understanding of institutionalised cultural capital. We will achieve this by incorporating a conceptualisation of 'geography-mediated institutionalised cultural capital'. This broadened conceptualisation can arguably help to make sense of regional geographic inequalities across national economic, higher education, and graduation employment fields.

In what follows, we will first outline our theoretical framework which contains our conceptualisation of three interlocked fields and the pivotal notion of 'geography-mediated institutionalised cultural capital'. We will then apply this theoretical framework to analyse regional inequalities in graduate employment. Thereafter, we will discuss our empirical context and findings and draw out both theoretical and empirical implications pertaining to a more updated and nuanced understanding of positional competition in contemporary graduate employment scenes.

Theoretical framework

This article is inspired by the conceptual works of Pierre Bourdieu, especially his notions of field and cultural capital. Bourdieu's conceptual tools have been proved useful for examining education and graduate employment inequalities, both in the West (Martin and Bhopal 2021; Brown et al. 2016; Tholen 2015) and in China (Liu 2021; Xu 2021). Bourdieu understands a field as 'a network, or a configuration, of objective relations between positions' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 97). It 'undergirds and guides the strategies whereby the occupants of these positions seek, individually or collectively, to safeguard or improve their position and to impose the principle of hierarchization most favourable to their own products' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 101). Each field has their own operating logic, which impacts how meanings are interpreted, decisions are made and positions of dominance or subordination are occupied (Bourdieu 2019). These positions depend on the amount of resources one possesses in relation to other social agents in the same field. Such field-specific resources are 'capital' as Bourdieu (1986) conceptualises.

Cultural capital is one form of such resources, defined as familiarity with the dominant culture and the ability to master the codes and language of the educated (Bourdieu 1986). Cultural capital is the most recognised in the educational system, and can be recognised in the embodied state (i.e. long-lasting dispositions of the body and mind); the objectified state (i.e. cultural goods such as paintings, books, and instruments) and the institutionalised state (i.e. educational credentials). All the above states of cultural capital can function as *symbolic* capital so long as they are perceived as a sign of

value and acts as a 'force, a power, or capacity for ... exploitation, and therefore recognised as legitimate' and can produce 'symbolic profits' (Bourdieu 1986, 249).

Three interlocking fields

Drawing on Bourdieu's conceptualisation, in this study we identify three different but interrelated fields, (1) the national economic field, (2) the higher education field, and (3) the graduate employment field. Firstly, the national economic field is a concept that Bourdieu himself (Bourdieu 2019) often deploys to refer to the unequal economic power and influences of different regions and municipalities, e.g. of France. As a field of forces and social positions, the national economic field in China is characterised by a high degree of uneven economic development and unequal economic resource access and distributions across regions and provinces, which are the major competitors in this field. Typically, there are marked differences in terms of the gross domestic product, industrial structure and urbanisation between the more prosperous eastern and southern provinces and less developed western and inland counterparts (Xu and Yang 2019; Yin, Hussain, and Kui 2022). Such regional inequalities have been perpetuated over time, due to a wide array of factors and struggles for resources, such as uneven natural resource endowments, degree of remoteness, financial and infrastructural provisions, differences in economic organisations, and government policy inclinations (Hamnett, Hua, and Bingjie 2019, 253). In this field, the less economically developed areas may find it challenging to break out of a circle of 'disadvantaged historical legacy' (Hamnett, Hua and Bingjie 2019) Research has shown that compared with the counterparts in the east, it costs more to live and achieve upward social mobility in the less developed central and western regions. Such unequal economic and social distribution of resources and livelihood opportunities, as accentuated by the dominance of first-tier cities like Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen that are all located in the east (Yin, Hussain, and Kui 2022), thus typifies the highly-unequal national economic field. The regional inequalities in the national economic field have significant implications for the higher education field.

Secondly, higher education as a field has been widely conceptualised across different national contexts, e.g. in France (Bourdieu 1988), South Africa (Naidoo 2004), China (Xu 2017) and globally (Marginson 2008). In much existing works, 'the intellectual field of university education is conceptualised as a field with a high degree of autonomy in that it generates its own values and behavioural imperatives that are relatively independent from forces emerging from the economic and political fields' (Naidoo 2004, 458). Crucially, Bourdieu (2019, 221) highlights that to define a field one needs to identify 'a dominant principle of hierarchisation, which is the unequal possession of the specific capital at stake'. Within this field, the specific, dominant principle of hierarchisation pertains to the HEIs' 'academic capital', which 'is linked to power over the instruments of reproduction of the university body; and "intellectual" or "scientific capital", which is linked to scientific authority or intellectual renown' (Naidoo 2004, 458). HEIs as the major competitors constantly struggle for such academic capital which is directly linked to their degree of domination in a steep hierarchy. For instance, nine of China's most prestigious universities formed a 'C9 League' since 2009 which is dubbed as the 'Chinese Ivy League'. These C9 institutions occupy the top echelon of the field: together they accounted for '3% of China's researchers, received 10% of the nation's research expenditure, and produced 20% of academic publications and 30% of total citations between 2001 and 2010' (Yang and Xie 2015, 67). Traditionally, it is understood that elite HEIs' academic capital can then be converted into their graduates' institutionalised cultural capital when they enter the graduate employment field. In turn, their graduates' employment outcomes can feed back to reproduce the dominance of elite institutions' academic capital or the subordination of lower-tiered HEIs (Bourdieu 1988; Ren, Zhu, and Warner 2017).

However, given the afore-mentioned unequal relations in the national economic field, the number and quality of HEIs vary across regions. Generally, the more economically developed and dominant a region is, the higher number of prestigious HEIs it hosts. Beijing and Shanghai alone have

respectively eight and four Double First-Class¹ universities (out of a total of 42). In contrast, the vast economically underdeveloped areas, particularly western and central regions, have merely one (e.g. Gansu) or none at all (e.g. Guangxi, Guizhou). Such a unique regionally differentiated geography of elite universities of China has significant implications for the graduate employment scene. This paper will, therefore, provide enriched insights into how it is not straightforward for the conversion of institutional academic capital into institutionalised cultural capital in the graduate employment field as mediated by geography.

Thirdly, the graduate employment field has often been deployed in the literature. Bourdieu (1979) has discussed the graduate employment field when depicting how the middle-class graduates are better able than their working-class peers to ascertain the best timing for departing from and re-entering the graduate market. Burke (2017) demonstrates how the 'entitled middle-class' in Northern Ireland has adopted similar strategies to first enter non-graduate jobs and continue to aspire to transition to graduate jobs. In Australia, O'Shea, Groves, and Delahunty (2021) underline how the 'first in family (to attend university)' status has impacted on graduates' performance in the employment field. In China, the graduate employment field is typified by observable advantages possessed by graduates from middle-class backgrounds. These advantages manifest through the middle-class graduates' substantial parental and familial support (Liu 2016; Ren, Zhu, and Warner 2017), sophisticated understanding of the competitive labour market, and confidence in mobilising their agency and devising strategic plans for the future (Liu 2021).

Importantly, China's graduate employment field is deeply influenced by 'external' forces (Bourdieu 2019, 223) from the national economic and higher education fields. The graduate employment field encompasses employers in the private and the public sector. Within the public sector, the various levels of governments constitute a major source of employment, and this is particularly the case in the context of the pandemic influence (Li, Xiang, and Gui 2021). Because of the uneven economic developments across China, coupled with the increasing difficulties in ensuring sufficient graduate employment, local governments could be motivated to protect the interests and employment prospects of graduates who have received their HE degrees from (elite) universities located in the same region. This inclination of the local governments, a major source of employment for public sector jobs, thus implies that recruitment policies may gear towards the interests of certain graduates, but not others. Given the uneven economic development across China, it is often the case that public sector jobs in local governments located in the prosperous, economically-developed regions are better paid, with more promising career prospects and are highly sought after (Liu et al. 2017). However, the local governments' intention to protect graduates with HE qualifications from the same region may mean that graduates with HE qualifications from the poorer, less developed regions suffer even further discriminations and barriers in the graduate employment field.

Geography-mediated institutionalised cultural capital

As such, we argue that geographic locations at institutional level can and should be conceived of as a form of institutionalised cultural capital (or indeed liability) that is recognised (or devalued) across the national economic, higher education and graduate employment fields. We call this 'geography-mediated institutionalised cultural capital'. We will show that for graduates with academic qualifications from an elite HEI located in less developed regions, their chances of getting employed in the more prosperous regions remain low, mainly because of the local governments' intent to protect graduates of HEIs in their own regions. Therefore, HEIs' geographic positions in the national economic field can imply that the elite academic qualifications they produce may get a 'discounted' price or conversion rate in the graduate employment field. This characteristic can have implications for other graduate employment fields that are adjacent to geographically uneven and unequal national economic and higher education fields.

Research on regional inequalities, higher education, and graduate employment

Extant western research on regional concentration and inequalities of higher education resources has focused predominantly on the roles of education institutions such as universities and schools. In Britain, by examining graduates' likelihood of entry to elite professions, Wakeling and Savage (2015) identify a distinct elite pipeline from the 'golden triangle' of universities (comprising Oxford, Cambridge and certain older London universities) to the elite sectors of the labour market. Recently, Gamsu and Donnelly (2021, 370) find that 'Regional circuits of higher education involving mostly newer, less prestigious universities and state schools sit alongside a distinctive national set of elite English universities and elite private and state schools'. In France, Bourdieu's (1977) research reveals how prestigious Parisian *grandes écoles* predominantly accept student intakes from Paris.

Specific to the (graduate) employment fields, existing research has shown differing degrees of regional inequalities across countries or multi-member states. In the UK where the devolution governments and local employers can devise their localised 'preferences' of graduates in recruitment, Crew (2018) reveals that a form of 'regional capital' is found to be required in North Wales. To successfully navigate the 'regional graduate employment field' of North Wales, graduates are often expected to possess 'bilingual Welsh-English language skills, locally based networks and access to own transport' (41).

Brown's et al. (2016) analysis of elite students from Sciences Po in Paris concludes that despite their privileged access to concentrated resources available in Paris, middle-class reproduction has been in crisis as these elite students are finding it harder to convert their cultural capital into currency that is readily recognised by the labour market.

In the European Union, well-established programmes such as the Erasmus and Socrates programmes become officially instituted initiatives to encourage labour mobility across its member states (Barslund et al. 2014, 121). Notable East-to-West labour mobility has been identified, i.e. workers from Bulgaria and Romania have consistently migrated to western states such as Germany and France (Barslund et al. 2014). Moreover, social security cooperation which enables international job seekers to go abroad without losing social security entitlements and unemployment benefits in countries of origin are also friendly policies to labour mobility.

In India, where regional inequalities have been on the rise across the metropolises and the 'backward' regions, research has shown that the socio-economic costs of migration have been increasing for the disadvantaged populations, such as those from rural, poor regions (Kundu and Mohanan 2009). Bigger and developed cities in India have been found to become increasingly unfriendly to low-skilled, illiterate migrants from developing regions (Kundu and Mohanan 2009).

In all these contexts, unequal economic and social developments across regions and/or member states have placed differing challenges to job-seeking populations, be they fresh graduates, low-skilled labourers, or experienced professionals. There are either official or unofficial incentives put forth by various governments to attract or exclude talents from other regions. This, we argue, is an aspect of geography-mediated graduate employment rule that is worth investigating and theorising. With this view, in this article we draw on the case of China to explore how geographic and regional inequalities are perpetuated from higher education through to the graduate employment field and the roles that (overt) government interventions play in this process.

COVID-19, graduate employment and the selected graduate project

The outbreak of COVID-19 came so suddenly and has had notable impact on college graduate employment. Based on panel data collected in November 2019 and March 2020, Li (2020) found that students were more pessimistic about the employment prospects and future economic trends, with more than 30% of them believing that China's economic growth rate would fall sharply and 45% of them anticipating that China would likely experience high unemployment in 2020.

Such pessimism has been accompanied by a change in graduate job preference. Li, Xiang, and Gui (2021) revealed that more than 40% of graduates from universities in Shanghai preferred jobs in public sectors, especially as civil servants. The proportion of graduates who preferred to work in foreign companies has dropped significantly, from 36% in 2015 to 14.4% in 2020. Similar patterns could be observed in Liu and Zhang's (2021) work, which surveyed graduates at Shenzhen universities. Changes in graduates' attitudes and behaviour due to the pandemic impact were also related to lowering job expectations and avoiding risks to adapt to the new economic environment (Li 2020). It is job *stability* rather than *income* that became the 'deal breaker' for Chinese college graduates amid this turbulent and uncertain time (Li 2020).

Under such circumstance, being a civil servant has become more desirable for students, especially those from prestigious universities. According to reports of graduate employment quality of Tsinghua and Peking universities, about 40% of the graduates in 2020 and 2021 preferred to work in public sectors, such as party and government offices, and public institutions. 75% chose to work as the 'selected graduates' (*xuandiaosheng*). From 2017 to 2020, about nine out of every 10 Tsinghua graduates who became civil servants were selected graduates.

The selected graduate project (SGP, *xuandiaosheng jihua*), implemented by different provincial governments, is a good option for those academically elite (Gao, Zang, and Sun 2019). To increase the quality of village officials, since 1960s the Chinese government has encouraged university graduates who are interested in becoming political officials to begin their careers as village officials (Gao, Zang, and Sun 2019). These graduates are usually seen as the product of political meritocracy and treated as reserved cadres for the party and government at or above the county level, and play a significant role at the grassroots levels (Wang 2019). To be selected, the requirements are higher than those for becoming a regular public official: an applicant must not only pass examinations like those used to select regular public officials, but also earn a degree from a top university (the list of qualified universities is prescribed by provincial governments) and have experience as a student leader or the like.

Recent years also witnessed another type of selected graduate project, the targeted selected graduate project (TSGP, *dingxiang xuandiaosheng jihua*), which initially targeted only a few elite universities, such as Peking and Tsinghua Universities, and later expanded to other Double First-class Universities. Students in this programme are often seen as reserved cadres trained for provincial and municipal governments. As of April 2019, 28 provincial-level governments launched the TSGP program and in addition, some economically developed prefecture-level cities, such as Hangzhou, Qingdao, also have similar policies. Compared to SGP, TSGP has the following characteristics: First, TSGP usually aims at elite universities, mainly the top universities or Double-First Class universities. For example, Guizhou province targeted only Peking and Tsinghua Universities at the beginning. After 2014, it gradually expanded to five universities, namely Peking, Tsinghua, Fudan, Zhejiang and Nanjing Universities. Similar situations also appear in many other provinces (e.g. Shanxi, Zhejiang, etc.). Second, students from the TSGP are given special care, including ease of travel for sitting the exam and reimbursement for examination accommodation and transportation fees. Third, TSGP promises advantages for recruits in department allocation and post rating upon completion of probation. Fourth, the policies of TSGP in some areas have relaxed requirements for job candidates; successful applicants are not necessarily Communist Party members or student cadres, which is a necessary requirement for candidates of the SGP. This article focuses on the TSGP.

In view of the above, we will address these questions: How do regional inequalities interplay with graduation employment inequalities? How can we enrich our conceptualisation of institutionalised cultural capital?

Research method

Research site

Unlike previous work that investigated graduate employment issues in the economically advanced regions (e.g. eastern regions) of China (Liu 2021; Chen and Tian 2021), we focused on the universities in North-western China. On the one hand, this region is rich in natural resources and energy. On the other hand, its regional economy is poor and does not have many ties with the outer world compared to their coastal counterparts. Thus, the region is hailed as ‘Poverty of abundance’ (Fei 1988). We adopted a case study approach and data was collected from an elite university (*University A*) in this region. The university was previously on the 985-university list and later became a Double First-class University, when the 985 project was abolished.

Data collection

Data were collected by life-history interviews from October 2020 to June 2021 at *University A*. Using purposive and snowball sampling, we conducted in-depth interviews and focus-groups with 25 Master’s students, including 13 graduates from rural areas and small towns, 7 from counties and other cities, and 5 from the local provincial capital. 13 were female. We also reviewed policies of targeted selected graduates (TGSP) in each region from 2019 to 2021, including the quotas, requirements and the list of selected universities.

Our interviewees were drawn from different subjects of studies, from social sciences (e.g. social work) to sciences (e.g. computer science). See Appendix 1 for participants’ profiles. We recruited participants with the help of career counsellors of each school, and participants were encouraged to recommend peers who fit our criteria.

All interviews were conducted face-to-face, with 8 one-on-one interviews (stage 1) and 2 focus group interviews (stage 2). The one-on-one interviews lasted between 1 and 3.5 hours and some of the interviewees were interviewed more than once. Stage 1 was conducted during October 2020 when students began to look for jobs. This was to gauge whether COVID-19 had any impact of students’ job search and if so, how and to what extent. Based on the findings of this stage, we conducted two focus group interviews, with one group comprising graduates who found jobs at the public sector and a second group encompassing those who accepted offers in the non-public sector. The focus group interviews were conducted during June 2021 when most students finished their job searches and therefore, these data yielded rich insights into their job seeking process retrospectively.

Findings

Our findings suggest that returning home to work as ‘selected graduates’ was an *honourable but forced* choice for our participants. On the one hand, working as the ‘selected graduates’ was an ideal job for our participants in general, and was especially true for those who received their bachelor’s degrees from non-elite universities (e.g. non Double First-class universities). These students would not have been qualified to apply for the ‘selected graduates’ posts had they not attended *University A* and obtained a Master’s degree from this elite university. The institutionalised cultural capital in the form of a *University A* master’s degree thus bestowed on them the essential pass ticket to qualify for the elite ‘selected graduates’ programmes. On the other hand, due to *University A*’s position in China’s HE field, as well as ‘local protectionism’ aimed at protecting local universities’ employment rate by provincial and municipal governments, these students were ultimately unable to find equally decent jobs in China’s more economically-advanced regions. They had no choice but to return home to be ‘selected graduates’. The following two sections will illustrate these findings in greater detail.

“Haokao” (easy to get)

The selection of ordinary civil servants, which is usually open to the public, requires strict written tests and interviews, and the admission rate is usually low. For example, the National Civil Service Exam in 2021 planned to admit 25,726 employees for 13,172 positions, but there were 358,879 qualified applicants taking the test, with a competition ratio of about 14 to 1 (Hua 2022). For some of the more respectable positions, such as those in the customs institutions, the ratio was 2,422 to 1 in 2021 (CCTV News 2020). In contrast to such fierce competitions, for students in *University A*, becoming the targeted selected graduates is ‘easy to get’ (*haokao*). *Haokao* is well exemplified with Kate’s account.

First, the [TSGP] project has already set the limit on universities. Either your university or your major must be on the Double First-class list. As a result, it places a big limit on who can apply and who cannot. Second, in some provinces, it has some additional requirements, such as party membership or student cadre experience. Consequently, many students are not qualified. Third, compared to the National Civil Service Exam or the provincial one, the written examination of the TSGP is not that difficult. Because you are the talent that they want, you cannot easily be failed.

Having a clear goal of becoming a targeted selected graduate, Kate sat exams in economically less-developed provinces like Guangxi, Shanxi, Jiangxi and Gansu. Although she secured offers from all these provinces, she chose Guangxi eventually to be closer to her boyfriend. Although we cannot deny her personal efforts in her success, the institutionalised cultural capital (i.e. educational credentials) played an important, if not determining, role. Kate’s story is not uncommon among our informants. The pivotal role of *University A*’s institutionalised cultural capital is even greater for students whose bachelor’s degrees were from less prestigious institutions.

Among the respondents interviewed working as targeted selected graduates, 75% obtained their bachelor’s degrees from non-Double-First Class universities. For them, partaking in the TSGP was a cost-effective vocational choice: ‘it may not be the *best* choice (for us), but it is certainly the most *appropriate* one’. This view is shared by many students from similar backgrounds, which is easy to understand considering the credential discrimination (e.g. first degree discrimination) in China’s labour market (Liu and Chen 2021). Jack revealed:

I obtained both of my degrees from a Double-First Class university, so I have nothing to fear. I could either work as a targeted selected graduate, or work at a good enterprise. Finding jobs is not that difficult for me. For those who received their bachelor’s degrees from non-Double-First-Class universities, however, they may encounter first degree discrimination if they want to work in good enterprises. Thus, it might be easier for them to work as targeted selected graduates, as most provinces only look at where you received your master’s degree.

While credentials of *University A* appear to work well for these Master’s graduates to secure positions as targeted selected graduates, such positions are almost always located in the less developed regions of China. Most respondents are originally from the less developed areas of China and it is true that some *were willing* to return home to work as targeted selected graduates, but many of them did so because they *could not* secure this type of jobs in the developed regions of China.

University differentiation intersecting interregional inequalities

University A is one of the Double-First-Class Universities in China, ranked between 23 and 31 at all times², much higher than some local universities in China’s more developed regions such as Zhejiang and Guangdong. It has a high degree of recognition in the HE field. However, due to its location in western China, where economic and social development lags far behind that of the eastern coastal areas, *University A*’s popularity among public sector employers (such as local governments) varies from region to region. Thus, when it comes to finding a job, *University A*’s credential does not necessarily work well; the symbolic capital it can accord to its graduates varies across regions. Therefore, many students used words like ‘friendly’ (*youhao*) or ‘unfriendly’ (*buyouhao*) to describe the relation of institutionalised cultural capital (i.e. credentials), to fields (i.e. national economic and

graduate employment). According to the graduates, two scenarios can be defined as being friendly to *University A*. The first is that certain regions and local governments have recruitment quota for students of *University A*. They could apply for the TSGP examinations in these regions. The second case is that some alumni have been successfully admitted to these regions. Thus, these graduating students detected the ‘friendliness’ of the governments of these regions. Those who were ‘unfriendly’ to *University A* did otherwise.

Generally, areas with higher levels of social economic development also have *higher requirements* for talents. This meritocracy-based high standard manifests itself on two levels, the individual and the institutional. Meritocracy at the individual level refers to the idea that those who want to be targeted selected graduates need to be equipped with some recognised cultural capital, such as party membership, student cadre experience and/or university or above level competitive awards. Amy commented:

The more developed the regions are, the more graduates want to work there and thus, the more requirements they set. Chinese first tier cities, such as Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Shenzhen, often require you to meet all the criteria (party membership, student cadre experience and university or above level awards). But in some less developed regions, such as those in western and north-eastern provinces, you will be admitted if you meet one of them, and sometimes, you can be admitted without any of them.

Graduates who did not meet these criteria often are excluded. For example, Tom wanted to work as a targeted selected graduate in Zhejiang province, an economically developed region, but he finally gave up because he neither was a Communist Party member nor had competitive awards offered by his university. He eventually went back to his hometown, Heilongjiang province, because Heilongjiang lies in the less developed areas and did not set any such requirements.

If individual based selection can be achieved by personal acquisition of cultural capital, then institutional based selection, especially geographically prejudicial treatment can be considered as discrimination. Institutional based selection refers to requirements that for the domestic graduated candidates, their degree awarding institutions must be from the Double First-class University list. The more economically developed a region is, the higher requirements it will set for graduates’ universities. For example, Shanghai, one of China’s economic centres, only opened doors for students from the C9 universities in 2019. Similar practices are observed in other higher-tier capital cities too, as Ann suggested:

Different cities of Hubei province have different requirements for the TSGPs. I only want to work in Wuhan. The quota of targeted selected graduates in Wuhan is few, perhaps only 6 to 8 places in the whole city. Thus, it sets a very high threshold. Only graduates of C9 universities have the opportunity, and the majority of them are from Tsinghua or Peking University. I turned to the selected graduate project, and this project accepts graduates from the Double-First-Class Universities.

Wuhan is the capital city of Hubei province; because of its highly developed economy, it sets high and exclusive standards for the targeted selected graduates. Compared to its high requirements, the selected graduate project allows many more students who are not from the C9 universities to apply. No matter which types of projects, both put restrictions on institutions.

Intriguingly, after carefully analysing students’ experience and the policy documents, we identify a phenomenon which indicates that institutional level selection is not entirely based on the university rankings; the Double-First-Class universities in the less developed regions, e.g. western regions, like *University A*, seem to be largely excluded in most socio-economically advanced regions.

For example, in Shanghai’s TSGPs recruitment list in 2020 and 2021, Double-First-Class universities located in western China (e.g. Northwest Agriculture and Forest Science and Technology University in Shaan’xi and Sichuan University in Sichuan province) are largely disregarded. Similar situations can be observed in other economically developed regions’ recruitment lists. Tom’s narrative testified to it:

I know that many graduates intended to look for *targeted selected graduate jobs* in some eastern coastal provinces, but our university (*University A*) is not within the lists of these provinces. Naturally these graduates are frustrated.

Bella shared a similar view:

There are a few universities which can truly be called national, and they are Peking, Tsinghua, Shanghai Jiaotong and Fudan Universities. They can be recognised everywhere you apply to. Some elite jobs, such as top financial institutions in the foreign/private sectors, only want students from these universities . . . Universities like Lanzhou University or the Northwest A&F University are basically regional universities, and they may only be recognised in the northwest. You can tell this by the annual policy of TSGPs. For example, students at Lanzhou University cannot apply for the TSGPs in Jiangsu or Shanghai.

Whether intentionally or not, the geographically prejudicial treatment prevented graduates of Double-First-Class universities in less developed regions of China from acquiring elite jobs in developed regions. These graduates' employment-seeking was made even more difficult by local protectionism (*difang baohu zhuyi*). As Xiong and Tang mentioned,

There are some local universities on the recruitment list. For example, Yanbian university³ is on Jilin province's recruitment list. Although it is not high level, it will be taken good care of.

If Zhengzhou has 30 positions, it will assign 5 quotas to students from Henan University⁴.

Graduates of *University A* experienced this local protectionism which aims to ensure employment rate of provincial-level universities and colleges. An administrator, Qian, who has been working in student employment for a decade, explained,

The reason why it is difficult for *University A's* students to get places for the targeted selected graduates' jobs is that *University A* is not their local university. Now each province has a consideration on the balance between universities run by Ministry of Education [e.g. Double First-Class Universities] and by their own. Each year, the Ministry of Education asks each college and university to issue their employment quality, and the employment rate is included. So instead of giving the quotas to other universities which are not run by their government, they are willing to give them to graduates from their locally-run universities, and thus the employment rate can be improved. By killing two birds with one stone, they not only recruit people, but ensure their own universities' employment rate.

Qian's account revealed the ecology in which provincial- and municipal-governments are keen to keep up employment rate of graduates from locally-run HEIs. From the perspectives of *University A's* graduates, having repeatedly encountered *unfriendly* job-hunting experiences for targeted selected graduate jobs, many had no choice but to return to their hometown. It is noteworthy that once they return, it is almost impossible for them to make career advancement towards working in the more developed regions under the TSGPs, unless they quit their job in their hometown and start afresh in a developed region. However, this would still disregard the experiences and seniority accumulated in their hometown. Therefore, these graduates' decision to return to their hometown and work under TSGPs can be highly consequential in shaping their subsequent career trajectories. This decision effectively pronounces their *affixation* to their respective hometowns.

Discussion and conclusion

This article investigates how regional inequalities shape the employment seeking experiences and behaviour of graduates by drawing on the case of Chinese Master's graduates. Our empirical data drawn from interviews with graduates of *University A*, located in the poorer North-western region of China, have revealed telling inequalities. We show how these graduates were situated at the intersection of three different but inter-related fields: the national economic, higher education and graduate employment fields. While their elite credentials from *University A* qualified them for these elite TSG programmes, they were disadvantaged by being excluded from TSG recruitments at economically developed regions. Importantly, we highlight that institutionalised cultural capital in

the form of academic credentials from elite HEIs does not work in a 'straightforward' manner, but it must be considered in conjunction with the geo-economic locations of their HEIs, and the regional economic dynamics.

Drawing on Bourdieu (2019, 212), the field of struggles in graduate employment can be seen as where graduates use the 'weapons', such as their institutional degrees and geographic locations, 'at their disposal to try to win a position' in the prestigious TSGPs across regions. Bourdieu suggests that in a field, 'actions motivated by conservative or subversive intentions are set in motion with the intention of preserving or transforming the balance of power' (Bourdieu 2019, 212). The local governments' attempts, e.g. their actions of favouring graduates from certain HEIs over others could be construed as their 'conservative' efforts to 'preserve the balance of power', i.e. to ensure the top HEIs' prestige get reproduced; equally, some governments' decision to prioritise graduates from local HEIs that might not be as prestigious as *University A* can be understood as 'subversive' efforts to 'transform the balance of power', i.e. as their attempt to mitigate the pre-existing inequalities of educational and economic resources in their respective provinces: provinces such as Henan and Heilongjiang have traditionally been disadvantaged by a large student population but a small number of elite universities (Hamnett, Hua, and Bingjie 2019). Such 'subversive' efforts of certain local governments should, however, not mask the discriminations exercised by local governments of economically-developed regions, such as Jiangsu and Shanghai, in deliberately excluding elite HEIs located in the less-developed western and central regions.

Crucially, all these forces work to advantage those graduates who obtain higher education degrees from institutions based in the more affluent provinces with a larger concentration of top universities, and better-quality civil service jobs: in more prosperous locations, with better pay and more career progression opportunities. In contrast, those receiving academic credentials from institutions at the poorer inland regions with few top universities are reduced to returning to their less developed hometowns to take up civil service jobs that are of lesser conditions. These graduates are thus disadvantaged due to the 'discounted' price and 'unpopularity' of their university qualifications. As such, we evidence how regional inequalities get perpetuated and exacerbated from the point of Gaokao (Hamnett, Hua, and Bingjie 2019) to graduate employment stage, in complex and nuanced ways.

Theoretically, our paper makes a key contribution in conceptualising geographic location as a form of institutionalised cultural capital (or liability) as intersected with regional economic inequalities. We call this 'geography-mediated institutionalised cultural capital'. We show that at the institutional level, universities, even elite universities, are subjected to unequal geographic 'treatments'. For elite universities located in the affluent, economically developed regions, their symbolic capital is often better recognised by local governments, e.g. Wuhan (which is a provincial city in central China) only recognises graduates with degrees from elite universities including Peking and Tsinghua which are both located in the national capital of Beijing, and not in Wuhan's local Hubei province. In contrast, despite being one of the most prestigious Double First-Class universities, *University A* is frequently excluded from local governments' civil service recruitment lists, such as Jiangsu and Shanghai in 2021. Relatedly, universities that are not as prestigious as *University A*, but are geographically located in the economically affluent areas, are often included in such government recruitment lists, thanks to local governments' keenness to ensure a high graduate employment rate of its local universities.

Based on the above, we argue that geographic locations play a pivotal role at institutional level, across the national economic, higher education and graduate employment fields. We therefore propose the notion of 'geography-mediated institutionalised cultural capital' to better capture this significant but under-theorised side of the graduate employment scene. Geographic locations of HEIs can become a form of 'positional good' and plays a leading role in positional competition. This conceptual innovation can enlighten the analysis of regional differences in other countries/multi-member states by considering which kind of official or unofficial incentives regional authorities might put forward to retain their local graduates or attract graduates from other regions, such as the cases of the UK's devolution contexts, India's unevenly developed regions and the EU's diverse labour mobility schemes across member states. It could be a fruitful exercise for future research to examine how this

notion of 'geography-mediated institutionalised cultural capital' can be employed to disentangle the complex regional and geographical structures in graduate labour markets across contexts.

Notes

1. 'In 2015, the State Council published the 'Overall Plan for Promoting the Worldwide First-class University and First-class Discipline Construction'. In September 2017, the MOE [Ministry of Education] released a selected list of universities and colleges which will participate in the country's plan of building 'worldwide first-class universities and first-class disciplines'. The plan, also known as the 'Double First-Class' plan, aims ultimately to build a number of worldwide first-class universities and disciplines by the end of 2050. There are 1243 general universities in China and 140 universities were selected for the Double First-Class plan in 2017' (Hamnett, Hua, and Bingjie 2019, 257). Among these 140 HEIs, 42 were First-Class institutions while 98 had disciplines that were considered as First-Class. Our case study site University A is one of the 42 First-Class institutions.
2. Different ranking systems have different indicators and assign them different weights; so the ranking of University A varies. For example, in the Nature Global University Rankings, it ranked 23rd, while in QS World University Rankings, it ranked 31st in China.
3. Yanbian is a university in Jilin which was not part of the 211 or 985 project, nor has it been included in the double-first-class project list.
4. Henan University is not a 211 university nor a double-first-class university, but it is the highest-ranked university in Henan Province, where the city of Zhengzhou is situated.

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Appendix

Appendix 1. Participant profiles

	Pseudonym	Gender	Hometown	Majors	Job Intention
1-1 Interview					
1	Kelly	F	R&S	Sociology	TSGP
2	David	M	R&S	Ethnology	TSGP
3	Athena	F	C	Social Work	TSGP
4	Xue	F	C	Social Work	TSGP
5	Gao	M	R&S	Computer Science	Private Sector
6	Harbary	M	LPC	Public Policy	TSGP
7	Bella	F	C	Philosophy	TSGP
8	Yani	F	R&S	Chemistry	TSGP
Focus Group 1					
1	Norman	M	R&S	Social work	TSGP
2	Xiong	M	R&S	Social work	TSGP
3	Kate	F	C	Sociology	TSGP
4	Marta	F	R&S	Sociology	TSGP
5	Tom	M	R&S	Higher Education	TSGP
6	Simon	M	C	Social work	TSGP
7	Amy	F	R&S	Social work	TSGP
8	Laura	F	C	Sociology	TSGP
9	Clive	M	R&S	Sociology	TSGP
10	Ann	F	LPC	Philosophy	TSGP
11	Meng	F	R&S	Sociology	TSGP
Focus Group 2					
1	Charles	M	LPC	Philosophy	Private
2	Nancy	F	R&S	Philosophy	Non-public
3	Jack	M	LPC	Sociology	Non-public
4	Jenny	F	R&S	Life Science	Private
5	Tang	M	C	Computer Science	Non-public
6	Zhou	M	LPC	Engineer	Self-employed

1. Gender.

M=male, F=female.

2. Hometown.

R&S=rural areas and small towns, C=counties and other cities, LPC=local provincial capital.

3. Job Intention.

TSGP= the targeted selected graduate project.