Navigating the Urban-Rural Divide: The Agency of Rural Chinese Female Higher Education Students in China

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Abstract

This dissertation explores how rural Chinese female students at urban Chinese higher education institutions conceptualize and negotiate the urban-rural divide that often interplays with gender and the discourse of quality (suzhi) to shape their lives. A substantial body of literature discusses the profound inequalities that rural Chinese people encounter due to the urban-rural divide and household registration system (Chan & Zhang, 1999; Wang & Zuo, 1999; Loong-Yu & Shan, 2007; Tang & Yang, 2008; Whyte, 2010; Han, 2010). An increasing amount of literature also addresses the experiences of rural Chinese migrant women working in urban China (Gaetano & Jacka, 2004; Jacka, 2006; Gaetano, 2004; Gaetano, 2005; Yan, 2008). However, little research has been done on rural Chinese university women. The few articles that do exist tend to blame them or their culture for their failure or struggles (Ren, 2008; Xu, 2007; Wan, 2007), or else focus on the unequal power structures that victimize them (Yu, 2006); but none of these studies incorporates the perspectives of these women. My dissertation fills the scholarly gap by focusing on the voices and perspectives of a group of rural female higher education students who talked about their experiences of negotiating multiple and intersecting power structures.

Qualitative methodology and feminist methodology informed this dissertation. To collect data, I conducted open-ended, in-depth interviews with 66 rural female students (51 undergraduates and 15 graduate students) at five public universities and one public college in northern China. This research revealed the profound inequalities that these students experienced in attaining higher education, such as urban primary
and secondary schools’ exclusion of rural students, overt and subtle forms of gender discrimination at home and school, regional discrimination reflected in higher education admission policies, and political control and punishment through the National Higher Education Entrance Examination. These had seldom been examined by previous studies.

The students that I interviewed also encountered numerous obstacles to their integration into urban campuses; they felt marginalized from mainstream urban life because the dominant culture regarded urban life and people as superior to rural life and people. Despite all these barriers, these women did not allow themselves to be defeated; instead they became active agents by developing strategies to negotiate and resist the barriers when they could. Building upon the work of Daniel G. Solorzano and Dolores Delgado Bernal (2001) and of Tara J. Yosso (2006), I define such agency that my participants exhibited as the ability to navigate the institutional barriers and social norms that constrain their conditions of existence.

Though my participants were constrained by the unequal structures of power, they were also aware of the inequalities. They responded by making decisions and devising strategies to become upwardly mobile through educational achievements. It may seem that by striving for educational success, they were merely conforming to the societal norm; but they were also in this way resisting marginalization arising from the dominant cultural capital and the discourse of quality that represents them as inferior or deficient. In response to the discourse of quality, they also exercised their agency by making meaning of their lived experiences with this discourse and/or
developing counter-discourses to negotiate it. Furthermore, when they encountered
different and sometimes contradictory forms of patriarchy across rural and urban
contexts, they expressed their agency by shifting and reformulating their identities.
NAVIGATING THE URBAN-RURAL DIVIDE: THE AGENCY OF
RURAL CHINESE FEMALE HIGHER EDUCATION STUDENTS IN CHINA

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Rural females in China are systematically discriminated against in education, denied access to high quality schools at the lower grades, and subjected to examinations that preclude critical thinking and to quota-based higher education admission procedures. Once they are in the higher education system, discrimination continues, coming from their student colleagues and professors. Yet rural women do succeed, drawing on the idea of being an independent and/or “strong woman” (女强人 nǚ qiángrén), a value largely endorsed in rural society but frowned upon by the elite culture in urban society in which the ideal Chinese woman is expected to be “weak” and submissive to men. This dissertation focuses on rural women in Chinese higher education institutions, their ideas and thoughts about their predicament and the ways in which they contended with it.

I examine the structural and cultural impediments to admission to and success in the higher education system by women defined as “rural” on the basis of their residential origin. I also look at the kinds of cultural knowledge on which these women draw—knowledge that is considered irrelevant to urban dwellers and university admission officers but essential to the success of these women struggling against the Chinese university system.

China has a long historical system of administering imperial examinations for government and elite roles that dates back to around the 7th century—examinations that gave one access to a gentry’s status of scholar-official (士 shì), which marked intellectual, political, and cultural leaders. The modern Chinese educational system continues the tradition of valuing the intellectual elite. However, the denigration of the peasant farmer is derived from the early twentieth century when intellectuals and early members of the Chinese Communist Party
portrayed Chinese peasants as “conservative,” “backward,” “feudal,” and “ignorant.” It is this history that shapes the aspirations of the modern rural women in seeking higher education, because they see that getting into a university is the only path to upward social mobility.

Nowadays, the internal residence system in China, *hukou*¹, monitors and controls the movement of people as well as their access to education and ultimately to the university. Because of *hukou* regulations, rural students cannot have equal access to city public schooling; and many city public schools only recruit students with local urban *hukou*. Even though some city schools have a limited quota for students with rural *hukou*, they require these students to achieve higher scores on the entrance exam, and/or charge them sponsorship fees. In addition, even when they live within the school district, children of rural migrant workers who have moved to the city cannot attend city public schools because their *hukou* is rural. This institutionalized discrimination prevents most students with rural *hukou* from entering urban public schools and pushes them to receive education either in rural public schools or in urban schools for children of rural migrants, which are generally not as well funded and equipped as their urban equivalents (Hannum & Wang, 2006; Han, 2010).

This discrimination continues when these students apply for universities. Each year, higher education institutions follow the guidance of the central government and assign different quotas to each region. Students who have taken the National Higher Education Entrance Examination (*gaokao*), are accepted into these institutions based on their *gaokao* scores and their regional *hukou* status. Universities and colleges tend to give more quotas to the region where they are located. However, the distribution of universities in general, and selective universities in particular, is far from equal geographically, in that the most
prestigious institutions are concentrated in major cities such as Beijing and Shanghai and southeastern coastal areas (Yang, 2007; Ma & Wang, 2015). Thus, students with hukou of major cities such as Beijing and Shanghai have more opportunities to enter prestigious universities than students with hukou of other regions. It is in this larger context that I carried out my dissertation research to explore how structural, educational, economic, and societal barriers operate in the academic and social lives of rural university women and how these women navigated these constraints.

**Studying Rural Chinese University Women**

I have had a desire to study rural Chinese university students since 2008 when I read several scholarly articles (in Chinese) about rural Chinese university students. These well-intentioned authors analyze various obstacles to urban socialization that rural university students face, but they tend to blame rural culture or rural students. Xu Xinlin (2007), for example, in his “Cultural Clash and Socialization of University Students from Rural Areas,” writes (in his English abstract):

> Because of the weak rural culture, it’s difficult for some university students from rural areas to adapt to the new cultural environment when they confront the difference between the rural culture and urban culture during their study life at university. This situation has hindered their socialization process. The way to socialize the rural students is to construct positive and harmonious campus cultural environment; improve the rural students’ quality; pay more attention to the psychological health education and provide economic aid to them in various ways. (p. 117)
Similarly, Wan Hui (2007) analyzes the psychological struggle, internal conflict, and “urban” performance of rural university students in their socialization and urbanization process. As she puts it (in Chinese, which I translated into English),

The economic situation of families of most students from rural areas is not good. They experience a sharp internal conflict when they compare with their urban equivalents from well-off families. . . . So many rural students seldom socialize with urban students so as to protect their self-esteem from getting hurt. . . . Because of financial constraints and their living habits, they do not have fashionable and cultured speech and deportment. Some rural students feel inferior and they subconsciously imitate urban students in language, behavior and dress. . . . After rounds of comparison, some students do not dare to lift their heads up and feel extremely inferior; some enclose and alienate themselves from other people; some are very sensitive and are afraid that they will be looked down upon; some put all their time and effort into studying and competing with urban students in educational performance. In studying [to pursue educational excellence] is where their hope lies. If they could not get good scores, they would feel that they do not have any value and thus lose hope in life. (p. 338)

These articles caused my heart to ache, partly because of my personal identity as a rural university student and partly because of my scholarly identity, which is based on striving for equity and social justice. I was born and grew up in a rural village in northern China and, from 1996 to 2000, received higher education at Hebei University—an urban university in China. On the Hebei University campus, I experienced marginalization, which made me feel
out of place in contexts where urban students dominated. I wondered whether there was something wrong with me and whether it was my fault that I did not have as much "knowledge" as my urban roommates and classmates.

While I was studying at Hebei University, I lived in a dorm where all five of my roommates were from cities and I was the only one from the countryside. A lot of times, when my roommates were talking to each other about novels, fashion, computer games, and traveling to other cities and even abroad, I could not participate. Neither could I find a way to ask because I did not know the terms to use. Thus, I felt alienated in my own dorm.

Throughout four years of undergraduate study, I felt sad, lonely, and frustrated. Even many years after I graduated from Hebei University, I could not make sense of what I experienced until I had the chance to do my master’s study in the United States, after five years in the workforce in China. I read Bourdieu’s work on cultural capital, Foucault’s theory of power, and feminists’ and critical race theorists’ theories about agency and resistance. Through reading this body of scholarship, I developed a sociological perspective from which to examine my lived experience when I studied at Hebei University. I came to know that it was not my fault, but rather it was unequal urban-rural power relations and an unjust social system that constructed social life to exclude me from my roommates’ conversation.

When I reread Xu’s and Wan’s articles, through this developing critical consciousness, I realized that they not only blame rural students for the fault of the system (and in so doing they conceal the unfair system and keep it in place), but they also silence rural university students’ voices and overgeneralize these students’ diverse experiences. Thus, I committed to conducting research that would emphasize rural Chinese university students’ voices and their
diverse experiences.

As my graduate studies went on and I read more scholarly work, I narrowed my focus to rural female students for two main reasons. The first reason is that patriarchy is deeply rooted in rural China and, often, as it intersects with socioeconomic factors, it tends to present more barriers for rural girls than for rural boys in their educational journeys (Hannum, 2005; Li, 2005). In addition, due to the urban-rural divide, “there are major inequalities and differences in lifestyles and values, especially those relating to gender and sexuality, between rural and urban China” (Jacka, 2006, p. 8). By highlighting rural university women’s educational and social experiences, I hope that my research can foster an awareness of the intersectional inequalities of gender and the urban-rural divide and inform attempts to challenge these inequalities.

The second reason that I chose to study rural female university students is that so few studies have been done about the lived experiences of this group. The few articles in Chinese on this group focus on their difficulties in the job market. Like Xu’s and Wan’s articles mentioned above, they tend to blame these students. Ren Xueli (2008), for example, gives four reasons for the adversity that rural university women face in trying to obtain professional jobs after graduation. The first reason, as Ren describes which I translated into English, is that those students “are relatively weaker in interpersonal communication and self-advocacy, which leads to their limited sources of information” (p. 197). The second reason is that they “lack social networks and economic backgrounds” (p. 197). The third reason is that “their comprehensive abilities in foreign language and practical skills are low” (p. 198). The fourth reason is that “some rural female students have impractically high expectations of their
employment” because of their “subconscious self-conceit” as “excellent beings” among their peers in rural areas, so they cannot find employment that fits their expectations (p. 198).

While some Chinese scholars try to touch upon the unequal power structures of Chinese society that marginalize rural university women, they fail to consider the perspectives of these women and tend to ignore their voices. Yu Hongping (2006), for example, analyzes gender and class discrimination in Chinese job markets. As he states, “Under the influence of traditional culture and the cultural norm of ‘females inferior to males’ as well as the utilitarian thought that hiring women costs more, it is not uncommon to see that a lot of positions are limited to recruit males only” (p. 26). He also analyzes the classism that rural female students encounter when they seek jobs in urban areas because many urban employers require the candidates to have native-city hukou, or household registration status. He also contends that because rural women generally have no social connections in urban areas, they cannot access some employment opportunities. Thus, Yu recognizes the gender and class inequalities in Chinese job markets that discriminate against rural university women. Yet, regrettably, he does not take into account the perspectives of rural university women themselves.

The above Chinese scholars neglect the perspectives and voices of rural university women. Indeed, their lives are severely under studied and are in urgent need of empirical research. By focusing on rural female students’ perspectives, I hope to make their experiences and voices central to my research since they have been silenced or marginalized in scholarly discourses. Tian Di, a junior majoring in English at Elite National University 1, one of the most elite universities in China, commented that my research is very meaningful particularly
because at her university rural students only make up about 10 percent of the student population, despite the fact that rural people make up the majority of the Chinese population. According to her, rural female university students have never been focused on. She expressed her strong hope that society will give its attention to this group of students, and that the government will give some preferential treatment to them; yet the reality, as she recognized, is that they not only receive no preferential treatment, but “the standards have been raised higher for us” (Second Interview with Tian, 07/29/2011). She had to achieve a much higher score on the entrance exam than urban students to get into a city high school, simply because her hukou was rural.

Shaoshi Fang, a sophomore at Non-Elite National University 1, also remarked on the importance of giving attention to rural female students. She used herself as an example and hoped that I could write from her experiences to break down social stereotypes that perceive rural students as less capable than urban students. As she said, “I hope that you can write something from my experiences to tell people what rural children are like so they can give us more attention. I hope that your research can bring more attention to the group of rural female university students because being rural doesn’t mean that my capacity is worse than that of urban students” (Second Interview with Shaoshi, 09/23/2011).

Both Tian and Shaoshi hoped that rural female university students would be given due attention. Tian suggested that schools and institutions should eradicate obstacles that prevent rural students from getting education equal to that of urban students. Shaoshi advocated revealing the unequal distribution of educational resources between rural and urban areas and challenged the deficit discourses about rural students. As she emphasized, “I hope that society
can know this [that rural students are not necessarily less capable than urban students].” This demonstrates their desires to want their voices to be heard by society. I hope that this research can provide a platform for my participants to voice their diverse perspectives and serve as a medium to call for social and scholarly attention to rural female students’ lives, so that positive changes can be made for social justice.

**Theorizing the Experiences of Rural University Women**

Rural female students in my study were oppressed by multiple power systems, but they exercised their agency to identify, accommodate, and resist the inequalities, with the support of familial and social capital.

**Oppression, Double Bind, and Structural Violence**

Marilyn Frye (1983) wrote an insightful article, titled “Oppression,” to illustrate what constitutes oppression in modern society. She defines oppression as “an enclosing structure of forces and barriers which tends to the immobilization and reduction of a group or category of people” (pp. 10-11). According to Frye, oppression has three main characteristics. The first characteristic is that it involves a system. The second characteristic is that the targets or victims of oppression are members of a social group. The third characteristic is that oppression differs from suffering. One can suffer without being oppressed, but people who are oppressed must suffer. Below I elaborate on these three characteristics.

Frye (1983) states that oppression involves being caught “between or among forces and barriers which are so related to each other that jointly” they confine the victims’ mobility (p. 2). Hence oppression is perpetrated through a network of systematically related barriers that immobilize victims. She uses “double bind” as a metaphor to illustrate this type of immobility.
She defines “double bind” as “situations in which options are reduced to a very few and all of them expose one to penalty, censure or deprivation” (p. 2). People in such a double bind cannot win, and they are constantly punished by “systematically related pressures” (p. 3).

Frye compares the “double bind” to a “birdcage” in that “the bird is surrounded by a network of systematically related barriers, not one of which would be the least hindrance to its flight, but which, by their relations to each other, are as confining as the solid walls of a dungeon” (p. 5). She illustrates that the reason why the oppressive structure—the birdcage—is hard to see and recognize by people living in it or by people who are studying it microscopically is that they only look at the individual wires without seeing the whole cage—the whole structure or system of related barriers. Thus, she suggests we look at situations macroscopically, that is, to focus on a “view of the whole cage” (Frye, 1983, p. 5).

The second characteristic of oppression, according to Frye (1983), is that the “‘inhabitant’ of the ‘cage’ is not an individual but a group, all those of a certain category” (p. 8). She explains:

If an individual is oppressed, it is in virtue of being a member of a group or category of people that is systematically reduced, molded, immobilized. Thus, to recognize a person as oppressed, one has to see that individual as belonging to a group of a certain sort. (Frye, 1983, p. 8)

Thus, the occupants of the birdcage are not just individuals but members of subordinated groups. The individuals living within the birdcage are not oppressed as individuals, but they are oppressed as members of a social group or category that they are thrown into by social forces and cannot voluntarily choose by themselves. As Frye (1983)
sharply points out,

When you ask why you are being blocked, why this barrier is in your path, the answer has not to do with individual talent or merit, handicap or failure; it has to do with your membership in some category understood as a “natural” or “physical” category. (pp. 7-8)

Frye (1983) distinguishes oppression from suffering in that one who suffers is not necessarily oppressed and one who is oppressed must suffer regardless of whether she or he recognizes the oppression. Oppressors themselves may suffer due to physical or emotional hurt, but that does not mean that they are oppressed, for two reasons: first, there is no system that immobilizes the oppressors; and, second, the oppressors do not suffer as a group but only as individuals.

Sometimes people who are oppressed do not realize it; they may even deny that they are oppressed because they hold the traditional view that oppression must involve a cruel or unjust exercise of authority, power, or tyranny. As Iris Marion Young (1990) states,

In its traditional usage, oppression means the exercise of tyranny by a ruling group. . . . Oppression also traditionally carries a strong connotation of conquest and colonial domination. . . . New left social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, however, shifted the meaning of the concept of oppression. In its new usage, oppression designates the disadvantage and injustice some people suffer not because a tyrannical power coerces them, but because of the everyday practices of a well-intentioned liberal society. In this new left usage, the tyranny of a ruling group over another . . . must certainly be called oppressive. But oppression also refers to
systemic constraints on groups that are not necessarily the result of the intentions of a tyrant. Oppression in this sense is structural, rather than the result of a few people’s choices or policies. Its causes are embedded in unquestioned norms, habits, and symbols, in the assumptions underlying institutional rules and the collective consequences of following those rules. . . . In this extended structural sense oppression refers to the vast and deep injustices some groups suffer as a consequence of often unconscious assumptions and reactions of well-meaning people in ordinary interactions, media, and cultural stereotypes, and structural features of bureaucratic hierarchies and market mechanisms—in short, the normal practices of everyday life. (p. 41)

Thus, according to Young, the structural concept of oppression not only includes tyranny and injustice exercised by the ruling group upon the ruled, but more importantly, it refers to the normative assumptions, discourses, and practices in our daily life.

Paul Farmer (2003) calls this oppression structural violence. In his book *Pathologies of Power: Health, Human Rights, and the New War on the Poor*, he “draws on social theory—and even liberation theology—to reintroduce the concept of structural violence and to link it to the acute violence of war crimes and systemic assaults against human rights” (Farmer, 2003, p. 20). The violations of human rights caused by structural violence, as stated by Robert S. Lawrence (2003), President of Physicians for Human Rights and Professor of Preventive Medicine at John Hopkins University, involve not only those “perpetrated by those who torture, murder, or imprison without due process,” but also “the denial of economic opportunity, decent housing, or access to health care and education” (Lawrence,
quoted in Farmer, 2003, Promo Page). According to Farmer, structural violence determines that the people who are most likely to be punished, who are most likely to be deprived of human rights, whose voices are most likely to be silenced, and whose agency gets most constrained, are always those living at the bottom of society, socially and economically.

In my dissertation, I apply Frye’s notion of the double bind, Young’s structural concept of oppression, and Farmer’s concept of structural violence to understand and analyze how the multiple barriers of the urban-rural divide, the household registration system of hukou, and the education examination and admission systems combine to perpetrate oppression upon rural female students.

The Urban-rural divide in China. The urban-rural divide stems from the Chinese government’s urban-centered policies that prioritize industrialization and urbanization at the expense of rural development, and from hukou, which regulates the urban-rural divide. During the 1950s and the 1960s, after the People’s Republic of China was established in 1949, the Chinese central government promoted heavy-industry development by means of using rural resources, including land, human, and economic capital, to support urban capital accumulation. As a result, before 1978 when the reform and open-up policy was implemented, “capital goods were excessively concentrated in urban areas” (Yang, 1999, p. 308), and rural residents’ incomes lagged far behind those of their urban equivalents. During the late 1990s, the central government funded health care and housing for urban people but not for rural residents (Wang & Zuo, 1999). This further aggravated the urban-rural inequality.

Along with urban-biased policies, the Chinese government enforced a residence system colloquially called hukou (commonly translated as household registration) to regulate the
urban-rural divide at the end of the 1950s. The *hukou* system, widely known as a “domestic passport system,” is regulated by the *hukou* booklet (*hukou bo*), which indicates the rural and urban status of its holder. According to Kam Wing Chan and Li Zhang (1999), the *hukou* system was first set up in cities in 1951 and extended to rural areas in 1955. In the early years of the system, it served largely as a mechanism for monitoring, not controlling, population migration and movements. But as the state saw floods of peasants moving into cities looking for jobs in the late 1950s, it promulgated *hukou* legislation to control these citizens’ “geographical mobility through a system of migration permits and recruitment and enrollment certificates” (Chan & Zhang, 1999, p. 820). This legislation was the foundation for the current *hukou* system. Despite some slight modifications made by the Chinese government, which I will discuss in Chapter 2, the system continues to this day. As such, the urban-rural divide is sustained by the *hukou* system.

The *hukou* system strictly circumscribes the lives of rural Chinese students. It prevents them from entering city public schools, with a few exceptions made for those who earn much higher scores on the entrance exam and/or pay higher fees than students with native-city *hukou*. Thus, rural Chinese students face systematic barriers to obtaining urban public education.

**Chinese National Higher Education Entrance Examination—gaokao.** In China, the precollege educational system is test-oriented and almost all Chinese high school students have to take the National Higher Education Entrance Examination—*gaokao*—in order to enroll in universities or colleges. *Gaokao*, mainly involving multiple choice and essay questions, is a standardized test for higher education institutions to select students for
admission. The exam usually takes place during June each year, and it includes common components of Chinese, math, and English for both science- and art-track students. In addition to the three common components, for science-track students, there is a comprehensive exam in science subjects, including physics, chemistry, and biology; for art-track students, there is a comprehensive exam in humanities subjects, including history, political science, and geography.

The student with the highest *gaokao* score in his or her province is guaranteed a place in the most prestigious university in China. Each year, universities in each region, following guidelines from the central government promulgated through the Ministry of Education, “assign admission quotas to each geographic area at the level of province, municipality or autonomous region” (Ma & Wang, 2015, p. 5). “Although higher education admission is contingent upon quotas assigned to each region/province, each region resorts to *gaokao* scores to select students. Thus, *gaokao* is one of the most significant life events in almost every Chinese student’s life” (Ma & Wang, 2015, pp. 7–8). The critical role of this exam has led most elementary and secondary schools in China to be test-oriented. Schools teach students to think of education as equal to testing, and learning as equal to preparing for exams.

This test-oriented educational system regulates students’ thinking in that it discourages them from challenging and critiquing unfair systems in society. As some of my participants noted, to get access to higher education students must repress their critical thinking so that they can survive the test-oriented education and pass *gaokao*.

The higher education admission system is another unfair wire of the birdcage that
intersects with other wires to oppress rural Chinese students. Each year, universities and colleges follow the admission quotas assigned by the central government to recruit students based on their *gaokao* scores and their *hukou* (Ma & Wang, 2015). These institutions give a higher quota to the region where they are located. Yet particularly prestigious universities are not distributed equally in each province or region; most are concentrated in big cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and the southeastern coastal regions (Yang, 2007; Ma & Wang, 2015). Therefore, students with *hukou* from major cities such as Beijing, Tianjin, and Shanghai have a greater chance of entering a prestigious university than students with *hukou* from predominantly rural provinces or regions.

In an article that Yingyi Ma and I (2015) co-authored, we present a table, attached as Appendix D, which lists the admission information of Tsinghua University—one of the most elite universities in China. This table shows that in 2011, Tsinghua University admitted 339 students from Beijing, where the total number of students who took *gaokao* was 70,800. Yet it only recruited 135 and 99 students, respectively, from Henan and Guangdong, even though students who took *gaokao* in these two provinces constituted the largest groups, 855,400 and 655,000 students, respectively. This means that in 2011, Tsinghua University’s admission rate for students in Beijing was almost 30 times higher than that in Henan, and 32 times higher than that in Guangdong. The higher education admission system discriminates especially against those students from the most populous provinces or regions who aspire to gain entrance into elite universities.

It is worth mentioning that, since the early 2000s, influenced by the Western notion of a “well-rounded” education, the Chinese government has been reforming higher education
admission practices so that they do not depend solely on the standardized test of *gaokao*. Independent Admission is a major reform adopted by several elite Chinese universities, such as Tsinghua University and Peking University, in order to select more well-rounded applicants. These universities assign quotas to top provincial or municipal high schools, which then select students to take the Independent Admission exams designed by these universities and attend on-site interviews. The Independent Admission is not intended to replace *gaokao*, but is an addition to it. In other words, students who pass the Independent Admission exams and on-site interviews of a specific university still need to take *gaokao*, but the credits that they earn from the Independent Admission exam will be added to their *gaokao* scores when they apply to that university.

This reform tends to further privilege urban students and disadvantage rural students for two related reasons. The first reason is that most rural students cannot attend top provincial or municipal high schools because of their *hukou* or socioeconomic status, so they cannot be included in the quotas to attend the Independent Admission in the first place. For the overwhelming majority of rural students, *gaokao* remains their only way to get into higher education. The second reason is that even though some lucky few rural students can attend the Independent Admission, they are at a disadvantage compared with their urban equivalents because the Independent Admission exams and on-site interviews evaluate students’ social and communication skills such as public speaking, making presentations, interviewing, artistic skills such as making music and painting, and exhibiting knowledge of history and culture that are beyond the regular curriculum in Chinese high schools (Yang, 2007; Ma & Wang, 2015). “Students in major cities and from well-to-do families are more
likely to have exposure and opportunity to foster their presentation and social skills than students from rural and poor families” (Ma & Wang, 2015, p. 12). My participants agreed with the consensus that the reform disadvantages rural students because they have little opportunity to cultivate these special skills and knowledge. As Linchu Ze put it,

We rural students do not have the chances to foster our abilities in music or fine arts.

So [the Independent Admission] will naturally disadvantage us and exclude us from the competition. I think it will benefit urban students, or students from well-to-do families. Our dream to change our destinies through gaokao would be diminished with this reform. I think the reform that emphasizes well-roundedness will create a vicious cycle and widen the urban-rural disparity. (First Interview with Linchu, 08/17/2011)

From Linchu’s perspective, the reform emphasizing the selection of well-rounded individuals tends to diminish rural students’ life-changing chances of getting through gaokao, because gaokao evaluates students based solely on their test scores.

Thus, in China the barriers of the urban-rural divide, hukou, gaokao, test-oriented education, and higher education admission policies and reform are joined to form a birdcage to trap rural Chinese students within. The oppression that these students have been experiencing is pervasive and reproductive. It permeates their everyday life and is “systematically reproduced in major economic, political and cultural institutions” (Young, 1999, p. 41). The following section will discuss how oppression gets reproduced.

Reproduction Theory, Cultural Capital, and Alternate Forms of Capital

Social reproduction theory, originated by Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis (1976),
argues that public schools represent the interests of dominant groups in society and reproduce the “current inequities of our social, political, and economic system” (Ferguson, 2001, p. 50). Specifically, schools function to reproduce “the dominant ideology, its forms of knowledge, and the distribution of skills needed to reproduce the social division of labor” (Giroux, 1983b, p. 257). According to Henry A. Giroux (1983b), reproduction theory maintains that schools’ reproduction takes three forms: reproducing the hierarchical order of society; reproducing the culture of the dominant class; and reproducing the state’s power and ideologies. As he states,

In effect, schools were portrayed as reproductive in three senses. First, schools provided different classes and social groups with the knowledge and skills they needed to occupy their respective places in a labor force stratified by class, race, and gender. Second, schools were seen as reproductive in the cultural sense, functioning in part to distribute and legitimate forms of knowledge, values, language, and modes of style that constitute the dominant culture and its interests. Third, schools were viewed as part of a state apparatus that produced and legitimated the economic and ideological imperatives that underline the state’s political power. (Giroux, 1983b, p. 258)

Bowles and Gintis (1976) put forward the “correspondence principle” (p. 131), or what Giroux (1983b) calls “correspondence theory,” to analyze the relationship between schools and society. Giroux (1983b) states that “correspondence theory posits that hierarchically structured patterns of values, norms, and skills characterize both the workplace and the dynamics of the daily classroom encounter. Through its classroom social relations, schooling functions to inculcate students with the attitudes and dispositions necessary to accept the
social and economic imperatives of a capitalist economy” (p. 262).

Social reproduction theory also contends that schools reproduce social inequalities through what Giroux (2001) calls the “hidden curriculum”—“those unstated norms, values, and beliefs embedded in and transmitted to students through the underlying rules that structure the routines and social relationships in school and classroom life” (p. 47).

Pierre Bourdieu, as Ann A. Ferguson (2001) states, also espouses cultural reproduction theory. Bourdieu (1977) coins the term “cultural capital” to refer to the “set of actual usable resources and powers—economic, cultural and social—that distinguish the major classes of the conditions of existence” (p. 114). He maintains that schools reproduce those resources and powers of the dominant class through “symbolic violence”—by imposing the dominant class views, standards, and cultural norms as superior (Ferguson, 2001, pp. 50-51).

Bourdieu (1977) also argues that individuals of different social classes are socialized differently. This socialization, as Annette Lareau (2003) notes, “provides children, and later adults, with a sense of what is comfortable or what is natural” (p. 275). Bourdieu (1977) names this sense of what is comfortable or what is natural “habitus,” that is, “a system of lasting, transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations and actions and makes possible the achievement of infinitely diversified tasks” (pp. 82-83). In formal education, habitus influences students’ inclination to pursue academic achievements (Bourdieu, 1977; Dumais, 2002). In her research on the social and educational experiences of black female undergraduates, Cerri A. Banks (2009) applies cultural capital theory to analyze how “academic success is connected to cultural capital in that cultural capital operates in the same
way as economic capital; both have ‘exchange value’” (p. 15). Citing Perry, she further argues that cultural capital is an inherited asset that facilitates educational achievements as the school system is dominated by and transmits the dominant culture, lifestyle, and practice.

The social reproduction school of thought sheds light on how schools transmit and reproduce knowledge that “legitimates the interests and values of the dominant classes” through its hegemonic curriculum, including both the formal academic curriculum and the hidden curriculum, while “marginalizing or disconfirming other kinds of knowledge” (Giroux, 1983b, p. 268). The rural female Chinese students whom I interviewed expressed that their knowledge and culture were marginalized or ignored by the dominant culture and standardized knowledge of schools in China, which legitimate and privilege the experiences, values, and lifestyles of urban people.

I also acknowledge that social reproduction theory is limited in that it does not take human agency into account; it is too “deterministic” in that its overemphasis on the analysis of social structures leaves little space to account for how human beings make decisions, choices, and/or changes in their own existence (Giroux, 1983b). From a social reproduction perspective, “power becomes the property of dominant groups and operates to reproduce class, gender, and racial inequalities that function in the interests of the accumulation and expansion of capital” (Giroux, 1985, p. 262). However, my participants’ stories challenged this view of social reproduction in that they used their agency to recognize how schooling enabled them to accumulate capital; therefore, they strived hard to achieve educational success, and many also aspired to get into graduate schools. In this way, although they appeared to conform to the social reproduction norm, they actually disrupted this
reproduction cycle by navigating the educational pipeline to move upward on the social and cultural ladder.

Although Bourdieu’s framework of habitus allows for human agency, his emphasis on habitus as dispositions reproducing “meanings,” “practices,” and the “existing system of inequalities,” as Laura M. Ahearn (2001) points out, gives “insufficient attention to the question of how any habitus . . . can produce actions that fundamentally change” the structure, and thus “leaves little room for resistance or social change” (pp. 118-119). Thus, Bourdieu “faces the dilemma of explaining how social reproduction becomes social transformation (Sewell 1992)” (Ahearn, 2001, p. 118). Some participants in my study intended to bring about social transformation by giving back to their rural communities the resources and information that they had accumulated. They also mobilized their rural community cultures and knowledges to challenge the dominant culture in the educational system. Thus, while I draw upon social reproduction theory to analyze how public education in China reproduces social hierarchy, I also move beyond it and consider my participants as agents of social transformation.

Bourdieu’s cultural capital theory has also been critiqued. Giroux (1983a), for example, argues that if individuals are simply the products of a cultural-capital power structure, there can be no answer to the crucial question of who can resist domination; further, it becomes difficult to explain why and how domination ought to be resisted. Lareau (2003) also contends that Bourdieu’s work only focuses on “the possession of capital” by the dominant social class but ignores “the activation of capital” by the dominated (p. 277). Prudence L. Carter (2003) critiques the sole emphasis on the dominant cultural capital and suggests
raising “a critical awareness of the value of non-dominant cultural resources within low-income racial and ethnic minority communities” (pp. 151-152). Solorzano and Villalpando (1998) suggest deconstructing the norm of cultural capital and propose the concept of “resistant cultural capital within the context of higher education” (p. 215) to reconceptualize the location of students of color “as a place to draw strength” and develop “critical navigational strategies to succeed” (p. 220). Applying the above critical analysis of Bourdieu’s work to her research on Black women undergraduates in the United States, Banks (2009) states that “Bourdieu’s focus on high culture as most socially valuable” renders the subordinated culture, that is, Black culture, “less powerful or less desirable than those of the dominant culture” (p. 15). This theory, when applied to Black women, focuses only on their own deficiencies (e.g., academic under-preparedness) or the deficiencies of their culture. As a result, it reinforces the deficit representation of the socially marginalized. Banks suggests reworking the discourse of cultural capital to the extent that it “must include the voices and perspectives of black women undergraduates” (p. 142) through the lens of sociological imagination, a concept developed by Mills (1959). Black women undergraduates can “develop and use a sociological imagination, which becomes [an alternate, in Bank’s term] form of cultural capital” that they “utilize to navigate success in higher education” (Banks, 2009, p. 43).

Tara J. Yosso (2005) moves the critique further to address the racism embedded in the traditional concept of cultural capital, in which the dominant communities are considered “culturally wealthy while others are culturally poor” (p. 76). This assertion classifies the White middle-class culture as the standard, the norm by which to judge all other cultures. She
proposes applying critical race theory (CRT), which acknowledges that there are “forms of cultural capital that marginalized groups bring to the table that traditional cultural capital theory does not recognize or value” (pp. 76-77). This CRT lens shifts the focus of traditional cultural capital “from notions of White, middle class culture to the cultures of communities of color” and recognizes alternate forms of capital that communities of color nurture such as “aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, and resistant capital” (p. 77).

Yosso (2006) reports on the work of Paula Guevara, a Chicana graduate student, who together with a parents’ group from an elementary school in the southwestern U.S. worked out the definitions of these various forms of capital. Aspirational capital refers to “the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future even in the face of barriers” (p. 41); navigational capital refers to the ability to develop resilience or academic invulnerability and “skills of maneuvering through social institutions” (p. 44), often with the support of individuals, families, and communities; linguistic capital refers to “those intellectual and social skills learned through communication experiences in more than one language and/or style” (p. 43); social capital refers to the social networks that Chicanas/os utilize “to maneuver through the system, but they also turn around and give the information and resources they gained through the navigation process back to their social networks” (p. 45); familial capital refers to “cultural knowledges nurtured among familia (kin) that carry a sense of community history, memory, and cultural intuition” (p. 48); resistant capital refers to “those knowledges and skills cultivated through behavior that challenges inequality” (p. 49).

Yosso’s (2006) concepts of navigational, familial, and social capital have helped inform my analysis of the stories that my participants shared about how they navigated institutional
barriers to gain access to higher education. Despite the *hukou* system and urban-rural socioeconomic inequalities that deprived them of equal learning opportunities with their urban equivalents, my participants, with the support of their families and communities, utilized navigational capital to maneuver through the educational system successfully. Chapter 4 will discuss this in detail.

In this section, I discussed how social reproduction theory and cultural capital theory inform my analysis of how schools reproduce the social hierarchy, dominant culture, and norms. I also pointed out that these theories are limited in that they ignore the agency and capital of the marginalized groups. Drawing upon Yosso (2005; 2006), I explained how navigational, familial, and social capital have enlightened my understanding of my participants’ experiences of navigating institutional barriers to gain access to higher education.

**Critical Literacy Theory**

Critical literacy theory was developed by Paulo Freire (1993) as “an ‘instrument’ in a political struggle, a critical space in which students become conscious of their rights and responsibilities and learn to be active citizens who advocate for their rights” (Bartlett, 2010, p. 68). Freire (1993) denounces “banking education” for stuffing students with knowledge and treating them as “docile listeners” (p. 62) or passive “containers” (p. 53). This type of education objectifies students to “patiently receive, memorize, and repeat” (Freire, 1993, p. 53) and discourages their critical thinking. By doing so, it “attempts to control thinking and action, leads women and men to adjust to the world, and inhibits their creative power” (Freire, 1993, p. 58). Ultimately, banking education serves to maintain the oppressive structure or
society, specifically “the interests of the oppressors, who care neither to have the world revealed nor to see it transformed” (Freire, 1993, p. 54).

Freire (1993) proposes a critical literacy approach: treating students as “critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher” (p. 62). This approach, as Bartlett (2010) cogently contends, aims to constantly unveil reality, “wake [students] up to the necessity of knowledge,” and “move people beyond false consciousness and toward a recognition of their oppression and need for collective action” (Bartlett, 2010, p. 86).

Freire’s (1993) critique of banking education informs my analysis of how the test-oriented educational system in China, as seven participants reflected in Chapter 4, silences and oppresses students through inhibiting their independent and critical thinking. The theory of critical literacy enlightens my “understanding of how the wider conditions of the state and society produce, negotiate, transform, and bear down on the conditions of teaching so as to either enable or disable teachers from acting in a critical and transformative way” (Giroux, 1987, pp. 14-15). As participants Xianzhi and Chen reflected, their high school teachers realized that the test-oriented education repressed students’ creativity, but they had to teach students to follow the rules and sometimes told them to write their critical thoughts only outside formal tests. This means that these teachers were aware of the “conditions of the state and society” that prevented them from teaching students “in a critical and transformative way.” Yet they were forced to “produce, sustain, and legitimate meaning and experience in classrooms” (Giroux, 1987, p. 14). Still, they also educated students about the oppressive reality. Thus, this theory includes not only the empowerment of students, but also teachers, who may engage in critical interactive dialogues with their students as a way to liberate
themselves and the students.

**Power, Knowledge, and Discourses**

Postmodern theories of power are illuminated by Foucault’s (1988) “genealogy of the present”: how the power that functions in modern societies came to be. His “genealogy of modern power” challenges the traditional belief that power is essentially negative and repressive by insisting that modern power is “provocative” and “productive” in that it “stimulates, excites and incites knowledge” (Keenan, 1997, p. 149) and produces subjects through discourses.

Foucault (1977) pinpoints the relationship between power and knowledge. As he states, We must admit . . . that power produces knowledge; that power and knowledge directly imply or implicate one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time, power relations. These are “power-knowledge” relations. (Foucault, 1977, p. 27)

Thus, power and knowledge depend on each other for existence and they are inseparable from each other: “knowledge is produced on the basis of power, while power needs knowledge to be exercised” (Peillon, 2001, p. 6). “Each presupposes the other: no knowledge without power, no power without knowledge” (Keenan, 1997, p. 149). As Alcoff (2001) explains in support of Foucault, “Power and knowledge form a dyad. . . . Politics is always involved in knowledge—even in truth. . . . All knowledge is connected to power. . . . Power and knowledge are co-constitutive” (p. 839).

Foucault (1978) claims that it is within discourses that “power and knowledge are
joined together” and “come to articulate themselves” (pp. 100-101). “He identified discourses as historically variable ways of specifying knowledge and truth—what it is possible to speak of at a given moment” (Ramazanoglu, 1993, p. 19). So discourses serve as variable vehicles for specific forms of knowledge and truth to be expressed and understood at specific historical moments. Besides, power is constituted in discourses and it is in discourses that power lies (Ramazanoglu, 1993, p. 19). Subjects are created in and through discourses and discursive practices (Ramazanoglu, 1993, p. 16). The modern regimes of power as constituted within discourses operate to produce individuals as subjects who are both the objects and vehicles of power. As Foucault (1977) states, “Discipline ‘makes’ individuals; it is the specific technique of a power that regards individuals both as objects and as instruments of its exercise” (p. 170).

Foucault (1978) also maintains that discourse is interwoven with power and knowledge to constitute the oppression of those “others” in the society, serving to marginalize and silence them. In The History of Sexuality (Vol. I), he uses “homosexuality” as a typical example to explain how hegemonic discourses on sexuality, that is, heterosexuality, perpetrate and naturalize social norms upon bodies and render certain behaviors or practices “abnormal” or “perverse.” As Stephanie Jenkins (2002) explains, because homosexual behavior is unintelligible within the prevailing heterosexual discourse, homosexuals are believed and said to have unnatural, inhuman desires (p. 12). Hence discourses define what is normal and what is not normal and by doing so, they shape, regulate, and subjugate individual bodies.

Discourses not only discipline and subject human bodies, but they can also serve as a
form of resistance when they oppose dominant knowledge and truth and challenge the old power regimes. These kinds of discourses, according to Foucault, are “counter discourses” or “reverse discourses.” Those counter or reverse discourses “produce new knowledge, speak new truths, and so constitute new powers” (Ramazanoglu, 1993, p. 23). In The History of Sexuality (Vol. I), Foucault (1978) gives discourse of homosexuality as an example of a reverse discourse. According to him, the idea of the “truth” of homosexuality appears as a discourse, which begins to speak in its own behalf, and claims homosexuality as natural (Foucault, 1978, p. 101). By doing so, it constitutes a new form of “self,” or subjectivity, and produces a new form of power/knowledge, which purports to transform heterosexual power relations.

To sum up, in Foucault’s view, modern power is generally productive rather than repressive in that it produces subjects and knowledge. People are social selves, and these social selves are not essentially fixed, but historically variable and socially constructed. They are constituted as subjects by power-knowledge regimes within discourses, and “(whether knowingly or not) contribute themselves to the process of turning themselves into particular kinds of subjects” (Ramazanoglu, 1993, p. 24).

Foucault’s theories of power, knowledge, and discourses have helped me analyze the operation of power in the rural-urban dichotomized Chinese society, particularly how subjects are constituted through the discourse of quality (suzhi) in schools and universities. Since the 1980s when China started implementing its reform and open-up policies, the Chinese state has constructed the discourse of quality by ascribing China’s poverty and backwardness to the low quality of its population, said to hinder China’s attempts to catch up
with the more advanced Western economies (Anagnost, 2004; Gaetano, 2004, p. 41).

According to Rachel Murphy (2004), in schools throughout China, the all-embracing discourse of *suzhi* is put to work in ways that help the state implement policies such as accelerating demographic transition, transforming the huge population burden into effective productivity, and professionalizing labor markets.

Subsequent to the industrialization, urbanization, and modernization starting from the late 1970s in China, rural cultures and ways of life have been regarded as backward. Rural people, as a consequence, have been labeled as backward, uncivilized, and above all, low quality. As Murphy (2004) states, “Chinese policy documents state that national modernization depends on accelerating quantity-quality transition in the countryside because a large low-quality rural populace hinders progression from tradition, poverty and agrarianism to modernity, prosperity and industrialization” (p. 3). Rural students, as the children of the rural population, are thus the main targets of the *suzhi* policy and discourses. To fulfill this task of improving the “quality” of the rural population, schools are given a pivotal role in “civilizing” these children in accordance with the urban-centered state policies and regulations. Those “civilizing” and urbanizing practices in the form of policies, regulations, and other official discourses of *suzhi* constitute technologies of domination.

It is not only “official” discourses, but also “unofficial” discourses that permeate everyday lives so as to normalize rural students in accordance with the urban-centered *suzhi* discourses. As Murphy (2004) states, “Because *suzhi* touches on all aspects of life in China, state objectives are infused into the ways that people conduct their everyday lives” (p. 5). Rural parents “want their children to avoid farming because of its association with hardship
and low suzhi” (Murphy 2004, p. 16), so they expect and motivate their children to leave rural areas through educational advancement. Thus, the powerful discourse of suzhi shapes rural students’ educational trajectory as well as their motivations and aspirations. It both enables them to get educational mobility and at the same time constrains them, as through everyday practices, urban citizens impose their suzhi standards upon rural people—they believe that their children receive better childhood education and more educational investment—thus they think of themselves as having higher ability and value than rural people.

My research findings show that rural female students have been systematically marginalized, stereotyped, and discriminated against due to the discourse of quality in intersection with that of the urban-rural divide and gender. Being aware of this, they developed counter-discourses to make meaning of their plight, and created alternative forms of knowledge that resist the dominant discourse, which will be elaborated in Chapter 5.

**Agency and Resistance**

Foucault’s theory of power has been massively critiqued by scholars for reducing social agents to “docile bodies” (Ramazanoglu, 1993; Hartsock, 1990), denying individuals agency (Gaetano, 2005; Fraser; 1989; Hartsock, 1990), and leaving no space for resistance to power (Fraser, 1989; Deacon, 2003). As Arianne M. Gaetano (2005) states,

As Michel Foucault theorized, domination is exercised through symbolic production, and social identities are effects or products of discursive power, not external to it. He therefore denied an agency based on “an unmediated and transparent notion of the subject or identity as the centered author of social practice.” (p. 49)
Stuart Hall (1996) also contends that Foucault only provides a “one-dimensional” archaeology of how subject positions are constructed within discourses “while revealing little about why it is that certain individuals occupy some subject positions rather than others” (p. 10). Thus, Foucault tends to negate the subjects’ “individual capacities to fill” the subject positions (Brown & Cousins, 1980, p. 272; Hall, 1996, p. 10).

However, some feminists and anthropologists have built upon Foucault’s work to analyze its implications for complexity of subjectivity, resistance, and agency (Butler, 1990; Alcoff, 1990; O’Hara, 1992). Judith Butler (1990) argues that “Foucault’s characterization of subject as a discursive product does not mean that it is completely determined or artificial and arbitrary.” She offers a “feminist genealogy of the category women” (p. 5)—to trace how the category of women is not an essence or core of human nature but a product of power. Linda Alcoff (1990) also concisely states that subjects are “effects [of power/knowledge], not causes [of power]” (p. 72).

O’Hara (1992) contends that Foucault proposes a model of agency that is “a matter of plurality, mobility, and conflict” (O’Hara, quoted in Ahearn, 2001, p. 116). Ahearn (2001) states that “Foucault’s notion of power is not a substance but a relation, a dynamic situation; it produces not only constraints on, but also possibilities for action” (pp. 116-117). However, even if Ahearn admits that “Foucault’s formulations do leave room for agency,” she argues that “his focus is more on pervasive discourses than on the actions of particular human beings” (p. 117). Thus, she incorporates “Abu-Lughod’s (1990) caution against the ‘romance of resistance’” and “Ortner’s (1995) conclusion that there is no such thing as pure resistance; motivations are always complex and contradictory” (p. 116). She also draws upon MacLeod’s
conceptualization of women’s agency to define agency as “go[ing] beyond the dichotomy of victimization/acceptance” toward “the multiplicity of motivations behind all human actions”—“a complex and ambiguous agency in which women accept, accommodate, ignore, resist, or protest—sometimes all at the same time” (MacLeod, quoted in Ahearn, 2001, p. 116).

Building upon Ahearn’s work, I would argue that Foucault does not simply deny agency or resistance, but he considers resistance to be never external to relations of power. As he contends in his later work titled “The Ethics of the Concern of the Self as a Practice of Freedom,”

In power relations there is necessarily the possibility of resistance because if there were no possibility of resistance (of violent resistance, flight, deception, strategies capable of reversing the situation), there would be no power relations. (Foucault, quoted in Foucault & Faubion, 2000, p. 292)

This elaborates his earlier statement: “Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power” (Foucault, 1978, p. 95). Take cases of some participants in my study as an example. When they compromised their critical thoughts to write acceptable views of the Communist Party and the government in their gaokao tests, they not only reproduced the power of the education, but they also embraced resistance to it. Their resistance did not occur from a position outside of power.

My participants’ reproduction of and resistance to power manifest their complex agency in circulating power as they accommodated, negotiated, reproduced, and resisted it.
As Gaetano (2005) notes about Lila Abu-Lughod’s analysis of “Bedouin women’s resistance tactics,”

Discursive regimes of power are manifold, and “[i]f the systems of power are multiple, then resisting at one level may catch people up at other levels” (Abu-Lughod, 1990, p. 53). In other words, resistance through subversion at one level of power may simultaneously entail subjection at another level of power. (p. 54)

My dissertation considers how rural female identities are configured through discourses as well as how rural female students as agents negotiated the multiple and often interlocking systems of power to construct their identities, whether through subjection, accommodation, disruption, and/or resistance. In other words, power has manifolds and multiple interrelated layers, and “is never just accommodated or resisted” (Gaetano, 2004, p. 43). Many of my participants expressed that they were disadvantaged by the urban-rural divide that was embedded in the household registration system of hukou, but they admitted that they had no say or ability to influence or change the system. This does not mean that they were simply subjected to the system without making any effort to navigate their life situations, but they used strategies (such as working extra hard, relocating to schools of better quality, and repeating grades) to gain educational achievements in order to get into a university, which they regarded as their only means of upward mobility. Some of my participants were also aware of how the National Higher Education Entrance Examination, or gaokao, suppressed them because they knew that, in order to pass gaokao and get into a university, they would have to follow their teachers’ guidance and write only acceptable views of the Communist
Party and the government. Thus, they both accommodated and resisted the existing systems of power.

I also draw upon theories of agency (Ahearn, 2001; Mahmood, 2005; MacLeod, 1992; Geatano, 2005) to analyze the complex motivations underlying the actions of my participants, particularly the notion that agency is neither “a synonym for free will” (Ahearn, 2001, p. 130) nor “a synonym for resistance to relations of domination” (Mahmood, 2005, p. 112), but can involve acceptance, accommodation, disruption, and/or subversion—“sometimes all at the same time” (MacLeod, quoted in Ahearn, 2001, p. 116).

Cornel West (1990) describes agency as “always enacted under circumstances not of one’s choosing” (p. 31). According to Joan Scott (1988), agency may be “action taken in specific contexts, but not entirely autonomously or without constraint” (Scott, quoted in Wolf, 1992, p. 23). Thus, agency is not synonymous with autonomy that people can voluntarily or freely choose, but it is exercised by the subject in the process of negotiation with constraints of power structures.

Some feminist scholars also deromanticize the concept of resistance that has been romanticized by liberal scholars. As Gaetano (2005) suggests,

It is important not to “romanticize” the resistance of women; careful ethnography suggests that women have complex subjectivities and are not necessarily “opposed” to power so much as negotiating power, both through resistance and accommodation.

(pp. 57-58)

Thus, resistance cannot be simplified as being opposed to power; but it can involve accommodation as much as disruption of and defiance against power (Wolf, 1992, p. 24;

When scholars Mahmood (2005), MacLeod (1992), Ahearn (2001), Wolf (1992), and Abu-Lughod (1990) discuss adaptation as a type of agency, they mainly address the complexity of agency and resistance that Muslim women showed in their practices of veiling and piety, but do not refer to agency in relation to schooling. Therefore, I draw upon critical race theories of resistance which address students’ agency in navigating the educational pipeline. Daniel G. Solorzano and Dolores Delgado Bernal (2001) put forward several forms of resistance: conformist resistance, resilient resistance, and transformational resistance (including internal transformational resistance and external transformational resistance). They argue that previous studies about Chicana and Chicano’s school resistance tend to focus on their “self-defeating resistance”—how they “recreate the oppressive conditions from which it originated”—while failing to acknowledge and study “other forms of resistance that may lead to social transformation” (p. 310). According to Solorzano and Delgado Bernal (2001), conformist resistance refers to “the oppositional behavior of students who are motivated by a need for social justice yet hold no critique of the systems of oppression” (p. 318). Transformational resistance refers to “student behavior that illustrates both a critique of oppression and a desire for social justice” (p. 319). They quote Tara Yosso (2000) to expand the concept of transformational resistance to include resilient resistance, which Yosso defines as “surviving and/or succeeding through the educational pipeline as a strategic response to visual microaggressions” (p. 180). According to Solorzano and Delgado Bernal (2001), “Resilient resistance is at the intersection between conformist and transformational resistance where the strategies students use ‘leave the structures of domination intact, yet help the
Solorzano and Delgado Bernal (2001) further break down transformational resistance into internal resistance and external resistance. Internal resistance “appears to conform to institutional or cultural norms and expectations, however individuals are consciously engaged in a critique of oppression” (p. 324). They give as an example a student of color who has a critical consciousness of racial oppression and is motivated to enter graduate school “by a desire to engage in a social justice struggle against the oppression,” for example, hoping to give back to her or his community through teaching and social service. According to Solorzano and Delgado Bernal, such a student embraces internal transformational resistance, even though “her or his behavior appears to conform to societal and parental expectations” (pp. 324-325). They define external transformational resistance as involving “a more conspicuous and overt type of behavior, and the behavior does not conform to institutional or cultural norms and expectations,” for example, Chicana/o activists writing and publishing political works to “challenge the institutionalized notions of knowledge from within the academy” (pp. 325-326).

Yosso (2000) and Solorzano and Delgado Bernal (2001) have inspired me to analyze the multiple forms of resistance that the participants in my research exhibited during their negotiation with multiple power systems in order to gain success to higher education. Having read the works of these scholars, I understand that when my participants said that they had to conform to the precollege educational strictures that repressed their critical thinking, it was not conformist resistance, but a form of internal transformational resistance. This is because my participants had a critical consciousness about the oppression of the educational system,
and they were motivated by a social justice agenda to combat urban-rural inequality (and patriarchy, in some cases), which limited their life chances and devalued them as rural females. Higher education was not only their ticket to upward mobility, but it was also the instrument that would enable them to prove that those who regarded them as inferior were wrong. This strategy of proving others wrong, as Yosso (2000) indicates, is another form of transformational resistance, which will be discussed in Chapter 4. My participants’ motivation to participate in this research also demonstrated their internal transformational resistance, because they hoped that their struggles and experiences with discrimination and marginalization would be publicized and become known by society. They believed that they would then be able to make a difference for educational reform and social justice, so that rural children would be given learning opportunities equal to those of their urban equivalents.

This section discussed how theories of agency—not being synonymous with resistance, but involving such complex motivations and actions as accommodation, acceptance, disruption, subversion, and resistance—inform my analysis of how my participants accommodated and resisted the multiple power systems of education, the urban-rural divide, and gender. Some scholars such as Abu-Lughod (1990) and Gaetano (2005) clarify that resistance is not simply opposition to power, but, like agency, it can involve complex actions. In this dissertation, I distinguish agency from resistance. Agency refers to the ability that my participants demonstrated to navigate the institutional barriers and social norms that constrained their conditions of existence. Drawing upon the critical race theorists Yosso (2000), and Solorzano and Delgado Bernal (2001) (particularly the concepts of resilient resistance and transformational resistance), I define resistance as the oppositional discourses
and behaviors that rural female students engaged in to fight against the power systems, in
order to survive and/or succeed as higher education students. I admit that agency and
resistance are related in that agency includes resistance, and resistance is one of diverse forms
of agency; yet agency is not reduced to resistance.

Intersectionality

“Intersectionality,” a term coined by legal scholar Kimberle Williams Crenshaw (1993; 1995), arose as a theory to challenge the problem of essentialism in identity politics, which
“frequently conflates or ignores intragroup differences” (1995, p. 279) and sees “race and
gender as exclusive or separable categories” (1993, p. 114). This theory evolved alongside
critiques of second-wave feminism whose dreams of a “global sisterhood” (Mohanty, 2003)
relied upon universalizing White Western women’s attributes or experiences as norms to
judge non-White, non-Western people and cultures. Here I characterize the features of
intersectionality and explain how these features inform my dissertation.

I. Challenging the homogeneous representation of a group and revealing the interaction
of race, gender, and class (among other social categories)

When Crenshaw (1993; 1995) uses the concept of intersectionality to explain the
employment experiences of women of color in the U.S., she states that the singular analysis
of either gender or race is problematic because its focus on one dimension such as gender
leaves out other dimensions such as race and class. Neither the discourse of feminism nor that
of antiracism can explain fully how these women experience the intersection of sexism and
racism in their daily lives. She uses the metaphor of “crossroads” to describe
intersectionality:
Intersectionality is what occurs when a woman from a minority group . . . tries to navigate the main crossing in the city. . . . The main highway is “racism road.” One cross street can be Colonialism, then Patriarchy Street. . . . She has to deal not only with one form of oppression but with all forms, those named as road signs, which link together to make a double, a triple, multiple, a many layered blanket of oppression. (Crenshaw, quoted in Yuval-Davis, 2006, p. 196)

Although the term intersectionality did not exist until it was put forward by Crenshaw, the concept had been used by many feminist scholars to challenge “the essentialist underpinnings of White academic feminism and its accompanying account of gender” (Bailey, 2010, pp. 53-54). Feminist philosopher Elizabeth Spelman (1988), for example, discusses “mainstream feminist theory’s inability (and often unwillingness) to grapple with the complexity of multiple identity categories” (Berger & Guidroz, 2009, p. 4). She exposes the false assumption and generalization of “universal womanhood” on which these mainstream feminists have relied. The assumption that there is a particular pattern of socially constructed behavior that is essential and universal to all women is false because it ignores the fact that women are diverse. This false assumption justifies certain forms of experience as the norm by which to judge other experiences. In order to dismantle “universal womanhood,” Spelman brings to the forefront the limitation of additive analysis of racism and sexism, which has distorted “black women’s experiences of oppression by failing to note important differences between the contexts in which black women and white women experience sexism” (pp. 123-125).
Inspired by Spelman’s argument, Trina Grillo (1995) states that essentialism is like picking a single pebble from a group of pebbles on the beach and letting it represent all of them despite the fact that they have diverse shapes and colors. Intersectionality critiques this one-representing-all pattern in essentialism and respects the complex and multidimensional reality of the human world. Grillo also argues that essentialism’s attempt to subtract race and class from gender “elevates white, middle-class experience into the norm, making it the prototypical experience” (p. 32). Thus, essentialism distorts the experience of the person whose identity has multiple and “inextricable” elements (Grillo, 1995, p. 32). This inextricability is due to the fact that different forms of oppression such as race, gender, and class are not separable but “mutually reinforce each other” (Grillo, 1995, p. 36).

Similar to Grillo, Patricia Hill Collins (1998) describes the mutually-constructive interrelationship between all forms of oppression. As she states, “Intersectionality references the ability of social phenomena such as race, class, and gender to mutually construct each other” (p. 205). This is in tune with Crenshaw’s insight that race and gender are interactive in the lives of women of color as mentioned above.

Peter Kwan (1997) states that essentialism’s separation of race from gender “often renders invisible the lives and experiences of people with multiple subjugated identities” (p. 1274). Both Grillo (1995) and Collins (1998) contend that intersectionality is an important conceptual tool for revealing multiple and mutually interactive forms of oppression. Agreeing with Grillo and Collins, Maria Lugones (2008) states that intersectionality, which considers “gender and race as intermeshed or fused” in women of color’s lives, “reveals what is not
seen when categories such as gender and race are conceptualized as separate from each other” and re-conceptualizes “the logic of the ‘intersection’ so as to avoid separability” (p. 4).

The theory of intersectionality informs my research in that it illuminates the “crossroads” of the urban-rural divide and gender by which rural Chinese female university students are multiply subordinated. Their lives cannot be understood by analyzing either the urban-rural divide alone or gender alone, because they have been shaped by the interaction of these power structures. Rather, one must analyze these multiple and mutually interactive forms of oppression (Grillo, 1995; Collins, 1998).

Intersectionality’s emphasis on intragroup differences also informs my research in that rural female students “do not constitute a unitary, homogenous category” (Brah & Phoenix, 2004, p. 82). Neither do they all “live an identical life” (Banks, 2009, p. 13). Each of them has a specific assemblage of identities based on gender, socioeconomic status, regional origin, ethnicity, and other social locations. My research addresses their diverse voices, perspectives, and experiences.

II. Disrupting the either/or dichotomous paradigm through an inclusive both/and lens and allowing for the simultaneity of oppression and resistance

Collins (1990) notes that the intersectional approach can be used to critique the either/or dichotomous paradigm in Eurocentric, masculinist thought that sustains the essentialism. She contends that the dichotomous paradigm is exclusive in two ways. First, one must be either White or Black, and anyone who does not fit one or the other category is excluded. Second, it ranks one side as superior and the other as inferior, one as privileged and the other subordinated. Thus, unequal power relations construct this dichotomous paradigm.
The “both/and conceptual lens of the simultaneity of race, class, and gender oppression” (Collins, 1990, p. 221) lets us see beyond the either/or binary because it does not separate identity markers from each other, but instead addresses them inclusively.

Similar to Collins, Rose M. Brewer (1999) states that intersectionality can be used to critique “dichotomous, oppositional thinking by employing both/and rather than either/or categorization” (p. 33). Employing Brewer’s concept of intersectionality in her research on the lives of Black female undergraduates in the United States, Banks (2009) argues that educational discourses that are based on Black/White, male/female dualistic thinking marginalize these Black women. The idea of both/and in intersectional analysis “empowers disenfranchised groups” like the group of Black women she interviewed, because “it includes all aspects of their lives rather than forcing them to choose” (p. 12).

Collins (1990) also states that the either/or binary portrays Black women as either victims of oppression or heroines in resisting oppression, thus reducing the complexity of human agency. While the former portrayal negates Black women’s ability to bring about social change, the latter obscures “the very real costs of oppression” and “can foster the perception that Black women need no help because we can ‘take’ it” (Collins, 1990, p. 237). Intersectionality’s emphasis on “the simultaneity of oppression and struggle” (Brewer, 1999, p. 33) helps to deconstruct this victim/heroine bipolarity because its both/and framework acknowledges that “black women not only are victims of oppression” but are also “engaged in struggles against oppression” (Banks, 2009, p. 12).

Because it addresses such binaries, intersectionality has helped me avoid privileging the voices of one group and marginalizing those of others so that I can better determine
“which voices” I need to “help bring forward” within each historically specific context (Grillo, 1995, p. 38). In some situations, my participants were dominant and privileged, but in others, they were dominated and subordinated—sometimes simultaneously. The important thing for me as a researcher is to highlight not only how my subjects are diversely subordinated by intersecting hierarchical systems, but to address the complex relationship between their experiences of subordination and privilege.

Intersectional analyses are inclusive so as to capture “the simultaneity of oppression and struggle” (Brewer, 1999, p. 33), and to show that subjects “not only are victims of oppression” but also are “engaged in struggles against oppression” (Banks, 2009, p. 2). The participants in my study negotiated and resisted oppression while they formulated their identities. For instance, when Chen Fu encountered gender discrimination from her primary school math teacher, who regarded girls as intellectually inferior to boys, she was not simply victimized, but rather she determined that she must exceed the boys’ achievements in order to combat the discrimination and prove that the teacher’s stereotype was wrong. Likewise, when she attended an urban junior secondary school and was ridiculed as a “countryside egg” by her urban roommates, she fought against this discrimination by arguing with them that, even though her clothes and living standard were not as good as theirs, she could achieve educational success through her own efforts. She proved it by studying hard and becoming the only student in her class to pass the entrance exam to enter the best high school in her district. These experiences shaped her identity, helping her to become strong, persevering, and unafraid of obstacles or discrimination.

III. Combating static and ahistorical beliefs and embracing fluidity and historicity
Uma Narayan (1997), M. Jacqui Alexander (2005), and Chandra T. Mohanty (2003) challenge the Western imperialism embedded in the advocacy of “global sisterhood” propagated by some White Western feminists researching third-world women. Narayan (1997) critiques some White Western feminists such as Mary Daly for their “cultural essentialism” in assuming and constructing “sharp binaries between ‘Western culture’ and ‘Non-Western cultures’ or between ‘Western culture’ and particular ‘Other’ cultures” (p. 82). According to Narayan, these feminists represent the non-White as an “unchanging tradition” across the past and present time frames without taking into account the cultural complexity and historical specificity of the third-world countries (p. 48).

Alexander (2005) unravels the dominant tradition-modernity paradigm in some White Western feminists’ work. She states that these feminists tend to use cultural explanations to analyze the lives of third-world women in the Global South; yet when discussing the Global North, they emphasize power and ideology. Using culture as “an overdetermined reason” (Alexander, 2005, p. 188) to explain third-world women’s oppression, they reduce non-Western culture to value and tradition. In doing so, they simplify “divergent histories and temporalities” to “these apparently irreconcilable binaries of tradition and modernity” (Alexander, p. 189), portraying third-world women as homogenous. Mohanty (2003) states that this notion of women as a homogenous group is not “on the basis of biological essentials but rather on the basis of secondary sociological and anthropological universals” (p. 22). According to Mohanty (2003), by describing third-world women as static victims of their own patriarchal cultures, institutions, and families, these feminists judge these women using White Western ideas regarding what constitutes democracy, progress, and modernity;
consequently, they ignore power relations within and across groups and erase the history and effects of Western imperialism that have shaped and continue to shape the daily lives of third-world women.

It is worth noting that, since the 1960s, some Western anthropologists have been examining the static Western representation of Eastern cultures, which, regrettably, is not mentioned by Mohanty (2003). For example, Susan S. Wadley (1994) studied how rural people of Karimpur in North India told stories of and lived their daily lives with “Hindu conceptions of order and disorder; of coherent action and chaotic action; of dharma, doing one’s prescribed duty, and adharma, going against the proper order of things; of control, subjugation, and oppression; and ultimately of karma, one’s destiny, which, through one’s actions, is constantly being made” (p. 2). She originally named this book Victims of Destiny, but when listening to an Indian friend who “pointed out the stagnant, fatalistic quality of that designation,” she realized that she had “fallen into the Western interpretation of karma as fixed and determinate” (p. 7). So she changed the title to Struggling with Destiny in Karimpur, 1925–1984. As she reflected,

The Western interpretation [of karma] is rooted in both the English language, where “to be” is the dominant verb, and in our notions of the self as fixed in one’s core, hidden inside and waiting only to be unpacked, but set genetically for all time. The Hindu view of karma is based instead on the idea that individuals are in constant flux, as each action creates them anew. And they are constantly acting to change what they are—to eat the right foods, to rub themselves with the correct oils, to perform a ritual or go on a pilgrimage to achieve a transformation of their self or
Thus, Wadley understands and interprets culture as being historically and geographically specific, and it is shaped through people’s daily lives. She also points out that gender and class/ caste are “interconnected systems of hierarchy” that “act simultaneously and in concert to produce the structures of a particular social order” (pp. 4–5), which idea resonates with the concept of intersectionality.


Intersectionality is a useful conceptual framework for understanding rural Chinese female university students as a historically specific and socially constructed group. Their identities are by no means fixed and are “never in existence outside of the larger historical and social contexts and power structures” (Banks, 2009, p. 152), but are always “shifting . . . around concrete material forms of interlocking oppressions” (Delgado Bernal, 2006, p. 78). This view of identities as fluid and shifting, subject to specific contexts, has enabled me to conceptualize how rural Chinese female university students “constantly remake their subject
positions” (Delgado Bernal, 2006, p. 78) as they encounter and negotiate interlocking power relations across both rural and urban contexts.

Theories of oppression, social reproduction, cultural capital, agency and resistance, and intersectionality converge to inform this research in that the network of systematically related barriers constrains these students, and schools reproduce this network or hierarchal system of oppression by passing on the values of the dominant class. My participants used their agency to recognize part of the system or some layers of the system, such as hukou and urban-rural inequalities, but they also used schooling to accumulate dominant academic and cultural capital. Their accumulation of dominant capital enabled them to transcend the urban-rural divide because they obtained the mobility to move upward from the rural to the urban, but also kept this system in place. So their agency was still working within the system, as they did not work against it, but they simultaneously accommodated and resisted the multiple layers of the system. Intersectionality helps to analyze the interrelationship of multiple layers of oppression, but also capture the complexity and simultaneity of oppression and negotiation.

**Contexts**

I conducted this research at five universities and one college in northern China. Before interviewing each participant, I said to them that I would not use the real names of the institutions that they were attending in order to protect their privacy and identity. So in this dissertation, I use pseudonyms to replace their real names as well as the real names of their institutions. For the convenience of readers I code the pseudonyms based on the types, or levels, of institutions that the participants were attending. The pseudonyms are Elite National
University 1, Elite National University 2, Non-Elite (less prestigious) National University 1, Non-Elite (less prestigious) National University 2, Provincial University, and Municipal College.

These six schools are all public higher education institutions in China. I chose these six research sites because they represent the four major hierarchical levels (elite national, non-elite national, provincial, and municipal) of public higher education in China, and because I wanted to study the heterogeneous lives and perspectives of rural women at various tiers of higher education.

Elite National University 1, Elite National University 2, Non-Elite National University 1, and Non-Elite National University 2 are all national universities supervised by the Ministry of Education and located in Beijing, the capital of the People’s Republic of China. Elite National University 1 and Elite National University 2 are the two most elite universities in China. Non-Elite National University 1 is one of the top teacher training universities in China. Non-Elite National University 2 is the nation’s top university focusing on ethnic language, literature, and studies. Provincial University and Municipal College are both located in Baoding, a medium-size city in northern China with about one million people, which is situated southwest of Beijing in one of the developing districts of Hebei Province. Provincial University is funded and run by the Hebei provincial government. Municipal College is a municipal associate college funded and run by the local municipal government.

Rural students constitute different percentages of the student population at these schools. They make up 10% of students at Elite National University 1, 17% at Elite National University 2, about 30% at both Non-Elite National University 1 and Non-Elite National
University 2, about 50% at Provincial University, and 80% at Municipal College. The different percentages of rural students at the different levels of institutions show that rural students are underrepresented in national elite universities in China; most of them are concentrated in regional or provincial universities and associate colleges (Ma, 2010; Yang, 2006; Wan, 2006). This means that the lower the level of post-secondary education in China, the more rural students make up the population.

Among these six schools, only Elite National University 1 reported (shown by the survey of Liu, 2009) the specific rate of rural female students, which is 4.2% in comparison with 44.7% urban males, 41% urban females, and 10.1% rural males in 2005. Given that rural females constitute 65% of the female population in China (Business News Report, 2014), this rate indicates the severe underrepresentation of rural female students at national elite universities.

Participants

This multi-site research involved 66 rural Chinese university women. I conducted preliminary research in November 2010, interviewing seven participants at Provincial University, and then conducted dissertation research intensively over an eight-month time span from June 2011 to February 2012. Altogether, I had 108 in-depth individual interviews with 66 participants: three interviews with one participant, two interviews with 40 participants, and one interview with 25 participants. Each interview lasted between 1.5 and 4 hours. All participants are identified by pseudonyms in this dissertation.

My participants were diverse in terms of their disciplines, years at a university/college, ethnic backgrounds, and places of origin. Among the 66 participants, 14 were from the two
most elite universities (10 participants were from Elite National University 1, and 4 were from Elite National University 2); 31 participants were from the two less prestigious national universities in Beijing (23 were from Non-Elite National University 1, and 8 were from Non-Elite National University 2); 11 were from Provincial University; and 10 were from Municipal College. Out of the 66 participants, 15 were graduate students ranging from the first year of master’s study to the first year of doctoral study, and 51 were undergraduates ranging from second to fourth year. My participants also had diverse ethnic backgrounds. Twelve were ethnic minorities of Manchu, Buyi, Hui Muslim, Tujia, Tibet, Hani, Mongolian, and Yi. The remaining 54 participants were of the Han ethnic majority. In contemporary China, there are 56 officially recognized ethnic groups, and Han is the ethnic majority group. All the other 55 ethnic groups are considered ethnic minorities. Han constitutes about 92% of the entire population in China (Wang, 2005). Appendix A lists the demographic information of the participants, including their ethnicity, year of birth, university year, major, province or region of origin, and parents’ occupations and educational levels.

Most of the participants share two similarities. One is that they were all unmarried except for one participant—Rangli Neng. Rangli was the only doctoral student and the oldest (33 years old) among the participants. She was married and had one child. The rest ranged from 19 to 25 years old and were all unmarried. The second similarity among most of my participants is that they had siblings, despite the one-child policy in China. The main reason is that in rural China today, many families have two children because the birth control policy permits them to have a second child if the first-born is a girl (Hansen & Woronov, 2012; Hardee, Xie & Gu, 2004). All my 12 participants with ethnic minority backgrounds had
siblings because ethnic minorities are allowed to have more than one child. Some rural families have more than two children through other means such as paying fines to the local authority, registering the extra child or children under someone else’s household, or registering an older child as disabled, because “compliance to and exceptions from the one-child rule are decided primarily by local officials” (Clemens, 2006), and the policy stipulates that a couple with a disabled child is allowed to have another one. Among my 66 participants, only four (Chen Fu, Rang Guo, Guangzhe San, and Juyang Ming) were the only child in their families. Among these four students, two (Chen Fu and Guangzhe San) were abandoned upon birth by their biological parents, who desired to have boys, and were adopted by their current parents. Only Juyang Ming and Rang Guo were from families that voluntarily chose to bear only one child. The remaining 62 participants had one to four siblings.

All the participants self-identified as rural female students, based either on their rural household registration (hukou) prior to attending a higher education institution or on their rural upbringing. Two (Wenxi Neng and Rang Guo) had had urban hukou since they were born, but they did not identify themselves as urban because they spent most of their childhood and teenage lives in rural areas. Gai Ci’s hukou was transferred from the rural to the urban category when she was in primary school, but she did not identify herself as urban because she lived in a rural village and her mother had been living and working on a farm. The other 63 participants all had rural hukou before getting into a university/college. Almost all 45 participants in Beijing (except for Wenxi and Rang who had urban hukou) converted their hukou from rural to urban and moved hukou from their rural villages to Beijing when
they enrolled in the universities. Of the 21 participants who were studying in Baoding City of Hebei Province, that is, Provincial University and Municipal College, 14 converted their hukou from rural to urban and moved it from their rural villages to Baoding, and seven did not move their hukou but kept it in their villages. This perhaps indicates that hukou in a metropolitan city such as Beijing is more desirable than hukou in a medium-sized city such as Baoding.

**Overview of Chapters**

In Chapter 2, I review literature about the historical transformation of the urban-rural divide and hukou, urban-rural educational disparities in contemporary China, and the representation of dominant discourses about rural women. Then, I discuss what higher education means to rural women and how ethnicity, rurality, and gender intersect to shape the lives of rural female students with ethnic minority backgrounds. Throughout, I present how related scholarly literature has informed my research and how my research enriches and challenges the literature.

Chapter 3 focuses on the methods and procedures that I used to conduct research. I discuss the relationship of qualitative methodology to feminist methodology, and how they converge to inform my research. I examine the qualitative feminist methods of open-ended, in-depth interviews that I used to collect data, and how my positionality as a female graduate student with a rural Chinese background affected the story telling of my participants. I also explore the unexpected obstacles that I encountered in the field, the lessons that I learned, and the limitations of this study.

 Chapters 4 to 6 discuss the three major themes that I identified from the data. Chapter 4
focuses on how rural university women navigated their life situations, which were severely constrained by the multiple systems of *hukou*, the urban-rural divide, gender, *gaokao*, and higher education admission. They utilized various strategies to negotiate these systems, such as working extra hard, repeating the 12th grade, and relocating to urban schools. In their negotiation process, they exhibited resilient resistance and transformational resistance, and drew on navigational, familial, and social capital. These strategies, resistance, and capital helped them survive and succeed in the test-oriented educational system and enter higher education.

Chapter 5 explores how my participants negotiated the urban cultural capital and dominant discourse of quality (*suzhi*), which presumes that rural students lack knowledge and capacity. Since the 1980s the Chinese party-state has constructed the discourse of *suzhi* to ascribe China’s underdevelopment to the low quality of a large number of rural people. It has also adopted the Western notion of quality education in its attempt to reform its test-oriented educational system. The discourse of *suzhi* especially hurt rural students because they are thought to receive lower-quality education than urban students, and their rural identity is often considered lacking. Participants in my study negotiated this discourse and the dominant cultural capital associated with this discourse in multiple ways, which will be discussed in detail in Chapter 5.

In Chapter 6 I discuss the intersection of gender and the urban-rural divide in shaping the lives of my participants when they moved from their rural origins to study in urban higher education institutions. Many of my participants expressed that they had experienced multiple forms of discrimination since their childhood because of their gender and rural status. They
worked hard to gain academic success as a way to combat the hardship and resist the negative connotations imposed upon their rural-female intersectional identity. By working hard to achieve educational excellence, they proved their value as rural females. In that process, they developed strengths. However, their strengths were undermined on urban academic campuses where they encountered forms of patriarchy that were different from and sometimes opposite to what they had experienced in rural areas. Thus, they had to constantly reshape their identities to adapt to different contexts.

In Chapter 7 I discuss the major findings of this research. Then I make recommendations for policy and practice in and outside of the academy. Finally, I introduce implications for theory and methodology.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

As discussed in Chapter 1, there is a dearth of research about rural university women in Chinese higher education, but some research has been done about the urban-rural divide, the household registration system of *hukou*, and rural women. My dissertation draws upon this literature.

In this chapter, I review literature about how the urban-rural divide came to the present stage and how *hukou* has evolved. Then I discuss the educational inequality brought about by the urban-rural divide. In the third section, I review literature that reveals how the dominant discourse of *suzhi* represents the rural population as backward and inferior (Han, 2009; Jacka, 2006; Anagnost, 2004) and reinforces the subordination of rural Chinese females. In the fourth section, I present what higher education means to rural Chinese women. In the fifth section, I focus on the intersectionality of ethnicity, rurality, and gender.

The Urban-Rural Divide and *Hukou* in Historical Transformation

Scholars have been using the term “caste system” to characterize the urban-rural divide in China (Whyte, 2010; Tang & Yang, 2008). The urban-rural divide is a sociopolitical construction that is regulated by *hukou*, the household registration system. It is an institutional legacy of socialism (Park, 2008, p. 41) and has significant material and socioeconomic impacts, especially on rural people’s lives.

During the 1950s and the 1960s, after the People’s Republic of China was established in 1949, the Chinese government, led by then-Chairman Mao Zedong, promoted heavy-industry development by means of using rural resources—including land and human and economic capital—to support urban capital accumulation. As Arianne M. Gaetano and
Tamara Jacka (2004) state, when the Mao government “faced with the dilemma of how to develop and modernize a largely agrarian economy scarce in capital” during the 1950s, it “resorted to the Soviet strategy of siphoning resources out of agriculture in order to finance the heavy industrial sector” (p. 16). The Mao government also guaranteed secure jobs, government funded housing, welfare, and benefits to urban residents (Gaetano & Jacka, 2004; Whyte, 2010; Yan, 2003). In contrast, those who lived in rural areas could not receive these benefits and they only had access to what their communities could provide (Whyte, 2010, p. 9). As a result, before 1978 when the reform and open-up policy was implemented, “capital goods were excessively concentrated in urban areas” (Yang, 1999, p. 308), and rural residents’ income lagged far behind that of their urban equivalents.

Along with this rural-urban division, the Mao government introduced hukou, the household registration policy, in the late 1950s (Gaetano & Jacka, 2004, p. 15). The hukou policy stipulated that at birth the newborn would inherit hukou status from the mother (instead of being registered by her/his place of birth). She or he would be registered as either agricultural (rural) or nonagricultural (urban) and by the level of village, township, county, city, and province or region (Whyte, 2010, p.11). For example, if a child was born to a mother with rural hukou in Bai Village, Bai Township, Bai County, Bai City of Shanxi Province, the child was registered with rural hukou of Bai Village, Bai Township, Bai County, Bai City of Shanxi Province, no matter where the mother then resided in China. According to Martin K. Whyte (2010), this hukou policy permitted individuals to freely migrate downward (e.g., from a big city to a small city, or from a city to a county, town, or village) or horizontally (e.g., a rural bride could move her hukou to the village where her groom’s hukou belongs), but not to
migrate upward from the village to the town, county, or city (p. 11). “Permission to migrate upward in the system was granted,” as Whyte (2010) notes, “only if the urban destination gave bureaucratic approval in advance, and that was granted only in relatively rare and special situations (for example, admission to an urban university, service in and then demobilization from the army as an officer, or in a situation in which an urban factory had taken over rural land for plant expansion)” (p. 11).

Xiaogang Wu and Donald J. Treiman (2004) state that there are five means through which rural hukou holders can convert their hukou from rural to urban status: entering a state-accredited higher education institution or professional school; joining the Chinese Communist Party (CCP); joining the People’s Liberation Army; marrying an urban person; and when their villages are incorporated into towns or cities. What these authors fail to mention is that since 1997 when the Chinese government started decentralizing hukou qualification and implementation procedures from the state’s Ministry of Public Security to localities, two other means have emerged: purchasing an urban hukou, and applying for an urban hukou after purchasing commercialized housing in cities (Wang, 2004). While small cities and towns allow anyone “who has a stable non-agricultural income and a permanent residence in [the] small city or town for at least two years [to] automatically qualify for an urban hukou and become a permanent local resident,” large cities “openly set high prices for their much sought-after hukou” (Wang, 2004, p. 119). As Fei-Ling Wang (2004) notes, the going rate for a set of three Beijing urban hukou (self, spouse and one child) involves no less than being a multi-millionaire investor or a foreign educated “talent.” Alternatively, one can purchase a high-end “commercial” unit or apartment
to qualify as a local *hukou* applicant—a one-off spending of at least 500 thousand RMB cash [about 80,000 USD], 30 times the average annual wage in Beijing.

Similar schemes exist in Shanghai, with a slightly lower price tag. To “purchase” a major city’s urban *hukou* this way is still subject to the available moving-in quota. (pp. 119-120)

For rural females particularly, getting into a higher education institution is the most feasible way to get an urban *hukou* because it “is based primarily on competitive examinations” which is, “in principle, equally available to all Chinese citizens, depending only on their individual merit” (Wu & Treiman, 2004, p. 369), whereas the other means all depend on external factors such as families’ economic situations, social networks, and chances. Since the early 2000s when the government started to provide some benefits such as medical insurance, old age pensions, and compensation for farmland to rural *hukou* holders, rural *hukou* has become somewhat valuable. Therefore, some rural *hukou* students decided not to convert their *hukou* when they entered higher education institutions, which will be discussed below.

The *hukou* or household registration in China was not a term created by the Communist Party government. Instead, it has been in existence for about 2,500 years, since the imperial era, “but its function was to keep track of where people lived, not to restrict their movement” (Whyte, 2010, p. 7). When the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) won the civil war over Kuomintang and founded the People’s Republic of China in 1949, “this general pattern did not change much at first” (Whyte, 2010, p. 7). During the 1950s when many rural people moved into cities to seek jobs in government offices and state factories, the government
started to use hukou to restrict migration and forbid rural people from migrating into cities (Whyte, 2010; Chan & Zhang, 1999). As Whyte (2010) states,

In multiple ways the social status, mobility opportunities, ways of life, and even basic citizenship claims of China’s rural versus urban residents diverged sharply under the socialist system that Mao and his colleagues created, producing a caste-like division that did not exist before 1949. Thus socialism in the Mao era produced a fundamental aggravation of the rural-urban cleavage, not the reduction implied by the conventional discourse. . . . The extraordinary status gulf between rural and urban residents in China—substantially a product of socialist policies and the practices and institutions of the Mao era—has left a legacy that has endured to the present. (pp. 5-6)

After Mao died in 1976, Deng Xiaoping took power and carried out the reform and open-up policies. Since then, China has been undergoing increasing economic growth. As a consequence, inequality between rural and urban areas, and among regions, has been growing. From the 1980s to the 1990s, the Chinese central government implemented financial transfer programs in favor of the urban sector, which widened the rural-urban gap. As Dennis Tao Yang (1999) states,

Between 1986 and 1992, China experienced an average inflation of 8.5 percent, and this burden was shared by all households. However, the increases in government expenditures and investments that are partly responsible for causing the inflation were disproportionately allocated to the urban sector. (p. 309)

Thus, urban areas benefited from the expenditures and investments but rural areas were
deprived of these benefits. During the late 1990s and early 2000s, the central government made great expenditures on health, housing, and education for urban citizens while leaving rural people unattended (Wang & Zuo, 1999), though they paid heavy taxes to the government. This further aggravated the rural-urban inequality. Azizur Rahman Khan and Carl Riskin (2005) state that “income inequality has risen sharply in China since the reform period began in about 1979” (p. 357). In 1995, the urban-to-rural ratio of per capita income nationwide was 2.47:1; and in 2002 the ratio rose as high as 3.01:1 (Khan & Riskin, 2005, p. 380; Jacka, 2006, p. 42). However, urban-rural income disparities vary from region to region in China. They are smaller in the eastern industrialized coastal regions such as Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Fujian, and Guangdong than in the western and central agricultural regions such as Xinjiang, Gansu, Shanxi, and Henan (Park, 2008, p. 47; Sicular, Ximing, Gustafsson & Shi, 2007, pp. 101-102). But even in the economically developed regions, there is urban-rural income gap (Sicular, Ximing, Gustafsson, & Shi, 2007). All my participants grew up in the 1980s and the 1990s, and they experienced this enlarging economic gap.

The widening divisions are “revealed not only in income distribution statistics, but also in dramatic differences in clothing, housing quality, access to medical care, vehicle ownership, and many other realms” (Whyte, 2010, p. 4). A rural status or identity is often marked “in clothes, speech, conduct—considered undesirable traits by urban dwellers” (Hu & Salazar, 2008, p. 4). Many participants in my study demonstrated that they experienced discrimination due to their clothing and socioeconomic status.

After 1978 people were allowed to have more geographical mobility, and more and more rural people moved into urban areas without having their hukou changed, and more and
more children with rural *hukou* were born or grew up in cities (Liang, 1999; Liang & Chen, 2007). In 1998 the State Council modified the *hukou* policy to allow the newborn child to inherit *hukou* from either parent instead of inheriting it only from the mother as in the previous policy (Chan & Zhang, 1999). Nevertheless, *hukou* is still inherited from the parent instead of determined by where the child is born.

After President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao took office in 2002, they conducted a series of reforms to address the long-standing disadvantages of being rural. Under Hu’s slogan of establishing a “harmonious society,” the new leadership made efforts to abolish educational surcharges (*jiaoyu fujiao fei*) in 2003 (Park, 2008, p. 54), and from 2003 to 2006 they “[phased] out agricultural land taxes and rural school tuition fees and [had] the state provide an increased share of funding for rural schooling” (Whyte, 2010, p. 20). In addition, the government also established “a network of cooperative medical insurance systems,” “a minimum income subsidy system for poor rural families,” and “modest cash old-age payments to rural parents who do not have a grown son to support them” (Whyte, 2010, p. 20). More and more state-funded schools have been established for the children of rural migrants who live and work in cities. Despite the improved conditions, the institutional discrimination against people with rural *hukou* is still palpable (Whyte, 2010; Hu & Salazar, 2008). Access to many urban jobs and public schools, and accompanying resources and opportunities, is still restricted to city natives (Whyte, 2010). As Xiaojiang Hu and Miguel A. Salazar (2008) rightly state,

> Nowadays, Chinese have gained full freedom of geographic mobility, but most do not have freedom of institutional mobility. Therefore, though people from the
countryside can now geographically travel to, and physically work and live in cities, they are unable to access full rights as citizens, including education, employment, social welfare, and regular status for their children. (p. 4)

Therefore, although rural Chinese can now move freely from rural to urban areas, they do not enjoy the benefits that are institutionally bestowed on urban hukou holders.

Since hukou is determined by blood rather than place of birth, this system is often referred to as “the Chinese version of racism” (Loong-Yu & Shan, 2007; Han, 2010) to keep rural people on the bottom rung of the social ladder. Dong Han (2010) states that China’s development of industrialization and modernization resulted in the “racialization” of its rural population “unique to the Chinese context” (p. 594). According to Han, while in the US race is perceived as social status constructed or assumed based on one’s skin color, racialization in China is based neither on skin color, nor ethnic origin, but on hukou—the politically imposed regulation that arbitrarily segregates Chinese people into a rural-urban binary.

I agree with Han that the hukou system in China does carry the characteristics of racism in terms of its institutional discrimination against the rural population. However, I argue that equating racism with hukou is problematic for two reasons: One, it tends to oversimplify people of color’s experiences with racism in countries where race is a significant issue; and two, it tends to erase the ethnic experiences of people in China, particularly those with ethnic minority backgrounds. In China there is no such clear-cut racial line of Black-White-Yellow-Brown based on people’s skin color. Instead ethnicity (a lot of times intersecting with urban-rural inequality) is an issue facing people with ethnic minority backgrounds. My data concerning 12 rural university women with ethnic minority
backgrounds illustrates this, as discussed in Chapter 7.

There is no doubt that *hukou* significantly restricts rural people’s social mobility and life chances. According to the *Business News Report* (2014), out of the 1.36 billion people in China in 2012, only 35% are urban *hukou* holders, and the other 65% have rural *hukou*. Even though the *Statistical Communiqué of the People’s Republic of China on the 2013 National Economic and Social Development* reports that 54% of the Chinese population lives in urban areas and only 46% live in rural areas, not all of the 54% living in urban areas have urban *hukou*. Those who live in urban areas but do not have urban *hukou*, for example, rural migrant workers, cannot enjoy benefits linked with urban *hukou* such as education and social welfare. In this dissertation, rural people are people with rural *hukou*, including not only those living in rural areas but also those who have rural *hukou* but live in cities.

*Hukou* is not only divided by rural and urban categories, but it is also geographically specific (Ma & Wang, 2015). Mainland China has 23 provinces, four municipalities (Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin, and Chongqing), and five autonomous regions (Inner Mongolia, Ningxia, Xinjiang, Tibet, and Guangxi) under the direct supervision of the central government. The administrative divisions of Mainland China consist of six *de facto* levels: central or national, provincial or regional, municipal or prefectural, county, township, and village. Residents of each municipality, province, and autonomous region have different *hukou*. For example, residents in Beijing have Beijing *hukou*, residents in Hebei Province have Hebei *hukou*, and residents in the Tibet Autonomous Region have Tibet *hukou*. Rural residents’ *hukou* is also specified by the administrative level: the specific village, township, county, city, province, or region.
Every year, admission quotas for each public higher education institution are assigned to each geographic area at the level of province, municipality, or autonomous region, and every institution selects students based on their gaokao scores and hukou. Higher education institutions generally give more quotas to the region where they are located (Ma & Wang, 2015). Because selective universities are disproportionately located in major cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin, and southeastern coastal areas, students with hukou of major cities have more opportunities to enter prestigious universities than students with hukou of other provinces or regions (Yang, 2007; Ma & Wang, 2015).

In the past, particularly before 2002 when the government started providing some benefits to rural hukou holders, almost all rural students moved their hukou to the place where their university or college was located, often in the cities. However, the change from rural to urban hukou was temporary and conditional on their staying in university/college. Once they graduated, their hukou would move to the place where they were employed. In other words, if upon graduation they did not get a professional job in a city, thus securing their hukou in the city, their hukou would automatically be relocated to the township nearest to their original home village (Wang, 2004, p. 122). Based on the regulation, once they move out of their village and their hukou changed from rural to urban, they could not move back to their village and change their hukou back to rural, and they could not take advantage of the post-2002 benefits attached to rural hukou. For this reason more and more rural students choose not to move their hukou to the universities or colleges they attend. Among my 66 participants, seven kept their hukou in their rural villages. They chose to do so in case that they could not find a job in the urban areas, they could go back to their home village. Their rural hukou provided
them with a backup. These seven students were all studying at Baoding—a medium-sized developing city in northern China. In contrast, all my participants who were enrolled in universities in Beijing (including two urban hukou holders) chose to move their hukou from their home villages to their universities and convert the category from rural to urban, even though the move was temporary. The hukou of a big city such as Beijing carries more benefits than that of a developing city such as Baoding. Yi You, one of my participants studying in Beijing, acknowledged the benefits of Beijing hukou:

Beijing hukou provides its holder numerous benefits. Besides the preferential treatment in university admission, people with Beijing hukou can have more insurances, such as pension, medical care, unemployment, work-related injury, and maternity [covered by the welfare system]. People with no Beijing hukou [but living and working in Beijing] can only enjoy the first three insurances such as pension, medical care and unemployment [based on the New Social Insurance Law implemented on July 1, 2011 in China]. [As a person with no Beijing hukou,] if you are pregnant or injured accidentally at the workplace, you cannot have any insurance or welfare to help you pay, but you have to shoulder all these by yourself. Recently Beijing government issued a policy [called Apartments Purchase Restriction Order], which limits non-Beijingers to purchase houses and cars in Beijing. This means that if you have no Beijing hukou, you cannot purchase any house or car unless you have resided and paid taxes in Beijing for five consecutive years. So without Beijing hukou, you are just like a secondary citizen in Beijing. (Interview with Yi, 07/02/2011)
Beijing *hukou* holders are entitled to receive many privileges that outsiders are denied. This is one of the most important reasons why many students with no Beijing *hukou* study extremely hard to get a chance to join a university in Beijing. If they can get to a university in Beijing, they can transfer their *hukou* from their place of origin to Beijing directly. Even though the transfer itself is temporary—because, if within one year after graduating from university they cannot get any employment, and their *hukou* would be returned to their local township—some still hope to find employment and keep their *hukou* in Beijing.

*Hukou* has substantially shaped the educational lives of my participants. Some of them explained that they could not attend some city public schools, or had to pay extra money (called sponsorship fees) before enrollment, solely because they had no local-city *hukou*. This will be discussed further in Chapter 4.

**Urban-Rural Educational Disparity**

The *hukou* system and the urban-rural divide, together with the government’s decentralization of the fiscal system, created and worsened the gap between rural and urban education in China. A large amount of literature discusses Chinese educational inequality, such as quality differences between rural and urban education (Lu, 2012), the disparity between urban and rural educational budgets and resources (Zhang, 2004; Fu, 2005; Hannum, 2003), urban-rural enrollment differences for primary- and secondary-school-age children (Park, 2008; Hannum, Wang, & Adams, 2008; Lu, 2012), the high dropout rate among rural students and girls (Li, 2005; Hannum, 2005), and the low admission rate of rural students at higher education institutions (Zhang, 2004; Yang, 2010).

According to Yulin Zhang (2004), the urban-rural economic disparity and the
dichotomized schooling system have led to severe imbalances between urban and rural education. In 1993 the ratio of expenditures for each urban versus rural primary-school student nationwide was 1.9: 1. Besides the urban-rural disparity, there were regional differences as well. In Guizhou Province, this urban-rural ratio of expenditure for each primary-school student was 3:1. Shanghai City was seven times that of rural Anhui. At the middle school level, the urban expenditure for each student was twice that of the rural areas nationwide. In Guizhou Province, it was 4.2 times, while in Beijing City it was 10 times that of rural Guizhou. In 1999 the urban-rural nationwide gap was further widened to 3.1: 1.

Emily C. Hannum, Meiyan Wang, and Jennifer H. Adams (2008) state how the decentralization reform, transitioning from the centrally-planned to the market-oriented economy during the 1980s, further widened the urban-rural educational gap. This reform shifted the responsibility for raising and spending educational revenue from the central government to local levels. Albert Park (2008) also notes how the fiscal decentralization in China contributes to urban-rural educational inequality. While this decentralization brought difficulties to both rural and urban areas, rural areas that had historically been economically disadvantaged were more affected than urban areas. As Emily C. Hannum (2002) states,

As responsibility for financing education increasingly fell to local governments and communities, poor areas without the resources to finance education increasingly covered the costs of education by charging fees to families. (p. 99)

Subsequent to decentralization, private costs for schooling increased (Hannum, 2003), and poor rural children were further disadvantaged. Many rural poor families had to pull their children, particularly girls, from schools (Hannum, 2003). Teachers’ payment in rural poor
areas was also affected. As Hannum (2003) states, “Indeed, for many poor rural areas, the lack of local government revenues or subsidies from upper levels of government precluded local governments from meeting salary obligations to teachers and from providing a high-quality education system” (p. 144).

In 1986, the National People’s Congress promulgated the Compulsory Education Law mandating nine years of education, comprising six years of primary and three years of junior secondary education as compulsory for all school-age children. “However, the law fell short of guaranteeing the funding for education, and many schools, particularly those in poor rural areas, financed local education by collecting either tuition or miscellaneous school fees” (Hannum, Wang, & Adams, 2008, p. 127). Children whose families could not pay the tuition or school fees “[were] not allowed to attend school” (Brown & Park, 2002, p. 529). My 66 participants received their primary and junior secondary education during the late 1980s, the 1990s, or the early 2000s, and had to pay the tuition or school fees.

Zhang (2004) argues that, after 2003 when the central government reduced the tax burden for peasants, the input to education by the rural local governments decreased further than before because the peasants’ tax constituted a large part of tuition for rural students. This further worsened rural education. As a result of the educational input disparity between rural and urban areas, education quality has been explicitly polarized.

In addition, there is an urban-rural disparity in teacher training, facilities and equipment, class size, and teaching style. Teachers in rural areas, compared with their urban equivalents, have fewer professional development opportunities, “lower salaries (sometimes paid in arrears for a long time) and no bonuses, worse medical care” (Li, 2012, p. 74). Thus, there is a
discrepancy between the training opportunities that rural and urban teachers receive. As Qing Li (2012) states,

Urban teachers, particularly those in key schools, attended professional development programs offered by higher educational institutions more frequently than their rural counterparts. Many urban teachers had chances to take advanced professional development courses organized and taught by experts in the field from top-tier universities. Rural teachers, in contrast, could only attend professional programs offered at the local level and rarely had a chance to hear from experts in the field. (p. 82)

Urban schools have better infrastructure and more advanced technology and facilities. Comparing seven rural and urban schools in Hunan Province, Li (2012) found that each classroom in each urban school had a computer and LCD projector for teachers to use at any time and the hardware and software were newly updated, whereas classrooms in rural schools, particularly remote schools 10 km away from a city or town, “had no computers, or very few old computers with limited Internet services” (p. 82).

Classes in rural areas are generally more crowded and schools are less staffed than those in cities (Li, 2012). While schools in cities tend to focus more on student-teacher interaction and provide students with more opportunities to foster social and hands-on skills as well as creativity, schools in rural areas tend to focus more on lecturing and preparing students to memorize textbooks and practice tests (Kipnis, 2001). Based on his research at five primary schools, four middle schools, and four high schools in Zouqing County of Shandong Province, Andrew Kipnis (2001) notes that rural primary schools mostly put more time to the core exam subjects of math and Chinese and are less likely to deliver computer, oral English, Arts, and
science courses than urban primary schools.

The disparity of teaching and resources between urban and rural China has led to the unequal higher education enrollment of urban and rural students. Xu Yang (2010) discusses the urban-rural difference in terms of high school completion and higher education admission rates:

The ratio of college attendance is much higher in urban-rich areas than in the rural. For example, in 1992, 156,981 children were admitted in primary schools in the rural areas of China; 12 years later [in 2004], only 8.2% of them successfully finished high school while urban areas had a 61% high school completion rate for their corresponding cohort. Of these students in rural areas who completed high school, only 76% of them took College Entrance Exam in 2004, and of that small group, 83% of them were admitted. (p. 195)

Teng Margaret Fu (2005) notes that “urban youth are more than three times more likely to be admitted to college and university than rural youth” (p. 2).

Some literature attributes the low enrollment rates of rural students to the financial situation of rural families. As Park (2008) states,

According to the 2000 census, urban enrollment rates are 93–95 percent and rural enrollment rates are 84–90 percent (Hannum, Wang, & Adams, 2006). Enrollment rates for secondary-school-age children are 72–80 percent in urban areas and just 50–64 percent in rural areas (Hannum, Wang & Adams, 2006). Quality differences in urban and rural schools are also significant. Many poor rural areas have yet to fully implement China’s nine-year mandatory education law, mainly because poor
families are unable or unwilling to pay required school fees. (p. 56)

Though the above literature presents a compelling picture of the urban-rural educational disparity, it does not address the specific and nuanced experiences of rural students. My research focuses on the educational and social experiences of a group of rural female students who navigated the institutional inequities to successfully enter higher education, their experiences on university or college campuses as well as how they made sense of their experiences. By centralizing the experiences and voices of these rural female students, this dissertation is intended to fill the scholarly gap.

**The Discourse of Quality (Suzhi): Reinforcing the Subordination of Rural Women**

Since the 1980s, when China started implementing reforms and policies in order to catch up with the economically advanced West, the Chinese state has constructed a discourse of *suzhi*, which ascribes China’s poverty and backwardness to the low “quality” of its population (Anagnost, 2004; Gaetano, 2004). As Kipnis (2007) states,

Contemporary uses of *suzhi* began in the early 1980s with the massive propaganda effort associated with the birth control policy. The term’s connotations shifted dramatically as a result of this propaganda. *Suzhi* has now come to refer almost exclusively to embodied human quality (as opposed to the quality of non-human entities or of broad human institutions like the military or industry), and the embodied qualities it refers to include those that result from both nature and nurture (as opposed to purely inborn attributes, which were more important in pre-1980s uses). (p. 388)

Tamara Jacka (2009) defines *suzhi* as “the innate and nurtured physical, psychological, intellectual, moral, and ideological qualities of human bodies and their conduct” (p. 524).
This discourse distinguishes the qualified human bodies from the unqualified “through embodied capacities acquired through intensified child nurture, educational inputs, and training” (Anagnost, 2004, p. 193). It encompasses the relationship between value and bodies, representing bodies as “expressions of value—as human capital” (Anagnost, 2004, p. 192). Because many urban Chinese people believe that their children receive better childhood education and more educational investment, they think of themselves as having higher ability and value than rural people, and deem urban life as having better quality than rural life. Rural bodies, therefore, are “devalued as having ‘low quality’ (suzhi di),” and “[their] sheer massiveness—[their] excess quantity—represents an overwhelming obstacle to modernization” (Anagnost, 2004, p. 193).

Although the suzhi discourse involves the whole Chinese population, the state particularly has been targeting groups in marginalized statuses who are thought to need special remedies (Murphy, 2004). Rural people as a group have been driven by this discourse and by the hardship of rural life to invest in their children’s education. Many participants in my study commented that their parents motivated them to study hard to get into higher education institutions in order for them to avoid farming and to escape rural life for a better quality and decent urban life. The suzhi discourse, therefore, has generated “a struggle for recognition” (Anagnost, 2004, p. 194) of value for rural parents and students.

This discourse, as Feng Xu (2000) precisely states, “translates structural problems into depoliticized individual ones” (p. 38). It blames rural people, cloaking the fact that rural people’s status quo is an institutionalized result of the government’s urban-biased policies, and constitutes a deficit paradigm that dominates social and scholarly discourses in China. Thus,
suzhi serves as a “blame-the-victim” deficit discourse against rural people, as Kipnis (2007) powerfully argues, because it implies that “no matter how hard they try, no matter how much effort they put into wearing the right clothes (Pun 2003), getting a better education, speaking with the proper diction, or behaving politely, they will never overcome their peasant lack of quality” (p. 390).

Consequently, rural people, especially rural women, are denigrated by this discourse as low suzhi, ignorant, backward, and inferior (Gaetano & Jacka, 2004). This denigration of rural people “serve[s] as a contrast against which the civilization and modernity of the urban population (and of the nation) is constructed” (Jacka & Gaetano, 2004, 16). Thus, this discourse reproduces the urban-rural divide that signifies the dichotomy of urban superiority versus rural inferiority. Justified by this discourse, “many if not most urbanites . . . regard villagers as well as rural migrants as uncultured, backward, and in general, less civilized than urbanites” (Whyte, 2010, p. 16).

The suzhi discourse often circulates through the intersectionality of the urban-rural divide and patriarchy to designate rural females as having lower ability and value than both urban people and rural males. Dao Jiao, for example, described the frequent discrimination that she encountered because of her rural female identity. Since childhood, she had experienced gender discrimination from her parents. After her older sister was born, her parents yearned for a son. When Dao was born, her parents felt so disappointed that she was a girl that they wanted to give her away. Although persuaded by her maternal grandmother to bring her up, they showed constant regret for bearing her. As Dao said,

Before my birth [my parents] wished that I were a boy . . . My mother constantly
said to me, “Why aren’t you a son? If I had known you were not a son, I would not have given birth to you.” (Second Interview with Dao, 07/30/2011)

Dao’s parents also compared Dao with rural boys who, in her parents’ view, had more physical strength than girls for helping their parents with farming. They constantly complained that Dao and her older sister were not as useful and valuable as boys. Her parents’ discrimination was so depressing to Dao that she had wanted to escape her home since her childhood. She studied hard to achieve educational excellence and get into the university both to escape her oppressive home and to prove to her parents her value as a girl.

Dao also described how she was discriminated against because of her rural identity. At about 10 years old, when she was invited to visit her aunt who lived in the city, she found that her aunt and her aunt’s children treated her differently. While her aunt’s children all could take baths and sleep together, Dao was not allowed; her aunt felt that Dao was not sanitary because she was a rural girl. When she was studying and boarding at a city high school, she went to visit this aunt during weekends and sometimes helped with housework. Once when she spooned out the porridge from the pot into a bowl, the porridge was so thick that some drops stuck to the outside of the bowl. When Dao brought the bowl of porridge to the table, she recounted her aunt saying to her aunt’s neighbor who was having dinner with her aunt, “Oh, what an ugly bowl of porridge! This girl is from a rural area. Please don’t mind it. She is rural” (Second Interview with Dao, 07/30/2011). Her aunt’s attitude and words indicate that she ascribed low suzhi to Dao because of her rural female identity.

Thus, for Dao, the suzhi discourse added to the gender discrimination and the urban-rural divide, further devaluing her rural female body. Due to gender discrimination, she
was regarded by her parents as less valuable than boys. Due to the urban-rural divide, she was perceived by her urban aunt as inferior and unsanitary. She was multiply oppressed by the intersectionality of patriarchy, the urban-rural divide, and the *suzhi* discourse.

**Literature on Rural Women and Higher Education in China**

Scholars seldom gave attention to the plight of rural Chinese women until the beginning of this century when Xinran, a journalist, published a book titled *The Good Women of China: Hidden Voices* in 2002 (Schaffer & Xianlin, 2007). This book drew upon letters from, and interviews with, rural Chinese women in the 1980s and 1990s to expose their oppression and suffering. Since then, many more studies have been done about rural women and rural migrant women in China. Some literature investigates rural women’s socioeconomic status such as their health status and household position (Li, 2005; Hardee, Xie, & Gu, 2004), high suicide rate of young rural women in China (Zhang, 2010; Gaetano & Jacka, 2004), high mortality of rural girls (Chen et al., 2007), and high illiteracy rate of rural women (Fan, 1998).

Since the People’s Republic of China was established in 1949, the Chinese government has been rigorously preaching gender egalitarianism, following Chairman Mao’s slogans such as “Women can hold up half the sky” and “What men can do, women can also do” (Yihong, Manning, & Chu, 2006; Johansson, 2001). These slogans advocated for women having equal rights with men. Since then, Chinese women’s status has improved compared to that of their ancestors. They were ultimately freed from footbinding, liberated from the enclosed familial doors, given “the right to choose their own marriage partners and to demand a divorce” (Honig & Hershatter, 1988, p. 3), and had access to education and employment.
However, women never gained *de facto* equality with men. The true intention of the government’s gender-equality slogans was to utilize women, particularly rural women who constitute the majority of the entire female population, as a labor force to promote national development. Rural women’s needs and interests have been ignored. Beaver et al. (1995) states that rural Chinese women serve as “‘fresh troops’ to be tapped” in China’s effort to make itself “truly competitive in the international market” (pp. 209–210). Jane Liu and Marylin Carpenter (2005) also contend that the egalitarian policy of the Chinese socialist government “portrayed everyone equally as a ‘nut’ or a ‘bolt’ in the giant ‘revolutionary machine’ on the surface,” but it actually “disregarded the historically unequal social status of women and gender-biased perceptions” and “sexism . . . lurked below the surface of the Chinese patriarchal political system” (p. 280).

Since the 1970s, due to the economic development that provides women more employment opportunities and the implementation of “state law that grants women the right to initiate a divorce” (Shi, 2011, p. 103), rural women have gained power in decision making regarding marriage and family relations (Shi, 2011). However, they are far from gaining equality with rural men. Instead, they still suffer gender oppression and violence. Recent literature has noted the high suicide rate of rural women in China. As noted by Hyeon Jung Lee (2014), “the [suicide] rate for rural Chinese women is 38.8 per 100,000, compared with 27.5 for rural men, 10.7 for urban women, and 9.9 for urban men” (p. 26). Jie Zhang (2010) also states, “Among Chinese young people 15–34 years of age, suicide is the leading cause of death, accounting for 19 percent of all deaths; female rates are higher than the male rates; and rural rates are three times higher than urban rates” (p. 311).
Scholars have been investigating the root causes of the suffering of rural Chinese women. Lee (2014) notes that “a whole series of oppressive social forces” contributes to the high suicide rate of rural Chinese women, including “patriarchal marriage customs and marital relationships, workplace harassment, despotism in and out of the family, the birth control policy, and rural-urban inequality” (p. 27). Jianghong Li (2005) regards the “patrilineal family system” as “a fundamental source” of rural Chinese women’s subordination because it “serves to limit women’s autonomy” (p. 235). According to Li (2005), most rural Chinese women have to live in extended households with their in-laws, particularly during their first years of marriage. The in-laws have control over “the familial decision-making process,” “resource allocation,” and the “well-being of daughters-in-law particularly in terms of care and nutrition for daughters-in-law during pregnancy and after birth” (p. 235). Furthermore, “gender inequality is deeply rooted in the division of labor within the family,” where husbands seldom share the housework and rural women have to take on a “dual onerous role as farm laborer and housewife” (Li, 2005, p. 233). Zhang (2010) states that rural Chinese women experience “value strain” between state gender egalitarianism that propagates the idea that “women and men are equal” and patriarchy “in which women are treated as being of less value at home” (p. 324). Because of the state’s gender-equality propaganda for national development, rural women are heavily used for the rural labor force. They have to do agricultural work (often manual labor on farmland) under arduous conditions, along with “the double day of the domestic burden” (Beaver, Lihui, & Xue, 1995, p. 209). Even though they shoulder these double burdens, the deeply entrenched rural patriarchy positions females as less valuable than males. Lee’s (2014) ethnographic
study of female suicide in villages in northern China pinpoints the fact that some rural women “prefer dying to living meaninglessly” (p. 42) that is, living with no dignity and value.

This hard and oppressive rural life, together with widening urban-rural socioeconomic inequalities, propelled most of my participants to study hard to get into institutions of higher learning. All my 66 participants, born between 1978 and 1992, experienced the sharp rise in urban-rural inequality and saw how other rural women suffered. They unanimously expressed that one of the most important factors that propelled them to get into institutions of higher education was to get out of the hardship, gain upward mobility, and improve their life quality. Linchu Ze, for example, said that she was motivated to study hard to get out of her village and avoid the destiny that rural girls in her area face. Her peers in her rural area dropped out of school very early at middle and even primary schools. Then they had to work as migrant workers in urban areas or farm laborers for several years. All of them ended up marrying rural people before 25 years of age, bearing children, and taking care of domestic and agricultural work. Linchu believed that if she did not get into a university, her life “would be over like this” (First Interview with Linchu, 08/17/2011).

Zhiduo Shi also said that, since childhood, she had been aware that she “had no other way out except for studying to get into a university” (Second Interview with Zhiduo, 11/18/2011). If rural girls in her area drop out of school, they have to do farm work or work as migrant laborers in the cities, and must marry early, mostly before their mid-20s. After marriage, it is not uncommon for them to shoulder the responsibilities for both the agricultural work and the household, including taking care of children and even their
husbands’ extended families, while their husbands generally work as migrant workers in urban areas. In Zhiduo’s view, this kind of life is very hard and tedious. If such women can get into higher education and, after graduation, find jobs in the cities, which most university graduates can, then they can change their destinies and live better quality lives. Zhiduo said that studying to get into a university “is the only way out for me to change my destiny.” Her knowledge of her social location as a rural female motivated her to work extremely hard to gain educational excellence so as to change her destiny.

Entering higher education institutions and migrating to work in urban areas have been two options for rural women who want to leave their rural villages. Rural-to-urban migration in itself can hardly provide rural women with upward mobility—unlike getting into higher education, which allows them to change their household registration status from “rural” to “urban,” find professional jobs in cities after graduation, and improve their quality of life. Scholars observe that higher education in China historically has provided a means of upward mobility for rural Chinese students, particularly rural female students (Jacka, 2006; Hannum & Wang, 2006; Hansen & Woronov, 2013). Thus, great value has been attached to entering higher education.

Since the early 2000s, a growing body of research has investigated the lives and experiences of rural migrant women who are working in urban China. Researchers studied the marginalized status of rural migrant women and examined how these women narrated the exploitation and discrimination that they experienced and how urban-centered discourses shaped their lives and identities (Yan, 2008; Jacka, 2006; Gaetano, 2004). Examining how the Chinese national slogan of modernization operates in the daily lives of rural migrant women
workers in urban China, Jacka (2006) contends that, in the state-sanctioned
tradition/modernity binary, rural women have been portrayed as objects of low quality that
need to be modernized and civilized. She also writes that “there are major inequalities and
differences in lifestyles and values, especially those relating to gender and sexuality, between
rural and urban China” (Jacka, 2006, p. 8) that makes it difficult for rural women to integrate
into the urban life. Gaetano (2004) states that the marginality of rural Chinese women is a
result of China’s reform to achieve a modernity that involves tracking with the economically
advanced West. This discourse of modernity renders the countryside as “a wasteland stripped
of state investment and inhabited by moribund tradition” (Yan, 2008, p. 44). Rural women
“figure into this schema as paradigmatically traditional (chuantong) or backward (luohou)”
(Gaetano, 2004, p. 41).

This literature has informed my understanding of the lives of rural university women
because these women moved from their rural homes to study and live at urban settings and, to
some extent, they are similar to rural migrant women workers in urban China. Both groups
are subordinated by the intersectionality of the urban-rural divide and patriarchy. Realizing
this similarity does not mean that I deny the privilege rural university women carry with them
compared with rural migrant women workers. I acknowledge that they are privileged because
they got the chance to receive higher education and obtained the academic capital to climb
the social ladder, which most rural women migrant workers could not do.

Some literature also discusses the disadvantage of rural girls and women in getting
access to education including higher education. According to Li (2005), in rural China,
particularly in remote areas, “some girls were forced to drop out of school either because they
were expected to help with housework or because they were considered as performing ‘unsatisfactorily’ in school” (p. 236). Li also states that rural families sometimes have to let older children drop out of school to work to “finance household expenditures and support younger children” (p. 338). While Li does not claim that female older children are more likely to drop out of school than males, Hannum (2005) contends that “girls appear more vulnerable to family financial difficulty or opportunity costs than boys” based on the reports of some rural mothers (p. 292). My research corroborates Hannum’s contention. Take Linchu as an example. When her mother encountered financial difficulty when Linchu was studying at junior secondary school, her mother chose to persuade Linchu, instead of her older and younger brothers, to drop out of school to work.

Some literature has demonstrated that rural females are disadvantaged not only compared with their male counterparts, but also compared with their urban female counterparts. Liu and Carpenter (2005) state, “Females in rural areas suffer from reduced educational opportunities more than their female counterparts in urban areas” (p. 280). Grace C. L. Mak (1994) explains that women who received higher education in China “tend to be from urban areas” because “most universities are located in cities and urban dwellers have greater educational opportunities at the primary and secondary levels” (p. 43).

Since the late 1990s, subsequent to the private marketization of higher education, the move towards students’ paying their own tuition has been further limiting rural female participation in higher education (Yang, 2010). Before the 1990s, particularly before 1985, higher education in China was free for eligible students (Sun & Barrientos, 2009). Subsequent to the development of a market economy, China commercialized its higher education by
requiring students and parents to share the cost with the state; it decentralized control of over 90% of higher education institutions, giving that control to local authorities, and expanded higher education enrollment rates (Wu & Zheng, 2008). Rising tuition and widening urban-rural socioeconomic inequalities have made it increasingly difficult for rural poor students to access higher education institutions, especially prestigious ones. According to a survey conducted by Yunshan Liu (2009), the proportion of rural students at Peking University dropped from around 30% during the 1980s and the early 1990s to about 14% in 2005, with 10% rural males and 4% rural females (Liu, quoted in Ma, 2010, p. 40).

Discouraging as the numerous barriers are, the rural female students in my study actively navigated these barriers and entered higher education. Yet previous studies seldom explored the experiences of rural female students who managed to enter higher education institutions. Research on female university students in China that has been done so far mostly centers on “contextual factors” (Zhao & Wang, 2004) affecting women’s access to and success in higher education, and their difficulties and disadvantages in seeking employment upon graduation. As Peizhi Wen and Hong Cai (1994) state, “In the work force market, women graduates face discrimination. They are not welcome simply because of their gender. The obvious reason is woman’s capacity for reproduction.” (p. 535). Wanhua Ma (2004) also states, “Employers often consider women to be a burden because of reproductive issues, physiological issues, and differences in physical strength” (p. 120). The dominant view in gender studies in China simply attributes discrimination against women to their womanhood without taking into account their complex, subtle, and heterogeneous lived experiences and perspectives. In so doing, it tend to universalize, homogenize, and essentialize all women,
using the yardstick of urban researchers. My research aims to complicate this issue by bringing the diverse voices, perspectives, and experiences of rural female higher education students into the sphere of women’s studies in China, so that the intersectional oppression of these students can be unveiled and questioned, and so that scholarly attention can be brought to these women’s agency in making decisions, devising strategies, and negotiating their life situations.

While there is little research about the lives of rural university women, there are a few brief articles (in Chinese) written about the difficulties of rural university women in seeking employment, as described in Chapter 1. These articles typically follow the deficit paradigm or the “blame the victim” model. They ascribe rural female university students’ difficulties and struggles to their psychological, social, and/or academic deficiencies, or portray them as the sole victims of urban-rural and gender inequalities, while ignoring the voices of these students themselves. It is also for this reason that I chose to focus on rural female university students, emphasizing their voices and perspectives on their social and educational experiences. I examined rural female students’ agency in navigating their educational and social paths, while aiming to dig deep into the structural situations in which these students were situated.

**Ethnicity, Rurality, and Gender**

In Mainland China, there are 56 officially recognized ethnic groups. Han is the ethnic majority group, which constitutes 92% of the total population in China (Wang, 2005). The other 8% are ethnic minorities that include 55 ethnic groups. Most ethnic minorities concentrate in remote rural mountainous areas (Gustafsson & Shi, 2003), such as Xinjiang,
Yunnan, Tibet, Inner Mongolia, and Guizhou.

Some literature examines the preferential treatment of ethnic minorities in China. As Sautman (1998) states,

There are preferences for family planning (exemption from . . . one-child strictures); education (preferential admissions, lowered school fees, boarding schools, remedial programs); employment (extra consideration in hiring and promotion of cadres); business development (special loans and grants, exemptions from certain taxes); and political representation (proportionate or greater numbers of minorities in “people’s congresses and among minority area leaders.”) (pp. 79–80)

Sautman (1998) continues to contend that despite these affirmative action policies, economic and educational inequality between Han and minorities has been widening in the 1990s. He attributes this to the residence of most minorities who “live in remote areas, where development lags increasingly behind the growth of coastal regions” (p. 80).

Some literature notes that in higher education admission, ethnic minority students enjoy bonus points on top of their gaokao scores. How many bonus points an ethnic minority student can get is based on her or his specific ethnic group and place of origin, which is indicated by her or his hukou. As Tiezhi Wang (2009) elucidates,

In Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, Hui applicants receive twenty bonus points while other [ethnic] minority applicants in the same region are given ten bonus points. In Xinjiang, when taking the admission examinations in Chinese, college applicants from Uygur, Kazak, Mongolian, Kirgiz, Tajik, Xibe, Uzbeck, Tatar, Daur, Tibetan, and Russian groups are given fifty bonus points if both parents belong to
one of these groups, but only ten points if only one parent belongs to these groups.

The same ethnic group may enjoy different bonus points in different provinces. For example, applicants from Daur, Oroqen, and Ewenki groups receive ten bonus points if they live in Inner Mongolia, but twenty if they reside in Heilongjiang Province. In Tibet, there are different cutoff points for Tibetan and Han students, a gap that is sometimes close to one hundred points. (p. 73)

Some scholars assert that this preferential policy discriminates in favor of ethnic minority students. For example, Teng and Ma (2009) argue that this policy, which provides preferential treatment to one based on one’s ethnic group, “leads to what is called ‘affirmative discrimination’ or ‘reverse discrimination’ undercutting the quest for educational equality among individuals” (p. 91).

The literature about affirmative action for ethnic minority groups informs my understanding of the context that my ethnic minority participants are from, and also informs my analysis of the research data. Among my 66 participants, 12 are ethnic minorities: Tujia, Hani, Manchu, Hui Muslim, Buyi, Mongolian, Yi, and Tibetan. They are from six regions or provinces including Guizhou, Yunnan, Hunan, Inner Mongolia, Hebei, and Tibet. Except for Jizhu Duan, 11 got 5–20 bonus points on top of their gaokao scores when they applied for university. Jizhu was selected to attend a top high school in the capital city of her province because the All-China Women Federation implemented a project to support rural ethnic minority girls in her province. But because she attended this high school, she was not eligible to receive preferential treatment in higher education recruitment.

My 12 participants with ethnic minority backgrounds presented different perspectives
on the bonus points given to ethnic minority students. Ying Hao, Yizhuan Gui, Jizhu Duan, and Linchu Ze expressed that the bonus points were not necessary for them. Ying said that the bonus made no difference for her because her score was high enough to get her into Non-Elite National University 1. Yizhuan voiced her opposition to this policy and said that she disliked the preferential treatment because she did not want herself to be treated differently from Han students.

In contrast, the other eight participants expressed that the bonus points made a big difference for them. Wan Fang said that without the 10 bonus points, she could not have been recruited by her current university. She felt greatly appreciative that ethnic minority students are given this treatment. Yin Yue said that the bonus points are a must for ethnic minorities because they have inconvenience in many areas such as food restrictions and language barriers compared to Han students.

Despite the divergent opinions on the bonus points, five of 12 ethnic minority participants shared feelings of discrimination, exclusion, and marginality, which they sensed were grounded in their rural-ethnic intersectional markers, such as language, clothes, and family’s economic status, often going back to their precollege schooling years. Existing literature about ethnicity in China seldom examines these issues. Parts of Chapter 5 and Chapter 7 show that some participants experienced discrimination and stereotyping due to the intersectionality of the urban-rural divide, ethnicity, and gender, and to some extent will fill the scholarly gap regarding the daily experiences of rural ethnic minority students in higher education institutions in China.

Some scholars argue that the urban-rural divide is the most significant form of
inequality in China, and that inequality based on ethnicity is not as pronounced as inequality based on the urban-rural divide. Hu and Salazar (2008), for example, state,

In contemporary China, the rural-urban divide is the most salient dimension of social stratification. The role of ethnicity, regarded as the most important dividing line in many countries, is less clear. (p. 1)

The empirical research that Hu and Salazar (2008) conducted about the interaction among rural Han migrants, urban Tibetans, and urban Han in Lhasa, capital of Tibet, indicates that rural Han migrants did not enjoy any privileges because of their dominant Han ethnicity; instead, they experienced discrimination from both Han and Tibetan urbanites because of their rural identity, marked by “clothes, speech, conduct—considered undesirable traits by urban dwellers” (p. 4). Thus, Hu and Salazar (2008) conclude that even in Tibet—a region of intense ethnic conflict in China, “urban-rural status is also the dominant marker of distinction,” (p. 4) and ethnicity cannot trump rurality.

The perspectives of some of my ethnic minority participants seemed to confirm Hu and Salazar’s above statement. Qiao He, for example, mentioned that she did not even know that she was a Tujia ethnic minority before high school. She thought that she was Han like everybody else in the class. It was not until her older sister told her that as an ethnic minority she could enjoy bonus points in her university application, she realized that she was a Tujia ethnic minority. As she said, “Both my father and mother are Tujia, but in our area, the love knot for the ethnicity is not that obvious. I feel that we have all been assimilated into the Han (hanzu hua le)” (First Interview with Qiao, 08/24/2011). When I pursued what she meant by “assimilated into the Han,” she said, “That is, there is no distinct difference between Han and
Tujia. There is also not so much difference in customs and habits” (First Interview with Qiao, 08/24/2011).

Resonating with Qiao He, Wan Fang did not think that her Manchu ethnic minority status affected her as much as her rural status. Although she was born and grew up in a Manchu Autonomous County, she felt that she had been thoroughly “assimilated into the Han (hanhua).” Several generations of her family starting from her grandparents do not speak Manchu, but only speak the Han language. Thus, she felt that as a Manchu she had “no difference from Han students” and has been “having a harmonious relationship with Han” (Interview with Wan, 08/27/2011).

The fact that participants such as Wan claimed that ethnicity did not affect their lives does not mean that ethnicity did not play a role in their lives. Wan and Qiao’s statements that they had been assimilated into the Han ethnic majority and had no difference from the Han may imply the ethnic oppression that the Chinese state has been perpetrating to mold its ethnic minority population into the Han dominant group and annihilate their ethnic identity. As Lu (1995) notes, “Because of its transitional stage as well as its concentration of military force, the Chinese government, regardless of world opinion, has by and large succeeded in silencing its ethnic minorities such as the Tibetans by means of violence” (p. 5).

While scholars such as Hu and Salazar (2013) contend that ethnicity is not as “salient” as the urban-rural divide in contemporary China, my research findings show that “while the aspects of intersectionality are always at work simultaneously, at various times certain identity markers may be more easily identifiable or evident as the cause of oppression” (Banks, 2009, p. 13), and sometimes it is hard to tell which aspect of intersectionality causes
the oppression, but various social markers intermingle to contribute to the oppression. For instance, when Shuji Mai (to be discussed in detail in Chapter 5), a Yi ethnic minority female student, encountered discriminatory questions, about whether ethnic minority women in her hometown in Yunnan Province were too poor to be sold out and whether ethnic minorities were “barbarous and kill people casually,” which were posed by a rural Han migrant woman, it was not any single identity marker of her rurality, ethnicity, gender, or place of origin that prompted this discrimination, but all these markers concurrently played out. Parts of Chapter 5 and 7 will discuss how rurality, ethnicity, gender, and other social categories intersect to shape ethnic minority rural female students’ lives, and how Han ethnic majority students perpetrate ethnic oppression upon ethnic minority students.

**Conclusion**

I began this chapter by reviewing literature about the sociopolitical construction of the urban-rural divide as a socialist legacy and the historical transformation of the household registration system—hukou; hukou-based regional discrimination in higher education admission; the urban-rural disparity between urban and rural social, economic, and educational resources and its impact on school enrollment, retention, promotion, and the higher education participation of rural students. Then I focused on the literature about how the political and social discourse of suzhi (quality) is interconnected with the urban-rural divide and patriarchy to devalue and subordinate rural female students. Then I described how, according to some literature, rural women are oppressed by multiple forces—state power, familial patriarchy, sexism, and urban-rural inequality—and how participants in my study witnessed, experienced, and were motivated by these oppressive forces to get into higher
education as a way to escape such oppression. Finally, I reviewed scholarly contentions about the ethnicity-based preferential policy of higher education admission and the views of my participants with ethnic minority backgrounds about this policy. I also noted the shortage of literature about daily discriminatory practices that ethnic minority students experienced and showed how my research with 12 rural female ethnic minority students fills the scholarly gap.
Chapter 3: Methods and Procedures

The combination of two methodologies, qualitative methodology and feminist methodology, informs this dissertation. I draw from Sandra Harding (1987) and Marjorie L. DeVault (1999) in distinguishing methodology from method in that method refers to particular skills and techniques applied in the research process, whereas methodology describes how the researcher theorizes, analyses, and makes sense of the research process and practices. This chapter not only discusses what methods, skills, and techniques I used to collect data, but more importantly, it addresses the processes, procedures, and practices I employed during my qualitative feminist exploration of the social and educational experiences of 66 rural female higher education students.

This chapter has four sections. In the first section I discuss the relationship between qualitative methodology and feminist methodology and how they inform my dissertation. In the second section I delineate my practice in the field, including reflexivity and positionality, open-ended in-depth interviews, unexpected obstacles that I encountered during the interviewing process, and the lessons I learned as a result. In the third section I focus on methods that I used, including recruitment of participants, data recording, transcription, translation, coding, and analysis, as well as ethics. In the last section I address the limitations of this study.

Qualitative Methodology and Feminist Methodology

I combined qualitative methodology and feminist methodology to conduct this dissertation research. Qualitative methodology is “difficult to define clearly” because “there is not one agreed upon definition of it” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 6). Nonetheless, most
scholars agree that qualitative research is an interpretive practice that attempts “to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 3). According to Robert Bogdan and Sari K. Biklen (2003), qualitative research has the following five characteristics: First, it is “naturalistic” (p. 4). Qualitative researchers assume that “human behavior is significantly influenced by” and, in return, influences “the setting in which it occurs” (p. 5). Hence, they conduct research in a specific natural setting and make sense of human behavior from the social context and historical circumstances in which the behavior came into being. Second, qualitative research is descriptive, analytical, open-ended, and detail-oriented. Third, it is concerned with process rather than outcome. Qualitative research does not study impact and effect. Rather than general information about results, it seeks specific perspectives about process. Fourth, it is inductive. It seeks to “discover, not test” hypotheses (Padgett, 1998, p. 2). And finally, qualitative research tends to pursue meaning from the perspectives of the subjects. It focuses on how subjects make meaning out of their daily life, how they engage in it, and how they interpret what has happened to them. Qualitative researchers make sense of the research as they go along, but it is the subjects that really provide the research meaning for the researchers. There are “many methods and approaches that fall under the category of qualitative research” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 2), such as open-ended interviews, participant observation, case study, ethnography, discourse analysis, focus groups, visual methods, and narrative inquiry.

About the existence of feminist methodology, there have been various debates among feminists. DeVault (1999) notes that as a product of the second-wave women’s movement
during the 1960s, feminist methodology was developed “as a critique that views the apparatus of knowledge production as one site that has constructed and sustained women’s oppression” (p. 30). Instead of “inventing research methods” (DeVault, 1999, p. 28), feminist researchers have adapted the existing methods—both quantitative and qualitative—to uncover women’s experiences that have been neglected or distorted by the conventional methods. Since its initiation, feminist methodology has been facing the skeptical question of whether it “exists” or is “really different” (DeVault, 1999, p. 22). Even feminist researchers, as Reinharz and Davidman (1992) state, “do not consider feminism to be a method” (p. 241). Rather, “they consider it to be a perspective on an existing method in a given field of inquiry or a perspective that can be used to develop an innovative method” (Reinharz & Davidman, 1992, p. 241). However, Star (1979) opposes the view that regards feminism as a perspective rather than a method. As she states,

Feminism is, in essence, a method—a method of strategic heresy—a method for understanding, from a marginal or boundary-dwelling perspective, one’s own participation in socially constructed realities, both politically and personally, both socially and cognitively. . . . Feminism, viewed methodologically, is an emergent scientific method—one which begins with the death of the subjectivity/objectivity dichotomy and which involves questioning the very bases of socialization and perception. (Star, 1979, p. 3)

DeVault (1999) argues that the contention around whether feminist methodology exists or not is “a fundamental feminist move and . . . an illustration of a method or strategy that feminist researchers share” (p. 23). Thus, this contention itself constitutes an important
element in the feminist methodology. For DeVault, feminist methodology not only exists, but its existence has “distinctiveness” (p. 24). This distinctiveness is not due to “feminists’ methods but their methodology, or thinking about methods” (De Vault, 1999, p. 21). DeVault (1999) identifies feminist methodology as “a distinctive body of writing about [feminist] research practice and epistemology” (p. 28). By epistemology, she means “a study of how and what we know” (p. 28). Drawing upon DeVault’s work, I define feminist methodology as conceptualizing, theorizing, and writing about feminist research methods, practice, and knowledge.

Qualitative methodology and feminist methodology have a complex relationship. They have both divergence and convergence. Feminist research is not necessarily qualitative; some feminist research uses quantitative methods such as statistics and surveys. Qualitative research “takes many forms” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003, p. 2), and feminist methodology is one of them. Qualitative research is open-ended, descriptive, and analytical, as above mentioned. Feminist methodology can be open-ended and descriptive, but it can also be close-structured, statistical, and numerical. Despite their differences, they have a lot of interconnections. Next, I will present a review of their historical association.

Since women’s movements in the United States inspired the production and development of feminist methodology, it is important to review the three waves of feminism. First-wave feminism refers to the early women’s movement in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the U.K. and the U.S., which was primarily concerned with gaining political power for women and the right to vote (Yang, 2008). Second-wave feminism, which spanned from the early 1960s to the 1980s, focused on challenging patriarchy (Harrison &
Fahy, 2005; Humm, 1992), raising consciousness, and discussing “the ideas that the personal is political as tools for achieving social change” (Harrison & Fahy, 2005, p. 705). The third wave of feminism, which started in the early 1990s, has been challenging the second wave’s homogeneous representation of women (particularly Black women and third-world women) based on White middle-class women’s experiences. It calls feminists to address not only diverse voices and multiple subjectivities of women, but also to move beyond the men/women, and masculine/feminine dichotomies to include all people who have been historically subordinated.

DeVault (1999) explains that it is out of “second wave feminism that the ideas of feminist sociology and multi-faceted literature on feminist research methodology began” (p. 30). Quoting Dorothy Smith, she regards feminist methods as “distinctive approaches to subverting the established procedures of disciplinary practice tied to the agendas of the powerful” (DeVault, 1990, p. 96). Ramazanoglu and Holland (2002) also contend that feminist methodology was developed primarily as a way of challenging “existing methods of producing knowledge as masculinist” (p. 15).

Feminists’ challenge to conventional “masculinist” methods is parallel with qualitative researchers’ response to quantitative researchers’ charge that “the work of qualitative scholars [is] . . . unscientific, or only exploratory, or subjective” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 8). Mike Grang (2002) notes that qualitative approaches have had a strong association with feminist methodology, in part as a reaction to “male” quantitative methodology. Qualitative methodology from its inception has been challenged by quantitative researchers, who embrace experimental and evidence-based principles and claim that qualitative research is not
transparent and objective, arguing it is “at best [in] the category of scholarship, not science” (Ryan & Hood, 2004, p. 81). Qualitative researchers have responded to this challenge in various ways. Howard S. Becker (1996) contends that qualitative methodology has a good deal of validity, but not in the dogmatic way of standard social science. In his article “Whose Side Are We On?” (1967), he coins the phrase “credibility of hierarchy” to refer to a phenomenon within institutional systems: objective judgments and evidence favor people at the top of the systems and discredit those at the bottom. He suggests that sociological researchers should be “biased in favor of the subordinate parties” and “tell the story from their point of view” (p. 241). The work of sociologists cannot then be judged by the neutrality- and objectivity-oriented standards of quantitative research. Norman K. Denzin, Yvonna S. Lincoln, and Michael D. Giardina (2006) argue that the criteria of transparency and objectivity are problematic. To whom is the research transparent and objective? How are transparency and objectivity represented? The connection that quantitative researchers make between accountability and objectivity is dangerous because it is always the voices of people in power that are assumed to be objective and scientific and that constitute the norm by which the subordinated are judged.

The third-wave feminist movement complicates the issue of power in research. During this wave the identities of women, seen by second-wave feminism as being singular, unified, and fixed, have been “sharpened and differentiated dramatically” (Olesen, 1994, p. 158) and subject to specific historical contexts and power relations. Feminist methodology has become “highly diversified” and “enormously dynamic” (Olesen, 2005, p. 235) during this period, which includes postmodern feminism, “queer theory, women-of-color consciousness,
post-colonialism, critical theory, and transnationalism” (Yang, 2008, p. 32).

Along with third-wave feminism, feminist methodology has been enriching qualitative methodology in various ways. For example, intersectionality, a conceptual framework developed by Black feminist scholars in the United States during third-wave feminism, has contributed profoundly to qualitative methodology in “doing race, class, and gender analyses” (Cuadraz & Uttal, 1999, p. 158).

Intersectionality addresses the interlocking power structures of race, gender, and class (Collins, 1990); the simultaneity and interaction of different forms of oppression (Collins, 1995; Crenshaw, 1995); the historical specificity of social location (Weber, 2004); and the simultaneity of domination and resistance (Brewer, 1999; Banks, 2009). Having been transformed into a methodological practice (Cuadraz & Uttal, 1999), intersectionality informs qualitative research in the following three ways: First, its emphasis on the multidimensionality of oppression encourages the qualitative researcher to study the diverse lives of people through the lens of multiplicity. It enables the researcher to focus not only on race, gender, and class, but also to think “inclusively about other oppressions, such as age, sexual orientation, religion and ethnicity” (Collins, 1990, p. 225). Accordingly, the researcher avoids viewing her subjects as “a homogeneous group” (Banks, 2009, p. 37) and using the same set of questions for each interview; rather she develops different questions for each subject in each specific context. Second, based on intersectionality, the qualitative researcher understands how the meaning that subjects make of their lives is historically specific and contextualized within certain power structures. She also discerns the intersection of individual agency and power structures, which enables her to not only see her subjects as
victims of oppression, but also to recognize their efforts in resisting that oppression (Brewer, 1999; Banks, 2009). Third, a “critical component of . . . race, class, and gender perspective,” as Gloria H. Cuadraz and Lynet Uttal (1999) argue, “privileges the voices and lives of those researched over preexisting theories and the researcher’s agenda” (p. 160). Intersectionality contributes to qualitative methodology by treating subjects as the experts in their own lives (Banks, 2009) and opening up spaces for them “to represent their experiences in their own voices” (Cuadraz & Uttal, 1999, p. 160).

**Deep Listening, Language, and Power**

Qualitative and feminist methodologies have contributed to each other in the development of interview methods. Qualitative research values “deep listening” in the interview as a means to “stimulate good talking” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003, p. 99). Unlike “a typical conversation” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003, p. 97) or random talk, qualitative interviews require the researcher to concentrate intensely on what the informant is saying without making judgments or leading the informant to the researcher’s framework. Thus, the researcher can capture ambiguities, contradictions, problems of expression, and even silence during the interview process. This method has informed the feminist in-depth interviewing method of “listening for ‘gaps and absences in women’s talk’” (DeVault & Gross, 2007, p. 183). Catching these gaps and absences, the feminist interviewer can then “disclose” her own perspectives as a way to elicit more of the “prior knowledge” or experiences behind these gaps or absences (Dunbar, Rodriguez, & Parker, 2002, p. 294). In this way the interview can be elevated into a “woman-to-woman talk” (DeVault, 1990, p. 98) and help develop “the story of a rich, nuanced, and important life” (Dunbar, Rodriguez, & Parker, 2002, p. 294).
The interviewer and the informant can work collaboratively to fill in the gaps and bring to light the neglected elements in women’s experiences that would be left out by standard interview methods.

While qualitative methodology informs feminist researchers’ in-depth interviewing, the feminist methodology, in turn, contributes to qualitative research. DeVault (1990) contends that feminism “gives us distinctive ways of extending the methods of . . . [the] qualitative tradition” (p. 96) in conducting interviews. Women’s lives, as DeVault further notes, cannot be fully revealed through the standard language that has traditionally been embedded in male power and symbolizes male experiences. Thus, women must discover their own ways, the nonstandard ways, to communicate with each other and gain power. Trinh T. Minh-ha (1989) introduces storytelling as a feminist method to transmit women’s experiences through words and translate their memory into truth. She states that at a time when women’s experiences cannot be fully described by standard language, storytelling works as an important instrument to pass the words “from mouth to ear,” “from body to body” (p. 136), and to create truth from memory, because “the storyteller is the living memory of her time, her people” (p. 125). Storytelling as a method has contributed greatly to the development of qualitative interview methods, which shift from standard vocabulary to nonstandard and folk language.

Postmodern feminist methods (particularly in-depth interviewing and ethnography) pay special attention to power relations in which personal narratives and experiences are contextualized. Since standard language has been imbued with male power, as DeVault (1990) argues, the feminist researcher should take responsibility for recognizing and accounting for women’s talk in nonstandard language and be reflexive about “how the concepts we have
learned as sociologists may distort women’s accounts” (p. 101). Thus, feminist research can help “create nonhierarchical relationships that are more reflexive about that power” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003, p. 87), as discussed in the following section.

**Radical Reflexivity as a Border-Crossing Tool to De-center the “Eyes” in the “I”**

Reflexivity, “a central preoccupation in qualitative research” (Padgett, 1998, p. 21), contributes methodologically to feminism, especially to transnational and postcolonial feminism. Deborah K. Padgett (1998) and Diane N. Hesse-Biber and Deborah Piatelli (2007) contend that reflexivity is a tool whereby the researcher reflects upon her self both within the research setting and in the writing process. Quoting Agar (1980), Padgett (1998) states that the problem of qualitative research is not to determine whether it is biased, but to determine what kinds of biases exist” (p. 21) and how the researcher examines her biases. Self-reflexivity, as she maintains, is “not a one-time thing,” but “requires ongoing vigilance throughout the course of the study” (Padgett, 1998, p. 21). Howard S. Becker (1970) also notes that it is not possible to do research that is neutral and bias-free. The question, as he further argues, “is not whether we should take sides, since we inevitably will, but rather whose side we are on” (p. 123). Bogdan and Biklen (2003) extend this argument by stating that qualitative researchers should not let their personal biases immobilize them, but instead, they should attempt to “objectively study the subjective states of their subjects” (p. 33).

Virginia Olesen (2005) utilizes the argument of Susan Speer (2002) that many feminist researchers do not yet have the skills to do reflexivity. Lacking these skills, researchers, of second-wave feminism in particular, end up naturalizing their White, middle-class, heterosexual, able-bodied, and otherwise privileged experiences as the norm by which to
judge their third-world subjects as being solely subordinated or victimized, when they universalize their projects of “global sisterhood” (Mohanty, 2003). Reflexivity is a useful tool to combat this “false universalism” (Klinger, 2002) because it requires the researcher to “acknowledge and take into account” her own privileges, biases, assumptions, and stereotypes “as a method of dealing with them” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003, p. 34). Besides, it also enables the researcher to treat herself as an object of scrutiny, and to examine how her identity may shape what she does (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Critiquing the assumption of Whiteness underlying the propaganda of “global sisterhood,” transnational feminist Chandra T. Mohanty (2003) urges feminists to be reflexive about “questions of power, equality, and justice in ways that address context and recognition of questions of history and experience” (Olesen, 2005, p. 241). Ruth Behar and Deborah A. Gordon (1995) employ this reflexive approach to examine how the Native woman—“the original Other”—“is always looked at and looked over” (p. 2) in the anthropological tradition and consequently becomes the gaze of her self, her “I” in her writing of her own culture. They suggest that the Native woman writer should be conscious that the eyes on her back are also her own eyes, each of which sees her “at a slightly different angle” (p. 2).

Besides drawing upon reflexivity from qualitative methodology, postcolonial feminists have also developed this tool in a radical and complex way to question such binaries as subject/object, researcher/researched, knower/known, self/other, and insider/outsider. As Hesse-Biber and Piatelli (2007) state, “The researcher must not only reflexively interrogate her or his positionality, but also engage in the communal processes of crossing borders and boundaries and creating a common space for building knowledge” (p. 503). Minh-ha (1989)
elaborates that the us/them or self/other binary in the White-dominated tradition of anthropology takes “us,” the Eurocentric self, as the only legitimate form of knowledge and hinders the self from understanding the other, the Native woman. She proposes a method of radical reflexivity to de-center the voices and eyes of Western feminism and include multiple conversations, stories, and eyes “in which western feminists are not the only analysts” (Rofel, 1994, p. 248). In this view, the subjectivity of the researcher becomes multiple and fluid: “One is neither entirely inside nor outside,” but constantly crosses the “borderlands . . . walking on the edges, incurring . . . the risk of falling off one side or the other side of the limit while undoing, redoing, modifying this limit” (Minh-ha, 1991, p. 218).

Applying the method of radical reflexivity to her ethnographic research in a Japanese workplace, Dorinne K. Kondo (1990) illuminates how her multiple selves as a female Japanese American researcher were crafted and negotiated as an “open, shifting, ambiguous” (p. 24) hybridity constituted by the multifaceted elements of “daughter, guest, young woman, student, prodigal Japanese” (p. 13). This method has enabled her to capture her “incomplete” or “fragmented” Japanese identities in relation to the identities of her Japanese friends, relatives, coworkers, and acquaintances across the power-loaded boundaries “between ‘Self’ and ‘Other’—the Western cultural baggage” (p. 24).

Feminist radical reflexivity enables the qualitative researcher to be critically reflexive of not only her biases, but also “the continuously shifting nature” (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2007, p. 499) of her positionality, being situated in changing power relations from site to site and from time to time. Hesse-Biber and Piatelli (2007) state that the researcher’s subjectivity is subject to negotiation as she interacts with her subjects in the field. So there is no definite
and pure self and insider. Neither is there any fixed and permanent outsider and other. Instead, in order to obtain a full understanding of the researched, the researcher needs to persistently cross the borders of self and other, insider and outsider, while examining the historically specific power structures in which the borders are embedded.

Patricia Hill Collins (1986) has developed the concept of “outsider within” to demonstrate how Black women intellectuals draw on “their own personal and cultural biographies to analyze the interlocking oppressions of Black women” (Zavella, 1997, p. 43). Using this approach to maneuver through the personal/political, self/other borders of power, the qualitative researcher can reap “a product of the interaction and negotiation between researcher and researched” (Bettie, 2003, p. 22), or in Judith Stacey’s (1991) words, “a construction of self as well as of the other” (p. 115). Only then can researchers, as Hesse-Biber and Piatelli (2007) suggest, “navigate the research process through both their own shifting positionalities as well as those of the participants to produce relationships that are less hierarchical and research that is more inclusive and less distorted” (p. 500).

In this section, I introduced the relationship between feminist methodology and qualitative methodology. I showed how intersectionality, as a methodological approach developed by Black feminist scholars, helped me to analyze the intertwined power structures of the urban-rural divide and gender. It also helped me to address the simultaneity of oppression and privilege as well as the simultaneity of oppression and resistance, and to treat my participants as the experts in their own lives. I utilized the qualitative technique of reflexivity to be aware of how my positionality had shaped my research process. To collect data, I combined qualitative open-ended interviews with feminist in-depth interviewing
methods to explore how my participants experienced education, the urban-rural divide, and
gender. Valuing the processes of how they conceptualized the urban-rural divide and gender
and negotiated their schooling, I focused on how they made meaning out of their experiences
(Bogdan & Biklen, 2003).

**Practice in the Field**

**Reflexivity and Positionality**

In the research field, I remained reflexive and humble about the partiality of my vision
and my capacity to represent self and other (Stacey, 1991, p. 117). Instead of using my
theoretical perspectives to measure and judge the lives of my participants, I respected my
participants as the experts in their own lived experiences and remained open-minded about
their different perspectives. In addition, I treated myself as an object of scrutiny and
examined how who I am shaped what I did (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). While trying to
minimize my influence on my participants, I also wrote reflexive field notes and memos and I
transcribed my interview data as a means to scrutinize and record the role of my positionality
in my research. Here I reflect on the complex roles that my positionality played in my
research.

When transcribing my first interviews with four participants, Tian Di, Benshan Xing,
Erwan Qian and Caizhe San, I found that the data that they had given me was not as specific
and detailed as I expected. Therefore, I developed the following interview introduction in
order to get rich data full of specific examples:

My research aims to have a deep understanding of how rural women studying at
urban higher education institutions experience and understand the urban-rural divide
and gender. If you could use specific examples to describe your social and educational experiences, it would be very helpful for my dissertation research. These also include what barriers or difficulties you experienced during your education process from primary to higher education, and what you did to deal with these barriers and difficulties. I have a list of interview questions around this topic. While you respond to these questions, please don't be limited by them. Please freely express anything you feel is important to you. Do you have any questions? Should we start?

For each interview, I also pondered whether or not I should reveal my own rural background and when it would be most appropriate to reveal it. For most interviews, I revealed my rural background either at the beginning of the first interview when I chatted with them casually, or at the end of the first interview, or at the beginning of the second interview. In some cases, I shared my rural experience in the middle of the interview when it was time to prompt my participants to be more specific about their experiences. During the first interview with Dao Jiao, for example, she mentioned that sometimes when she told people at the university that her parents were farmers, they seemed to be very surprised and pretended not to hear what she said. This made her feel very sad. Expressing this, she bowed her head in silence. At this time I shared my rural background with her. I said, “I can understand you totally. Since I myself am from a rural area originally, I also experienced such unjust treatment and judgment.” Hearing this, she raised her head and uttered,

I am so angry, you know. They really care about it, care about your origin, but they pretend not to show it. (First Interview with Dao, 07/03/2011)
I prompted her further: “Can you specifically describe what happened?” She then told the following story,

It happened when I gave a trial lecture at the interview [when applying] for a part-time tutor job. After I finished the lecture, he [the interviewer] asked me, “Where are you from?” I then said that I am from Xinjiang. He said, “You don’t look like.” He then asked me what my parents are. I said, “They are farmers.” Then he opened his mouth widely and said nothing. (First Interview with Dao, 07/03/2011)

Revealing my own rural background made a difference in many, if not all, interviews. Another significant example is Erbai Shi. My first interview with her was more like a question-and-answer session because she tended to answer each question with one or two sentences and afterwards sat quietly waiting for more questions. The following example illustrates her initial style of response to my questions:

Lifang: Can you tell me something about yourself?

Erbai: In what aspect?

Lifang: Something that is important to you.

Erbai: Important?

Lifang: En, en. [I nodded and smiled]

Erbai: Er, the scope [of the question] is rather wide and I cannot have any idea.

Lifang: Could you describe your family?

Erbai: Oh, my family can be considered a very big family. Counting my parents my family has five people.

Observer’s Comment: She stopped and looked at me. So I nodded and said, “En,
en,” to encourage her to say more. She continued:

Erbai: There is my father, my mother, my younger brother, and sister.

(First Interview with Erbai, 09/16/2011)

During this first interview with her, I had to use more specific questions to encourage her to say more, e.g., “What is the educational level of your parents?” “What are your younger brother and sister doing?” “What are the occupations of your parents?” and “Could you describe your rural area and your experiences in your rural area?” I also asked her to specifically describe her primary school, middle school, and high school experiences, including her experiences with her teachers, classmates, and friends, her best and worst experiences at the university, when she felt most self-conscious about her rural background, people or events that had affected her life most significantly, etc. Reflecting on this interview, I wrote the following comment:

I noticed that she was overcautious at this first interview as she did not seem to want to reveal her specific life stories, but she tended to answer my questions with very simple and short answers, which turned the interview into a question-and-answer format. So this interview lacked free flowing dialogue. As I reflect on it now, I get a sense that she was overcautious maybe because I did not reveal my rural background, and thus did not build a trustful rapport with her. So at the next interview, I will reveal my rural background and see how it goes.

At the start of the second interview with her, I stated frankly that I was also from a rural area in China, and that I was very interested in doing this research because of my personal experiences as well as the experiences of some friends with rural backgrounds. She
smiled and nodded. I continued to say that I feel that this group of students deserves attention from society and scholars. I also restated to her that her name and her university’s name would be changed for confidentiality. I explained that I hoped that our interview could be free flowing just like the storytelling of her educational and social experiences. The second interview turned out to be much more successful than the first interview in that she used a lot of specific examples to describe how her high school teachers with rural backgrounds cared about her and other rural students and how she took advantage of her rural experiences to gain access to Elite National University 1. This is an example of the dialogue in the second interview:

Lifang: During our first interview, you said that the Independent Admission exam, particularly the interview session, disadvantages rural students. Can you elaborate on this?

Erbai: Yes. First I felt disheartened (hanxin) by the atmosphere [at the interview] because all the students attending this interview were urban. Everybody introduced themselves like, “I am good at calligraphy”; “I can play musical instruments”; or “I won awards in some contests like chess.” But when it was my turn to introduce myself, I found that I had nothing to say. So I only said what I believed in.

Lifang: Can you specify how you said what you believed in?

Erbai: Because I was from a rural area, I—actually, at the Independent Admission site—felt that if I demonstrated that I was rural, the teachers might purposely give me a way out [网开一面 wang kai yi mian, literally translated as leave loopholes for an escape from the law]. So I deliberately emphasized that I was rural.
Lifang: Then how did you emphasize this?

Erbai: Er, after I gave my name, I said that I am from a rural area, and how hard it is for me to receive education, implying that it was very difficult for me to get this opportunity [to attend this interview for the Independent Admission exam], because I had to pass the writing tests before attending the interview. I thought at that time that this kind of self-introduction might compensate for my disadvantage in not having any specialty like that of all the other students. I did not know whether it would help. I feel it helped a bit, because this way the teachers [interviewers] would understand, as most teachers have gone through this during that era and they may understand that rural students have a hard life.

Lifang: What do you mean that most teachers have gone through this during that era?

Erbai: I mean that the teachers may have undergone this hardship. They may have experienced the rural life. For example, I have many high school teachers who are from rural areas. My chemistry teacher, who was originally from a rural area, treated rural students very well. Another teacher who taught Chinese also gave special attention to rural students. She was also from a rural area. During her childhood her family was very poor. It was through studying to get into a university that she changed her life. So she cared about rural students very, very much.

Lifang: How did she care about rural students?

Erbai: For example, she often talked with rural students, or gave some cakes and gifts to rural students at festival events.
Lifang: Can you say how she treated you?

Erbai: She often talked with me to motivate me to study. If at some exams I did not do well, she came to me for some conversations.

Lifang: For example, er, can you give an example as to what happened that this teacher went to talk to you, and what you talked about?

Erbai: Er, the most impressive one was that at the beginning, when I just went to high school, I did not understand what level the high school students could get to. When I was in middle school, I could get very good scores in my Chinese subject. Of the total score of 120, I could get 117 or so. But after attending high school, out of the total score of 150, I just got around 120. So I could not accept this and cried. Seeing this, the teacher came to talk to me and helped me analyze the situation. She said things like, “120 out of 150 is already very good. Don’t be narrow-minded, as at high school there are many tests. Don’t take one test too seriously.” This kind of comforting words.

Lifang: How did it make you feel when the teacher said that?

Erbai: I felt that the teacher’s words were very right and reasonable. I felt very warm that she was concerned about me.

Lifang: At the Independent Admission interview, how did you reveal your rural background?

Erbai: I just related it to my name. I said that my parents gave me this name because they hoped that I would be strong and have endurance when encountering difficulties in my life. (Second Interview with Erbai, 11/22/2011)
At the end of the second interview, when I asked her to reflect on how she felt about sharing her experiences with me, a Chinese woman researcher with a rural background who is now doing her doctoral study in a university in the USA, she said that the reason she could talk to me “freely” about her rural experiences was because I shared a rural background with her. As she said,

Actually, when I got to know that you are also from a rural area originally, I felt so warm. So I wanted to share my experiences with you because I felt that you could understand me, unlike my classmates and roommates now. . . . With my current roommates at the university, I don’t tell my experiences so fully because for them some of these experiences are just laughs. Like the bad relationship between my mom and grandpa—it’s so hard to speak with them, because it’s a family scandal. Besides, when I really talked about some of these experiences with urban students, they always laughed first and then asked me why. For example, when I said that my mom and grandpa’s relationship is bad, they asked, “Why is it? Two families live their own lives. What’s the matter?” But when speaking to you, you can understand.

(Second Interview with Erbai, 11/22/2011)

She continued that when she talked with her urban classmates about her values, which she inherited from her mother, she found that they tended to reject her view. As she is the oldest of three siblings from a farming family, and because her mother spent a lot of money on her education, her mother hopes that she will earn and give some money back to the family after she graduates and finds a job. While Erbai thinks that her mother is right and that she should follow her mother’s wishes after graduation, she found that her urban roommates and
classmates could not understand, and sometimes they even criticized her view. These urban students are the only child in their families, and their parents have stable jobs and savings in the bank too. So “their objective,” in Erbai’s words, “is not to ask for money from their family after graduation” (Second Interview with Erbai, 11/22/2011). But Erbai has a younger brother and a younger sister, and her parents don’t have stable jobs but just depend on farming for living, so she wants to share the burden of her parents and support the family after graduation. Feeling that her urban roommates and classmates do not understand her, she declines to tell her experiences “freely” and “fully” to them. My revealing of my own rural background at the start of the second interview dispelled her doubts about my background and brought our relationship closer; thus, she could feel free to tell her experiences. This was not true of the first interview, during which she was overcautious.

Similar to Erbai, Jizhu was very cautious during the first interview and replied to my questions with brief sentences. At the beginning of my second interview with her, I shared my rural background with her. As a result, she shared rich stories about her rural experiences. At the end of the second interview, when I asked her to reflect on how she felt about participating in this research and sharing her experiences with me, she expressed that having a common rural background brought us closer together. As she said,

Since I knew you are also from a rural area, I felt that we had empathy because we shared that background. If you were from an urban area, I would feel that, first, you might not understand what I would say. Second, I would have distance from you in my heart. . . . For example, when I talk about my childhood experiences, I feel that they [urban people] may not understand me. For example, my mom had to sell blood to pay for my school fees. They might feel strange. They might not understand why
my parents could not pay that small amount of money. But at that time, it was exactly true, really like that. Also, I have cooked since I was four or five years old. They definitely would not understand [why a four- or five-year-old should cook], but might feel that I was abused [she chuckled]. They would think that, at four or five years old, a child cannot even walk steadily. They would judge that my parents were abusing me. They definitely would not understand why my parents were like that. (First Interview with Jizhu, 11/29/2011)

Thus, if I were a researcher without a rural Chinese background, Jizhu would have been cautious in describing how her mother had to sell blood to pay for her school fees. She would have been concerned that the researcher might “feel strange” about her. She also would have been afraid to reveal her childhood experiences with cooking at such an early age. She would have thought the researcher could not understand her but would instead judge that her parents had abused her. However, the reality, as she explained, was that her parents, particularly her mother, had no choice but to work day and night to make a living for the impoverished family and could hardly find time to cook. My revealing of my rural background at the beginning of the second interview dispelled her worries and encouraged her to describe her rural experiences to me.

Resonating with Erbai and Jizhu, Zhiduo Shi also remarked that my rural background made her feel closer to me, and it was easier for her to tell her stories frankly to me. As she said,

I feel that you can understand me more easily. Of course I can tell [my stories] more easily to you too. If you were an urban person, I might not be that candid about my predicament and my feeling of inferiority because I would worry that you could not understand me, or that you would look down upon me. Because of our common
background, I feel that you can understand me. So I am willing to tell. (Second Interview with Zhiduo, 11/18/2011)

She continued that, besides my rural background, another important reason why she was willing to share her experiences with me was because of my status as a graduate student researcher. As she said,

The fact that you are doing your PhD study made me feel that your study belongs to academic research. It made me feel, how can I say? That is, it is similar to nonprofit, or it has the nonprofit characteristic. So I am willing to tell. If a person wanted to use this to make money, no matter how much money she would give me, I would not be willing to tell. (Second Interview with Zhiduo, 11/18/2011)

For Zhiduo, my double subjectivities of sharing a rural background with her and being a graduate student researcher motivated her to tell her stories and share her experiences with me.

However, not every participant placed such a weight on my rural background. Some participants commented that they did not care about my rural background but just wanted to share their perspectives and play a meaningful role in my research. For example, Wuchang Ci, a senior majoring in biology at Municipal College, explained that she was candid about telling her experiences to me, but not because I shared a similar rural background with her. As she stated flatly,

If you were an urban person, I would have been so candid too as this research is so meaningful. I hope that this research will affect people in the future. I sincerely hope that this research can promote educational reform and improve the situation of rural
students. . . . I hope that your research can be publicized and read by people in power and involve them in action, overall changing something. So I think my doing this [participating in this research] is very meaningful. (Second Interview with Wuchang, 11/06/2011)

In addition, she said that my gender as a woman affected her storytelling.

Wuchang: Since you are a woman, I can speak out with no extra concerns. If you were a man, I might have some scruples when talking about living details and emotions. I might not have outed with the whole story. [She laughed and I laughed with her]

Lifang: For example, in what aspect would you have extra concerns if I were a man, and what story would you not tell in whole?

Wuchang: Er, I feel freer when speaking to women about emotions than when speaking to men. Take the pretending-weak thing as an example, as I just talked about. [If you were a man] I might not have said [that I pretend to be weak in front of males]. I don’t know whether or not I would be so specific, but I think I would be shy to speak about that in front of males.

Lifang: Why would you feel shy to speak about it in front of males?

Wuchang: Pretending to be weak is not done in front of women, but done in front of men [She laughed]. I would feel embarrassed to tell a male researcher that I pretend to be weak in front of males. (Second Interview with Wuchang, 11/06/2011)

Wuchang explained that the fact that she could speak about her tendency of pretending to be weak is because I am a woman. As she stressed above, “Pretending to be weak is not done in
front of women, but done in front of men.” So my gender as a woman relieved her from worrying about pretending to be weak and made her feel free to tell the whole story of her experiences of pretending to be weak.

**A distant positionality fosters a sense of security.** Several participants expressed their sense of security in telling their stories to me due to the distance between her, the researched, and me, the researcher. Qiao He, for example, stated that the unfamiliarity between us made her feel more secure:

> Since we are not familiar with each other, you will not be involved in my living in the future. So the distance between us molded my security. (Second Interview with Qiao, 09/10/2011)

Dao Jiao also said that she told her stories to me because of our unfamiliarity:

> I feel very good to fish out things on my mind, because those things are unspeakable to people who are familiar with me during my daily life. Speaking to an unfamiliar person, I feel afraid of nothing and thus can speak whatever is on my mind. I feel that we won’t be in contact with each other in the future, and we don’t have any conflicting interests too, so I am at ease telling my experiences. Besides, I also get pleasure from pouring out what’s on my mind that has been lying buried deep in my heart. (Second Interview with Dao, 07/30/2011)

Thus, like Qiao, Dao felt secure when sharing her stories and experiences with me, a stranger.

Tian also explained that she had a sense of security with me because of our unfamiliarity. As she said,

> I feel secure with both people who I am familiar with and people who are complete
strangers. But interacting with people who are somewhat familiar, I feel embarrassed. If I am completely familiar with somebody, I must have known her and trusted her. So I can open my mind to her. Interacting with a complete stranger, I feel secure too, because I don’t have to worry about undertaking some consequence. Since your research will use pseudonyms, I don’t have to worry about being hurt or hurting anybody. So I have opened my mind to you. (Second Interview with Tian, 07/29/2011)

Resonating with Qiao, Dao, and Tian, Gai Ci also held the view that when talking to me, she did not have to withhold anything because of our distance. Neither did she have to worry about being judged. As she said,

When I talk to people around me, I must be on guard, because we live together. For example, if I speak badly about somebody [to people around me], I may sound humming around her and destroy the harmony. But when I speak to you, I don’t have to worry about this because you don’t know her, and you are standing in a neutral position. So I can speak freely to you. (Second Interview with Gai, 09/12/2011)

The distance between my participants and me, the researcher, provided security for Qiao, Dao, Tian, and Gai so that they shared their experiences with me.

**My manner and dress bring a sense of comfort.** During the research process, I was aware that my manner should be low profile and modest. As my participants were all rural female students in higher education settings, I dressed myself as a student, with a bob hairstyle, usually wearing a shirtdress and sandals in summer, a jacket, coat, trousers, and boots in winter, and shouldering a backpack. Many participants expressed that they felt very
comfortable interacting with me. Erqian Bai, for example, said that the reason she could tell her life stories in detail was because I was originally from a rural area on the one hand, and on the other hand, my style of dress made her feel very comfortable.

Erqian: If you were from an urban area originally or if you wore very stylish makeup to walk on click-clack high-heel stilettos toward me, I would have had the feeling that I did not want to speak so much with you, because this type of person makes me feel that she will not want to listen to me seriously. So I would not want to tell [if you wore something like that].

Lifang: Where is the idea from, er, why wouldn’t you want to tell your experience to me if I wore stylish makeup and walked on stilettos toward you?

Erqian: Because that kind of person, that kind of person gives me the feeling that she is full of finicky airs. Her wearing of that makes me feel that sitting together with her, I would have to be very careful. If my water cup accidentally splashed water on her, she would wipe for a long time. I feel that kind of person is flashy without substance.

Lifang: What do you mean by a person who wears stylish makeup?

Erqian: Stylish, er, is that her full dressing is famous and precious, which makes you feel that you dare not touch her. Once you touch her, maybe her clothes would be spoiled. It seems that her full dress is like decoration. If somebody dresses like that and wants to listen to me, I would feel that it’s not easy and simple to approach her.

So I would have had a psychological distance already. (Second Interview with Erqian, 11/24/2011)

I was glad that I wore a pair of flat-heeled boots instead of high-heel stilettos to
conduct interviews with her. Otherwise, I would have been rendered untrustworthy, and thus, unworthy of listening to her stories.

My intersectional social location of being a Chinese woman and graduate student researcher with a rural background, therefore, affected my participants’ storytelling in multiple ways. My rural background made some participants feel close and willing to tell their experiences, while some participants did not care about my rural background; rather my gender made them feel more comfortable about sharing their gendered experiences of “pretending to be weak.” My status as a researcher brought security to some participants in that they did not have to worry that I would be getting into their personal lives after the interview. My plain dress as a student and my humble manner also made some of them feel more comfortable interacting with me.

**Open-Ended In-Depth Interviews**

I used the feminist qualitative method of open-ended, in-depth interview to collect data for this research for two main reasons. First, the voices of rural female university students have been ignored or silenced by social and scholarly discourses. This method provides them a means to speak out. Second, this method treats my participants as “the experts on their own lived experiences” (Delpit, 1995, p. 47; Banks, 2006, p. 64). “Using in-depth interviews to talk to women,” as Cuadraz and Uttal (1999) contend, can “[make] them the center of discourse and [position] them as experts and producers of knowledge about their lives” (p. 159). In doing so, this method opens up spaces for them to claim their expert positions and “represent their experiences in their own voices” (Cuadraz & Uttal, 1999, p. 160). Thus, utilizing this method helped me place the voices and lived experiences of the rural female
university students that I interviewed at the center of this research.

When I used this method to conduct fieldwork, I posed open-ended questions (contingent upon each specific context) to pursue rich data filled with details and examples that reveal the participants’ lives and experiences. I avoided asking either/or questions or leading questions that could be answered simply by “yes” or “no.” I usually started each interview with such questions as “Can you tell me something about yourself?” “Can you describe the village or area where you grew up?” or “Can you talk about your family?” To learn about how my participants experienced the rural-urban border crossing, I asked them, “What was it like for you when you first arrived at the urban campus?” To get their perspectives about their identity, I asked such questions as, “How do you identify yourself?” “Please describe when you feel most conscious about your rural identity or background” and “What does being a rural woman mean to you?” Appendix C lists more detailed questions that I used for the interviews. These questions were never fixed; rather I adjusted them in each specific interview context.

During each interview, I avoided pursuing general information and opinions, and tried to elicit specific perspectives about what the subjects experienced, what happened, what they did, how they felt about what happened and what they did, and how they made sense of what they experienced, etc. For example, after Dao Jiao described how her male classmate at the university called her a “strong woman,” I asked, “How did you feel when that male student called you a ‘strong woman?’” She replied,

I felt, er, [I wondered] what I did that made me appear like a strong woman. Then I told myself that I should reflect on this, that I should not be that ambitious in the
future, and that I should care for males’ face. This was my thought at that time.

(Second Interview with Dao, 07/30/2011)

Thus, the open-ended interview question created an open atmosphere for Dao to share her specific perspectives about what she experienced.

I also combined the qualitative strategy of deep listening with the feminist in-depth “listening for ‘gaps and absences in women’s talk’” (DeVault & Gross, 2007, p. 183). In order to capture the “contextuality, depth, and nuance” (Stacey, 1991, p. 118) of women’s experiences from each interview, I listened very carefully to the kind of talk “where standard vocabulary is inadequate, and where a respondent tries to speak from experience and finds language wanting” (DeVault, 1990, p. 103). I also took note of the subtle tones, intonations, pauses, and silences as well as emotional responses (anger, excitement, sadness, and happiness, etc.) during each interview, because these may carry “meanings [that] might lie beyond explicit speech” (DeVault & Gross, 2007, p. 183) and teach me about women’s voices in ways that might have been belied by standard verbal language.

For example, during the first interview with Hua Cheng, she talked calmly and with a free flow about how her mother supported her education; but as soon as she started talking about the reason why her mother did so, her tone turned low with feeble shivering; she sighed with sadness and said, “She felt that she herself was really very sad being shut in the out-of-the-way mountain.” Noticing her tone change from calmness to sadness and subsequent silence, I asked her about how her father regarded her education (as at the start of the interview she stated that she has a father, a mother, and an older sister). Hua replied, “From my perspective, he belongs to the kind whose thoughts are very conservative.” I asked
more specifically, “What does it mean that his thoughts are conservative?” This question provoked her to tell the following detailed story:

Feudal. When I was at grade 11, he still did not like me to go to school. Since attending the [high] school, I had earned a scholarship, which covered my tuition. He only needed to provide living expenses, about 200 [$31.75 USD] or 300 [$47.62 USD] yuan every month. But he still opposed my going to school. My mom was very supportive. She always quarreled with my father about supporting my education, but she never told me. She only said to me, “Since you are determined to continue school, you should focus on studying.” During a summer holiday at grade 11, my father asked me to cook. How can I say? At school, I never cooked. I did not know how at that time, but I put seasoning before I put vegetables in the frying pot. Then my father lost his temper. He said some words that made me cry whenever I thought about them. He shouted at me. Then my mom said, “What use is it for you to shout at her? She has already been doing so well, since she hasn’t been home for such a long time. She did not mean to make a mistake. It’s not that she cannot cook, but only that she forgot it.” But my father was a type of fierce person. He quarreled with my mom for a long time and also slapped me in my face. He said things that seemed like he was meaning good for me. He said, “If you cannot cook now, you will suffer after you marry in the future.” (First Interview with Hua, 07/28/2011)

I thought that Hua’s experience with her father illustrated her situation as a rural female, therefore, to prompt her to tell more about her experiences with her father, I developed more specific interview questions, such as these: “What did your father say to forbid you from
going to school?” “Can you describe more specifically what your father said to your mother when they quarreled?” “What did your mother say?” “How did you feel at that time?” “How did you respond?” “How did your father treat your older sister?” These questions elicited more in-depth responses about how her father preferred boys to girls, felt disappointed that her mother only gave birth to two girls including Hua and her older sister, strongly forbade Hua from spending money on her schooling, and even said to Hua’s mother that he would divorce her if she continued to support Hua’s education, and how her mother insisted on supporting Hua despite her father’s threat.

My strategy of deep listening can also be demonstrated by my interview with Renzi Wei. When she described how her advisor treated her unfairly because he did not allow her to do research in the field outside campus but did allow male students to do so, she said,

He thinks that it’s not convenient for a girl to travel and live outside. So he worried a lot. For example, if a girl lives outside and meets a bad man, what would happen? . . . Actually, his intention is good. He cares about you and doesn’t want you to get hurt.
But it is actually male chauvinism. [After saying this, she was silent]. (Second Interview with Renzi, 09/18/2011)

Using deep listening, I caught the contradiction in her perspective about her advisor’s good intention that was also “male chauvinism.” I noted down her silence after she made a quick judgment about her advisor as a male chauvinist. Catching this silence, I applied the feminist in-depth interviewing method to “disclose” (Dunbar, Rodriguez, & Parker, 2002, p. 294) my own perspective, “‘filling in’ what has been incompletely said” (DeVault, 1990, p. 104). As I said to Renzi,
Because I am also from a rural area, I have experienced the different expectations of people in urban settings of me as a woman. For example, I did the same hard labor as men when I lived in the rural area. But after arriving at the urban university campus, I found that some men held the idea of protecting women by forbidding them to do this kind of work. (Second Interview with Renzi, 09/18/2011)

Observing that she frequently nodded and said, “Right! Right! Right!” I continued,

I feel that their behavior of trying to protect me actually inhibited my free development. The previous normal and natural behavior that I had developed at my rural home was rendered abnormal under the males’ eyes in the urban setting. (Second Interview with Renzi, 09/18/2011)

Hearing this, she became so excited that she articulated her perspective:

Right! Right! Right! Yes! Yes! Yes! I accept this view. Actually, his intention is good. I know that he means good for me, but sometimes I feel very aggrieved because I think that as an advisor he should respect what his students really think and want. Since she expressed that what she wants is better for her development, an advisor should try his best to meet her needs. Anyway, I want to go outside [to do research] like those male students. (Second Interview with Renzi, 09/18/2011)

Following these words, she sighed sadly and said, “He doesn’t know what I really want after all.” Noting this sigh, I asked her, “For example, can you specify how he doesn’t know what you really want?” This question further provoked her to tell a detailed story that when her mother fell sick after her advisor had recommended her to study abroad in Poland, he could not give her any emotional support, but instead pushed her to go abroad. As she told this
I feel that my advisor just trains you in his own way, but he doesn’t know what a student really wants. For example, there is another thing that I have been sad about all along. At that time my mom’s health was very bad. It was never the case that my mom herself did not want me to study abroad, but she just felt very sad. She thought that this daughter would leave her and she would not see her for one year or more. So she felt very sad. At that time I felt very sad too. I thought, “What if my mom cannot be cured? I would feel very regretful if I really left her to go abroad.” So I talked to my advisor about this. But he said, “Your parents will pass away sooner or later, but your life is still long. You cannot do that [stay with them]. What use is it if you stay at home? Will you accompany them every day? You should consider yourself.” At that time, I felt that there was such a distance between him and me [she sobbed]. Maybe because he is male, his thinking is different from that of women. I don’t know exactly. Anyway, I felt very uncomfortable. (Second Interview with Renzi, 09/18/2011)

Noticing that in this narrative she did not say how she talked to this advisor, I asked her, “What did you say to this advisor at that time?” She responded,

I did not say much. Because I cried very, very badly at that time, so badly that I could hardly talk. I myself wanted to go abroad to pursue my study, but my family’s situation would not let me go. I found that when I told my advisor about this, he could not understand me at all. He went so far as to say, “Your parents will pass away sooner or later.” Then I felt that I was not understood by him at all. Besides, I
thought, “It is easy for you to say.” After all, he is the eldest child of his parents. He is now over 40 years old and his parents are very healthy. He said that he would face this issue too. At that time I was thinking, but did not speak out, “If I were over 40 years old and my parents were very healthy, then I would not worry so much. But now I am just over 20 years old. If my parents would pass away when I am so young, I would suffer great agonies.” (Second Interview with Renzi, 09/18/2011)

The methods of catching absences and silences and “disclosing” my own perspective that I applied in this interview with Renzi provided a way for me to acquire more knowledge about her prior experiences behind these absences and silences (Dunbar, Rodriguez, & Parker, 2002, p. 294). Renzi, the informant, and I, the interviewer, worked collaboratively to fill in the gaps and uncover the elements embedded in her experiences that could have been ignored by standard interview methods without the deep listening.

In regard to topics that needed further clarification, I employed “the words that the subjects [have used] in describing themselves” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003, p. 190) to raise such questions as “I hear that you just talked about . . . Is this what you mean?” or “Just now (or during our last interview) you said . . . Maybe I am wrong; please correct me if I am wrong. Did you mean . . . ?” During my first interview with Shi Zhi, for example, when I asked her in what way her rural culture, customs, or values affected her life, she said,

Maybe my idea that the success that I achieve in the future is not just my own personal success. That is, I strive not just for myself, but for my whole family. If I am successful, it can be of help to the whole clan. (First Interview with Shi, 08/21/2011)
To get further clarification, during the second interview I used the words that she used during the first interview to question her further:

During our last interview you said that the success that you achieve in the future is not just your own personal success. You strive not just for yourself, but also for your whole family. If you are successful, it can be of help to your whole clan. Maybe I am wrong, Shi. Please correct me if I am wrong. [She nodded]. Did you mean your personal success is not counted as real success for you, and only if your success can be of help to your parents and siblings it is a real success? (Second Interview with Shi, 11/13/2011)

This question prompted her to elaborate on how her family (that is, her parents) conveyed their expectation of her and how she internalized this expectation.

My family, my parents, said this to me: “If you can get a good job in Beijing in the future, you can help support the family.” I also think so and hope that I can be successful. Because only by being so [successful], can I create more opportunities for all members in my family. Yes, I have this kind of thinking. (Second Interview with Shi, 11/13/2011)

At the end of each interview I asked the participant to say what motivated her to participate in this research. I also asked them to reflect on how they felt about participating in this research as well as what it was like for them to share their experiences and tell their stories to me, a Chinese woman with a rural background who received her graduate education in the US. This technique elicited rich data about the complex roles my positionality played in this research, which I discussed in the above section.
Unexpected Obstacles Encountered and Lessons Learned

I remember that, before I went into the field, my friend, a doctoral student in the humanities at Syracuse University (SU) who is originally from China, reminded me that this research is very meaningful but it might be difficult to get enough participants because, in her view, many rural female students do not want to come out to identify themselves as rural. My research, to some extent, verified her view—but not because I did not get enough participants. Instead, it was because of the unexpected obstacles that I encountered when I posed the following interview questions: “How do you identify yourself?” or “How do you define your rural female identity?” Originally I designed these questions because I wanted to find out how my participants make sense of their identity, particularly how they make meaning of their rural female identity. After getting into the field, I found out that many, if not all, participants, were puzzled by these questions, and some expressed their discomfort.

This issue did not come to my attention until July 20, 2011, when I conducted the first interview with Cui Zhen. Before interviewing Cui, I had completed the first round of interviews with Erwan Qian, Benshan Xing, Caizhe San, Dao Jiao, and Zuo Chao. In response to my interview question, “How do you identify yourself?” Erwan replied, “Now I am a university student” (06/24/2011); Caizhe answered, “I identify myself as a contemporary university student” (06/25/2011); Benshan Xing, the third-year master’s student who was about to graduate when the interview was conducted, answered, “Now I am a student . . . and soon will be a job-seeker” (06/27/2011); Bujiao Gou replied, “I am peasants’ daughter” (06/30/2011). When I posed this question to Dao Jiao, she asked me instead, “Identify myself? Do you mean back to my childhood or now?” I said, “Now.” She
answered, “Now I am a female university student” [she smiled]. I pursued further, “How did you identify yourself when it was back to your childhood?” She said, “During my childhood, I felt very inferior. My family’s situation was not good. Then I felt that I was a child that my parents did not like” (07/03/2011) (Later during the interview, I asked her to specify why during her childhood her parents did not like her, which provoked rich data about how she was discriminated against because of her gender, as mentioned in Chapter 2). When I asked Zuo Chao this question, she responded, “I feel, er, as the daughter of peasants [she giggled], I don’t feel inferior at all. Instead, I feel very proud. In fact, I feel that I have wider knowledge than some urban people” (First Interview with Zuo, 07/06/2011). Zuo’s response manifests her internal negotiation with a rural female identity that is perceived to be inferior by the dominant discourse in Chinese society. She tended to resist this dominant discourse by identifying herself as being “proud” of a rural female identity and “having” wider knowledge than some urban people.”

On July 20, 2011, I encountered the first obstacle when I interviewed Cui, a sophomore at Non-Elite National University 1. When I asked her “How do you identify yourself?” she seemed very confused, “How do I identify myself? I don’t know.” I made the question more specific, “How do you define your rural female identity?” She frowned and said, “I am a rural female. Why should I define it?” I explained to her, “Different people define their identity differently. Take rural identity as an example. Some people define it by their hukou; some define it by their home origin; some define it by their living experiences.” Hearing this, she answered, “I should define myself by hukou. I am rural, no matter whether it is because I had rural hukou [before entering the university], or due to my living experiences. I am rural, for
sure. I think it is a kind of geography thing” (First Interview with Cui, 07/20/2011).

After completing this interview and while transcribing the data, I wrote the following comment:

It seemed that Cui was confused by my question, “How do you identify yourself?”
Maybe this question sounded very general to her. When I asked her, “How do you define your rural female identity?” she frowned and sounded hesitant to reply.
During my second interview, I should ask her to reflect on how she felt about being asked, “How do you identify yourself?” and “How do you define your rural female identity?”

I called her to make an appointment for the second interview. However, she was not available until two months later, on September 24, 2011. But I noted this as an unexpected problem that I encountered and was mindful of it when I interviewed other participants. It turned out that Cui was not the only one who was confused by the question, “How do you identify yourself?”

When I interviewed Zhiduo on July 26, 2011, for example, she was confused too. This was our interaction:

Lifang: How do you identify yourself?
Zhiduo: What do you mean by “identify?”
Lifang: Er, it means, how do you define your identity?
Zhiduo: What is “identity?”
Lifang: That is, how do you define yourself as a rural female student?
Zhiduo: Hukou.
Noticing that I could not get her rich perspective about her identity, I asked her directly if the terms “identify” (in Chinese: jieding shenfen), and “identity” (shenfen) were abstract and general for her. She said that these terms sounded unfamiliar to her. I discussed with her how I could change these questions. After I showed my list of interview questions to her, she said that “What does being a rural woman mean to you?” might be easier for participants to understand.

I noted Zhiduo’s suggestion, but did not delete the question, “How do you identify yourself?” from my list of interview questions, because some of my participants as mentioned earlier did not experience any difficulty with this question. I also read some sample dissertations and found Cerri Bank’s list of interview questions that she used for her dissertation. She used the term “describe” in her sample interview questions, “How do you describe your gender? Why?” “How do you describe your socio-economic status? Why?” “How do you describe your race and/or ethnicity?” I borrowed the term “describe” that Banks used for her interview to replace “define” and reframed the interview question as “How do you describe yourself as a rural female?” This proved to be successful when I interviewed some participants. Take Hua as an example.

Lifang: How do you identify yourself?

Hua: In what aspect?

Lifang: How do you describe yourself as a rural female?

Hua: Actually, I feel nothing. I don’t think that I should feel inferior. After all, we all got here because we worked hard. Even if there are some places where I fall short, I can offset it through learning. Actually, after studying and living here for one
semester, I still felt inferior. Every time when I attend class activities, there are many things I don’t know. For example, before coming to study here, I seldom had access to the Internet. But after coming here, I need to use the Internet and computers to do everything. When I first went to classes, I felt so miserable because I did not even know how to turn on the computer. (First Interview with Hua, 07/28/2011)

Thus, the more specific question of “How do you describe yourself as a rural female” provoked Hua to describe her contradictory self-perceptions. While she did not think that she should feel inferior, she still embodied that feeling because of her unfamiliarity with the Internet and the computer.

The same question that provoked Hua, however, was difficult for Linchu. When I asked Linchu, “How do you identify yourself?” she replied, “How do I identify myself? What does it mean?” I asked, “How do you describe your identity as a rural female?” She still felt confused, “How do I describe my identity as a rural female? I don’t know.” Then I used the question that Zhiduo suggested, “What does being a rural woman mean to you?” This question prompted her to speak in detail about her experiences with the urban-rural divide in the university setting:

Ah! Now I, I feel that since I am from a rural area, even though I achieved well in my study from primary to high school, after getting to the university I found I could not catch up with urban students in my class. Because we received different education [prior to university], now I feel that I have a gap with urban students. Take English as an example. These urban students may have better economic situations in their families so they received better training in English. But for us, what we learned
is mute English. Even though we achieved high scores like over 80 or 90 in exams at that time [prior to university] and we felt very good at that time, after getting here we felt actually very bad because we could not speak English at all. What we learned was just how to take exams. So I feel, isn’t there a book called *I Can Sit With You Drinking Coffee After Striving for 18 Years*? Later there comes another book which describes the reality of the current urban-rural disparity and it's called *I Still Cannot Sit With You Drinking Coffee Even After Striving for 18 Years*. I feel it’s so true. That is, no matter how hard we rural students work, we still cannot catch up with those urban students from well-off families. (First Interview with Linchu, 08/17/2011)

From the interview with Linchu, I learned that when my participants found it difficult to describe their identity, the question “What does being a rural woman mean to you?” could prompt my participants to describe their experiences related to their identity. So at interviews with participants after Linchu, I used this question when they struggled with responding to “How do you describe your identity?” This question, “What does being a rural woman mean to you?” elicited rich data that demonstrates how my participants negotiated their rural female identity.

During my first interview with Qiao He, when I asked, “How do you identify yourself?” she replied by asking, “Er, what does it mean?” I explained, “It means how you describe your identity.” She remained puzzled: “How do I describe my identity?” So I changed to the question, “What does being a rural woman mean to you?” This time she replied,

Er, maybe, er, I don’t have any big problem with this. Maybe sometimes what other
people think, or maybe their judgment will have some effect. That is, maybe they think rural kids are limited in their thinking and understanding of things and don’t have as wide knowledge as urban kids. But I myself don’t think so. (First Interview with Qiao, 08/24/2011)

Similarly, during my first interview with Yuqin Xiao when I posed this question, “How do you describe your identity,” she felt confused and asked in reply, “What does it mean?” When I explained, “What is the most important identity to you?” She still felt puzzled, “Ah? Can you be more specific?” So I specified, “What does being a rural woman mean to you?” This time she replied,

I don’t feel very, very, because I am from a rural area. . . . Some people may think that rural people are inferior compared to urban people, like rubes. But I never had such an idea. That is, I never had such an inferior feeling. Some people may think that you are rural so you don’t have as wide knowledge as urban kids. But I think that there is nothing I should mind. (First Interview with Yuqin, 08/24/2011)

Thus, the question, “What does being a rural woman mean to you?” provoked Linchu, Qiao, and Yuqin to describe their negotiation with their rural identity, which is attached to the stereotype of inferiority constructed by the dominant discourse in Chinese society. My friend at SU was correct that many rural female students in China might refuse to identify themselves as rural because of that stereotype. While my participants such as Yuqin and Qiao tended to resist the stereotype, which perhaps was one of the reasons why they were willing to participate in this research, they tended to struggle with conflicting self-perceptions when they were asked to identify themselves. This demonstrates that some rural female students
have to undertake extra emotional labor in order to identify themselves as rural.

Even though this question, “What does being a rural woman mean to you?” was provocative for participants Linchu, Qiao, and Yuqin, it was not effective for Cui when I posed this question to her during the second interview. She replied, “It means nothing to me” (Second Interview with Cui, 09/24/2011). But when I asked her how she felt about being asked, “How do you identify yourself?” she said that she did not understand me, and when I asked her, “How do you define your rural female identity?” she felt very uncomfortable.

Cui: I did not understand you when you asked me the question how to identify myself. I did not know how to say. Later you asked me how to define my rural identity. At that time, I felt very uncomfortable, do you know?

Lifang: Why did you feel uncomfortable?

Cui: You [posted the recruitment that you] want to interview rural female students, and I am a rural female student. Then, later, you explained, like, even if a girl, her hukou is urban, can she still identify herself as a rural girl?

Lifang: Yes.

Cui: Why so? Or do you mean that even if a girl has rural hukou, she can still identify herself as an urban person? How do you classify rural and urban? What are your criteria?

Lifang: Everybody may define their identity differently. They have different criteria. I define myself as a woman with a rural background because I had rural hukou before getting into a university; I lived in a rural area for almost 20 years, and had rural living experiences. The reason I asked that question was because I wanted to
understand how each of my participants makes sense of her identity, as different people may describe their identity differently and I want to include their diverse perspectives about their identity.

Cui: Then, in your interview, is there anybody who has urban hukou but identified herself as rural?

Lifang: Yes, there are some.

Cui: Then why did she identify herself as rural?

Lifang: Because she has rural living experiences.

Cui: Ah? What else?

Lifang: What do you mean by what else?

Cui: I mean, is there anybody who identifies herself as urban because she thinks her quality is high, has better economic status, and received better education?

Lifang: This is a very interesting point that you brought up. Thank you so much. Actually, all my participants self-identified themselves as rural. None of them defined themselves as urban because of their quality, economic status, and education.

Cui: So do you mean that the criteria for classifying rural and urban are not based on one’s capacity or quality?

Lifang: No, I did not set up such criteria. Neither did I agree with it. Actually, one of the reasons why I am conducting this research is because I want to break down such criteria, because these criteria are based on stereotypes of rural people as being less capable or having lower quality than urban people. The stereotypes and criteria are wrong.
Cui: I see now. But at that time [when you asked me those interview questions], I felt very uncomfortable. I never thought some girls with urban hukou could define themselves as rural because they lived or had experiences in rural areas. I never thought about this. I only thought what I understood just now, so I felt uncomfortable.

Lifang: What did you understand? Or why did the interview questions about identity make you feel uncomfortable?

Cui: Because I didn’t realize that some urban people can define themselves as rural. I think that I misunderstood your question. My misunderstanding made me feel uncomfortable.

Lifang: Can you specify what you mean when you say that you misunderstood my question?

Cui: The quality issue. That is to say, urban people [are perceived to] have higher quality than rural people. If a person is classified as rural because his or her quality is low, I cannot accept it. After hearing your explanation, now I feel that I misunderstood your question. (Second Interview with Cui, 09/24/2011)

Cui’s reflective narrative fascinated me, because it provided me with rich data that indicated her negotiation with the stereotypes imposed upon her rural identity by the dominant discourse of quality that associates rural identity with low quality. From her narrative, I came to understand that the reason why she felt uncomfortable with my question, “How do you define your rural female identity?” is because she was thinking that I was using the dominant criteria to distinguish rural from urban people. In other words, her discomfort was because of
her internal resistance to the dominant discourse.

I apologized to Cui for the discomfort I brought to her during the interview and expressed my appreciation to her that she pointed this out to me because it could help me with my future interviews with other participants. She smiled and said that she was very glad that what she said can be useful to me. I asked her to give me some suggestions on conducting my future interviews, she said that the question “How do you define your rural female identity?” easily leads people to misunderstand and that I should change it. She remarked,

Maybe this question should not be asked at the beginning of the interview. After you chat for a while, you can say, “You say that you are rural. Is it because you lived in a rural area or you were born in a rural area?” In a tactful way, instead of a standardized question. (Second Interview with Cui, 09/24/2011)

Learning from Cui, I got to know that “How do you define your rural female identity?” is not an appropriate question to ask. So I deleted it from my list of interview questions.

Based on the suggestion that Zhiduo gave me and learning from interviews with Hua, Linchu, Qiao, and Yuqin, I also understood that questions such as “How do you describe yourself as a rural female?” and “What does being a rural woman mean to you?” can provoke my participants to reveal their negotiation with the dominant meaning attached to their rural female identity. So I added these questions to my list of interview questions. Since some participants did not have any difficulty with “How do you identify yourself?” and Zuo Chao reacted directly to challenge the stereotype of inferiority attached with rural identity, I kept this question in my list of interview questions.
Methods Used

Recruitment of Participants

To recruit my participants, I used the following three avenues. First, I sought help from faculty and staff who were working in the participating five universities and one college. I asked them to send my participant recruitment e-mails to their students so that some of their students could choose to volunteer to participate in this research. The recruitment e-mail is attached in Appendix B. Second, I asked one participant from each of the five universities who had already been interviewed by me to post the recruitment e-mail to their university electronic bulletin board system, abbreviated as BBS. These are websites that almost all students at their universities can access. Third, I used the snowball sampling technique and asked each participant who had already been interviewed to recommend anyone who may be a potential participant.

Collecting Data

I interviewed 66 rural female students in Beijing and Baoding—two cities in northern China—to explore how they experience and negotiate education, the urban-rural divide, and gender. Thanks to the financial support of the International Fellowship granted by the American Association of University Women, I could travel back and forth from Beijing to Baoding to interview my participants.

Altogether, I conducted 108 open-ended, in-depth interviews with 66 participants: three interviews with one participant, two interviews with 40 participants, and one interview with 25 participants. Each interview lasted from 1.5 to 4 hours. Most of the interviews went longer than I originally planned—one to one and a half hours—because most of my participants
were willing to spend more time and discuss their experiences with me. My second interview
with Xiangjin Xing, for example, went beyond 3.5 hours. I asked her repeatedly if I was
taking too much of her time and told her that we could stop any time she wanted. She
answered consistently, “No, not at all.” “No, It’s Okay. We can continue.” She said, “I love to
talk to you.”

All the interviews were conducted face to face, and at places of my participants’
choosing, which were mainly on or close to their campuses. Since Mandarin Chinese is the
language that all my participants could speak most proficiently, I conducted all the interviews
in Mandarin Chinese and transcribed them in Chinese as well. I translated into English the
quotes that I subsequently used in my findings.

Data Recording, Transcription, Translation, Coding, and Analysis

DeVault (1990) maintains that conventional books on qualitative methods stress “the
exhaustive recording of conversation in interviews and field settings” (p. 106), but pay little
attention to the methods of recording, transcription, or writing about the recording and
transcription. She critiques Bogdan and Taylor (1984) in that they omit the discussion of
transcription techniques when they recommend that researchers remember dialogue, gesture,
tone, and accent, and use tape recorders for intensive interviews. She also challenges Howard
Becker, a qualitative research representative in the symbolic interaction tradition, for
regarding tape-recording as needless in the interview because he thinks that the details that he
remembers are sufficient for him to conduct sociological analysis. Becker’s memory work, as
DeVault argues, may enable him to “write sound and interesting sociology,” but it neglects
the fact that memory is often inadequate to “recover and examine unnoticed experience”
during the interview and in the field (p. 107).

To obtain adequate and accurate data regarding subtle “unnoticed experience[s]” in the field, I did not totally rely on my memory. Before starting each interview I asked for permission from each participant to use the digital recorder to record each interview. Fortunately, all my participants agreed. During the interview process, however, I did try to remember what I observed, such as my participants’ dress, facial expressions, hand gestures, body postures, speaking tones, punctuation, and silences. I relied on my memory and did not take notes on these things because I noticed that some participants stopped talking when I lowered my head to take notes on paper. As soon as I completed each interview, I wrote down what I remembered on paper or in the laptop that I carried with me to make sure my notes were as accurate as possible.

Among the 108 sets of interview data, I transcribed 48 sets by myself and hired 10 students at Provincial University to help me transcribe the remaining 60 while I was focusing on interviewing participants and doing data analysis. I gave these students instructions that they only needed to type what was recorded by the recorder and I would do the rest of the work. After receiving the transcription from these students, I listened very carefully to each interview that they transcribed, filled in some gaps they missed, and corrected errors that they made.

As mentioned earlier, since Mandarin Chinese is the language that all my participants spoke most proficiently, I conducted all the interviews in Mandarin Chinese and had them transcribed in Chinese as well. I was careful in translating into English the quotes that I used in my data analysis and in the writing of this dissertation to make sure the translations
accurately represented the original Chinese of my participants. For example, my participant Erbai said that at the Independent Admission interview at Elite National University, she felt 寒心 (pronounced as hanxin) when she noticed that all the other interviewees were urban students who had more cultivated talents and expertise in a variety of areas than she. When I was trying to translate the word 寒心, I first thought that “upset” or “discouraged” might be the right English translation. The literal meaning of the Chinese word 寒心 is “chilly heart.” So I checked further to find a more precise English equivalent, and I found “disheartened.” According to the Canadian Oxford Dictionary, “dishearten” means “cause to lose courage, confidence, hope, etc.; make despondent.” “Disheartened,” the adjective form of “dishearten,” thus means “made despondent,” which better expresses Erbai’s state of mind when being surrounded by so many privileged students.

After each interview was transcribed into Microsoft Word, I added my observations (called observer’s comments) to the interview transcript along with notes that I had taken and ideas that I had generated after reflecting on each interview. I then developed the interview transcripts into field notes.

I hand coded the data, read and reread the transcripts carefully, line by line and word for word, and labeled words, phrases, sentences, or passages that were repeated, that surprised me, and that sounded important for the interviewee based on her facial expressions, vocal intonations, or words used. I looked for connections among codes, grouped these codes, and developed common themes. While coding, I tried not to bring any preconceived ideas or theories to bear, but remained very close to the data and open-minded about what the data told me, from the perspectives of my participants.
Based on my preliminary interviews with seven rural female students at Provincial University in November 2010, and on my personal experience of being a rural female student in China, I initially planned to use ideas of cultural capital, Foucault’s theory of power, and the feminist theory of intersectionality to analyze the data. But after I got to the field and conducted my dissertation research from June 2011 to February 2012, I expanded my theoretical base to include oppression and structural violence, agency and resistance, and discourses and counter-discourses. While doing data analysis, I conceptualized the common themes developed from the data by using the above theories, examining how the themes challenged, complemented, or enriched these theories and current literature relevant to rural female students in China. I also analyzed how participants’ specific perspectives were shaped by their experiences of their homes and rural origins, people who played significant roles in their lives, precollege schooling and higher education experiences (including graduate school experiences), hierarchical levels of the higher education institutions they were attending (four levels for elite national universities, nonelite national universities, Provincial University, and Municipal College), and their intersectional social locations (such as rural origins, regional origins, gender, ethnicity, and family’s socioeconomic status). During the writing process, I reread and revisited the transcripts whenever needed to make sure what I wrote accurately represented what my participants told me.

While writing, I also reanalyzed the data related to the concepts of *suzhi* and strong woman, because I realized that some women’s voices were left out during my initial data analysis. Initially, I had focused too narrowly on the distinct terms and phrases that some participants used. For example, I only described how a rural identity was associated with
suzhi and how participants contended with the social stigma of strong woman. After the primary data analysis, I expanded the concepts of suzhi to include broader social ideas about a rural identity, and the idea of strong woman to include ambition, strength, independence, and self-reliance—terms that my participants used. As the reanalysis proceeded, I differentiated my participants’ strategies of negotiating institutional barriers, suzhi, and the strong woman into categories that form the three data summary tables of Chapters 4 through 6.

Ethics

Before starting each interview, I e-mailed, telephoned, or talked to each participant in person and assured them that all information they provided me during the interviews and my observations would be kept confidential. I reassured them that when I transcribed the data, I would use made-up names for them and their university or college, and I would be the only person to know which made-up name belongs to which participant. I promised that in any writings or any presentations that I make, I would use these made-up names. I would keep all their personal information private and confidential and not share it with anybody. I also assured them that, if there was any information that they did not want to reveal during the interviews, they could decline to answer the relevant questions. If for any reason they did not want to participate in this research, they could withdraw at any time and I would not be offended. Neither was there any risk involved if they chose to withdraw. Fortunately for this research, not a single participant quit in the middle of an interview. To protect the privacy of my participants and avoid any unnecessary risks to them, I have consistently used pseudonyms for their names as well as the names of their institutions.
Limitations of the Study

There are four limitations to this dissertation research. The first limitation is that the data are not representative of all rural female college and university students in China or even at the six institutions studied. I focused on 66 rural female students studying at five public universities and one public college in northern China, but did not include any students at private universities or colleges because public institutions are the overwhelming majority in China. Rural female students generally tend not to choose to attend private higher education institutions, because private institutions are at a lower status: They receive far less financial and policy support from government than public institutions, and sometimes they charge students “excessive fees” and fail to fulfill promises to students about issuing degrees or certificates (Mok, 2009, p. 44).

A second limitation is that the findings do not tell the complete stories of the 66 participants. However, the narratives of these women do provide multiple angles through which to examine their struggles and strategies to break the bonds of intersecting inequalities and challenge dominant discourses that victimize rural female students.

A third limitation of my project is that my participants were all, in the end, winners in the precollege educational system of China. Their perspectives may be inextricably bound up with their success. For example, those who failed to challenge such systems as gaokao, hukou, and higher education admission, may be biased by their success in gaokao and in entering the university. Still, my participants presented diverse perspectives that capture their complex and nuanced thoughts about these systems. Notably, out of 66 participants, 15 failed gaokao once or twice, had to repeat grade 12, and took gaokao twice or three times before getting into a
A final limitation is that I used only open-ended in-depth interview methods to collect data. I did not use participant observation to observe them in their social interactions as I originally designed, because many participants said that they did not want to be observed. For example, Dao Jiao expressed three reasons why she did not want to be observed:

First, it would affect the lives of my roommates and myself. If I were living off campus by myself, I would not mind your observation. But because I am living together with my roommates in the dorm, I would feel uncomfortable. Besides, it would disturb my roommates’ lives as well. Second, I would feel embarrassed. If you would accompany me to my social activities for observation, I would have to introduce you to my classmates and teachers, by saying, “This lady is a scholar from the United States. Now I am her observation subject.” It would be very troublesome. Besides, I would feel worried whether or not I would give other people the impression that I am too proud. Third, there would be too much cost involved. Although many people don’t want to admit that they have the desire to perform, they always show their best side to you. I would get tired of being on display 24 hours a day. In this way, it would cost me too much. (First Interview with Dao Jiao, 07/03/2011)

Because of my participants’ discomfort, I did not observe them in their social gatherings and did not find answers to the following questions that I originally designed for participant observation: How do they perform in each site? How do they interact with people around them? Whom do they bring to social gatherings? How do they dress, speak, and
behave for each particular occasion? What are their conversations like? What are the topics discussed? How do other people treat them?

In order to offset this limitation, I added more interview questions to allow my participants to describe how they socialized with people in the dorm, classroom, and social get-togethers; how they dress, speak, and behave; and how they are responded to and treated in each significant context.

**Conclusion**

This chapter focused on the methods and procedures that I used to collect data in the field. I first discussed the relationship between qualitative methodology and feminist methodology that informs this research, including how they contribute to each other in developing methods of deep listening and reflexivity. Then, I described my practice of doing fieldwork by applying reflexivity, and conducting open-ended, in-depth interviews. In this section, I also presented my participants’ reflections on how my multiple subjectivities as a female graduate student who had a rural Chinese background and received her education in the United States affected their storytelling and performance at the interviews, as well as how some interview questions created obstacles for some participants, which helped me to reframe certain interview questions. In the third section, I laid out how I recruited my participants, and recorded, transcribed, translated, and coded data, as well as the research ethics that I abided by. In the final section, I set forth the limitations of this research, including the nonrepresentativeness of the data, the incompleteness of the stories, how participants’ perspectives might have been affected by their successful experiences of entering higher education institutions, and the shortage of participant observation in this
Despite the four limitations, this research stands out strong in bringing to light the diverse voices of 66 rural female students at six higher education institutions. I did my best to use their own words to represent their stories. I was especially careful to make sure that my analysis represents their multiple perspectives and heterogenous experiences.
Chapter 4: Navigating Institutional Barriers to Gain Access to Higher Education

This chapter focuses on understanding how my participants exercised their agency to make sense of the urban-rural divide and what strategies enabled them to gain success by entering higher education despite the severe structural constraints. The chapter is organized into six sections. In the first section, I present a historical review of the ideas of ruralness in China, the ideas that shape the current urban-rural divide. In the second section, I discuss how negative ideas of peasants have been developed in China. In the third section, I analyze how some participants identified urban-rural inequality in the educational system and developed resilient resistance to navigate the barriers to gain access to higher education. In the fourth section, I examine how some participants embraced the navigational, familial, and social capital that helped them achieve educational success. In the fifth section, I discuss how some participants disproved people who held stereotypes about them as intellectually inferior, and I show how their refusal to accept misrepresentation was an act of resistance to the discrimination against them as rural females. In the sixth section, I explore how some participants had to repress their critical and independent thinking in the test-oriented educational system in order to survive/pass the higher education entrance exam, in this way simultaneously accommodating and resisting the multiple power systems of the educational system, the urban-rural divide, and gender.

The urban-rural divide in China, as scholars note, did not fully develop into its current form until the 1800s when China was conquered by Western and Japanese colonial powers and began to adopt Western negative ideas about peasants (Jacka, 2006; Stockman, 2000;
Feuerwerker, 1998). As far back as the fourth century B.C.—when Mencius made the classic
pronouncement that “those who used their minds and hearts (laoxin) ruled and those who
used their muscles (laoli) were ruled (Feuerwerker 1998, 11)” (Jacka, 2006, p. 33)—the most
salient distinction was “between the scholar-official class (shi) and the ordinary people
(min).” In the middle 1800s, China’s conquerors established foreign-treaty ports in cities such
as Shanghai and Nanjing, which resulted in the concentration of industry and commerce there
(Jacka, 2006) and increased contact with the West. “As a consequence, the distinctiveness of
the quality of life and culture of these cities relative to the rural hinterland also increased and
city dwellers sought more and more to distinguish themselves from their rural

**Ideas of the Rural in China**

In the late 1800s and the early 1900s, educated elites asked each other, “What is wrong
with China?” They attributed the humiliation of China at Western and Japanese colonists’
hands to the backwardness of China’s vast rural hinterland. These elites came to see the
peasant as a culturally “alien ‘other,’ passive, helpless, unenlightened.” Meanwhile they
“confirmed their own moral claim to an inherently superior, privileged position in national
political life” (Cohen, 1993, p. 155). Hence, during the early 1900s, “the shi/min divide was
reconstituted as one between the urban population or, more particularly, urban intellectuals,
and the ‘peasantry’ (nongmin) (Feuerwerker 1998, 9)” (Jacka, 2006, p. 35).

Some initial founders of the Chinese Communist Party (founded in 1921) such as Chen
Duxiu accepted the negative image of the peasantry represented by Chinese intellectuals and
also adopted the Marxist ideas of the peasantry as conservative (Day, 2013). Nevertheless,
Mao Zedong, who succeeded Chen Duxiu to take over the leadership of the party, characterized Chinese peasants as both revolutionary and backward. The Maoist ideology that peasants have a revolutionary nature prompted the party to build an alliance with them (together with workers of whom the party claimed itself to be an advanced part) to win the revolution over Kuomintang, which resulted in the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949. From 1949 to 1976 when Mao governed China, peasants, particularly poor peasants, were given moral honor, yet an urban-rural binary hukou regulation was set up to restrict their movement to seek jobs in cities during the late 1950s. After Mao died, Deng Xiaoping took power and undertook the reform from a centrally-planned to a market-oriented economy. Since the late 1970s, the state and intellectuals have incorporated the historical idea of ruralness as backward and inferior and to reconstruct rural people for national modernization purposes.

Hence, the current urban-rural divide in China is a continuation or evolution of the historical shi/min class division of mental and manual labor in that rural people are distinguished from urban intellectual-bureaucrats as the ruled labor class and stereotyped as uncultured, uneducated, and inferior. The rural, as Hairong Yan (2008) notes, has become “the urban’s devalorized Other” (viii). Jacka and Gaetano (2004) state that in contemporary China, “the inferior quality of the peasantry became a central preoccupation for the intellectual and official elite” (p. 16). “Being a peasant,” as Myron L. Cohen (2005) cogently contends, “is to be disadvantaged. . . . Peasants in modern China now have second-class citizenship, thus, ironically, giving legal confirmation to the second-class, ‘backward,’ culture they earlier had been identified with” (p. 67).
Understanding Peasants or Farmers in China

The modern Chinese term for peasants or farmers is 农民 nongmin, which has two characters, 农 nong and 民 min, wherein 农 nong means agriculture, farming, peasant, or farmer, and 民 min means the people. This term 农民 nongmin entered China during the late 19th and early 20th centuries from Japanese vocabulary, along with the term “feudal” (fengjian) (Cohen, 2005, p. 64). Before then, the term during the late imperial era (Qing and Ming dynasties) in China was 农夫 nongfu, which means “agricultural worker” (Jacka, 2006; Day, 2013).

In the Chinese language, unlike in English, there is no distinction between a peasant and a farmer. As Cohen (2005) states,

More firmly in the Western tradition of the comparative study of rural society is the effort to redefine the peasant in functional terms free of the cultural associations provided by European history. In this context the peasantry is seen to comprise the subsistence-oriented agriculturists of premodern societies, a portion of whose output is skimmed off by overlords in the form of rent, taxes, or tribute. Farmers, in contrast, are produced by modernization and characterized by their involvement in a commercialized, market-oriented economy. (p. 69)

Frederick W. Mote (1977) notes the different Western and Chinese concepts of peasants in history:

The idea that the city represents either a distinct style or, more important, a higher level of civilization than the countryside is a cliché of our Western cultural traditions. It has not been so in traditional China. . . . [The] sharp division into distinct urban and
rural civilizations disappeared very early in China, although it remained characteristic of much of the rest of the world until recent times and produced distinct urban attitudes in other civilizations. The conditions allowing such attitudes in China seem to have vanished in the beginning of the imperial era, so long ago that a sense of that kind of urban superiority has not remained.

Chinese civilization may be unique in that its word for “peasant” has not been a term of contempt—even though the Chinese idea of a “rustic” may be that of a humorously unsophisticated person. (pp. 102–103)

Because there is no such distinction between the peasant and the farmer in the Chinese language, I use them interchangeably in this dissertation. When I use the term “peasant,” by itself it does not carry any negative connotations except for the political and social meanings imposed upon it by the modern Chinese state and intellectuals that I discuss below.

In European novels such as the French, English, Italian, and Russian, “it has commonly been held that peasants are essentially a stabilizing and conservative force in human history” (Lewis, 1964, p. 25). China’s negative representation of its rural population since the late 19th and early 20th centuries, to some extent, has imported the Western heritage. As Cohen (2005) contends,

Mote and others have shown how especially during the later imperial era (Ming and Qing dynasties), China was notable for the cultural, social, political, and economic interpenetration of city and countryside. But the term nongmin did enter China in association with Marxist and non-Marxist Western perceptions of the “peasant,” thereby putting the full weight of the Western heritage to use in the new
and sometimes harshly negative representation of China’s rural population. (p. 65)

During the early 20th century, intellectuals portrayed “the peasant negatively as backward, ignorant, and feudal” (Day, 2013, p. 19). “This negative image reached its peak during the May Fourth period of the late teens and early twenties. Furthermore, this negative image was adopted by the young CCP in the 1920s, as the Marxist Orthodoxy in Europe held a similar view of peasant conservatism. Peasants, according to General Secretary of the Communist Party and May Fourth intellectual Chen Duxiu, were a feudal and petty-bourgeois class that carried a feudal consciousness which led towards destructive revolts rather than communist revolution” (Day, 2013, p. 19).

Mao Zedong and other members of the Chinese Communist Party challenged Chen Duxiu’s view of peasants and alleged that “peasants were neither simply a unitary petty-bourgeois class to be pushed to the sidelines of the revolution, as Chen Duxiu had argued, nor were they by nature socialist” (Day, 2013, p. 20); but they had the “dual nature” of being rebellious and revolutionary; and conservative and backward (Day, 2013; Jacka, 2006). According to Mao, “the vacillation of the quintessential peasant—peasants who owned and cultivated their own land, known as middle peasants—like the bifurcated images of peasant nature, could only be understood by a dialectical analysis that focused on their material interests and subjective attitudes, and only by an analysis that broke the peasantry down into differentiated classes” (Day, 2013, p. 20). The Communist Party “incorporated into its official and administrative classification of China’s population” “the distinction between peasants and other categories . . . such as ‘workers’ (gongren) or ‘urban residents’ (jumin)” (Cohen, 2005, pp. 65–66). It further classified peasants into “‘poor,’ ‘middle,’ or ‘rich’
peasants, or as ‘landlords,’ and among the various peasant classes . . . further subdivisions” (Cohen, 2005, p. 66). Landlords were not categorized as belonging to peasants according to this differentiation. Nevertheless, “by 1959, landlords and the various classes of peasants were all peasants—nongmin—in contradistinction to ‘workers’ (gongren) or ‘urban residents’ (jumin), the more inclusive term” (Cohen, 2005, p. 67). The class designation was assigned to peasants and inherited by their children. “During the various political campaigns [including the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976], those with ‘rich peasant’ or ‘landlord’ labels could be subject to public humiliation and condemnation, while the ‘poor and lower-middle peasants’ were defined by the Communist state as the new rural political elite” (Cohen, 2005, p. 66). Along with the “rich peasants” and “landlords,” numerous government officials and urban intellectuals were condemned, persecuted, and exiled to the countryside under the anti-bourgeois banner during the Cultural Revolution.

Ironically, even in Mao’s era, “Mao Zedong and other Communist intellectuals . . . believe[d] that the physical, political, and economic liberation of the peasantry required its cultural destruction” (Cohen, 2005, p. 63). Thus the then-Mao-governed Communist Party came up with the ideology that the peasantry “could be usefully employed in the service of the revolution, but they could not lead the revolution themselves” (Jacka, 2006, p. 37). Instead, “they needed the leadership of the proletariat and its party, the Communist Party” (Jacka, 2006, p. 37). Expanding the Bolsheviks’ notion of a “worker-peasant alliance,” the Chinese Communist Party “claimed that the party was the most advanced element of the working class itself and that wherever the party commanded peasants the worker-peasant alliance and the proletarian credentials of the revolution were intact” (Jacka, 2006, p. 37).
This perhaps explains the contradictory behavior of the Mao government in that it portrayed the peasantry as revolutionary and conferred high lip service honor on poor peasants on one side, and on the other side, granted “superior, privileged position” (Cohen, 1993, p. 155; Jacka, 2006, p. 35) to the urban working class by promulgating the regulation of the household registration (hukou) system to deny rural residents services and benefits that the urban workers/residents enjoyed, as mentioned in Chapter 1. To this day rural people are denigrated as second-class citizens and subordinated to the urban residents.

After Mao died in 1976 and Deng Xiaopeng rose to power, the Communist Party called an end to the Cultural Revolution, dismantled the Maoist policies related to the Cultural Revolution, and “instigated sweeping reforms of the Chinese economy and society” (Day, 2013, p. 27). “Intellectuals, many of whom had been targets of the Cultural Revolution but who were now brought back into public life, played an important role” (Day, 2013, p. 27). Many of these intellectuals “characterized the Cultural Revolution . . . as a result of the peasant mentality of dependency that was still dominant in Chinese society” (Day, 2013, p. 5). They “contested the historical agency of the peasant as a revolutionary subject—a central component of Maoist and dialectical understanding of the peasant” (Day, 2013, p. 15) and “characterized Chinese peasants as problematic: backward, harboring remnants of feudal thinking, and the root cause of China’s slow development as well as of its violent history” (Day, 2013, p. 5).

Since the 1980s, the Chinese party-state has also used the discourse of quality (suzhi) to ascribe China’s underdevelopment to the low quality of the large rural population, which was said to impede the progress of China’s modernization, which was described in Chapter 2
and will be elaborated in the next chapter.

Even though a small number of intellectuals, such as rural activists James Yen and Liang Shu-ming and anthropologists and sociologists Fei Hsiao-tung (Fei Xiaotong), Lin Yuehua, C. K. Yang, and Martin M. C. Yang, advocated for rural people and development, they were hostile to the folk religion, culture, and customs of the countryside (Cohen, 2005, p. 63). In addition, their sympathy with rural lifeways “was the minority view,” and “the notion of the peasantry as a culturally distinct and alien ‘other,’ passive, helpless, unenlightened, in the grip of ugly and fundamentally useless customs, desperately in need of education and cultural reform, and for such improvements in their circumstances totally dependent on the leadership and efforts of rational and informed outsiders, became fixed in the outlook of China’s modern intellectual and political elites” (Cohen, 2005, p. 63).

Peasants worldwide, especially in developing countries, have been portrayed as living in what Michael Harrington (1962) calls and Oscar Lewis popularizes as the “culture of poverty” in that the poor have different traits (passiveness, dependency, and helplessness) and ways of life from the rest of society and “these cultural differences explain continued poverty” (Zinn, 1989, p. 856; Lewis, 1963, 1964). This social theory has been critiqued in various ways, particularly for its “psychological reductionist and individualistic interpretation of the persistence of poverty” (Tinker, 2001, p. 11904) that ignores the structural factors that create and sustain poverty and blames the victim for their condition (Gajdosikiene, 2004).

Even though the Chinese state and intellectuals did not use this term, the discourses they have imposed upon Chinese peasants resonate with the concept of “culture of poverty,” which presumes that the peasants are such a backward, ignorant, uncultured, and inferior
class that their quality needs to be improved, and their ways of life and thinking need to be changed and modernized by the standards of urban intelligentsia.

**Identifying Educational Inequality and Exhibiting Resilient Resistance**

I felt that my rural background is something that I cannot change. So I must work much harder, with 10 times or even 100 times more effort than urban students, to enter college. Since I didn’t have urban *hukou*, I had to totally rely on myself. I could not change my rural status, so I decided that I must change myself by studying much harder. (First interview with Wuchang Ci, 10/21/2011)

Wuchang described how the top city high school in her district treated rural and urban students differently in its admission policy based on students’ *hukou*. She achieved 464 out of the 600 total marks in the entrance exam to this high school but was declined. Her middle school teacher told her that if she had had *hukou* of the city where that high school was located, she would have been eligible to enter this school. This teacher told her frankly, “This is the difference between rural and urban *hukou*.” Because Wuchang had no urban *hukou*, she ended up attending a high school in a small town in her district.

Wuchang was aware that it was the *hukou* system that excluded her from entering the city public school. Yosso (2000) refers to “awareness of oppression” as “consciousness” (p. 149), so Wuchang had a consciousness about the oppressive system. She did not become a passive victim of the system, but actively exerted her agency to study “much harder.”

Human agency, as Ahearn (2001) suggests, is never “in isolation from the social structures that shape” it (p. 117). Thus, agency exists and has to be understood in relation to structures of power or oppression. Scholars argue that agency is not synonymous with
resistance to power, as mentioned in Chapter 1, but can involve complex actions such as accepting, accommodating, ignoring, resisting, protesting, disrupting, [I would add] navigating, and subverting—“sometimes all at the same time” (MacLeod, quoted in Ahearn, 2001, p. 116). Some scholars also contend that resistance should not be simplified as merely opposed to power. For example, Abu-Lughod (1990), applying Foucault’s power and resistance, states, “Resistances are . . . neither outside of nor independent from the systems of power” (p. 50). She suggests that resistance should not be romanticized as opposition to or refusal of power, but should be used to diagnose and examine the systems of power or oppression in specific contexts. Following Abu-Lughod, Gaetano (2005) notes,

It is important not to “romanticize” the resistance of women; careful ethnography suggests that women have complex subjectivities and are not necessarily “opposed” to power so much as negotiating power, both through resistance and accommodation. (pp. 57–58)

In this chapter I apply all these scholarly claims to analyze the agency that my participants demonstrated in navigating institutional barriers to gain access to higher education, and the multiple forms of resistance they engaged in. I do not romanticize or simplify resistance, but examine its various forms to “teach us about the complex interworkings of . . . structures of power” (Abu-Lughod, 1990, p. 53).

Critical race theorists Solorzano and Delgano Bernal (2001) put forward various forms of resistance: conformist resistance, resilient resistance, and transformational resistance. According to them, conformist resistance refers to “the oppositional behavior of students who are motivated by a need for social justice yet hold no critique of the systems of oppression”
(p. 318); resilient resistance is a strategic response to structural inequality through “surviving and/or succeeding through the educational pipeline,” although it leaves “the structures of domination intact” (pp. 180–181); transformational resistance refers to “student behavior that illustrates both a critique of oppression and a desire for social justice” (p. 319).

My participant Wuchan recognized that she could not change the hukou system. She persisted in her academic studies so that she could gain access to higher education. Her consciousness about the hukou system, and her hard-working and persistent characteristics constituted a form of what Solorzano and Delgado Bernal (2001) term “resilient resistance,” which enabled her to navigate the educational system and succeed in entering higher education.

Among my 66 participants, 10, including Wuchang, identified the hukou system, as well as the urban-rural disparity of socioeconomic and educational resources that disadvantaged them. Instead of falling into passive victimhood, they actively exercised their agency to study extra hard as a strategic response to the inequalities.

Tian pointed out that urban students not only receive better quality education and educational resources from the start of their schooling, but students from big cities such as Beijing are also granted additional privileges in nationwide higher education admission. She stated:

I know that students from Beijing can be admitted by such prestigious universities as Xiamen University [the best one in Fuxian Province] with a much lower score in gaokao than students from Fujian Province [the very region where Xiamen University is located]. It is all because so many good universities are in Beijing, and
students in Beijing therefore have many choices. For those few who are willing to leave Beijing for universities in other places, they get advantages in higher education admission there. . . . This is all because of the unequal distribution of resources, so centralized in Beijing. (Third Interview with Tian, 09/11/2011)

But she added later:

But so what? This is China. We have no influence upon the policy. We are not in the position of power. What we can do is to make efforts to change our own life, but we cannot change the external environment. (Third Interview with Tian, 09/11/2011)

This sentiment of accepting the status quo due to the inability to change was palpable among my participants. Some of my participants pointed to the role of hukou to highlight the source of the unchangeable status quo. As Jizhu noted:

This [hukou] is something you were born with and you cannot change. This is your fate. I can only make efforts on my part to make up for it [the fact that I do not have Beijing hukou]. (First Interview with Jizhu, 09/08/2011)

The rigid hukou policy and the unfair benefits attached to it apparently give rise to the sentiment of powerlessness. Their statements that they have no say or power to influence the policy also reflect the political context in China: the authoritarian regime of the party-state has been depriving them of their rights to influence or change the political system.

Osnos (2014) describes how the Chinese Communist Party exerts its power to censor and control people’s public expression through the deprivation of life and the threat of violence. According to Osnos, censorship and control particularly impact the lives of Chinese young people who grew up after the 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown of the students’
movement. As he notes,

For two decades since Tiananmen, Chinese young people had been apolitical, not simply because the basic conditions of life had improved but also because the alternative was frightening and hopeless. (p. 175)

All my participants were born between 1978 and 1992 and grew up during this era. They learned to be “apolitical” not only because of the improved economic conditions but also because of the “frightening and hopeless” reality that the activists of the previous generation were executed in 1989 at Tiananmen Square and that many others have been arrested, such as Liu Xiaobo, the Nobel Peace Prize winner still living in prison. As Chen Fu, a junior at Provincial University, commented compellingly,

I feel, China is like this. It set up these regulations. You cannot speak against them.

You cannot change [them]. You are not the people in power. For me, I can only try to change my own destiny, but I cannot change the environment. This is what the overall trend is like. You can only follow the current. If you go against it, you may come to grief. (Second Interview with Chen, 09/03/2011)

Thus, my participants’ discourses about hukou and relevant regulations help to reveal the power structures in China.

While my participants felt powerless to change the broad structures in China, they still enacted their agency to work on their academics and make a difference in their own lives. In other words, these students felt unable to change their rural hukou with its associated disadvantages, but they still believed in individual efforts, that is, studying hard to attain top scores in the threshold exams of key urban schools, which could provide better teaching and
resources (than their rural public schools) leading to passing *gaokao* and enrolling in a good university. As Tian said,

> I have always been feeling that I have to do much more work, make much more effort than urban students in order to receive equal education with them. (Third Interview with Tian, 09/11/2011)

She had the consciousness that she did not have equal educational opportunities with her urban equivalents, so she decided that she must study much harder to achieve much higher scores in order to earn the opportunity to study in the same school as her urban equivalents.

Like Tian, Xianzhi was also fully aware of the unfairness against rural students in urban school admission policies due to the rigid *hukou* restriction. She felt that she had no way of changing the policies, so she chose to study much harder so as to meet the requirement set by the school. As she narrated with a tone of sadness,

> I feel that it is very unfair [that rural students have to get higher scores than urban students to enroll in urban schools]. But you have no other way. What I can do is just to study much harder so I can get the chance. (First interview with Xianzhi, 08/20/2011)

She chose to “study much harder” to enter the top city junior secondary school because its teaching quality was much better than that of her local junior secondary school. She said that she would not have entered Elite National University 2 if she did not get to study in that city school, as it was very difficult for students from her local school to get into an ordinary university or college, not to mention Elite National University 2. She entered the city school through her individual effort of working extra hard and with her family’s support to pay the
extra sponsorship fee of 6,000 yuan ($942 USD) per year (plus the tuition and boarding charge). Successful enrollment in this urban school increased Xianzhi’s confidence in her studies. With this confidence and the good teaching quality in this school, she studied well through her secondary schooling and finally ended up attending one of the most elite universities.

While Tian and Xianzhi were lucky enough to get access to key urban schools and ended up enrolling into the most elite universities in China, most of my other participants did not have such luck. Wuchang, for example, was declined by a city high school. She had to repeat her 12th grade, take gaokao twice, and attend a local college despite the great efforts she put into her studies. Because she had no urban hukou and her parents could not afford the high sponsorship fee to send her to a city high school, she ended up attending No. 3 High School, a high school located in a town near to her home. Fully aware of the educational inequality and the subsequent disadvantage facing her, she was willing to work extra hard to make up for it. All through her high school, she immersed herself in her studies. Every day she got up at 5 a.m. and studied until midnight. With this great effort, she won the No. 1 scholarship all three years at this No. 3 high school. However, she still failed gaokao because of the poor teaching and resources. Realizing the disadvantage of this school after gaokao, she made the decision to repeat Grade 12 in a city high school (to which her parents had to pay a sponsorship fee). This one year of repeating her grade at this city high school paid off. The second year, she passed gaokao and entered Municipal College.

Thus, besides working extra hard, participants like Wuchang who received poor education in rural schools had to repeat their grades in urban high schools to make up for
their educational disadvantages.

Like Wuchang, Linchu Ze also failed gaokao when she first took it because of low teaching quality and lack of resources in her high school—a school for rural migrant children. She repeated grade 12 in a key city high school thanks to the suggestion of her older brother who had entered this urban high school and passed gaokao. As she said,

Repeating my grade in this school, I found my scores going higher and higher because the teachers taught so much better and this school had better facilities such as computers and PowerPoint projectors, but my previous high school only had blackboards and chalk. Then the second year when I took gaokao, I got a much higher score, 130 points higher than the first year. (First Interview with Linchu, 08/17/2011)

Her narrative, on one side, presents an accurate picture that educational resources that rural and urban students disproportionately enjoy determine their success or failure in getting to university/college. On the other side, it also demonstrates the strategy that she took to change her learning environment, which led to her final success in entering the university.

Apparently, when participants Tian, Xianzhi, Wuchang, and Linchu engaged in individualized approaches to achieve educational success, they embodied an ideology of individualism; they failed to recognize and thus failed to challenge the power structure of the authoritarian regime that sustained the educational inequality that they experienced. I would argue that their individualism served the interests and fulfilled the purpose of the authoritarian regime, which disciplines individuals “both as objects and as instruments of its exercise” (Foucault, 1977, p. 170). The individualism of these participants functioned as a
“specific technique of power” (Foucault, 1977, p. 170), which they embraced to discipline themselves and that the authoritarian regime manipulated to maintain its governance. Thus, they reinforced the unequal structure, helping to perpetuate the status quo, in this case keeping the urban-rural divide and hukou in place.

Yet I would also argue that the individualism that these participants embodied expressed a form of agency. Through individualism they showed that they did have some control over their lives in a political environment beyond their control. In the face of the educational inequality, they exerted their agency to identify the inequality, and they developed strategies such as working extra hard, changing schools, and repeating grades to qualify for higher education. Yosso (2000) suggests that when students are resilient in the face of identified inequality, they also demonstrate resistance (p. 179). My participants’ identification of the inequality, and the strategies that they developed to navigate the inequitable educational system constituted a form of resilient resistance that enabled them to survive and succeed in their schooling.

Navigational, Familial, Aspirational, and Social Capital

As noted in Chapter 1, Yosso (2006) critiques Bourdieu’s traditional notion of cultural capital and moves beyond it to include various alternative forms of capital that include but are not limited to navigational, familial, aspirational, and social capital. According to Yosso, navigational capital refers to the ability to develop resilience or academic invulnerability and “skills of maneuvering through social institutions” (p. 44); familial capital refers to “cultural knowledges nurtured among familia (kin) that carry a sense of community history, memory, and cultural intuition” (p. 48). Familial capital, as indicated by Yosso and demonstrated by
my participants, is not limited to the support and resources that they got from their parents, but includes their siblings and extended families such as grandparents, uncles, aunts, and cousins. Aspirational capital, often connected with familial capital, as Yosso (2006) notes, refers to “the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future even in the face of barriers” (p. 41). Social capital refers to the social networks that students utilize “to maneuver through the system, but they also turn around and give the information and resources they gained through the navigation process back to their social networks” (Yosso, 2006, p. 45).

Among my 66 participants, 41 exhibited navigational capital; 49 demonstrated that their familial capital together with the aspirational capital of their familia motivated them to gain educational achievements; 29 indicated that their social capital included their communities and teachers who helped and encouraged them to overcome barriers and succeed academically.

**Navigational Capital**

Forty-one participants expressed that they had developed characteristics of strength, diligence, independence, persistence, and perseverance by overcoming adversities that they experienced from their rural upbringings. From their perspectives, these characteristics helped them adapt to the residential life at junior and senior secondary schools and navigate the educational barriers. Xianzhi Yi, for example, explained that the strength that she had developed since childhood enabled her to persist in putting extra efforts into her studies despite the discriminatory policy of her urban public junior secondary school, which required rural students to earn much higher entrance scores than urban students. She started doing housework such as cooking, cleaning, washing clothes by hand, and raising pigs by age 9.
Since that age, she had also been taking care of her younger brother who was 4 years younger than she when her parents had to farm and travel far to sell the oranges that they grew to make ends meet. She described how when her parents went to do business and could not come back home for several days, she took the responsibility of caring for her brother every day: cooking for him, sending him to school, picking him up after school was over, helping him take a bath and change clothes, and putting him to bed. During the nights when her brother woke up, even though she was very scared of darkness, she had to get up to comfort him. According to her, these experiences shaped her independence and perseverance. As she said, “Because of the hard condition of my family during my childhood, I became very independent. I also learned that no matter what difficulties I encounter, I cannot have any single idea of giving up” (First Interview with Xianzhi, 08/20/2011).

Her efforts paid off and she was admitted into the urban public junior secondary school with outstanding entrance scores. While attending this school at 13 years old, she had to live at the school dorm because the school was located in a city far from her home. According to her, over 70 percent of the students in this school were from the local city, and therefore they did not have to live at the dorm. Xianzhi said that she felt very homesick at the beginning as it was the first time she had lived away from home. But she persisted in studying and living at this school, in her words, “bit[ing] my teeth to persevere. So hard was the life in the past that I had experienced, how could I be beat down just by homesickness?” (First Interview with Xianzhi, 08/20/2011).

Persisting in her studies, she became accustomed to the living environment and earned top rank in class. Her academic performance at this school was so excellent for three
consecutive years that she did not have to take the threshold exam to enter a key high school in the city, but was directly recommended to attend this high school in May, two months earlier than other students who had to take the exam before being admitted.

Similar to Xianzhi, Wuchang also explained that the strength and independence that she developed from her childhood experiences motivated her to work extra hard in her studies when facing the discrimination of the hukou in urban school admission policies. She helped her parents do farming such as harvesting wheat and picking corns at the very early age of 7 or 8. For three years since about the age of 13, every morning from five to eight o’clock before school started, she helped her parents sell deep-fried dough sticks by traveling across villages and townships, while her older sister stayed home to take care of housework and cooking. These experiences fostered her strength and perseverance, which enabled her to overcome the difficulties posed by the differential treatment at the city high school towards rural and urban students. Even though she was declined by the city high school, she did not lose hope but persisted in studying hard through three years at the rural high school, consistently earning scholarships. Although she failed the first gaokao, she still sought other options such as repeating her 12th grade and relocating to a city high school, which led to her successful navigation of gaokao to enter Municipal College.

Xianzhi and Wuchang’s understanding of the system of educational inequity perpetrated by the urban-rural divide, and the strategies that they utilized to navigate the educational system to earn academic success are a form of what Yosso (2006) terms “navigational capital”—“skills of maneuvering through social institutions” (p. 44).

This navigational capital was utilized differently by another participant, Erbai. When
she attended the Independent Admission exam interview at Elite National University 1, she saw that all the other students attending this interview were urban and good at such things as calligraphy, musical instruments, performance, and playing chess. She “deliberately emphasized” that she was rural and explained how difficult it was for her to receive education as a rural student. She also explained to the interviewers that her rural upbringing experiences fostered her strength and perseverance. She hoped, as she said, that “this kind of self-introduction may compensate for my disadvantage that I don’t have any specialty” such as those that her urban equivalents at the interview cultivated through extracurricular training, and that the interviewers could understand her situation. She passed the interview at last and was admitted by Elite National University 1.

Though revealing her rural background may not be the reason that she passed her interview, there is no doubt that she utilized her rural status to negotiate the inequality between herself and urban students. Recognizing that she lacked training in highbrow culture, she took advantage of her rural status, making the case that she was valuable as a rural student because of her qualities of strength and perseverance. She also proved that she was capable based on the fact that she was given the opportunity to attend the Independent Admission interview after her excellent academic performance at high school and after passing the Independent Admission written tests, despite the urban-rural inequality that deprived her of resources and opportunities. As she said,

As a rural student I didn’t have equal learning resources and opportunities [with urban students]. For example, our teaching quality was worse than that of urban students. This means that it was more difficult for me to achieve the same academic
performance as urban students. Now that I passed the writing tests for Independent Admission, it proves that I am capable, even more capable than urban students [who achieved the same performance]. (Second Interview with Erbai, 11/22/2011)

Her comment shows that she understood that as a rural student she had unequal “learning resources and opportunities” that led to a disadvantage when competing with urban students. Yet she did not think that she was incapable, but rather she revealed her rural status, acknowledged the values she carried as a rural student, and used her knowledge about the urban-rural inequality that caused her status quo to navigate the interview process. By doing so, she developed resilience or academic invulnerability—navigational skills or capital—to maneuver through the higher education admission.

**Familial and Aspirational Capital**

While the rural female students that I interviewed utilized various strategies and skills to successfully navigate the educational system that disadvantaged and discriminated against them, their individual efforts did not exist in a vacuum but were situated in social contexts. Scholars contend that when a student’s family has high expectation for the student to achieve better academic performance, the student has a better chance of school success (Boocock, 1972; Seginar, 1983). Forty-nine participants out of 66 expressed that their families played significant roles in their successful entrance to institutions of higher learning.

These 49 participants revealed that one of their most important motivations to get into universities was their family members, usually their parents who suffered the poverty and hardship of living in rural areas. Liyan Wu, a junior at Provincial University, remarked that her mother strongly motivated her to go to university because she herself had had a hard life
and thought that if her daughter would stay in the village, she would have no prospects.

According to Liyan, women in her village have few life chances except for farming, getting married, and raising children. Ying Hao also said that on the first day she went to school, her father told her that she must attend university someday so that she could have a better and decent life in the future. As she said, “My Dad . . . feels that in this society, if you want to live as a human being, that is, if you want to live a decent life, you must receive education. He has been holding this view. So it’s a must for me to get to a university” (Second Interview with Ying, 08/19/2011). Cheng Sui also recounted that her mother constantly told her that if she would not study hard, she would end up staying in rural areas doing such hard and dirty labor as farming and working with mud and feces; if she would pass gaokao, enter a good university, and find a white-collar job in the city, then she could avoid this destiny.

According to these 49 participants, their parent(s) and sometimes grandparent(s) always talked with them about their dreams and hopes and expressed their high aspirations and strong support for their education, even though their parents did not get the chance to receive it. Yosso (2006) calls “the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future even in the face of barriers” as “aspirational capital” (p. 41). By teaching their children what education meant and expressing their dreams, hopes, aspirations, and support to their children, these rural parents transmitted aspirational capital to their children.

Some rural parents and family members actively participated in their children’s education and schooling. Tui Wei’s grandmother, as Tui said, taught her how to read and write Chinese characters during her childhood, which built a solid basis for Tui’s formal schooling later on. Besides telling Tui that studying to get into a university was the only way
out for her as a rural girl, and no matter how difficult the family situation became, Tui’s grandmother and Tui’s father would support Tui’s education. Tui’s grandmother also showed to Tui that studying itself had always been an enjoyable thing. This, according to Tui, instilled in her a strong desire to commit to studying.

Shi Zhi’s father took Shi to dinner every weekend when she was in a boarding high school. During dinner, he always chatted with her about how she was doing at each stage of her study. He also visited her school regularly to talk to her teachers about how she was doing in school. After realizing that she had little communication with her teachers, he constantly prompted her to talk to her teachers whenever she had questions or she encountered anything that she could not understand. After she took gaokao and felt that she did not do well, her father encouraged her by saying that he would fully support her repeating one year and taking the exam again, which she did. The second time she did very well at gaokao, with over 640 scores out of 750 in total and was ranked the No. 1 in her county. Her parents consulted with her teachers to help her fill in the application form and successfully enrolled her in an industry-sponsored program at Elite National University 2, which could waive her university tuition, provide her with living expenses, and guarantee her employment after graduation. Shi also explained that the success that she achieved by entering the most elite university did not belong to herself alone, but to her whole family—including her parents and three siblings. Her future success, as she said, “is not just my personal success.” She determined that she must strive hard to create more opportunities for all members of her family. She also hoped to contribute to the development of her home village by donating to the school and helping to support poor senior people.
Besides this kind of participation in their children’s education, some rural parents made conscious decisions to utilize their social resources and networks to relocate their children from rural to urban schools, due to the poor educational quality of rural schools. Buxue’s father, for example, moved the whole family from the village to the suburban area of a county after Buxue’s grade 2 teacher in the village school suggested that they do so. At the beginning of their settlement in the county, he had to pay a huge sponsorship fee to enroll Buxue and her brother in the county school because their hukou was rural. Later, after earning some money by transporting bricks and selling vegetables with Buxue’s mother, he purchased the urban county hukou for the whole family, so Buxue and her brother could enter the county urban public schools with no barriers. Buxue greatly appreciated what her parents did for her, which motivated her to study hard to meet their expectations. As she said with tears,

I feel that my parents work hardest in the whole world in order to provide good education to their children. Although they themselves cannot teach me any school knowledge as they themselves have little schooling, they have tried their best. My father earned some money by doing transportation, but he did not spend a penny of it. When some people suggested that my father use this money to buy some stocks when the stock market was very good, he said that this money should be solely spent on his children’s education. He could not allow himself to use it for any other purpose. (First Interview with Buxue, 08/17/2011)

Similar to Buxue, Rang Guo was relocated to a junior secondary school in another county with the help of her uncle who was teaching in this county school. According to Rang, only a limited number of rural students could join this school. In her class, only she and
another girl were rural. The rest of the students in her class were all residents of that county. Rural students could not be accepted into this school except for those with some special backgrounds, which, in Rang’s case, was that her uncle was teaching in this school. So her parents could have her registered in this school by paying a sponsorship fee. The teaching quality of this school, according to Rang, was much better than that of the junior secondary school in her rural area. Receiving education at this urban junior secondary school built a strong academic foundation for her. Upon graduating from this school, she performed very well at the entrance exam to a key urban high school, which led her to successfully enter Elite National University 1 at last.

The familial motivation, expectations, and support that my participants got to gain educational success constitute what Yosso (2006) calls “familial capital,” which includes but is not limited to “emotional support,” “instrumental support,” “moral guidance,” and “teach[ing] about hard work and integrity” (p. 47). As mentioned above, 49 participants out of 66 had this capital, which enabled them to achieve success by entering higher education. Among them, participants such as Liyan, Ying, and Cheng were taught by their parents to work hard to enter universities so they could get out of the hardship in rural areas. Tui, Shi, Buxue, and Rang were influenced to commit to studying hard by their families’ high investment and engagement in their education. Rang got into a county middle school with the help of her uncle who was teaching in this school. This form of familial capital enabled her to receive a higher quality education, which gave her a head start when applying to the most prestigious university.

**Social Capital and Cultural Wealth**
Yosso (2006) notes that Chicana/o students “bring the teachings from home with them to the classroom, but the schools ignore or can’t ‘see’ these funds of knowledge” (p. 48). In the case of my study with 66 rural Chinese female students at six Chinese higher education institutions, these students commented that schools, particularly the rural schools that they attended, did not ignore the teachings or knowledge they brought from home to schools. Instead, rural teachers sometimes worked with students’ parents to help them engage in the students’ education. Teachers’ support, I would argue, is a form of community or social capital that enabled some rural female students to gain academic success and maneuver through the educational system.

Wuchang, discussed earlier, said that she was taught by her middle school teacher that she was deprived of the chance to enter a city high school solely because she had no urban hukou. From Wuchang’s perspective, this teacher helped her to understand the urban-rural inequality and motivated her to work extra hard so she could enter higher education despite the unequal situation. This same teacher also helped her significantly when her parents had financial difficulty in paying her tuition. During her second year in middle school, her family could not even afford her trousers and she had to wear just one pair of trousers for one whole year. She and her older sister each had to pay tuition of 1,000 yuan ($157 USD) per year, which was far beyond the financial capacity of her family. Getting to know her difficulty, the teacher reported to the school principal and had her tuition waived. According to Wuchang, this teacher’s support played a crucial role in her continuing her education. To have students prepare for the entrance exam to high school, the school asked each student to pay 20 yuan ($3.14 USD) to purchase simulation tests. But Wuchang could not afford this 20 yuan. This
teacher gave her a free copy. She practiced the simulation test meticulously and ended up earning very good scores at the entrance exam to high school.

While the teaching quality of rural schools is generally lower than that of urban schools, my interviews with rural female students indicate that some rural teachers are very conscientious and try their best to teach their students. At some rural mountainous schools, in Ying’s village primary school, for example, when textbooks did not arrive on time, her teacher volunteered to hand copy the previous years’ textbooks for students to use until the new textbooks arrived. While this teacher had to give lectures to students during the day, she used her after-school hours and worked until midnight to hand copy the textbooks to make sure students could learn the next day.

Some teachers deeply understood the disadvantaged situation of rural schools in comparison with urban schools. For the benefit of their students, they suggested to some parents that they move their children to urban schools. Buxue’s grade 2 teacher, for example, suggested that Buxue’s father register Buxue in an urban primary school in a nearby county. Buxue was a top student in grades 1 and 2. This teacher was afraid that Buxue would be delayed if she continued to study in this rural school. It was because of this teacher’s suggestion that Buxue’s destiny was changed. She said that if she stayed in her rural school, she could not have gotten the chance to enter a key urban junior secondary school and a key urban high school afterwards, as for decades students from her original rural school “seldom finished their junior secondary schooling, not to say continuing their high school” (Second Interview with Buxue, 10/03/2011).

Despite the systemic discrimination in urban school admission based on the hukou
system, some rural students did manage to enter these urban schools through earning higher scores on entrance exams than urban local students, their families’ social networks, and/or paying sponsorship fees. Some teachers with rural backgrounds at these urban schools treated rural students with special care, and they served as role models to encourage these students to pursue academic success. Erbai attended a key high school in a city of Henan Province. Two teachers with rural backgrounds gave special care and attention to rural students, for example, sending them festival gifts, talking to them frequently, and motivating them to study hard. When Erbai felt upset about her first test score at the high school, one of the teachers who taught Chinese encouraged her by saying that her score, that is, “120 out of 150 was already very good.” This teacher was a role model and important in motivating Erbai to change her life through studying to get into a university.

Teachers’ support was also crucial for Tui Wei’s remaining at high school after her mother committed suicide. Seeing that her father was struggling to support her education and thinking that many of her classmates at the junior secondary school already discontinued their education to work in the cities and did not add any burden to their families any more, Tui was torn about what to do, and thus her educational performance had a drastic decline. Her homeroom teacher expressed great concern about her after talking with her and getting to know her family’s situation. This teacher always smiled at Tui in class and called her to walk together after class so they could have a chat. Noticing that Tui was not concentrating in class, she gently told her not to think about too many things as many things could not be thought through. She also told Tui that whenever she had things she wanted to say to her, she was welcome to come to her office. Besides spiritual support, this teacher also provided her
material help, such as paying tuition for her and giving her some living expenses. It was thanks to this teacher’s support that Tui could sustain her study at high school and finally got the chance to go to university.

This teacher’s enthusiasm and passion also greatly influenced Tui. Always preparing for class until midnight, this teacher worked very hard and conscientiously not only in teaching every class, but also in evaluating students’ homework and responding to students’ questions. This teacher served as a living role model to encourage Tui to study passionately and conscientiously. During this process Tui developed her internal motivation to persist in studying hard despite the hardship in her family. She also learned to be responsible for her father and teachers when faced with the dilemma of whether to continue higher education or marry after falling in love with a senior upon graduation from high school. She made the final decision to go to university instead of marrying her lover because of her responsibility for her father and teachers. As she said,

I was born with many responsibilities. I could not just put down these responsibilities and leave. My father had been living an unhappy life and shouldering the burden for the whole family after my mother committed suicide. He hoped that I could enter university. Many teachers also had great expectations for me. I must live up to their expectations. (First Interview with Tui, 11/11/2011)

These stories illustrate that parents’ and teachers’ care and support could help students develop characteristics such as diligence, persistence, and responsibility and conquer the hardships that they experienced in their education and life. These characteristics can be what Yosso (2006) terms “navigational capital,” which enabled these students to “navigate school
successfully—to be academically invulnerable or resilient” with “individual, family, and community support” (p. 43).

Twenty-nine participants also articulated that they wanted to give back to their communities in the form of educational and social services. Liangshu Dao, for example, said that after graduating from Non-Elite National University 1, she would return to Tibet to work as a teacher in a rural school. According to her, during her educational process from primary school to university, she was supported by many people, including a rural entrepreneur who provided her with books and clothes, and her primary school teacher in the village who let Liangshu live with her in the school for two years from grade 4 to 5 when her village was always out of electricity and her parents had to leave home to work. This teacher also encouraged her to leave Tibet to study in the inland provinces, so that she could get away from the peasants’ life, with which Liangshu concurred. The reason, as Liangshu said, is not because I look down upon peasants. Any occupation has its unique honor. But my teacher told me, “Your parents have suffered the hardship. You don’t have to suffer again. If you study outside Tibet, your future life will become smoother. When you find a good job, your parents will have a good future too.” (Interview with Liangshu, 09/24/2011)

According to Liangshu, it was because of this teacher’s encouragement that she went to study in a middle school at Jiangsu Province, which led her to enter a high school at Jiangxi Province, and finally join Non-Elite National University 1. When I asked her what her future plan is, she said firmly:

I definitely will go back to Tibet. I will go back to teach in Tibet, regardless of how
remote the school is. I must go back. I want to share all the things that I saw and learned 11 years outside Tibet, including four years in middle school, three years in high school, and four years in university. I want to tell them, because many things are what students at mountainous schools cannot learn and access. For example, the big buildings, rolling roads, highways, combining bridges for crossroads, and so on. . . . They read so little outside class too, not to say Western things, such as *Romeo and Juliet*. I want to teach them all things that I saw and learned. I don’t have very big dreams, insights, or thoughts, but I just want to tell them all the things I learned during these 11 years when I was outside Tibet. I will encourage them to imagine and comprehend that there are many wonderful things. (Interview with Liangshu, 09/24/2011)

Thus, Liangshu had the strong motivation to contribute what she learned to her community in Tibet. She demonstrated a strong sense of responsibility to teach the children in her community who she thought would have no opportunities to learn.

Similar to Liangshu, Xue Ren, a junior majoring in chemistry at Non-Elite National University 1, also expressed that she would like to go back to teach in her home town. She described how her teacher’s care played a significant role in her education and life. Her geography teacher in high school who was also her class supervisor treated her like her own daughter. No matter when she felt homesick and had something on her mind, she talked to this teacher. Whenever this teacher saw Xue unhappy, she called her to office to have a talk. This care motivated Xue to study hard and well, in Xue’s words, “as a way to express my appreciation to this teacher.” Xue chose to enter a teacher’s program at Non-Elite National
University 1 when she filled out the application because she wanted to be such a teacher in the future to help and motivate more students in her hometown.

Some participants expressed that they wanted to contribute to the development of their hometowns through donation and/or public service. Cui Zhen, a sophomore in English at Non-Elite National University 1, said that she had been dreaming to improve the adverse situation of her village, which is located in an isolated mountainous area where transportation can hardly reach. During harvest season, people are very busy, but out of the season, people “kill time by chatting and playing around,” in Cui’s words. As she continued, “They don’t think about doing anything else like making full use of their casual time to make money as urban residents do.” She felt that this was all because people in her area had no chance to see the outside world due to the poor transportation. So her aim was that as soon as she has the financial capacity, she would build transportation for her villagers so that they could integrate into the metropolitan life.

Liangshu, Xue, and Cui hoped to “give the information and resources they gained through their navigational process back to their social networks” (Yosso, 2006, p. 45). As Yosso (2006) contends, “Cultural capital is accumulated, like a deposit in the bank, but cultural wealth is meant to be shared” (p. 46). The cultural capital that these rural female students wanted to share with their communities could be transformed into cultural wealth.

In summary, among 66 participants, 41 mobilized their navigational capital to maneuver through the precollege educational system that they realized discriminated against them because of their rural hukou status. They recognized their disadvantage, made the decision to work extra hard, and/or used their rural identity or knowledge to combat the
unequal situation in which they did not have as much extracurricular training as urban students. By doing so, they became academically invulnerable, able to gain educational success even if they were vulnerable to the unequal power structures. Forty-nine participants commented that their families, including their parents, siblings, grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins and their families’ friends, motivated and supported them to overcome barriers and get into higher education, which constitutes familial capital. Twenty-nine participants recounted that their rural teachers played a significant role in helping them achieve educational success despite the cumulative stress they faced, which is a form of social capital. These 29 students also expressed their hope to give the information, resources, educational, and/or social services back to their communities, thus transforming cultural capital into cultural wealth.

“Prove Them Wrong” and Transformational Resistance

Twelve participants stated that they wanted to achieve educational success and enter higher education in order to prove wrong the ideas, attitudes, statements, or behaviors that presumed that girls or rural students were “useless,” “valueless,” “incapable,” “incompetent,” and “inferior.” Quoting Yosso (2000), Salorzano and Delgado Bernal (2001) state that students’ “prove them wrong’ strategy” is a form of transformational resistance that “illustrates both a critique of oppression” and “motivat[ion] by a sense of social justice” (p. 319).

The 12 participants used this strategy to “(a) confront the negative portrayals and ideas. . . . (b) [be] motivated by these negative images and ideas, and (c) [be] driven to navigate through the educational system for themselves and other [girls or rural students]”
(Yosso, 2000, p. 109). For example, Linchu said that she always proved wrong her mother, villagers, and teachers who judged her negatively. She commented:

I feel that from my childhood up to the present, I . . . have always been giving other people surprises through my actions. Other people always judged me, like, “This girl is so and so.” Then they wrongly defined me. But I have been using facts to prove that their definition is wrong. . . . For example, because when I was a child I was slow in doing things such as speaking and walking, my mom told me that the villagers said, “Look at this girl. She definitely will not have a good future.” But later after attending school, I got very good scores. This proved them wrong: even if I walk and speak slowly, I can still do well. Also, at school, an event happened that struck me. The teacher thought that because I was introverted, I could not be put on the platform [for a speech contest]. She felt that I was too introverted to speak well. So when she selected students for this contest, she did not select me. But I fought for it. I said, “Please let me try.” At that time I talked with the teacher and after she agreed, I practiced for a long time at home. Then when I got to the platform, even though I felt really scared, I performed okay. I got a second prize [among about 20 performers]. So I feel that through this I proved to the teacher that I can make it.

Also, I was very active in attending activities at school, for example, practicing witty skits and running for class president. All these proved to the teacher that I can make it. (First Interview with Linchu, 08/17/2011)

During her childhood she had been told by her mom that the villagers judged her, saying that she would not have a “good future” because she was slow in speaking and
walking. Feeling hurt by these words, she wanted to prove that their judgment about her was wrong. Later when she attended primary school, she studied very hard to get good scores to prove to the villagers that she will have a good future by studying well. At school, she also faced negative judgment from the teacher who thought she was too introverted to do well at the speech contest. Because of this, she was not selected to attend the contest. But she did not simply accept the teacher’s judgment about her. Instead, she “fought for” this opportunity by talking to this teacher and asking for an opportunity to try. After persuading the teacher, she worked very hard on practicing her speech and when she got to the speech platform, she performed well and won a second prize among about 20 selected contestants. She was also very active in attending activities at school. Through studying hard to achieve educational excellence and attending school activities, as she said, “I proved to the teacher that I can make it” and “I have been using facts to prove that their definition is wrong.” These experiences illustrate that she used the strategy of “prove them wrong” to push against the prejudice and discrimination.

Similar to Linchu, Shuji also used this strategy to fight against the discrimination perpetrated by some teachers in her primary school who treated rural and urban students differently. Since her primary school was located near a factory that produced fertilizer, some children of the factory staff joined this school. These children had urban hukou and shared the same Yi ethnicity with Shuji. Many other students were from peasants’ families and their hukou was rural. Some teachers gave preferential treatment to urban Yi ethnic students, such as appointing them as the class committee members. Almost all students in the class committee were urban. She described an event that she felt was most unfair. Once she forgot
to clean the floor when it was her turn. The homeroom teacher, who was an urban woman with Yi ethnicity, punished her by calling her to stand in the front of the class. In contrast, when some urban students forgot to clean the floor, they did not get the same punishment as Shuji, but the teacher just warned them not to forget next time. Feeling discriminated against, Shuji was not defeated. Instead, she pursued educational excellence as a way to respond to the unequal treatment. As she said,

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Actually the unfair treatment of the teacher towards me caused me to study harder,
because I thought, “The more she looked down upon me, the harder I should study.”
I must excel in my education. (First Interview with Shuji, 08/27/2011)
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Thus, Shuji pursued educational excellence to resist this teacher’s discrimination. Even though this school was a Yi ethnic school and all teachers and students were Yi, there was urban-rural inequality. Rural students like Shuji were discriminated against. Shuji was aware of this discrimination and pushed herself to study hard to pursue educational excellence in order to combat this discrimination.

Some participants expressed that they had to counter stereotypes from some teachers who derogated girls as being intellectually inferior. Chen Fu, for example, experienced discrimination from her math teacher in primary school who preferred boys to girls, as this teacher thought that boys were cleverer at studying math than girls. The teacher’s discrimination did not beat Chen down, but stimulated her to study hard. Her following comments show her strong determination to achieve educational excellence as a way to combat the discrimination:

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During my childhood, many people preferred boys to girls. It was at that time that I
was stimulated to study hard. I made up my mind that I must study well and even
better than boys. I wanted to let them see that for things that males can do, I can do
them too. . . . For example, my math teacher in fourth grade. He liked boys but did not
like girls. I thought, “Why do you like boys? You cannot like somebody just because
he’s a boy. It does not make any sense.” Anyway I did not like this kind of thing. I felt,
“You, you like boys but don’t like me.” I felt very uncomfortable. So I decided that I
must exceed boys. I could not change my gender but I could study math well through
my individual effort. (Second Interview with Chen, 09/03/2011)

To fight against this teacher’s stereotype, she studied very hard on math and earned very good
results. At every test, she got over 90 points out of 100 in total and sometimes full marks.

Seeing this, this teacher felt “very strange” in Chen’s words. As she said,

I remember at that time my math performance had been continuously good, over 90
points, and even full marks. Then that teacher felt very strange. . . . He thought that
boys are more suitable to study math and girls are not good at it. But I thought that I
can achieve many things only if I work hard on them. (Second Interview with Chen,
09/03/2011)

Even though this teacher did not change his stereotype as he thought that Chen was just a
“strange” example among girls, Chen learned from this experience that she could gain
academic achievement through her hard work and developed the strategy to work hard on her
academic studies. She used this strategy to deal with many other types of discrimination
toward her. For example, at 11 years old when she left her home to study and live in a
boarding junior secondary school in another county, she experienced overt discrimination
from her urban classmates. She and her cousin were the only two rural girls in the class. Her urban classmates ridiculed them as “countryside eggs” and laughed at their accents and clothes.

Chen: At the beginning [when I attended junior secondary school] . . . all my classmates were urban. My cousin and I went together. We were the only ones who were from the countryside. They looked at us every day with their urban eyes. They felt that we were from the countryside and they looked down upon us very much. But finally I proved to them that I am much better than they.

Lifang: How did you prove to them?

Chen: That is, they bad-mouthed us all the time, but I still felt that I could exceed them in some other ways. I could not change my family background, but I could exceed them in some other ways.

Lifang: What do you mean by “in some other ways?”

Chen: In studying and interacting with people, I felt that I could do better than they. For example, I remember at the beginning when I attended the junior secondary school, my desk mate was very bad. He constantly said that I could not make it into high school. Then I decided that I must attend high school and let him see. (Second Interview with Chen, 09/03/2011)

Chen chose to focus on her academic studies to achieve educational excellence in order to prove to these classmates that she could make it through her own efforts even though she did not have as well-off a family background as they. She put almost all her time and effort into her studies and was the only one at this school who passed the entrance exam to the best high
school in the city.

The above participants like Linchu, Shuji, and Chen confronted the discrimination or negative ideas about themselves due to their rural or female identity. They were motivated by these negative ideas and driven to maneuver through the educational system for themselves and other girls or rural students. Even though their behavior was “subtle or even silent” (Salorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001, p. 324), they were consciously engaged in a critique of the unfair urban-rural and/or gender inequities, developed strategies to prove others wrong who held negative ideas about them, and gained academic success despite the cumulative stress. This act of proving others wrong can be conceptualized as a form of transformational resistance to false assumptions and stereotypes.

**Resisting and Reproducing Multiple Power Systems in Navigating the Test-Oriented Precollege Educational System**

What *gaokao* [the Chinese National Higher Education Entrance Examination] forbids most is that kind of thought that doesn’t love the party [Chinese Communist Party] and is rebellious. If you condemn the party or any corrupt official in your essay, I think it must be very cruel. Did you see those 0-score essays? . . . That is, those essays at *gaokao* that have some anti-party thoughts and were given 0 score. This kind of essay was given 0 score not because it’s not well-written, nor because its literary style is not good, but solely because it carries some thoughts that tend to be rebellious to the party. . . . I dare not write like them. For the sake of my future, I had to compromise temporarily. . . . That is, do according to the teachers’ guidance. Teacher, you want this kind of essay? Okay, I just bite my tongue (*biezhe xingzi*) to
write for you. Now I cannot write it out any more. (Second Interview with Yuqin Xiao, 10/01/2011)

Here Yuqin said that, prior to being admitted to Non-Elite National University 1, she had to follow the rules of gaokao, the Chinese National Higher Education Entrance Examination, which is the single most important criterion for higher education admission in China. She described how the essay writing tests at gaokao in China are politically dangerous if students write too radically such as “condemn[ing] the party or any corrupt official” in their essay. They face the danger of the punishment of getting low scores, even a “0 score” at gaokao if their writing critiques the Chinese Communist Party or any corruption issues.

Yuqin understood that this danger of punishment was even greater for her as a rural woman because passing gaokao to join a university was the only way to survive for her. She fell severely sick and was almost paralyzed when she was 13 years old. Her mother told her that she could not survive in rural areas because of her physical condition, which meant she could not do hard labor such as farming. As she said,

Actually my mom did not get so much education. But she recognized that education is very important and hoped that I could get a way out through receiving education. . . . She kept on saying that you must study hard. Otherwise, with your fragile body that can not shoulder heavy burdens or do any hard work (肩不能挑, 手不能提 jian buneng tiao, shou buneng ti), how can you survive in rural areas? You cannot do any farming at all. . . . I also felt that I must study hard. Otherwise, because of my physical condition, really it’s very, very difficult for me to live in rural areas [she said this with tears in her eyes and a lump in her throat]. (First
When I asked her to clarify what she meant when she said that with her physical condition, she cannot survive in rural areas, she said,

Up to the present, rural people [in my village] mostly make a living with their physical labor. For example, to get necessities like water, you have to shoulder it back home from the outside. What will happen if you cannot shoulder water? . . . Also in rural areas when you grow vegetables you must fertilize the farmland. It definitely cannot work if you cannot shoulder [bags of] fertilizer. Also I am not able to do the excavation. I cannot even lift the hoe. (Second Interview with Yuqin, 10/01/2011)

Her physical condition did not allow her to do all this physical labor that rural people in her village relied on for survival. She was left no way but to study very hard in order to pass the National Higher Education Entrance Exam—gaokao—the only way to enter university/college. Getting access to higher education, therefore, provided her the only way for survival. As she said with tears, “I had no other way out. Really this is the reality. As a rural girl, I didn’t have any other way except for getting into a university” (First Interview with Yuqin, 08/24/2011).

In order to pass gaokao and get the opportunity to go to a university, Yuqin chose to compromise her independent and critical thinking. She forced herself to write in conformity with the rigid format even though she did not want to do so. In this way, she was caught in the tension between what she really wanted and what she had to do to survive. Although she hated a type of education that tended to repress students’ genuine thinking, she had to follow
the rule and inhibit her interest in pursuing originality in order to do well on tests.

She explained that to prevent herself from writing any anti-party or rebellious thoughts, she had to utilize the strategies of rote memorization to spit out the facts or the accepted views on a test. By reproducing the accepted views in her essays and not challenging the unfair system of higher education admission, ironically, I would argue that she tended to keep the system in place. In this way, she was caught in what Frye (1983) conceptualizes as the “double bind—situations in which options are reduced to a very few and all of them expose one to penalty, censure or deprivation” (p. 2). To survive, she had to withhold her rebellion and reproduce the accepted views in her essays. In doing so she was penalized in another way: her critical thinking was repressed and she was subjected to being complicit in reinforcing the system. Either way she was punished and could not win.

I would argue that the double bind that Yuqin was constrained by is constructed by the authoritarian regime of the Chinese party-state, which uses this bind to control and regulate students in general and rural female students in particular. To maintain such a bind, the regime also manipulated such unfair systems as the urban-rural divide, hukou, test-oriented education, and hukou-based higher education admission. Merging all these systems to perpetrate oppression upon the life of Yuqin, it built “a network of systematically related barriers . . . which, by their relations to each other, are as confining as the solid walls of a dungeon” (Frye, 1983, p. 5). Frye uses the “birdcage” as a metaphor for such “a network of systematically related barriers” in that those living within the cage cannot see and recognize the network because they look at each wire of the network myopically instead of stepping back to “take a macroscopic view of the whole cage (i.e., the whole network)” (p. 5).
Foucault (1977) went a step further to analyze why those under the governance of the sovereign modern power cannot see the power. He employed Jeremy Bentham’s “panopticon” as a metaphor to illustrate the operation of the modern power in that a single guard from one central position can monitor all prisoners in each cell while the guard is unseen. It is through the invisibility of the guard and hypervisibility of the prisoners that the constant surveillance is conducted.

Foucault’s panopticon model of modern power needs to be modified when applied to China’s context because the working of power in China is through the ubiquitous censorship and control perpetrated by the Chinese Communist Party upon people’s expression and everyday life (Anagnost, 1997; Osnos, 2014). In China the tower at the center of this panopticon “is not entirely a darkened space inhabited by an invisible gaze but an illuminated stage from which the party (Chinese Communist Party) calls, ‘Look at me! I make myself visible to you. Your return gaze completes me and realizes my power’” (Anagnost, 1997, p. 116). The Chinese party-state makes its power hypervisible and it is through its hypervisibility that the power exercises its relentless control and induces a fear of surveillance and punishment that regulates the people and normalizes their “proper” behaviors.

Through exercising “systematically related barriers” to confine Yuqin’s life and constant surveillance to monitor Yuqin’s writing, the party-state instilled a fear in her heart. As she said, “I dare not write [some thoughts that tend to be rebellious to the party].” In this way she was regulated and her behavior was normalized as she took the exams. She could find no way out of the birdcage or the “panopticon” except to compromise the system of
higher education admission in order to survive. She sighed as she said, “For the sake of my future, I had to compromise temporarily.”

However, her compromise was not without resistance. Her resistance was complicated and intertwined with her subjection to multiple levels of power due to her status as a rural female. At one level, her resistance lay in her knowledge of her social location as a rural woman who had to compromise in order to pass gaokao so that she could enter higher education. Her compromise to gaokao rules revealed her resistance to the rural-urban inequality that limited her options so severely. In this way, her compromise and resistance were coexistent and her resistance was embedded in her compromise. At the second level, her resistance lay in her internal controversy when she expressed that she hated this type of education that repressed her critical thinking, but she could not show her hatred and had to pretend to be “a ‘lambkin’ student” in her own words. As she said,

Even though I look like a “lambkin” student on the surface, actually in my heart I am rebellious. . . . I hate that kind of education. I hate it very much. . . . I have this rebellious psychology all the time. . . . Even though I studied very hard at high school, I feel that I did not learn anything except for the knowledge from the textbooks (书本知识 shuben zhishi). I learned nothing. So I strongly resist it. (First Interview with Yuqin, 08/24/2011)

Her comment shows that she was embracing what Yosso (2006) terms “internal transformational resistance.” As Yosso states, “The behavior of internal transformational resistance appears to conform to institutional or cultural norms and expectations; however individuals are consciously engaged in a critique of oppression” (p. 324). Conforming to the
gaokao rules was her survival technique that she had to take in order to enter higher education. This does not mean that she succumbed to the educational system; instead she was “rebellious” against it and consciously engaged in critiquing it as repressing her critical thinking.

As Abu-Lughod (1990) persuasively states, “If the systems of power are multiple, then resisting at one level may catch people up at other levels” (p. 53). Encountering multiple power systems, Yuqin resisted “through subversion at one level of power” that “may simultaneously entail subjection at another level of power” (Gaetano, 2005, p. 54). Specifically, she resisted the rural-urban inequality through gaining educational achievement to get into a university, but was simultaneously subjected by the education system and had to compromise to accommodate its rules. Thus, for Yuqin, the subjection, accommodation, compromise, resistance, and reproduction of power systems happened simultaneously. She enacted her agency to recognize, critique, and resist some power systems, for example, the rural-urban inequality and the test-oriented precollege educational system; but she also had to compromise with the unfair educational system by accommodating and reproducing its rules.

Similar to Yuqin, Yin Yue also revealed her simultaneous resistance to and reproduction of dominant views at gaokao. She pointed out her fear of being penalized with low scores if she did not follow the rule of writing. As she said,

Before every test, the teacher teaching essay writing told us to try to write positive things, not to write negative things, particularly about some views about the social atmosphere. Because it’s gaokao after all, we can only write positively and don’t ever touch upon any negative things. Before every test the teachers warned us about
this. The teacher said that when we took the essay writing class, we could write a little bit [about negative social phenomena], because only our own teacher read this. So it’s no problem. But at gaokao, we must not do that [write negative things], because if you do, you cannot get good scores even if you write very well. (First interview with Yin, 09/03/2011)

She gave as an example an article that was written by a student who attended gaokao and was given a 0 score because it critiqued the higher education admission policy of privileging students with Beijing hukou. This article, as Yin said, “actually is very well written, both in grammar and style, but it’s too true. It’s just because it’s too true that it got a 0 score.” When I asked her what she meant by “too true,” she responded,

Yin: He disclosed something that nobody else dares to say. All other students at gaokao only write positive things. They don’t write these negative things.

Lifang: What did he disclose?

Yin: He wrote a lot about the policy that gives preferential treatment to students at Beijing; for example, students at Beijing can be admitted to prestigious universities like Peking University or Tsinghua University with much lower scores than students from other provinces, Hebei Province, for example. While a student from Hebei Province has to get over 680 points to enroll in Peking or Tsinghua University, students at Beijing don’t have to get such high scores. (First interview with Yin Yue, 09/03/2011)

Yin’s high school teacher used this article as an unfavorable example to tell students what not to write in order to pass gaokao. Like Yuqin, Yin was very well informed of the
writing strategy at *gaokao*. She learned that she could not write critically or radically about social realities. Even though she might believe it was true, she could not write it at *gaokao*. If she wrote it in class, it was fine, as the teacher could understand. But she could not write at *gaokao* because, otherwise, she could receive punishment from the *gaokao* gatekeepers by getting low scores. So she chose to write “good aspects about the society” in order to make the *gaokao* examiners “feel good.” Like Yuqin, she used this as a survival technique in order to get access to university. Although she appeared to conform to institutional norms, she was consciously critiquing *gaokao* and developed strategies to move through it.

Like Yuqin and Yin, Xianzhi Yi also expressed how the test-oriented education forced her to repress her independent thinking. She said that from junior secondary school to high school, she had been constantly told by the teachers to write essays “conforming to the norms,” which means to Xianzhi that the writing cannot be “too radical.” It must be “positive” and cannot indicate anything that is “anti-party and anti-government” (Second Interview with Xianzhi, 10/02/2011). “Otherwise,” as Xianzhi emphasized, “you will irritate the teachers who review the tests and get penalized by getting very low scores. Besides, the ideas for the writing cannot be too innovative to make the *gaokao* graders feel uncomfortable” (Second Interview with Xianzhi, 10/02/2011). According to Xianzhi, this is more so for the tests of history and politics, many of which tend to examine how students view some historical and political events. She said that to avoid breaking the rule, she simply memorized what was said in the textbooks and repeated it for the tests. As she commented,

> Before *gaokao* the education is just for tests, which is really strictly restricted, particularly so for the subjects like history and politics. Many tests for these subjects
evaluate how you view some historical and political events. Even though you don’t agree with some ideas, you have to write that you do agree with them. Otherwise, you cannot get good scores. Despite these restrictions, I still feel that you can have your own independent thinking. I had a very good teacher of history at high school. She told us frankly to memorize the historical facts and political ideas for tests. She also fostered our independent thinking by recommending some extracurricular textbooks for us to read outside the class. (Second interview with Xianzhi, 10/02/2011)

Thus, like Yuqin and Yin, Xianzhi experienced the contradiction between what she wanted and what she had to do to survive. She loved using her independent thinking to analyze historical and political events, but the educational system did not value her independent thinking and even tended to punish her with low scores. She had to use rote memorization to learn the historical facts and political ideas from the textbooks and write tests. By doing so, she tended to reproduce accepted views in her essays.

Yuqin, Yin, and Xianzhi all expressed their consciousness about and critiqued the oppressive precollege educational system that repressed their critical and independent thinking. To survive the educational system and get access to university, they had to follow the teachers’ instruction not to write any negative or rebellious things, which means, in Yuqin’s words, “that kind of thought that doesn’t love the party,” and in Xianzhi’s words, “radical” things and “anything that is anti-party and anti-government.” So they learned to write positive accepted views on tests. This demonstrates that they were aware of the oppression perpetrated upon them and tended to resist it. Their resistance lay in their
expression of their internal contradiction between what they wanted and what they had to do in reality. As Xianzhi said poignantly, “Even though you don’t agree with some ideas, you have to write that you do agree with them.” In order to survive, they had to conceal their critical thoughts when writing tests, and only write the accepted views that they memorized. In doing so, they exercised their agency to develop strategies to maneuver through, survive, and succeed in the system, while simultaneously reproducing the oppression that constrained their critical thinking.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, my participants demonstrated various forms of resistance and capital in order to survive and succeed in the precollege educational system and enter higher education. The following table shows the number of participants at each institution who exhibited each specific form of resistance and capital.

**Table 1**

*Resistance and Capital: Navigating Institutional Barriers*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Elite National University</th>
<th>Elite National University</th>
<th>Non-Elite National University</th>
<th>Non-Elite National University</th>
<th>Provincial University</th>
<th>Municipal College</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>66</td>
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<tr>
<td>Graduates</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduates</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>51</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under-graduates who attended city high schools</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under-graduates who repeated 12th grade</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resilient resistance</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Navigational capital</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Familial capital</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social capital</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Prove them wrong” and transformational resistance</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Among eight undergraduates at the two most elite national universities, Tian, Erbai, and Xianzhi attended city high schools; Tui, Ershi, Erqian, and Shi repeated their 12th grade. Rang was the only one who neither attended a city high school nor repeated her 12th grade. (Arriving at the elite university campus, she experienced the sharp sense of isolation and lack of belongingness, which will be discussed in Chapter 5.) This indicates that for most rural female students to attend the elite universities, they have to take extra time and effort to repeat their grades at high school, and/or obtain extra financial and social resources for their families to enroll them in city high schools. This can be demonstrated by Shi’s comment below:

In order to enter Elite National University 2, we [rural students] needed to make much more effort and study much harder, and even repeat our grades for one or two years at high school, but my [current] classmates from cities [in the university] mostly studied for three years at their high schools. They seldom repeated their grades, but we had to spend one or two more years. (First Interview with Shi, 08/21/2011)

This pattern seems to apply to the two non-elite national universities and Provincial University, but sounds much less significant at Municipal College. At the two non-elite national universities in Beijing, among 22 undergraduates in my study, 2 repeated their 12th grade at county high schools; 10 joined city high schools; and 2 repeated their 12th grade at city high schools after failing gaokao. So 14 out of 22 followed this pattern. At Provincial
University, out of 11 undergraduates, 3 attended city high schools, and 4 repeated their 12th grade. So 7 out of 11 fell into this pattern. Nevertheless at Municipal College, out of 10 undergraduates, 2 repeated their 12th grade, and 1 (Wuchang) repeated her 12th grade at a city high school.

This demonstrates a pattern that in this group of rural female students, most had to repeat their 12th grade or attend a city high school in order to join elite national universities, less prestigious national universities, and provincial universities. Yet to enter local colleges, they mostly did not have to do so. This is evidenced by the comment of Zhixin at Municipal College who expressed her regret that she did not repeat her 12th grade:

Now I feel so regretful that I did not repeat my 12th grade at high school, because many classmates of mine at high school repeated and they ended up joining better universities. (First Interview with Zhixin, 10/12/2011)

All the students in this study who joined city high schools did not repeat their 12th grade but directly passed gaokao to enter institutions of higher learning, except for those who failed gaokao and then repeated their 12th grade at city high schools which enabled them to finally pass gaokao to enter higher education. This confirms previous studies that urban education, particularly in cities, has better teaching quality and resources than rural education in China (Hannum & Wang, 2006; Han, 2010), and implies that urban students have the structural privilege of not having to take extra time and effort to join universities.

This research also uncovers nuanced patterns that were not revealed by previous studies. Ten participants mobilized their resilient resistance to challenge the institutional discrimination of the hukou system that excluded them from entering city public schools.
They developed a critical consciousness to critique this system. They also recognized that they could not change the system, so they focused on their individual efforts to develop strategies such as working extra hard, relocating to better quality urban schools, and repeating grades. Forty-one participants demonstrated navigational capital to become academically resilient and invulnerable so as to maneuver through the educational system. These participants’ resilience to survive and succeed the educational system despite the structural constraints did not happen at their individual levels only, but was motivated and supported by their familial and social capital including rural teachers’ efforts. Forty-nine participants exhibited familial capital that motivated and supported them to get into higher education. According to 29 participants, rural teachers especially, through emotional and financial support, helped those who exhibited a strong potential for success and great yearning for learning, and sometimes they suggested that parents relocate their children to better quality schools.

Nevertheless, some teachers, as 12 participants revealed, perpetrated class oppression upon rural students, and/or had gender stereotypes about girls as being intellectually inferior. These students experienced this discrimination, and thought that it was unfair that they were discriminated against simply because they were female or rural. They developed strategies to “prove them wrong”: to work extra hard to achieve excellence in their studies and combat this discrimination. By doing so, they demonstrated transformational resistance to critique the discrimination, and were motivated by a sense of social justice to change teachers’ prejudice or stereotypes.

Seven participants demonstrated that they had to simultaneously resist and reproduce
multiple power systems. They recognized that the *hukou* system, urban-rural inequalities, and being gendered as female limited their life chances and social mobility so that getting into higher education was their only means of upward mobility. They worked extra hard to gain educational achievement in order to enter higher education. Yet the precollege educational system repressed their critical thinking and forbade them from writing their genuine thoughts, particularly those that critiqued the Communist Party, the government, and the negative political atmosphere. To survive such education, they had to conceal their critical thoughts and only write accepted views on tests, thus reproducing the oppressive power of the educational system. They were aware of the tension between what they wanted and what they had to do to survive, and revealed their resistance to the system during the interviews. Their discourses about the urban-rural divide, gender, and the educational system manifested their complex agency in simultaneously accommodating and resisting multiple levels of power.

It is worth noting that when my participants commented on *hukou* as fixed, it meant that they acknowledged that they had no power or ability to change their own *hukou* or influence the *hukou* policy, except for getting into higher education, which they knew could provide them a chance for changing their *hukou*. This is consistent with previous scholars’ studies that admission to higher education institutions facilitates *hukou* mobility in that students, once admitted, can convert their *hukou* from rural to urban status (Wu & Treiman, 2004; Whyte, 2010). Yet my research uncovers a finding that enriches the studies of *hukou* in that due to the new regulated economic benefits that are linked with rural *hukou* such as insurance, old age pension, and compensation for farmland as per government policies initiated in the early 2000s, some rural students have started choosing not to convert their
Among my 66 participants, seven kept their hukou in their rural villages. All these seven students were studying at Provincial University and Municipal College (out of 21 participants in these two institutions) in Baoding—a medium-size developing city, and they were all from economically developed rural areas of China, particularly suburban areas of developed cities. All 45 participants who enrolled in universities in Beijing (including two urban hukou holders) chose to move their hukou from their villages to their universities. This has two implications. First, a hukou in a major city such as Beijing is much more desirable than a hukou in a medium-size developing city such as Baoding. Second, rural female students’ decisions about whether or not to convert their hukou also depend on how developed their rural areas are and what material benefits and economic prospects a rural hukou in their villages may carry.

My participants almost unanimously agreed that they must focus on their individual efforts to study hard to get into a university. In face of unfair treatments, they developed such individual strategies as working extra hard, changing schools, repeating grades, developing academic resilience, and disproving people who held negative stereotypes of them. It is surprising to find that none of the 66 participants ever engaged in or thought about engaging in collective actions to build alliances with other rural students to challenge the unfair systems. Being afraid of getting penalized by the examination graders and losing the opportunity to gain access to higher education, as seven participants acknowledged, sounds like a very important factor that forbade these students from speaking/writing up against the systems prior to their admission to higher education. Yet it is interesting to note that during the interviews of this research, after they had already successfully entered higher education,
they still tightly embraced the individualistic ideology of counting on themselves to change their situations or destinies, without showing any intention for collective actions to challenge or change the institutional systems. This may be due to two reasons, economic and political. First, the private marketization of China’s economy, compounded with taking on Western views of individualism in the past three decades, has driven people to pursue personal gains through individual efforts. Second, the party-state authoritarian regime of China has successfully disciplined and regulated these students. This can be illustrated by the comments of two participants, Zuo at Provincial University and Jun at Non-Elite National University 2, when they commented on the reasonableness of the quota-based higher education admission policy, which grants privilege to students with hukou of big cities such as Beijing. As they said,

Local protection is a very normal phenomenon. Or else, if it [a local university] recruits all outside people, what will happen to the local people? That is, my dad always said to me. He said that anyhow every policy has its reasonable existence, because it’s impossible to let all outside people receive higher education [in the local area]. If so, the local people cannot get to the local universities and will lead the locals to a riot. My dad said that there would be a riot. When the local people are getting more and more dissatisfied, there arises unrest and anxiety. When most of these people assemble, there will be a big riot and social disturbance in our country. (Second Interview with Zuo, 08/28/2011)

Since the universities are located in Beijing, for sure they must give preferential
treatment to Beijing students, for the sake of raising the overall quality (suzhi) of Beijing residents. Then Beijing can get development. After all it is the capital of China, so of course the quality of its people and economic development must be better than those in other places. . . . I think that the preferential treatment of Beijing students is good. I don’t feel it is unfair. . . . I think that the national policy must care about the overall social development. If people in the capital of Beijing cannot live well, it is not good for the national development. What is the policy? Yes, letting some people get rich first. After the locals are taken well care of, the other regions such as the [underdeveloped] western regions will be taken care of gradually. (First Interview with Jun, 08/25/2011)

Zuo and Jun’s comments show how the state policy including its discriminatory practices is normalized through the discourse of national and social stability and development, as well as the discourse of quality (suzhi). Such discourses tend to overpower students’ social justice motivations by diverting their attention away from challenging the unfair systems to focusing on maintaining social stability, promoting national development, and turning to their individual efforts to raise their own quality for personal gains. The meaning of the discourse of quality (suzhi) from the perspectives of rural female students will be discussed in detail in the chapter to follow.
Chapter 5: Negotiating Dominant Cultural Capital and Discourse of Quality

This chapter discusses how my participants negotiated the dominant cultural capital and discourse of quality (suzhi) that marginalized them in urban settings. In contemporary China, dominant cultural capital is concentrated in urban areas, particularly metropolitan cities. Educational spaces are often constructed as centered on urban-contextualized experiences and knowledge, which tend to marginalize and devalue the experiences, knowledge, culture, lifestyles, and values of rural students. As Gaetano (2004) contends,

Formal education and training, symbolized by the ubiquitous diploma (wenping), along with familiarity with media, computers, and the Internet, are important forms of cultural capital. Since modern technology favors the developed infrastructure and high concentration of centers for higher education found in the urban areas, the countryside and its residents appear technologically primitive in contrast. (p. 47)

Suzhi, as discussed in Chapter 2, itself is a form of cultural capital in China that distinguishes people by “the innate and nurtured physical, psychological, intellectual, moral, and ideological qualities of human bodies and their conduct” (Jack, 2009, p. 524) or “through embodied capacities acquired through intensified child nurture, educational inputs, and training” (Anagnost, 2004, p. 193). Those qualities or embodied capacities are judged by the standards of urban people, particularly urban intellectuals and officials—those with more dominant cultural capital or so-called higher suzhi. The discourse of suzhi intersects with that of cultural capital and negative connotations associated with a rural female identity to perpetrate multiple forms of oppression upon rural female students.
Discourse of Quality (Suzhi) in Education

The *suzhi* discourse permeates almost every aspect of Chinese people’s lives. In education, *suzhi*—assimilating Western notions of well-roundedness or quality education—“is always associated with traits like creativity, innovation, knowledge, vision, and pro-social skills” as well as with knowledge about material and cultural products like computers and the Internet, and with public speaking and presentation and communication skills, “which work to the advantage of urban students thanks to the dense information-saturated environment in which they live” (Lou, 2011, p. 82). The *suzhi* discourse represents rural students as lacking in knowledge, capacity, and social skills.

The Chinese term for quality education is 素质教育 *suzhi jiaoyu*. It comprises four characters in Chinese: 素 *su* means element, plain, or native; 質 *zhi* means nature, quality, or character; 教 *jiao* as both a noun and verb means teach, instruct, tutor, religion or schools; 育 *yu* means raise, bring up, rear, educate, or give birth to. 素质 *suzhi* is commonly translated as quality or value. 素质教育 *suzhi jiaoyu* as a major educational reform carried out by the Chinese government in the past 30 years has been translated into “quality education,” “quality-oriented education,” “character education,” or “well-rounded education” (Dello-Iacovo, 2009; Quan, 2013). For the sake of convenience of expression, I use “quality education” throughout the dissertation.

The Decision of Deepening Education Reform and Comprehensive Promotion of Quality-Oriented Education of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council on June 13, 1999 states that “the implementation of quality-oriented education must integrate moral education, intellectual education, physical education, and
aesthetic education in every aspect of educational activities; that schooling must not only do intellectual education well, but also strengthen physical education, aesthetic education, skills teaching and social practices . . . to promote the well-rounded development and healthy growth of students” (Website of the Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, 1999, http://www.moe.edu.cn/publicfiles/business/htmlfiles/moe/moe_177/200407/2478.html, accessed on July 20, 2015). Nonetheless, the concept and content of quality education are ambiguous and varied when it is implemented in each school. There is a general difference of understanding and implementation of quality education between big cities and rural areas: in developed cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou, it seems to “stress the psychology of the child, his/her rest and play time, as well as other values that are associated with liberal Western conceptions”; yet “in rural areas . . . ‘quality education’ mainly stress[es] the importance of obtaining education, encouraging parents to invest more resources in child education and preventing children from quitting school in early age, in order to engage in their household peasant work (http://thinkingchinese.com/the-dilemma-of-quality-education-in-china, accessed on July 20, 2015). Kipnis (2001) found the “significant rural/urban equity issues with the curriculum reforms” from his research in Zouping County of Shandong Province (Kipnis, quoted in Dello-Iacovo, 2009, p. 247). Since rural students dedicated themselves to “long hours of memorization which was enabling them to succeed in an environment where they were disadvantaged in all other aspects,” they “would not gain from reforms reducing the importance of long study hours,” which they used to learn textbooks and practice tests (Dello-Iacovo, 2009, p. 247). Kipnis (2001) also found that rural primary schools mostly “spent more time on the core exam subjects of math and Chinese and
were less likely to study computing, oral English, or ‘creativity’ classes as they lacked the teaching expertise, while rural students were also less able to access after school private tuition in these subjects (Kipnis, 2001, pp. 15–16)” (Dello-Iacovo, 2009, p. 247).

Because many urban Chinese people believe that their children receive better childhood education, educational investment, and quality education, they think of themselves and their children as having higher ability and value than rural people, which causes discrimination against and marginalization of rural students, which will be discussed in detail in this chapter. Some rural people also internalize this view and are driven to invest in their children’s education so that their children can escape the rural life for a better quality urban life. The suzhi discourse, therefore, has generated “a struggle for recognition” (Anagnost, 2004, p. 194) of rural people’s own value for themselves and their children.

This suzhi discourse is always linked with the historical ideas of peasants as backward and inferior. Hence, in this dissertation, I expand its meaning from its original quality or value or quality education to broader social ideas about a rural identity. This chapter deals not only with how my participants negotiated the discourse of suzhi, but also the broader meanings of a rural identity that this discourse constructed in intersection with the historical ideas of the rural, and the cultural capital that favors urban values and norms.

Accepting the Suzhi Discourse

Twenty-one participants out of 66 in my study demonstrated that they accepted the suzhi discourse in that they thought that urban students received better quality education, and so have more comprehensive or well-rounded suzhi than rural students. Yet they held the view that their suzhi is not rigid and fixed, but fluid and changeable through their individual
efforts for self-development.

Naiqian Xing, a first-year master’s student at Non-Elite National University 1, commented that she learned that she must raise her own quality and improve her own capacity from her observation about gender discrimination on the job market: that many employers preferred recruiting males to females. As she said,

Only if your capacity becomes strong, these factors cannot affect you so much. I feel that you cannot change other people, but you can only change yourself. Really, you can only raise your own quality (suzhi) and improve your own capacity to meet the requirements of other people, and adapt to society. (Interview with Naiqian, 11/10/2011)

For her, getting into graduate school meant a way to broaden her employment prospects, and also a way of raising her quality and improving her capacity. She also said that when her urban classmates commented that she ate and walked too fast, she accepted their suggestion and adjusted her speed of eating and walking. However, she also remarked that she was very proud of her achievement as a woman from rural origin because she was the first woman in her village to enter graduate school. Thus, she showed pride in her rural female identity because of her educational achievement, and also accepted the suzhi discourse to improve her quality as a rural student.

Like Naiqian, Caizhe San, a sophomore at Provincial University, thought that she should improve her suzhi:

I feel that rural students are only good at exams, but not good at many other things. Urban students are good at, for example, dancing, public speaking, music, playing
flute, various kinds of development. They also read so widely such as famous novels and Western books. But I never read these. I feel that I am lacking in these aspects. I think that I should take the opportunity in the university to read more books to widen my knowledge and vision. (Interview with Caizhe, 06/25/2011)

Li yi Xi, a third-year master’s student at Non-Elite National University I and originally from Shandong Province, resonated with Caizhe and Naiqian in blaming herself for “low ability,” but she also noted the regional difference in intersection with the urban-rural divide:

Students from Shandong and Henan provinces, particularly from rural areas of these provinces, are all with high test scores but low ability [she laughed]. That is to say, students in our areas are good at memorizing, but this kind of learning method is not good for creative thinking. I really felt this and I myself have this defect (缺陷 quexian). (Second Interview with Liyi, 11/14/2011)

Later she mentioned that rural students from Henan and Shandong provinces were particularly disadvantaged in quality education, because they had fewer resources to receive extracurricular training, unlike their urban equivalents.

In China, provinces such as Shandong and Henan have large student populations and because of the quota system of higher education admission that gives preferential treatment to students of major cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, students from these provinces compete fiercely to get into national universities in Beijing. Only the top students from these provinces are selected, so students are driven to devote more time to memorizing and practising for tests, which is why Liyi generalized that students from these provinces have “high test scores but low ability.” Ironically, she did not critique the unfair higher education quota system that caused
this situation, but solely blamed herself and rural students from these provinces.

In this section, I discussed that participants such as Liyi, Caizhe, and Naiqian did not seem to show any resistance to the *suzhi* discourse, but just accepted it. I would argue that choosing to accept the *suzhi* discourse is a kind of agency. They also showed their understanding that *suzhi* is fluid and could be improved through their own efforts.

**Ambivalent About the Suzhi Discourse**

One day somebody posted an article at BBS [university campus website]. I don’t quite remember the title of this article, but it’s about how urban students are more excellent than rural students. It listed numerous facts to prove the idea; for example, urban students received better quality education (*suzhi jiaoyu*) and attended various extracurricular training schools, so they have well-rounded capacity, higher vision, and more excellent leadership skills; but rural students are timid, and their capacity is not outstanding and [they] cannot be leaders. But I feel this is a type of discrimination. This discriminatory language is so disgusting. We all know that maybe there is some difference from this place to another. Urban kids are certainly more skillful in certain ways, such as interacting with foreign people, because they have grown up in an environment where they saw foreigners more often. Despite this, the author of this article should not show this off. Some people are indeed born with good family situations and some are born with bad situations, but it doesn’t mean that the people born with good situations should show off this thing. I dislike it when people degrade other people to upgrade themselves, but about this thing itself, I think that everybody has their own fate. There is no problem that they were born in urban areas, had better
growing up environments, and have wider knowledge, but they cannot belittle and
look down upon rural people. . . . Take my parents as an example. Even though they
could not make a lot of money, they used their own labor to make a living and didn’t
do anything that hurt anybody. Why did he look down upon rural people? (First
Interview with Ershi Yi, 09/15/2011)

This author deserved slapping. He was too self-centered, and his ideas were too
narrow. I wished that I had slapped him. . . . It was mainly because he has superiority
as an urban person. I don’t know how to say, but anyway he showed off the thing that
he was born with. It doesn’t make any sense because that is not what he achieved
through his individual effort. I think that what one is proud of should be things that
they get through their own efforts. If he achieved something because he had better
situations, we cannot blame him. But he simply boasted, “I am innately much better
and more excellent than you.” This is too disgusting. (Second Interview with Ershi Yi,
11/10/2011)

Here Ershi, a sophomore majoring in economics at Elite National University 1, described an
article that an urban person posted at the university campus website last semester, an article
that used the discourse of suzhi to discriminate against rural students and people. Ershi felt
looked down upon because this urban author showed off his urban privilege that he was born
with to judge rural students as less capable than urban students. She challenged this urbanite’s
rigid discriminatory view against rural students as “innately” different from urban students by
holding a fluid view that “what one is proud of should be things that they get through their
own efforts,” and resisted his discriminatory language as “disgusting.” Nevertheless, she did not challenge the privilege that she saw that this urban author carried; instead she accepted the norm that one cannot be blamed because s/he was born with better situations and “urban kids are certainly more skillful in certain ways” because of better quality education they received. This indicates that she internalized the discourse of *suzhi* to accept the *suzhi* difference between rural and urban students, so she could not recognize the system that created the unequal urban-rural situations. This case demonstrates the complex subjectivities and ambivalent perspectives of my participants in simultaneously internalizing, accepting, and resisting the discourse of *suzhi*.

Similar to Ershi, 26 other participants demonstrated that they accepted that rural students’ *suzhi* is less comprehensive or well-rounded than that of urban students, and meanwhile negotiated the negative stereotype of a rural identity. For example, Rongwen Bu, a senior at Municipal College, remarked that she did not feel inferior about her rural background because, as she said, “all people around me are rural” and “rural students are more independent.” She particularly compared herself with an urban classmate in the college who had to depend on her mom for her daily living such as washing clothes. Rongwen felt that she herself was better than this student because since childhood her mother has been too busy to take care of her; therefore, Rongwen had to take care of herself and “so became independent” in her words. Nevertheless, she also said that the rural was more backward than the urban and she found, as she said, that “urban students are better than us in dealing with social relationships, and have wider knowledge and vision than us,” because “parents of urban children took them to various zoos, gardens, and museums, which our rural area
doesn’t have. Rural areas only have crops. So we accessed few things. Urban children can also attend many specialty and interest classes which rural students cannot.” Hence, Rongwen partly internalized the suzhi discourse to judge herself as less knowledgeable than urban students and the rural as backward, and in the meantime seemed to challenge the stereotype that a rural identity is inferior. Like Ershi, she thought that her status of having less knowledge and vision was changeable and her “gap with urban students” could be bridged through her individual efforts to learn these knowledge, vision, and skills.

Xiangjin, a third-year master’s student at Elite National University 1, shared similarity with Rongwen in simultaneously accepting and resisting the suzhi discourse, yet for different reasons and in different ways due to the severe marginalization she experienced as the only rural female student in her dorm and class in what she called the “elite culture” of the university campus. As she said,

I found that I was surrounded by city people, being squeezed and pressed. I feel that I am in a pressed status. Their speech, their conduct, their elegance, and their calmness are what I don’t have. They accomplish tasks with ease. Besides, their material situation is so superior (优越 youyue). Every day when they come to class, they wear different clothes, famous brand clothes, very beautiful, showing taste (有品味 you pinwei) and disposition (气质 qizhi). Their quality (素质 suzhi) is so good, singing, dancing, and drawing pictures. This has caused such a big pressure for me. I feel pressured all the time. . . . I once thought that this is the regional difference, but later when I interacted with more people, I knew that this was not the regional difference, but the difference between the city and the rural. During my graduate
study, I once conducted research in Guizhou, Shaanxi, and Inner Mongolia [the underdeveloped regions in China]. Even within these regions, urban people live so much better than rural people [from non-underdeveloped regions]. Really, these urban children receive even better education than we rural students from the central provinces, such as Henan and Hebei. Their comprehensive quality is higher, because they can sing and dance and received many more trainings. Even in the least developed cities there are training classes. These [city] children live in affluent environments. They have much better growing up environments and receive much better education than we rural students from rural areas of the so-called inland (内地 neidi) provinces which are not that underdeveloped. (First Interview with Xiangjin, 07/10/2011)

Xiangjin did not experience this marginalization in her undergraduate university—a local university in Henan Province—because as she said, in that university, “60 or 70 percent, or even more, were rural students. Students around me mostly had similar situations. Even though there were urban students from some counties or cities and I also felt the difference, that difference was not as that big and deep as I feel here in Beijing.”

Her comments show that she felt deeply marginalized on the elite university campus because she did not think that she had the suzhi that urban students had, such as “their speech, their conduct, their elegance, and their calmness” and had not received as good education and training as they. Here she accepted this suzhi discourse.

Nevertheless, when she talked about how her master’s advisor discriminated against rural people and stereotyped them as inferior and low suzhi, she challenged this discourse. As
she remarked,

My advisor has prejudice against peasants and his prejudice is based on his theoretical knowledge. My understanding is that he has aristOCRatism (guizuzhuyi). He thinks that as an intellectual, an elite, what he wants is beyond the imagination of the ordinary people, and those ordinary people are people who cannot think, especially peasants. In his view, those people have no ability to think, but just labor every day and live boring lives. . . . I think that, as an urban person, he has never experienced rural life and knows nothing about rural life and people at all. But he just blindly blames and debases peasants. Since I chose to study peasants as my master’s thesis, I once held a discussion about the needs of peasants in class. I stated to the class that we must understand the peasants’ needs and try to meet their needs. But this advisor responded that peasants’ needs are endless and every peasant wants to be an emperor. It hurt me so much. (First Interview with Xiangjin, 07/10/2011)

Xiangjin’s comments indicate that her advisor, who regarded himself as an intellectual elite, inherited the historical division of intellectuals and peasants and negative historical ideas of peasants as “ordinary people” inferior to intellectuals.

Xiangjin also described how her advisor particularly discriminated against rural people from Henan—the province where Xiangjin was from. According to Xiangjin, when her advisor gave a lecture in class, he commented that when the Chinese state moved rural people from inland provinces such as Henan to develop the Xinjiang Autonomous Region, it did not move intellectuals who had culture and suzhi. For Xiangjin, who identified herself as a child
of rural people from Henan, her advisor’s comment was “a type of humiliation” because it indicated that rural people from Henan Province had no *suzhi*.

Xiangjin felt oppressed by her advisor’s urban intellectual power because of her rural-(Henan)-regional-intersectional identity. Facing this oppression, Xiangjin chose to keep silent and did not speak up against her advisor in class. Her silence did not mean that she submitted to her advisor’s power, but instead, it embodied her struggle and resistance. As she said,

> I chose to say nothing because I noticed that everybody in class appeared to agree with my advisor. For example, when he joked about the peasants who have no ability to think, everybody laughed with him. I was the only one who did not laugh at all. This made me feel that I was an other. . . . My identification with this group [of peasants] is what nobody in class could understand. (First Interview with Xiangjin, 07/10/2011)

Instead of being a passive victim, Xiangjin exerted her agency to recognize and resist the oppression perpetrated by her advisor. As an agent, Xiangjin acknowledged that her advisor’s perception of peasants oppressed and marginalized her as an “other” in the class. She also realized that, in such an overwhelmingly urban atmosphere, she had no option but to keep silent. Yet she chose to resist her advisor by identifying with the peasants and refusing to participate in the class’s complicit laughing.

Shuji, a second-year master’s student at Non-Elite National University 2, resonated with Ershi and Xiangjin, simultaneously resisting and accepting the *suzhi* discourse. However, unlike Ershi and Xiangjin who were ethnic Hans, Shuji was a Yi ethnic minority. Her
experiences with the suzhi discourse were related to her rural-regional-female-ethnic-minority identity. She described the discrimination she felt that was perpetrated by a Han rural migrant woman while she worked off campus at a company in Beijing:

During a summer break, when I was an undergraduate student, I worked off campus. A [rural migrant] woman at my working place asked me where I was from. I told her that I was from Yunnan. She said, “Oh, Yunnan is an ethnic minority province.” I then said that I am a Yi ethnic minority. She then said, “Huh, isn’t Yunnan’s transportation backward? Isn’t it that people at Yunnan don’t have enough food and clothing?” She then said that there are many women sold out from Yunnan to marry men in her area [a rural area in Anhui Province]. She also asked me whether ethnic minorities are barbarous and kill people casually. . . . She thinks that Yunnan is backward and uncivilized. . . . I feel that she discriminates against rural people with ethnic minority backgrounds from our province. Because she was working there and I was also working there, she said frankly to me, “Many women from your area were sold to marry men in our area. Isn’t your area poor?” Then I explained to her. I said, “My home is in a rural area. It is a bit poor, but my area is rarely so poor that we sell women to other areas.” . . . I explained to her because I wanted to correct her [mis]understanding about us. (First Interview with Shuji, 08/27/2011)

According to Shuji, this migrant woman is from a rural area in Anhui Province and a janitor at the same company where Shuji worked as a salesperson. This woman tended to stigmatize Yunnan rural ethnic minority women as “poor,” “barbarous,” “backward,” and “uncivilized.”

Historically, rural ethnic minority women in China have been the “internal others” of a
Han patriarchal society (Gaetano, 2005, p. 61). “Representations of these ethnic females from geographically remote regions of China,” as Geatano (2005) precisely notes, “connote backwardness and exoticism by means of their lowly social position in terms of age/generation, minority status, gender, and place” (p. 2005). These representations intermingle with the suzhi discourse to oppress rural ethnic minority women. Since Shuji is an ethnic minority woman from the countryside of Yunnan Province—a remote region in China, she was questioned by this rural Han migrant woman with the negative connotation of “backwardness,” barbarism, poverty, and lack of civilization due to Shuji’s rural female ethnic minority status from a remote place. This woman’s questioning caught Shuji within the intersectional oppression of ethnicity, rurality, gender, and place of origin.

Even though Shuji immediately responded to this woman to correct her misunderstanding about rural ethnic minority people in her area, she learned not to reveal her ethnic minority identity in the future. As she said,

I feel that if I say it, people look at you differently. They are like, “This person is different from us. She is an ethnic minority.” Some people think ethnic minorities come from backward areas, eat strange food, and speak their own languages. If I say that I am an ethnic minority, I have to explain a lot to them. So sometimes, in order to save trouble, I don’t say [my ethnicity] if people don’t ask. (First Interview with Shuji, 08/27/2011)

Thus, Shuji learned to make her ethnicity invisible. She understood that this rural woman’s assumption that ethnic minorities are “backward and uncivilized” was discriminating towards her. Nevertheless, she internalized this discourse of “uncivilized” as part of the suzhi
discourse to judge herself in other contexts. When I asked her what her life was like when she first arrived at the university, she said that the learning style that she developed as a rural student was not as “flexible” as that of urban students, which means that she could only focus on studying but did not know how to communicate with teachers. She compared herself with a Han urban male student who did not do as well as Shuji in his academic performance but was good at socializing with teachers. For example, he frequently invited teachers to dinner and gave them luxurious gifts. This student got to know many resources and opportunities that Shuji did not know. As a result, he won many awards and got many benefits, which Shuji did not. As she said,

    Anyhow, he is a city kid. His family is also wealthy. I think he is more civilized than us in building and using networks. He always brought some special products for teachers such as ginseng. Even though he is from northeast [China], ginseng is very expensive. So I feel that he is so capable in building relationships with teachers. He often eats together with teachers. Anyway, he was recommended to a graduate school, joined the Communist Party, and got all the scholarships that he wanted. It looks as if the teachers helped him a lot. I don’t know. Anyhow, I feel that the teachers did help him a lot. (First Interview with Shuji, 08/27/2011)

In China, joining the Communist Party grants one the privilege to access many benefits such as getting scholarships, entering associations and unions, seeking jobs, and getting into graduate schools. Osnos (2014) notes that in China today, there are 80 million Communist Party members—one in every 12 adults (p. 26). As Osnos (2014) states, “China was a high-functioning dictatorship—a dictatorship without a dictator. The government answered to
the party; the party appointed CEOs and Catholic bishops and newspaper editors. It advised judges how to decide sensitive court cases, and it directed the nation’s military generals” (p. 26). The Communist Party is the powerhouse in China that dominates people’s daily lives. Becoming a member of the Communist Party amplifies one’s job opportunities and life chances (Osnos, 2014, p. 26). Because of this, many university and college students compete and sometimes bribe teachers to join the party. This is why Shuji thinks joining the Communist Party is one of the benefits that this Han urban male student got, along with other benefits such as getting scholarships and being recommended to a graduate school at a prestigious national university.

Shuji’s experience shows how the intersectionality of rurality, regional origin, ethnicity, and gender worked in her life. The Han rural migrant woman whom she encountered at the company used her Han privilege to judge her and all ethnic minority women from Yunnan as “uncivilized.” Shuji realized that it was a type of discrimination toward her and challenged and resisted it. When facing the unfair situation where the Han urban male classmate could get many more opportunities and benefits by socializing with teachers, she used the suzhi discourse to judge herself as less “civilized” and less capable in “building and using networks,” in her words.

The sovereign power of the Chinese party-state constructed a “birdcage” composed of many wires such as the urban-rural divide, hukou, the educational system, and regional discrimination in higher education admission. While Han participants in my research were significantly constrained by these wires, participants with ethnic minority backgrounds such as Shuji encountered one more wire: ethnicity in their daily life. Yet the one more wire of
ethnic oppression that rural ethnic minority women face, as Gaetano (2005) suggests when she paraphrases Schein (2002, p. 403), “is not wholly dominated by the state but participated in by a variety of civil society actors—Han elites, local elites, and ‘local cultural practitioners’ including women themselves for whom identity poses contradictions” (p. 61).

Cui Zhen, a sophomore at Non-Elite National University 1, also showed ambivalent perspectives about the *suzhi* discourse, but in different ways from Ershi, Rongwen, Xiangjin, and Shuji in that she described herself as being proud of her rural identity and moral values, yet acknowledged that she did not have the capacity of urban students and refused to identify herself as rural in front of urban people who looked “wealthy” and “snobbish” in her words. The reason is that, as she said, “it is not because I look down upon myself, but other people may look down upon me.” Then she elaborated that she heard from news reports that many urban people looked down upon rural people and thought that the quality (*suzhi*) of rural people was low. She also said that she had no capacity by the standards of quality education because her academic scores at the university were not good, and she had no leadership capacity as she was not good at competing, but she was proud of the attributes she developed from her rural upbringing such as sincerity, honesty, and modesty and because she knew vegetables such as dandelions, which her urban classmates did not know. Her ambivalence about the *suzhi* discourse is perhaps one of the reasons why she said she felt uncomfortable when I asked her how she defined her rural female identity at the interview—as she was negotiating the *suzhi* discourse deeply within herself, which I wrote in Chapter 3.

In this section, I used five diverse examples, from Ershi, Rongwen, Xiangjin, Shuji, and Cui, to discuss how my participants accommodated and resisted the *suzhi* discourse.
They believed that they did not receive as much quality education or socialize as much as urban students, so they appeared to accept the idea that their capacity was less comprehensive or well-rounded than that of urban students. Yet, they challenged and resisted this discourse when it was used to stereotype their identity as negative.

**Challenging and Redefining the Meaning of “Quality” in Quality Education**

Unlike the above participants who partly or ambivalently accepted the *suzhi* discourse that presumes that urban students have received better quality education, eight other participants critiqued and subverted the dominant meaning of *suzhi* in quality education. Four participants challenged the content of quality education that is urban-centered and only focuses on “the so-called quality” that rural students had no opportunities to develop. Five participants including one participant from the above four tried to redefine the meaning of quality in quality education and add new elements to it.

Four participants in my research shared the view that the elements of quality education mostly refer to computer know-how, public speaking, social and communication skills, and knowledge of music and fine arts, which the rural students lacked opportunities to learn. According to them, the attributes, knowledge, skills, and experiences that rural students did have, such as independence, caring, farming, cooking, and doing housework, were not valued. For example, Tian at Elite National University 1, challenged the conventional standard of quality education. As she said, “Why doesn’t quality education evaluate whether or not we can climb the trees, and whether or not we can garden crops? . . . This is a type of quality. But it only evaluates the so-called quality that rural children did not get opportunities to foster.”

Qiao at Non-Elite National University 1 also challenged the idea of quality education,
which, in her eyes, only evaluates specialties that are fostered in urban environments. She critiqued the way in which it disadvantages rural students. She stated, “The well-rounded quality that they evaluate is certainly not the quality that comes from farming. But due to the limited rural resources, there is hardly any possibility that rural students can learn piano, musical instruments or dancing, or practice their oral expression and speaking capacity in front of the public.”

Tian and Qiao made sense of the rural-urban disparity and the concept of quality education by recognizing that they deprived rural students of equal opportunities to learn valued skills and knowledge and marginalized them for not having those skills and knowledge. They used this understanding to disrupt the dominant discourse of quality education.

Five participants, including Qiao mentioned above, redefined quality in quality education and gave new meaning to it. For example, Xianzhi Yi, a sophomore majoring in nuclear engineering and technology at Elite National University 2, called the areas of so-called quality education—music, fine arts, and dancing—“floating clouds.” For her, the essence of well-roundedness is humanity, that is, how to be an honest and happy human being. She said that, compared with her urban university classmates who had been attending various kinds of training classes to foster their specialties since their childhood, she as a rural student had had a much more happy childhood because she played in nature. Her childhood memories were very happy, rich, and meaningful for her. But when she talked with her urban classmates, they did not seem to have this sort of happiness in their memories of childhood. While her childhood was full of freedom and happiness, her urban classmates’ childhoods
were full of stress and competition. Besides, she developed, in her words, the “quality” of “diligence,” “caring,” “independence,” and “strong sense of responsibility” from her childhood because her parents endured financial hardship and had to always leave home to do business and leave her younger brother under her care. She thought that the attributes she developed should count as elements of well-roundedness, but they were not valued by the discourse of quality education.

Like Xianzhi, Qiao also expressed that the discourse of quality education is too limited, focusing only on students’ “oral communication,” “public speaking,” and “musical instruments and dancing.” She said that from her rural experiences she had developed such attributes as sincerity and honesty, and a pure, calm, and peaceful mind. She suggested that quality education should take these attributes into account when it evaluates students, instead of pressuring students to compete with each other.

Thus, the above participants challenged the meaning of quality education in two key ways. While four participants, including Tian and Qiao, stated that quality education further marginalized rural students who had been disadvantaged by the urban-rural disparity, five participants like Xianzhi and Qiao redefined quality in quality education. These five participants thought that their own attributes of humanity and being honest, kind, calm, peaceful, caring, and responsible to others should be important elements of quality education. According to them, quality education should not only be focused on competitive skills, but it should be humanity-centered. These participants gave new meaning to quality education and developed counter-discourses to represent quality differently.
Developing Counter-Discourses to Counteract Marginalization

At the beginning when I just entered university, I thought that my life would be like it was in high school. But I found it was not. I found that many students didn’t study hard at all, that is, they didn’t go to study in the library every day like I did. But they attended fine arts performances, speech contests, and music groups because they had talents in these areas, which I did not. So I feel that in the university this kind of talent is widely favored. What is valued is not solely test scores any more, but those specialties which are attractive. . . . This was also true in my daily study. Our program required the ability to coordinate and organize people to film movies and to write film reviews. The teachers asked us to print out our homework from the computer. I did not know how to print out a paper, so I had to call my cousin who had entered the university earlier than I. He told me to first copy the paper to a USB memory stick and take the USB stick to print out the paper. But I did not know what a USB memory stick was. I had to ask other people. . . . Also, I did not know how to use a computer at all and every time it took me a long time to do the homework on the computer. Before [getting into the university], I did not have any computer classes, but my urban classmates have been using computers for a long time. Their [high] schools had some computer classes. Also, their families were relatively wealthier and could afford computers for them. So they had known how to use them and studied more easily than I. But I did not have such a condition at my home and high school. So at the university I had to spend more time to learn how to use computers. . . . So urban students know more and they could adapt to the university
more easily than rural students. I feel the situation was so unfair. . . . If the urban-rural disparity doesn’t get improved, rural students can never get equal opportunities to foster their abilities and talents. (First Interview with Rang, 09/17/2011)

In the above comment, Rang, a senior majoring in radio and television editing and directing at Elite National University 1, acknowledged that the urban-rural disparity created an unfair situation for her. According to her, while neither her school nor her home prepared her for how to use a computer and to cultivate specialties beyond taking tests prior to entering the university, her urban classmates had learned many more academic skills at their high schools or their homes. This shows how the cultural capital on urban campus marginalized and hindered rural students like Rang.

Encountering this marginalization, Rang did not present herself as a passive victim. Rather she actively exercised her agency to develop a counter-discourse on the urban-rural disparity to make sense of the marginalization she experienced as not her fault, but the fault of the system. According to Foucault, counter-discourse is not inevitably divided from the dominant discourse, but it aims to “represent the world differently”: its different representation “goes beyond simply contradicting the dominant, beyond simply negating its assertions”; rather it seeks to “detect,” diagnose, and navigate the codes by which the dominant discourse naturalizes “understanding of the social worlds,” and consequently it serves to project the subversion of the codes (Terdiman, 1985, p. 149). Foucault also suggests that counter-discourses “produce new knowledge, speak new truths, and so constitute new powers” (Ramazanoglu, 1993, p. 23). The counter-discourse of the urban-rural disparity that
Rang developed from her meaning making of her marginalized experiences thus forms new knowledge with which to disrupt the dominant discourse of quality (suzhi) that regards rural students as deficient.

Similar to Rang, Erbai Shi, a sophomore majoring in economics, also at Elite National University 1, said that she was marginalized on the university campus because her rural home and school lacked the resources to help her develop computer skills. The computer teacher at the university did not help her learn the basics, such as how to turn on and off the computer, how to type, and how to use Microsoft Word and Photoshop, because she was the minority in the class and the overwhelming majority of students had mastered these basics. Therefore, she had to fumble by herself. Compared to the other students, she needed much more time and effort to complete her homework, which required students to use computers. It seemed to her that it was much easier for her urban classmates to get higher test scores at the university because they had already acquired this computer know-how—this cultural capital—at home. Lacking these skills, she was excluded from mainstream learning at the university. Even though she did not use the term “cultural capital,” her discourse showed that it was the urban dominant cultural capital that marginalized her on higher education campus.

Like Rang, when Erbai experienced how the urban cultural capital marginalized her, she recognized that it was not her fault but the fault of the educational system that did not provide her with relevant opportunities. Feeling alienated from the urban circle, she joined the work-study association on the university campus where rural students gathered and built alliances with each other. In this context she developed a counter-discourse to counteract the marginalization that she experienced. As Foucault suggests, discourse means “not purely a
‘linguistic’ concept,” but “is about language and practice”; it is about “the production of knowledge through language” (Hall, 2001, p. 72; Xu, 2000, p. 23). Erbai’s understanding about how the urban cultural capital marginalized her constitutes a form of knowledge that enabled her to make sense of her marginalization as not her fault, so she came up with the practice to seek and build external alliances.

Like Rang and Erbai, Shaoshi Fang at Non-Elite National University 1 expressed her understanding about her marginalization in an educational system that was built on rural-urban inequality, and she challenged the dominant discourse that blamed rural students for their struggles or failure. She took Tsinghua University’s Independent Admission exam and failed it because it tested for a lot of knowledge that she had never been exposed to. She attributed her failure to the unequal distribution of educational resources between rural and urban areas. She said,

Being rural doesn’t mean that my capacity is less than that of urban students. . . . I do not know anything beyond textbooks and things tested on the regular gaokao exams, as my education is test-oriented. But I would not accept that I do not have the ability to learn. . . . I do, but I have no resources, no opportunities to broaden my horizon, and nobody to mentor me. (Second Interview with Shaoshi, 09/23/2011)

The Chinese government adopted the Independent Admission exam in the early 2000s as part of the reform initiatives. The exam is not intended to replace the Chinese National Higher Education Entrance Exam (gaokao), which remains the most important basis for selecting students for admission to higher education in China; rather, it is an addition to gaokao. Students who do well on the Independent Admission exam and in a university’s
on-site interviews still have to take *gaokao*. However, the credits they earned from taking the Independent Admission exam will be added to their *gaokao* scores when they apply to the university. The Independent Admission exam’s paper-based tests and on-site interviews emphasize students’ social and public speaking skills. These skills, though important, tend not to be included in the regular curriculum in Chinese education (Yang, 2007; Ma & Wang, 2015). A typical Chinese student has few opportunities to practice public speaking. Indeed, most precollege schooling in China is geared toward preparing students for *gaokao* (Niu, 2007), even though the booming market economy and the presence of many foreign, including Western, companies in China creates a demand for employees with communication skills (Bian & Logan, 1996). Thus, most precollege education fails to prepare students for modern life. Students in major cities and from well-to-do families are more likely to have opportunities to hone presentation and social skills than students from rural and poor families (Wu, 2008; Yang, 2007; Ma & Wang, 2015).

Shaoshi understood that the reason she failed the Independent Admission exam was not her lack of capacity, but because, as a rural child, she had been deprived of opportunities to acquire the requisite knowledge and skills. She developed a counter-discourse to resist the dominant discourse that blames rural students for being less capable than urban students.

This section demonstrated the counter-discourses that participants such as Rang, Erbai, and Shaoshi developed to make meaning of the marginalization that they recognized as the result of the urban-rural disparity that deprived them of equal learning opportunities with their urban equivalents. Instead of blaming themselves, they used counter-discourses to make sense of their status quo as the fault of the unfair system.
Decentering the Superiority of Urban Knowledge and Culture

Sixteen participants out of 66 challenged the superiority of urban knowledge and culture. Among these 16 students, eight took pride in their rural experiences, knowledge, skills, and identity as a way to resist the dominant culture at the urban university settings; eight used the moral values they developed from their rural upbringing to critique the urban culture.

Using their pride in their rurality, eight students appeared to decenter or deconstruct the supposed superiority of urban-contextualized knowledge. For example, Gai Ci, a junior in Information Management and Technology at Provincial University, stated,

Since my childhood I have been doing farming, so I know the names of various vegetables and corns. This is common-sense knowledge, which I feel that university students should possess. However, some urban classmates don’t know this. For example, when they saw spinach, they were like, “What is this?” Now newspapers also report that many university students don’t have this type of common sense. I feel that they shouldn’t be like that. . . . This kind of common-sense knowledge is easily neglected. (First Interview with Gai, 09/12/2011)

Gai argued that her common-sense knowledge should be valued by urban students. However, from her perspective, it was not perceived as useful and valuable on the urban university campus, which valued such cultural capital as knowledge about modern technology and products and oral communication skills.

Like Gai, Cheng Sui, a senior in ethnic minority language and literature at Non-Elite National University 2, also took pride in the knowledge and skills that she had developed
from her rural upbringing, and she pushed against the urban cultural capital in higher education that she felt oppressed her. She described her experience of being excluded from social activities on the university campus because these activities mostly valued participants’ abilities in music, fine arts, drawing, and dancing, which she did not have any opportunities to foster prior to university. She said that these activities advantaged urban students over rural students and that the urban university granted privileges to urban students while marginalizing rural students.

Although Cheng felt marginalized in the university setting, she refused to present herself as a passive victim of the emphasis on urban cultural capital. Rather she challenged it by reclaiming and making visible her identity, based on her rural upbringing. For example, she noted that, while her urban classmates sometimes had difficulty washing clothes, cooking, and doing housework, it was no problem for her because she had been cooking since she was five years old and washing clothes for the whole family ever since she was seven or eight years old. In the first year after she entered the university, she helped her roommates put on the quilt cover and fix the bench when it was broken. In addition, she also knew what herbs treat what kind of disease because she learned this when her father was sick. She claimed that it was unfair that her urban classmates’ cultivated specialties were acknowledged to be useful and valuable on the urban higher education campus yet her knowledge and skills were not taken into account.

Similar to Cheng and Gai, Jun Shu, a senior in finance at Non-Elite National University 2, expressed her pride in her rural background and used this pride to counteract the marginalization she felt in her field of study because she came to it with little knowledge
about financial products and the stock market, but her urban classmates had known about it before entering the university. It took her a much longer time to adapt to her studies at the university than her urban equivalents. However, she said,

I never felt inferior about my rural background. Instead, I feel very good about my rural background as I know many things that my urban classmates don’t. What impressed me most deeply is that once when one of my urban classmates and I watched TV together, he asked what that is when seeing the paddy on the show. I was so astonished that I asked him, “If you have not seen the real paddy, you should have seen it from some books.” Then he said that he did not notice it before. So I feel that it’s very good that I am from a rural area because I learned many tangible things. These things are what urban people don’t know. Since my childhood I have been harvesting rice and wheat with my parents. So I know many things [about farming]. Actually urban students and I have been learning different things since our childhoods. I feel very honored that I know many things that they [urban students] don’t know. (First Interview with Jun, 08/25/2011)

Jun expressed her pride and sense of honor in knowing about the rice paddy because of her rural upbringing. Her rural experience had also taught her to be independent; for example, she began to take care of her own living and cooking much earlier than her urban classmates. While she learned such skills as cooking, washing clothes, and cleaning her room as early as primary school, most of her urban classmates did not do these until they got to high school or even university. Like Cheng, she thought she was better and more skillful in taking care of her daily living than her urban classmates. Her rural knowledge, experience, and skills
constituted part of her identity that she was proud of.

Jun also said that her childhood was more free and happy than that of her urban classmates. When talking with them, she learned that they had had little time to play during their childhood because their parents sent them to extracurricular classes in English, fine arts, music, chess, and so on. They had to attend these classes during evenings, weekends, and even summer and winter holidays. But in rural areas, rural parents had no financial resources to support such activities. This left rural children with much freer time to play with their peers. She said that during her childhood and even when attending primary and junior secondary school, she had a lot of time to play with her peers; they skipped rope, played games with rocks, and played hide-and-seek. After school she and her friends went to look for vegetables and plants to bring home to feed the poultry and pigs. They also went to the mountains to pick wild fruits and played while picking. Reflecting on this, she said that many of her urban classmates missed out on “a real childhood.” As she stated,

Reflecting on it now, I feel that if my childhood was solely spent on attending these classes [the structured specialty-training classes that urban students attended], even though I could have learned many things, I might have missed a real childhood. A real childhood should be playing as happily as you want and with little pressure. Then recalling it later in your life you could have the feeling that that time is really very natural, free, and happy. I feel that my childhood time was very important for me. When thinking about it now, I feel very happy. When I share this with my roommates sometimes, I feel so happy particularly because we [she and her two rural roommates] can talk a lot in common. (Second Interview with Jun, 09/09/2011)
Jun expressed her pride that she had had a “very natural, free, and happy” childhood. In reflecting on her childhood now, she felt happy not just because her childhood was free and happy, but also because she could share this happiness with her rural roommates who had had similar experiences.

Eight participants drew upon their moral values to challenge the dominant discourse, which represents rural culture and people as inferior. For example, Cui, at Non-Elite National University 1, said that the influence of her parents upon her “ties well with traditional moral value,” which means, in her words, “treating other people honestly and sincerely”; “don’t benefit the self at the expense of others”; “keeping a content mind and don’t engage in malicious competition.” She found that in urban spaces, particularly big metropolitan cities like Beijing, people engaged in intense competition and did not usually care about other people’s feelings and interests. In contrast, she felt that rural life was more peaceful.

Zhiduo Shi, a third-year master’s student in journalism and communication at Elite National University 1, went deeper than Cui to explain the values that she developed from her rural community culture. To her, “rural” meant more traditional and collectivistic; and “urban” meant more modern and individualistic. She explained that in her rural area she was required to be “modest,” “restrained,” and “compromising and submissive to care about everybody else’s interests.” Yet in urban areas she found that people were expected to advocate for themselves and strive for their own benefits. As she said,

In urban modern culture, everybody fights for their own interest; but if you do so in rural traditional culture, other people might feel, “Oh, this person ignores the collective interests and doesn’t care about other people.” (First Interview with
She gave an example that when she was asked to nominate somebody for the award of outstanding editor, she wrote down the name of another editor even though she had done more work as a chief editor. She stated the reason below:

I will never compete with my friends, particularly because we always see each other. But if I compete for something, for example, a job at an interview, I don’t have so much concern, because I don’t know the interviewees who compete with me and they don’t know me either. Then I can compete with no concern. But as far as my friends are concerned, I will never compete for that single award. I feel that I should withdraw and not compete. (Second Interview with Zhiduo, 11/18/2011)

Zhiduo observed that the attributes she had developed from her rural culture, such as honesty, modesty, and caring, were more implicit and invisible than those that urban students possessed, such as knowledge of music and fine arts, which, in her words, were “more externally demonstrated.” She was aware that her attributes were not always recognized as valuable by other people in urban settings, but she valued these attributes and used them as guiding principles in interacting with other people.

Whether or not Zhiduo overgeneralized the differences between rural and urban, what is important is that she realized and was proud of her own value as a rural person. This realization allowed her to use her rural identity to challenge the discrimination against rural people. For example, when she visited her cousin, a Beijing resident, they saw on TV a woman in outdated clothes. Her cousin said, “Look at how earthy her dressing is. She looks like so rural.” She recognized that her cousin was discriminating against rural people and
immediately responded to him, “I am also rural. It’s not fair to say that.” Her cousin did not say anything in response, but she taught him that he did not understand rural people at all. As she said, “This society is already so unfair to them. If you add discrimination to them, you reinforce the unfairness” (Second Interview with Zhiduo, 11/18/2011).

She also informed her cousin that rural people and culture have traditional values that are not usually appreciated by urban people, such as sincerity, honesty, modesty, and caring about other people’s interests. Thus, Zhiduo developed a counter-discourse of “unfairness” to combat the discrimination.

In this section, I discussed two key means that 16 participants used to challenge the commonly perceived superiority of urban culture and/or to combat discrimination. Eight participants, including Gai, Cheng, and Jun took pride in their rural knowledge, experiences, and attributes. Eight, including Cui and Zhiduo, recognized and relied upon the moral values they had learned from their rural communities, which comprised but were not limited to caring, honesty, and modesty.

**Combatting an Internalized Negative Rural Identity Through Accumulating Dominant Cultural Capital**

In contrast to the pride in their rural status and moral values that 16 participants expressed in the above section, 22 participants commented that they felt inferior (自卑 *zibei*) about their rural status or identity at some moments of their life, particularly at the beginning when they attended their university or college. Among these 22 students, three participants, Wan and Erqian (and Liyan whom I will discuss in the section on feeling inferior about a low status for the convenience of analysis) explicitly spoke against peasantry.
Speaking Against Peasantry

Wan at Non-Elite National University 2 and Erqian at Elite National University 1 said that they found some rural people’s quality was lower than that of urban people. They used such labels as “barbarous” (野蛮 yeman), “uncivilized” (不文明 bu wenming), and “rude” (粗鲁 culu) to judge rural people. 野蛮 yeman is made up of two characters: 野 ye which means wild, rude, or unrestrained in its adjective form, and field or vision when it is used as a noun; 蛮 man which means unreasoning, bullying, or reckless as an adjective. 野蛮 yeman is commonly translated as barbaric, wild, barbarous, or savage. 不文明 bu wenming is the antonym of 文明 wenming. 不 bu means no; 文 wen means culture, literary, or character; 明 ming means bright, brilliant, light, clear-sighted, or discerning as an adjective or sight as a noun. 文明 wenming is commonly translated as civilized, so I translate its antonym 不文明 bu wenming as uncivilized. 粗鲁 culu comprises two characters 粗 cu and 鲁 lu. 粗 cu means coarse, crude, rough, rude, unrefined or vulgar; 鲁 lu means stupid, dull, rash, rough, or rude. 粗鲁 culu is commonly translated as rough or rude.

Wan said that she felt ashamed about her rurality particularly at high school when her homeroom teacher constantly encouraged her to enter higher education so she could “cast off the rural shadow.” This teacher shared the same Manchu ethnicity as Wan. He always chatted with her and encouraged her to study hard to move out of the rural area and to settle in a city.

Wan: He was very close to me because he married a woman from my village. He always talked to me and said that I must cast off this shadow.

Lifang: What shadow?

Wan: Rural. At the class meeting, he always told us, “The outside world is very wide.
You must go out and have a look.” He said that you must study hard to cast off your rural shadow. He also mentioned hukou and said that you should move your hukou out too. And as long as you can take root in cities, you should. (Interview with Wan, 08/27/2011)

This teacher’s words motivated Wan to study very hard to get into a university so she could change her hukou from rural to urban. She ended up joining Non-Elite National University 2, the top ethnic minority university in China, and moved her hukou from her village to Beijing. After arriving at the university, however, she experienced what she called discrimination from her boyfriend who was an urbanite with a Mongolian ethnic minority background. When Wan met him, he had already graduated from a university and was working in Beijing. She said that when she started dating him, he brought her to dine with his colleagues. When she did not take the initiative to propose a toast to his colleagues, he said to her, “You are so rural and do not know anything” (Interview with Wan, 08/27/2011). Feeling hurt, Wan did not argue with him. Instead, she accepted it and blamed herself for not being as well educated as urban students and not having the “knowledge” to propose a toast. She perceived her inability to toast as “knowledge” she lacked as a rural student, so she took painstaking efforts to learn it from her boyfriend and her urban classmates.

Wan internalized the dominant discourse about her inferior rural status and used it to judge her mom when her mom came to visit her in Beijing:

Wan: He [my boyfriend] met my mom when my mom came to Beijing last time. She is a genuine peasant. Many of her manners were not appropriate. He saw them all.

Lifang: What did he say?
Wan: He did not say anything, but I sensed it. I have been staying in Beijing for such a long time. My mom’s many inappropriate manners, of course, I know.

Lifang: For example, what inappropriate manners?

Wan: For example, when she ate at home, she liked to put the chopsticks on the table after she finished eating. In the city, she should have put them on the plate, but she still put them on the table. Last time when my mom, my boyfriend, and I went to eat out, my mom rudely put her chopsticks on the table. At that time I really wanted to remind my mom, but as a daughter I could not say [anything]. So I did not say anything. But he [my boyfriend] saw all this. He is a very meticulous person. His observation is very sharp. Then he winked at me and I understood.

Lifang: What did you understand?

Wan: I understood that he had a little sense of disdain... At that time, I thought that he must be thinking, “See, rural people are just like this.” (Interview with Wan, 08/27/2011)

Wan sensed her boyfriend’s contempt of her mom’s behavior, but she did not question him.

As Diane Geng (2014) states, according to mainstream values in China, the urban lifestyle is much more desirable than that of the rural. Wan internalized these values to stand on the side of her boyfriend, perceiving his urban table manners as more appropriate than her mom’s rural table manners. In this sense, she was colluding with her boyfriend to use his urban standards to speak against her mom as a “genuine peasant.”

Similarly, Erqian explained that, after coming to Beijing, she found that the quality (suzhi) of urban people was sometimes higher than that of rural people. She said that her view
was based on her personal experience when she traveled with her Christianity group to a village and lived in a rural hotel. According to her, the hotel was not only badly equipped and did not provide any garbage bags and nearby bathrooms, but also in the early morning around 8 o’clock, the male owner of the hotel came to knock on the door of her room, which she shared with another female, shouting, “Will you leave or not? Will you check out today?” She felt humiliated by the fact that the man shouted too loudly in the early morning, and 8 a.m. was too early to check out (because as far as Erqian knew, the common check-out time for hotels in China was before 12 noon), so she quarreled with him. But the man shouted to her that they did not have such a practice that she could stay until 12. She also said that this man kept his upper body naked when he swept the floor, which she said annoyed her and made her feel that he was “barbarous” (野蛮 yeman), “rude” (wuli), and “uncivilized” (不文明 bu wenming). As she commented,

Since you are doing business, your behavior should be civilized. I felt so annoyed by his behavior. I don’t mean that urban people are noble and rural people are degrading, but I feel that urban people have their own pride that certainly sometimes they are more civilized in quality (素质 suzhi) or self-restraint (涵养 hanyang), which is worthy of learning by rural people. I feel that the city inevitably restrains people to be more civilized. That restraint lets you feel that this [the city] is better than the rural, and it lets you feel that when you suddenly go down to the countryside you face what may be called savage (野蛮 yeman). At that time you feel a sense of superiority. When I argued with that unreasonable person [the male hotel owner] and felt so disappointed, I felt that even though I could not argue over him because his
voice was louder, I still felt that it did not matter. [I thought,] “Anyway you are like this, and I won’t argue with you any more. I have the confidence not to argue with you.” That is, I feel that the urban-rural difference actually is not only the economic difference. Of course, economically urban people are richer than rural people, but actually I feel that it is better in the city than in the countryside, because it is at least a place in order. But in rural areas there is no such order, no standards; so there are unreasonable things, and there is no way to reason things out. (First Interview with Erqian, 10/04/2011)

Thus, both Wan and Erqian spoke against rural people and their ways of life. While Erqian felt that rural people are sometimes unreasonable and their ways of life have “no order,” “no standards,” Wan used urban standards to judge her mom as “inappropriate” and “rude.”

Despite this, however, they did not just present themselves as passive or helpless rural students with low quality, as represented by the suzhi discourse. Instead, they actively made the choice to accommodate and learn the urban standards and ways of life, in Erqian’s words, “in order to have urban people’s quality”; and in Wan’s words, “to cast off the rural shadow.”

Feeling “Inferior” About and Combatting Low Status

Twenty-two participants, including Wan and Erqian, stated that they felt inferior (自卑 zibeī) about their rural status or identity at times after they entered urban higher education institutions. 自卑 zibeī is made up of two characters: 自 zi which means self; and 卑 bei which means low, humble, inferior, or modest. Based on the contexts where these students used this term to express that they found themselves having less knowledge, narrower vision, lower quality, or less comprehensive abilities than urban students, I translated the term 自卑
For example, Yin Yue, a sophomore in chemistry at Provincial University, said,

Maybe because I am from a rural area, I feel a bit inferior. After all, I did not see much in the rural area. Sometimes I feel that urban people see more, but rural students have so little knowledge. Our scope of knowledge is much narrower. So I feel, myself, a bit inferior. . . . For example, when I just came here, I heard urban students talk about modern things such as computers, games, and popular and fashionable clothes. At that time I felt that I knew nothing. I never heard the words that they talked about. I was like, “This thing I have never seen. This word I have never heard. This game I have never played.” Then I felt a bit inferior, mainly in terms of knowledge. (First Interview with Yin, 09/03/2011)

Erqian shared Yin’s feeling of inferiority. She stated the reason why, after entering the university, she had no confidence in participating in campus activities such as performances and contests:

Because I felt that I didn’t have their vision. I didn’t get a well-rounded education as much as they. For example, they were good at singing, dancing, and drawing pictures, but I was good at nothing. I felt that they had seen more about the world than I. I didn’t know as much as they. It was much easier for them to move on in this environment. Anyway they are such a strong group of people. . . . You feel that this is their place. (First Interview with Erqian, 10/04/2011)

Similar to Yin and Erqian, Huzhong Ying, a senior at Municipal College, remarked that she felt inferior as a rural student because she thought that she did not have as broad
knowledge and wide vision as urban students. As she said,

When I went to attend the contest for the Convenance Model [in the college], I felt
too nervous to walk. But other people were all so in good taste, so natural. They
could express themselves along with the music. Why was I so nervous? When I was
a class president [before college], I felt it was nothing to speak in front of all my
classmates, but why do I have this psychological issue after coming here? Then I
realized my rural background. I feel that I am from a rural area, so I don’t have the
broad knowledge as other people. I know less than other people. I have this
inferiority mentality (自卑心理  zibei xinli). So I have the feeling that I dare not
perform. . . . People who perform more naturally than I, people who know more than
I, are all urban children. So I feel that, as a rural child, my vision is too narrow.

(Interview with Huzhong, 10/19/2011)

Huzhong used to be a class president prior to college and all through her schooling
years from primary to high school and never felt nervous about making public speeches. But
now on an urban college campus she felt overwhelmed, and she developed what she called
the “inferiority mentality.” She said that those who attended contests such as Convenance
Model were exclusively urban students who had such talents as playing the piano, singing,
dancing, or playing chess. As a rural child, she never had opportunities to cultivate such
talents prior to college. She also expressed that urban students knew and talked about many
things that she did not know, such as the iPhone and KTV. She gave a vivid example that
once when she visited her neighboring dorm, she saw a cloth storage case with beautiful
colors and pictures, but she did not know what it was. This storage case belonged to her
urban classmate. She did not know how to ask. Like Yin, Huzhong attributed the inferiority she felt to her rural status.

Similar to Yin, Erqian, and Huzhong, Liyan, a junior at Provincial University, appeared to have internalized a negative rural identity. She said that she attended a prestigious city high school before entering the university, so she had had exposure to quality education. According to her, she did not do well at gaokao, so ended up at the local university. She commented that her city high school particularly emphasized raising students’ quality (suzhi), which meant, as she said, “breaking through the test-oriented education and emphasizing the all-around development of morality, intelligence, physique, and aesthetic. It let students develop in an all-around way, but examinations were a must too. Though the all-around elements were added, they had to be evaluated by examinations too.” So her city high school emphasized quality education with more attention to students’ all-around development, even though it was still test-based. She said that all students who entered that city high school improved their quality (suzhi) after studying there. Thus, her city high school shaped her perspective about what suzhi meant. She used this discourse to speak against rural people in her area, who, as she said, “need to pay attention to their image (xingxiang) and quality (suzhi).” She gave as an example that when her aunt (her father’s sister-in-law) quarreled with her mom, her aunt pulled her mom’s hair “wildly” (撒泼 sapo). She thought that rural people like her aunt needed to be educated about improving their “moral quality” (daode suzhi) in her words. Even though she did not say that she felt inferior about her rural identity, what she said appeared to indicate this. She also completely accepted the suzhi discourse (similar to Naiqian, Caizhe, and Liyi), without showing resistance to it.
From my analysis, I found that participants who spoke against the peasantry and/or combatted a rural identity were mostly those who completely accepted the *suzhi* discourse, did not show any pride in their rural identity, and internalized an inferior negative identity. When these participants, such as Naiqian and Cui, completely or partly accepted the *suzhi* discourse but meanwhile also showed pride in their rural identity, they did not speak against the peasantry. Participants who challenged the meaning of quality education, developed counter-discourses to counteract marginalization/discrimination, and showed pride in their rural identity were those who were most resistant about the *suzhi* discourse and the negative stereotypes attached to a rural identity, and thus were least likely to internalize an inferior rural identity.

However, the analysis also indicates that even the participants who accepted the *suzhi* discourse and who internalized an inferior rural identity, did not regard themselves as essentially or innately different from urban students as represented by the urban dominant discourse. Instead, they used various means including getting into graduate schools, joining students’ associations or groups on various subjects, participating in contests, obtaining licenses and/or certificates, getting a dual degree, volunteering, or taking part-time jobs on and off campus as ways to raise their quality (*suzhi*). Except for Huzhong and Chenyi who said that they would go to the job market right after graduation, the rest of the 20 participants who articulated that they felt inferior about their rural status expressed that they wanted to get into graduate schools so that they could upgrade their degrees, widen their knowledge, and strengthen their capacity. Among 51 undergraduates in my study, 37 expressed their aspiration to join graduate schools either after graduating from their undergraduate studies or after working for several years. In this way, they simultaneously accommodated the discourse
of *suzhi* and resisted a low status. This shows the complexity of their agency: accepting and accommodating the *suzhi* discourse, combatting an inferior rural identity or status linked with the *suzhi* discourse, resisting the marginalization caused by the cultural capital, and accumulating the cultural capital.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, my participants demonstrated how they negotiated the *suzhi* discourse and marginalization caused by urban cultural capital. Urban cultural capital, which includes but is not limited to knowledge about modern material and cultural things such as MP3 players, the stock market, computer skills, and extracurricular training, are sanctioned and valued by the higher education system. Before arriving at their higher education institutions, rural students did not have opportunities to obtain such knowledge and foster such skills due to the urban-rural disparity of socioeconomic and educational resources. But their rural experiences gave them more opportunities to be independent, acquire knowledge of nature, and develop abilities such as farming, cooking, and doing housework. Yet their knowledge and life abilities were not acknowledged and valued by the higher education system. They experienced marginalization or discrimination in urban settings.

Facing the marginalization or discrimination, they were not solely passive victims. Instead, they enacted their agency to make meaning out of their experiences, navigate the marginalization, or negotiate the discrimination in multiple ways. The following table shows the specific number of participants who engaged in each type of agency.

**Table 2**

*Negotiating Suzhi*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perception</th>
<th>Elite National University 1</th>
<th>Elite National University 2</th>
<th>Non-Elite National University 1</th>
<th>Non-Elite National University 2</th>
<th>Provincial University</th>
<th>Municipal College</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accepting the <em>suzhi</em> discourse</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambivalent about the <em>suzhi</em> discourse</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenging and redefining the meaning of quality in quality education</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing counter-discourses to counteract marginalization</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Speaking against peasantry

Combatting an internalized negative rural identity

Twenty-seven participants out of 66 accepted part of the suzhi discourse that urban students received better quality education and thus had more well-rounded capacity than rural students, and in the meantime resisted the discourse when it was used to judge their rural identity rigidly and negatively. Twenty-one participants completely accepted the suzhi discourse without showing any resistance, yet they and the above 27 participants held a fluid view about suzhi, and thought or demonstrated that suzhi was changeable through their own efforts and achievements. Eight participants challenged the limitations of the prevailing notion of quality education as based on urban values; they redefined and gave new meaning to it by drawing upon their rural experiences and understanding of humanity. Eighteen participants conceptualized the urban-rural disparity and cultural capital in ways that counteracted the dominant discourse that portrayed them as lacking in capacity and
knowledge. Sixteen took pride in their agricultural skills, knowledge, identity, and characteristics that they developed from their rural upbringing, or drew upon moral values and knowledge from their rural community experiences to combat the discrimination. In doing so, they demonstrated the value of their rural capital, which tended to challenge the notion of dominant cultural capital in China.

Twenty-two participants internalized the inferiority of “low quality” (素质低 suzhi di) that the suzhi discourse perpetrated upon them, made sense of the inferiority, and focused on academic advancement to get over the inferiority. They accumulated academic and cultural capital to climb the social ladder and become upwardly mobile, simultaneously resisting their low status and accommodating the notion of dominant cultural capital.

Analyzing the data by comparing the number of participants in each specific institution, I found that participants from the two elite national universities were mostly resistant to the suzhi discourse. This is perhaps due to the most severe marginalization they experienced in what some of them called “elite culture” on a campus where rural female students are underrepresented. For example, Rang and Xiangjin, both at Elite National University 1, who were the only rural female student in their dorms and classes, said that they could not find belongingness in what they termed “elite culture” on campus and in their daily life there was nobody who could listen to and understand them. Rang expressed her feelings of envy towards her previous high school classmates who were at provincial universities or local municipal colleges and did not have to experience such isolation. Xiangjin compared her current life with her undergraduate life at a local university and commented that it was because of the low number of rural female students at the elite university that she experienced
sharp marginalization.

My participants at Provincial University and Municipal College did not experience as much marginalization as those in elite national universities, but they mostly expressed their sense of inferiority about their rural status or identity, accepted the *suzhi* discourse that portrayed them as inferior, and felt insecure about their job prospects. They were trying to use various means, particularly getting into graduate schools, to combat their sense of inferiority. Getting into graduate schools was deemed the most effective way to accumulate cultural capital and combat inferiority by my participants who were graduate students. For example, Shiyou Qin, a second-year master’s student majoring in accounting at Non-Elite National University 1, stated:

> I feel that now I have jumped out of the inferiority (*自卑 zibei*), because I have this capital. No matter what I want to do, I can achieve it through my own effort. I can get something through working hard. I also know what I can get. For things I don’t know, I know that I can get to know them through my own effort. I am more certain of myself. So I don’t feel inferior now. . . . As I said earlier, I was not certain with myself before, so I felt inferior when confronting things that I didn’t know. (Second Interview with Shiyou, 02/05/2012)

Thus, entering a graduate school, for Shiyou, meant gaining the “capital” to jump “out of the inferiority” that she used to face.

Like Shiyou, Yi You, a third-year master’s student majoring in psychology, also at Non-Elite National University 1, said that, after getting into graduate school, she outgrew the inferiority she used to feel because of her rural identity. She commented, that during her
undergraduate years, she felt so inferior that she tried to “wash away” her rural identity by mimicking her urban classmates; but now as a master’s student at Non-Elite National University 1, she could accept her rural identity and regard it as part of herself. Shiyou and Yi’s stories show that by upgrading their academic degrees and accumulating academic and cultural capital, they were able to overcome the inferiority they felt.

High schools that my participants attended also shaped how they thought about the *suzhi* discourse. Participants who attended city high schools tended to think that their own *suzhi* had been improved through the quality education they received, so they had less sense of inferiority or experienced less marginalization on university campuses than those who attended high schools in rural districts, small towns, or counties. However, some of these participants, such as Liyan, internalized and used the *suzhi* discourse to speak against the peasantry as “low quality.”

Students’ socioeconomic status based on their rural origins did not seem to affect their perspectives about the *suzhi* discourse and their rural identity as much as different schools and levels of higher education institutions they attended. For example, even though Huzhong and Tian were from rural wealthy families, and Hushu and Ziqin were from developed rural areas near to the capital of Hebei Province, Tian still experienced marginalization after attending Elite National University 1 in Beijing; Huzhong, Hushu, and Ziqin all expressed their feelings of inferiority, and internalized the *suzhi* discourse to judge themselves as inferior to urban students after getting into Provincial University and Municipal College in Baoding. This confirms my participant Xiangjin’s observation that, even between rural areas of the developed regions and urban areas of the underdeveloped regions, there is the
urban-rural disparity. While this disparity is largely economic, it is also due to the cultural
distinction of the urban-rural divide that has normalized the rural as inferior to the urban,
which can be manifested by Shiyou’s statement below:

Rural people feel inferior when arriving at urban areas, but urban people never feel
inferior when arriving at rural areas. I think it’s because “urban” means advanced, and
“rural” means backward. This is the overall idea. (Second Interview with Shiyou,
02/05/2012)
Chapter 6: Navigating Femininity Across the Border of Rural Homes and Urban Academies

Ideas of femaleness in China have been shaped by historical, political, and social factors. Historically, Chinese women have been subjugated to men due to the patriarchal political manipulation of Confucianism throughout Chinese history, particularly before the early 1900s. During the New Culture Movement in the early 1900s, intellectuals and liberal activists, including Mao Zedong, the founder of the People’s Republic of China, vehemently criticized Confucianism for causing misery to Chinese women.

Mao Zedong was an important figure to advocate dismantling Confucianism, which he understood as intertwined with feudalism to oppress women. Under his leadership, the Chinese Communist Party built the People’s Republic of China in 1949. He regarded workers, peasants, and women as being oppressed by imperialism, feudalism, and bureaucrat-capitalism. He particularly treated “women as a special group, the most oppressed under the Chinese feudal system, the most in need of revolution, and the most reliable in the Chinese revolution during the wars and in the socialist construction after a new China was established in 1949” (Yuan, 2005, p. 52). He promoted gender egalitarianism through slogans such as “Women hold up half the sky” and “Women can do everything men can,” which continue to affect many Chinese today (Yuan, 2005, p. 52). These slogans played a significant role in driving and motivating women to walk away from the constraints of their households to engage in agricultural and industrial production, yet did not address the daily problems that Chinese women faced as they had “double shifts and burdens when they participated in production” (Yuan, 2005, p. 52). There were many forms of discrimination against women in
society, workplaces, and families, but these matters were undermined by “Mao’s emphasis on class struggle and his dominant theory of continuing revolution under the dictatorship of the proletariat” (Yuan, 2005, p. 52).

Under Mao’s leadership until 1976, Confucianism was regarded as the ideological root of feudalism, and to build a thorough communist country, he called on the nation to eradicate it from public policies and social discourses through an anti-Confucian movement and the Cultural Revolution. He enforced Marxism and Leninism and his own thoughts and quotations to govern the nation, and anyone who had disputes about this guidance was labeled either a “leftist opportunist” or a “rightist traitors” and was publicly criticized, denounced, and persecuted (Yuan, 2005).

After Mao died in 1976 and Deng Xiaoping took power, the Chinese Communist Party “dramatically changed the focus of its work from class struggle to economic construction” (Yuan, 2005, p. 75) in light of the destruction that the Cultural Revolution brought about. The party introduced the market reform and open-up policy to propel economic development. The Communist Party’s need for stability and national unity rehabilitated “Confucianism, which advocates women’s traditional roles, family values, and loyalty to the state” (Yuan, 2005, p. 75).

This post-Mao period, however, “has so far remained a kind of ‘dark age’ for women’s political representation” (Yuan, 2005, p. 75). Propelled to pursue material interests, many Chinese women are caught in the tension between the slogan “women can do everything men can” and social pressures resulting from “difficulty in finding jobs, sexual risks in the workplace, marriage breakups,” and unequal labor division at home (Yuan, 2005, p. 83). As a
result, “more and more women have adopted the Confucian traditional view of women’s roles of following men”; they have been “forced . . . back to believing in the so-called women’s virtues in the household,” and “begun to redesign their self-image according to male demand: being soft, beautiful, and compliant have become women’s standards since traditional Chinese men like women with these characteristics” (Yuan, 2005, p. 83). Thus, like in history, Confucianism is once again used by the patriarchal political system to maintain male domination over women.

Rural Chinese women have been affected less significantly or less slowly by the market economy than urban women, because they have agricultural work to do. They do not have to compete with men in the job market as urban women do, even though they have to experience the double burdens of their agricultural and household work and are constrained by limited life chances and social mobility. Thus rural Chinese women seem to be affected less by the concern of “adopt[ing] the Confucian traditional view of women’s roles of following men” and redesigning their self-images “according to male demand: being soft, beautiful, and compliant” than urban Chinese women. Many rural Chinese women still carry on the ideas of femaleness—assuming the same roles as men—that were shaped during Mao’s era.

This chapter focuses on how rural female students negotiated their gender when they moved from their rural homes to study in urban higher education institutions. It is divided into six sections. In the first section, I review literature on discourses of gender and femininity in China, to provide background information about how femininity has been constructed and changed over the past six decades. In the second section, I discuss how six
participants developed a double-sided identity across the spaces of the rural and the urban. In the third section, I address how eight participants rejected the model of “strong woman.” In the fourth section, I explore how nine participants persisted in aspiring to pursue the model of the “strong woman” despite the social stigmas imposed upon it by urban patriarchy. In the fifth section, I elaborate on how six participants transgressed the boundary of strong/weak. In the final section, I present the various and complicated reasons that motivated most of my participants to aspire to be independent and/or strong.

**Femininity in China**

Discourses on gender and femininity in China have changed significantly ever since the People’s Republic of China was established in 1949. During the 1950s and the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), in order to mobilize and use women as a labor force for rapid industrialization, the Mao-led Communist Party called on Chinese women nationwide to be like men through propagating the notions that “times have changed; men and women are the same”; “women can hold up half the sky”; and “what men can do, women can do too” (Yihong, Manning, & Chu, 2006; Johansson, 2001). As Jin Yihong, Kimberley E. Manning, and Lianyun Chu (2006) point out, “Beginning in the 1950s, urban Chinese women began to enter employment arenas that had been traditionally considered ‘men’s work.’ This tendency became more pronounced during the Cultural Revolution when even rural women began to achieve an ostensible equality with their male counterparts in agricultural work” (pp. 613–614).

The Mao government also constructed the heroic image of “Iron Girl” (铁姑娘, tieguniang) or “Iron Girl Brigade” as role models for all Chinese women to follow (Yihong,
Manning, & Chu, 2006). While undoubtedly women were de-feminized during the Mao era (Johansson, 2001) to “take men as the norm” (Yihong, Manning, & Chu, 2006, p. 617), the image of “iron girl” “became an inspirational role model for a whole generation of young women who aspired to live an independent life on an equal footing with men” (Yihong, Manning, & Chu, 2006, p. 630).

The official gender discourse and image appeared to be especially appealing to rural women during the Mao era, as many rural women indicated in Yihong’s interviews, because the discourse of “men and women are the same” “became rural women’s most powerful weapon to challenge these norms” of gender inequality in rural China (Yihong, Manning, & Chu, 2006, pp. 624–625). Many urban women whom Yihong interviewed did not show as much excitement as rural women when they recounted their experiences with the Maoist gender discourse. The main reason, as Yihong, Manning, and Chu (2006) argue, may be because “they experienced more class inequality than gender inequality in the social division of labour” in urban settings (p. 625).

Subsequent to the end of the Cultural Revolution, particularly due to the transformation from the socially-planned to the market-oriented economy during the 1980s, the Maoist ideology that “men and women are the same” was critiqued and dismantled by the official media with its message that “women should be feminine” and “sexy” and that “women’s liberation’ runs the ‘danger’ of ignoring feminine characteristics” (Yihong, Manning, & Chu, 2006, p. 627). The ideas emerged and burgeoned in the public that gender differences lie in biological, physical, or even intellectual characteristics. As Perry Johansson (2001) notes,

In the early 1980s, similar biological explanations of gender differences resurfaced
in the popular press. Quasi-medical articles talked about a difference in brain functions between boys and girls that predestined them for different work activities (Honig & Hershatter 1988, 15). Women, for example, were said to fall behind men in adolescent intelligence tests. Subdermal fat and finer bone structure made them slower and weaker than men and therefore less suitable for certain kinds of jobs (Honig & Hershatter 1988, 17). (p. 105)

The “post-Mao gender discourse,” as pointed out by Xu (2000), has “shifted towards biological determinism, men’s supposed biological characteristics such as rationality, independence, vigour, dominance, tough-mindedness and daring make them natural readers. Women’s supposed biological characteristics such as emotionalism, sentimentalism, quietness, fussiness about details and gossip make them unsuitable to lead” (p. 56).

In addition, “critical voices denounced the ‘Iron Girl Brigade’ as role models for women” (Johansson, 2001, p. 105). “Newspaper and magazine articles articulated a rejection of the idea of gender equality, scornfully admonishing women to stop acting like ‘imitation boys’ and ‘iron women’” (Honig & Hershatter, quoted in Johansson, 2001, p. 105). These articles also warned Chinese women not to “compete with men in the workplace,” with the rationale that “love, marriage and childbearing put such a heavy burden on them that it became hard for them to pursue a career” (Honig & Hershatter, quoted in Johansson, 2001, p. 105). These voices resounded more in urban China than in rural China due to the redundancies of labor and the high laid-off rate of urban residents in the 1990s. As Isabelle Attane (2012) states,

In the 1990s . . . urban women are now returning to the home in force: in 1990, 76.3
percent of them were in paid work compared to only 60.8 percent in 2010. . . .

Although rural women are not totally spared by this trend, their effective participation in economic activities (mainly agricultural) remains far greater (82 percent in 2010) than in urban areas. The gap between urban areas and the countryside is therefore widening, underlining the effect that the reorganisation and privatisation of the Chinese economy, particularly in the industrial sector, is having on employment for women in the cities. (p. 8)

Affected by the unemployment and insecurity that it brought about during the 1990s, urban China particularly held vehement debates about whether women should “strive to compete with men in the workplace” or return to their households (Johansson, 2001, p. 105; Honig & Hershatter, 1988, p. 17). Johansson (2001) states that the question of what a proper woman should be became so “pressing that it triggered a series of articles in the authoritarian [Chinese official magazine] Chinese Women” during the early 1990s (p. 105). This magazine published numerous letters and articles summing up the view of readers in response to the opening editorial in the August edition of 1991 referring to what an American scholar of Chinese descent, Zhao Haosheng, said when he visited China: “There are no real women in mainland China,” which, according to this scholar, meant that “Chinese women had lost their ‘female characteristics’ . . . and ‘proper charm’” (Johansson, 2001, p. 107). As Johansson (2001) notes, “The readers seem unanimously to agree on one thing: contemporary Chinese women are too strong and coarse, acting too much like men (jia xiaozì). ‘Strong women’ (nü qiángrén)—an expression signifying women with careers and positions of their own—were definitely not feminine” (p. 107).
Hence, during the Mao era from 1949 to 1976, women were called on to be like men. The image of “iron girls,” which was perhaps the prototype of “strong women,” was shaped. Since the late 1970s’ market reform, the Maoist ideology of gender and “iron girls” has been critiqued by the official media, which has affected urban China more significantly than rural China. Thus, I argue that the Maoist ideology of “men and women are the same” still plays a role in rural China, which may be one of the reasons why 32 out of 66 participants in my study said that their parents held the view that boys and girls are the same, so they did the same agricultural labor as men and enjoyed the same educational opportunities as their brothers.

**Developing a “Double-Sided Identity”**

Six participants said that they had to remake their identities at the urban academies, which expected them to perform their femaleness in ways different from what they used to in their rural homes. They commented that they had experienced discrimination or hardship since childhood because of their gender and rurality. To resist the negative connotations imposed upon their rural-female intersectional identities and survive the hardship, they studied hard to achieve academic success. Through this process, they developed strengths. However, their strengths were undermined on urban campuses where the forms of patriarchy were displayed in ways different from and sometimes contradictory to what they experienced in rural areas. Thus, they had to develop what one of them, Gai Ci, called a “double-sided identity,” performing their gender differently in private versus public spaces and in rural homes versus urban settings. As Gai remarked,

Urban life taught one a type of politeness (礼貌 limao), a type of quality (素质
At the first meeting after we entered the [city high school], the principal told us that all female students at the school must act as ladies, and all males must act as gentlemen. I feel that all male students really did well, and they were really gentlemen. In our class, all the heavy physical labor work was undertaken by male students. Female students did not need to do them. All females seemed ladylike. . . . Now maybe I do not look ladylike, but when I just graduated from that school and met with my previous [primary school] classmates, they all said, “Why do you become so [refined]?” “Why do you speak in such a fine voice?” “How come you have become so ladylike?” They all said that. Then after getting out of that [city high school] environment, I changed. I decided not to be like that. . . . Because to be a lady means to be too . . . [she paused for a few seconds] reserved (矜持 jinchī) and gingerly (小心翼翼 xiaoxinyiyi), which is not good for socialization because you are at a passive status and wait for other people to interact with you. My high school trained me to be quiet (文静 wenjing) and obedient (听话 tinghua), but my mom told me, “You must take active participation in socializing with other people. You should speak more [actively] and build a good relationship with other people.” I feel that I did not do well at this point. I hope to make more friends. So I decided that I must change. When the environment requires me to be ladylike, I just act like a lady, being quiet and reserved and speaking finely and softly. When the environment doesn’t pose such a requirement, I don’t care so much about my posture, but I am just as active as I can be and speak as loudly as I can too. That is the double-sided identity that I have developed. (Second Interview with Gai, 09/12/2011)
In the above comment, Gai described how her femininity was regulated when she attended a high school in Shijiazhuang, the capital city of Hebei Province. Her home village is in the suburban district of Shijiazhuang City. As the city expanded, her village was incorporated into Shijiazhuang City and her hukou was therefore converted from rural to urban when she was studying at primary school. Because of this, she had the opportunity to attend the city high school in Shijiazhuang after she passed the entrance exam to this school. However, she did not identify herself as an urban person because her family still depended on farming for a living. Studying at the city high school, which was primarily made up of urban students from the Shijiazhuang City, she experienced the urbanized regulation of femininity. During the first school meeting, the principal said to the whole school that all female students in this school “must act as ladies” and all male students “must act as gentlemen,” which means, as Gai elaborated when I asked her for clarification at the end of the interview, “males should protect and help females and females should act ladylike and submissive (顺从 shuncong)” (p. 38).

From Gai’s perspective, her high school shaped male and female students differently. While males were required to behave in certain ways, such as being gentlemen to “protect and help females,” females were required to behave in different ways, such as being ladylike and submissive. The dualistic requirements of gender ended up producing and normalizing certain behaviors and practices. Gai gave as an example that once when she inadvertently broke a water bottle in class, female students all stood by quietly but male students all pressed forward to help take the broken bottle out and bring brooms to clean the floor.

Gai’s life at high school was not only gendered, but also urbanized. In her comment above, she endorsed urban life with “a type of politeness, a type of quality” and shaped her
femininity in accordance with the urbanized regulation of gender at high school. Seeing how her urban female classmates acted, she learned to sit straight, smile without showing teeth, and speak slowly and softly. She also trained herself to foster an inner disposition of being quiet and obedient. This showed how she internalized the urbanized power of gender and used the discourse of quality (suzhi) to shape her identity.

Her internalization, however, did not happen without examination. She examined her internalized femininity particularly when she met her rural peers who questioned her different tones and behaviors. Gai was also aware that another reason that she did not think she could afford being a lady is that she must be strong for her mother to rely on. Her father passed away when she was six years old. Since then, her mother had been raising Gai and Gai’s older sister by herself. Considering the family’s poverty, the village committee provided her mother with such part-time jobs as cleaning the street. Still, Gai remembered that her family was constantly living in such abject poverty that her mother had to work extremely hard in the farmland to make ends meet and pay for Gai’s education. As a result, Gai developed the ability to take care of herself and do housework as early as primary school, and she fostered the consciousness that she must become a strong person to support her mother in the future. Her independence and ambition to become a strong person, however, were suppressed at her high school, which required women to be “passive” (被动 beidong), “obedient” (听话 tinghua), “submissive” (顺从 shuncong), and “reserved” (矜持 jinchi). The term passive,被动 beidong in Chinese, is the opposite of active 主动 zhongdong. 听话 tinghua comprises 听 ting which means listen, and 话 hua which means words, so these two characters joined together are commonly translated as obedient. 顺从 shuncong comprises
顺 shun which means obey, and 从 cong which means follow, so these two characters mean obedient or submissive. 矜持 jinchi comprises 矜 jin which means restrained or reserved, and 持 chi which means hold, keep, or maintain; these two characters when joined are translated as reserved or restrained.

After getting out of the high school where urban students predominated and joining Provincial University where rural students made up half the population, Gai realized how the gendered regulation at her high school restricted her ability to socialize. Listening to her mother’s advice that she should be active in socializing and interacting with other people, she also realized that the ladylike passive posture prevented her from active participation in class and from making new friends. So she decided that she must change. As she said,

Before, I didn’t actively speak with other people. Neither did I actively speak in class. I was only passively waiting for the teachers to call my name before speaking.

But after getting into the university, I found that many things you cannot just make it by acting as a lady, but they need your active participation and interaction. (Second Interview with Gai, 09/12/2011)

After getting into the university, Gai started to deconstruct her internalized femininity of urbanity. In this deconstruction process, she developed a fluid “double-sided identity” that tended to change subject to the requirement of the external environment.

Gai’s experience showed how poverty, urban-rural inequalities, gender, and the discourse of quality (suzhi) intersected to shape her identity. The urban high school that she attended regulated all female students to be ladylike, passive, and submissive. Since the urban life and standard represented “a type of quality” for Gai, she internalized the discourse of
quality and urban superiority to discipline herself to follow the gender norms. However, the poverty and hardship at home required her to be strong, independent, and active in taking initiatives. Situated across the spaces of her rural home and urban academia, she learned to shift her identity, subject to the change of the environment. Thus, her identity was not static and fixed, but was fluid and in the constant process of shaping in each specific context. As Hall (1996) notes,

> The concept of identity . . . is . . . not an essentialist, but a strategic and positional one. . . . That is to say . . . this concept of identity does not signal that stable core of the self, unfolding from the beginning to end through all the vicissitudes of history without change. (p. 3)

Gai remade her identity strategically, subject to her positions at different spaces.

Like Gai, Dao also learned to reshape her identity strategically and fluidly in different contexts. She developed qualities of strength and self-reliance in order to achieve academic success and economic independence. Since her parents complained that she was not as useful and valuable as a boy, she never asked her parents for any money after attending university. Instead, she earned money by doing part-time jobs on and off campus and saved 10,000 yuan (about $1,667) to send back to her parents. In this way she earned her parents’ recognition of her value. She said that after she entered the university and earned a living by herself, her parents’ view completely changed. Before, they always complained that Dao and her sister could not help them with farming and thus were not as useful and valuable as boys. Now, they constantly said that they felt very lucky to have had these two daughters because Dao and her sister not only brought them so much honor among the villagers for joining
prestigious universities, but they also earned and returned money to them.

Dao established her value to her parents through her hard work and ambition in gaining academic success and economic independence, but her strong characteristics of hard work and ambition were undermined on the urban university campus. She was labeled a “strong woman” (女强人 nü qiangren) by an urban male classmate after she exhibited her strength in a group presentation. She described how after presenting a very good report about a group discussion in her class, she was approached by this student and told, “You are such a strong woman.” Afterwards, no matter when she performed well and won the applause from the audience, this student always said to the other students around, “She is essentially a strong woman.”

Dao was aware that this term carried a negative connotation, particularly due to the context in which this male student used it to address her, so she did not “want to accept this form of address from him.” As she said,

I feel that what he means by “strong woman” is something negative. It implies that you don’t have femininity as you are fighting with males every day and are competing with males. So I don’t want to accept this form of address from him.

(Second Interview with Dao, 07/30/2011)

When I pursued further how she felt about being called a “strong woman” by this male student, she said,

I felt, er, [I wondered] what I did that made me appear like a strong woman. Then I told myself that I should reflect on this, that I should not be that ambitious in the future, and that I should care for males’ face. This was my thought at that time.
Thus, she reflected on what she did that made her appear like a strong woman. She concluded that she should not appear ambitious and, to use her words, “should care for males’ face.” That is, she should behave more delicately and pretend to be weak in the presence of males. Nevertheless, she was also aware that her rural background and origin made her feel that she could not afford to be a tender and delicate woman. As she said,

In our daily communication, we have been discussing the fact that no matter how well you study, you cannot be as competitive as someone who has a wealthy and powerful father. People who have experienced job seeking say that nothing is more important than networks (关系 guanxi). Originally from a rural area, I feel that I don’t have any networks [in the city]. So I must work even harder to make myself competitive. I feel that since you don’t have any background, you must depend on yourself for everything and strive hard to get it so you can survive. (Second Interview with Dao, 07/30/2011)

Strength, ambition, and independence were her techniques for overcoming difficulties brought about by urban-rural inequalities and gender discrimination. Yet she encountered punishment when she acted in these ways in the urban university. Therefore, she was caught at the intersection of the urban-rural divide and patriarchy. On the one hand, her rural background and family conditions drove her to become strong and competitive so that she could survive and prove her value as a rural girl. On the other hand, patriarchy in the urban setting penalized her for being ambitious and competitive and labeled her a “strong woman.” In response, she developed a double-sided identity for survival, maintaining the attributes of
strength and competitiveness internally to work hard and motivate herself, while being constantly careful to appear less strong and ambitious in the presence of males.

Similar to Dao and Gai, Xiang Xi, a first-year master’s student at Elite National University 1, described how she developed her double-sided identity of being strong at her rural home and performing as weak on her urban university campus. Due to abject poverty at home, her mother abandoned the family (Xiang, Xiang’s two younger siblings, and Xiang’s father) and went away with another man when Xiang was in seventh grade. Since then, Xiang’s father had shouldered the responsibility of raising three children by himself. Despite the poverty, her father supported her education because she did very well in her studies. Ironically, his support was not without conditions. He hoped that Xiang would enter the most elite university in China, and constantly told Xiang that if she could not enter Tsinghua or Peking University in the future, he would not support her and would send her to work as a migrant worker in a city. Living in poverty and facing great pressure from her father, Xiang showed strength and promised her father that she would make it into the most elite university. As she said,

My father said that he would not send me to school any more if I could not promise to enter the most elite university such as Tsinghua or Peking University. But I wanted to go to school and enter a university in the future regardless of whether it was an elite university or not as [getting into a university] was the only way for me as a rural girl to leave the hard and poor life in the village. My father had been saying that he would not let me go to school any more if I could not make the promise. But I persisted in going to school. I had a strong will to go to school. So I
worked out some ways. I made him the promise and showed him that I am strong and capable enough not only to enter an elite university but also to earn my own living. For example, when I was at high school my father did not have enough money to pay my tuition, so I used weekends and vacations to work in a cracker-making factory to make some money. I wanted to prove to my father that I could definitely be successful and change our family’s situation. Actually, when I said [to my father] that I could enter an elite university in the future, I was not confident at all. But I could not let him see that. I could only tell him, “I can certainly be successful. I can certainly give you the life that you want. I can certainly improve the situation of our family. Please believe me.” Actually, who knows? But if I did not speak like that, I could not get into school. (Interview with Xiang, 07/01/2011)

Xiang’s comment demonstrates how she negotiated her father’s power and her familial poverty. Her father supported her education based on the condition that she must promise to enter the most elite university and improve the family’s situation. To get her father’s support, she had to express herself strongly and promise him that she could meet his requirement, even though she herself was not sure that she could. Xiang earned her educational opportunity by expressing herself strongly and by proving this strength through making money despite her intensive study at high school.

Her father’s requirement and expectation gave Xiang too much pressure, which she said negatively affected her academic performance. She was only admitted to Shanxi Agricultural University, a provincial university. Her father felt so disappointed that he did not
want Xiang to enroll in that university. But Xiang went to enroll by herself without letting her father know. By the time her father knew she had enrolled, she was already in the university. He had to accept it.

Since Shanxi Agricultural University was not Xiang’s ideal university, she studied very hard to prepare herself for the graduate entrance exam to Elite National University throughout her undergraduate years. Her effort paid off at last as upon graduating from Shanxi Agricultural University, she was admitted into the graduate school of Elite National University. Now as a first-year master’s student, when she reflected on this experience, she commented that she had gone through a “very toilsome education path” as she had to shoulder her father’s pressure and economic burden all by herself.

Arriving at the urban spaces (previously at Shanxi Agricultural University in Taiyuan, and now at Elite National University in Beijing), she found that the expectations of women differed from those of her father. Whereas her father required her to be strong and capable, she observed that many urban women did not display their strength: they avoided competing with males and got what they wanted by “giving the impression of weakness.” She gave an example of how women could get help with lifting heavy bags in the train by “playing the woman”; but if a woman exhibited herself to be too “strong” or “tough,” it was difficult for her to get help from men. She observed that, in her class, the seemingly frail women got more help from male students than the seemingly strong women. She learned to masquerade femininity and act weak in order to get males’ help in the urban environment. Nonetheless, at home, she had to continue to display and even over-display strength so that she could give her father hope that she was capable of improving the family’s situation. Thus, Xiang
developed a double-sided identity to survive in two very different contexts.

Shaoshi and Wuchang also briefly talked about how they learned to “pretend to be weak” (装弱 zhuangruo) and “cannot act too strong” (不能表现出来很强 buneng biaoxian chulai hen qiang) after getting to the urban settings, whereas in their rural areas they did not have such concerns. According to Shaoshi, she chose to pretend to be weak in order to get males’ help. For Wuchang, she was reminded of “not acting too strong” by her friends in the city high school where she repeated her 12th grade, because, as she was told, if she would do so, she could give pressure to males who interact with her. It is worth mentioning that after getting to Municipal College, Wuchang found that many male students with whom she communicated about this issue said that they wanted women to be excellent instead of expecting them to pretend to be weak. This is perhaps because most male students in the college were rural.

Liangshu Dao at Non-Elite National University 1, was like Shaoshi, Wuchang, Xiang, Dao, and Gai in developing a double-sided femininity, but in different ways. As she said,

Liangshu: It’s not good for a woman to be too independent. For example, for a family, if a woman is too independent, the man would feel that the home has no meaning for him to stay. Really, there is some problem.

Lifang: What do you mean? Can you specify . . .

Liangshu: I mean the man likes the woman to be not only independent but also to rely on him a little, because if you are too independent, [the man would wonder,] “What do you need me for? If you don’t need me any more, why should I stay?” You see, if a woman is too independent, the man would find himself of no use and would lose his
self-esteem. So I feel that if a woman is independent, her home would have this problem.

Lifang: When did you get this perspective?

Liangshu: I did not form this perspective until I came to the inland. At my home [village in Tibet], there is no such clear-cut line between men and women. As long as our characteristics match with each other and we are happy with each other, we can form a family and live together. (Interview with Liangshu, 09/26/2011)

Unlike Shaoshi, Wuchang, Xiang, Dao, and Gai who are Han ethnic, Liangshu is Tibetan. She grew up and received her primary education in a village in Tibet. At 14 years old she went to study and live in a city middle school in Jiangsu Province after passing the admission exam to this school, and afterwards received her high school education in a city in Jiangxi Province, before entering Non-Elite National University 1. She specified that she did not form her double-sided independent/dependent perspective about her femininity until she moved out of her village in Tibet and came to study in the inland city. At her home in rural Tibet there is no such “clear-cut line between men and women,” as she said, “as long as our characteristics match with each other and we are happy with each other, we can form a family and live together.” Getting to the inland city, however, she found that the standard about what counts as good femininity is much more complicated in that the woman must be strong and independent in her mind, but she also has to appear soft and dependent in the presence of males. When I pursued further what happened that made her form such a perspective, she responded,

It was formed gradually at the inland. I am not sure when and what happened. Maybe
when I watched some TV or when chatting with my roommates. (Interview with Liangshu, 09/26/2011)

Although she could not remember when and what happened that made her formulate such a gendered perspective, she internalized it and used it to regulate herself. As she said, I hope that I can be both independent and have the sense of dependence too. I feel that I cannot become a totally independent woman, neither can I be a totally dependent one. I will choose to be in the middle. How can I say? If I am too independent, I am afraid the men who interact with me will feel uncomfortable and feel that their self-esteem gets challenged. If I am too dependent, I cannot bear myself because I want to be independent from my deep heart. (Interview with Liangshu, 09/26/2011)

Liangshu was having this internal struggle and ambivalent perspectives about whether she should be independent or not. When she was at her home in rural Tibet, she did not have to experience this struggle and ambivalence but was just being her self and as happy as she wanted because there did not seem to be so much restriction about how she should behave as a woman. Being happy used to be the most important standard for her to judge her relationship with other people. But in the inland cities, she had to care about men’s self-esteem when interacting with them. Thus, she developed the double-sided femininity of remaining independent in her deep heart, and trying not to appear “too independent” in order to make males who interacted with her feel comfortable.

In this section, I discussed how my six participants, Gai, Dao, Xiang, Shaoshi, Wuchang, and Liangshu, learned to remake their identities to adjust to urban environments, particularly in order to save males’ face, get males’ help, or let males feel more comfortable.
They developed strong and independent attributes from living in rural areas or from their experiences of negotiating the urban-rural divide and gender. They internalized these attributes as part of their identity. However, after moving to urban campuses, they faced a tension. The attributes that they developed were challenged in urban-male-dominated contexts. They had to continually reformulate their identities as they encountered and negotiated with the intersectionality of the urban-rural divide and gender.

Rejecting the Model of the “Strong Woman”

Eight participants internalized the negative stereotypes of the “strong woman” and refused to be such women. They commented that they did not want to be a “strong woman,” because a “strong woman” lives a “stressful” and “tiring” life, is too “domineering,” or because their rural female status could not allow them to become such a model.

“Strong woman” (女强人 nü qiangren) comprises three characters in Chinese: 女 nü which means female, 强 qiang which means strong, and 人 ren which means person. Thus the direct translation for 女强人 nü qiangren should be “female strong person.” Ironically, in the Chinese language there is no such term called “female weak person” or “male strong person.” Neither is there such a term “male weak person” in the Chinese language, but there is a common, humiliating expression that “he is not like a man” (他不像个男人 ta buxiang ge nanren). This indicates that the term “male person” or “man” (男人 nanren) in Chinese equals strong, and “male strong” is such an unmarked norm that it does not need the word “strong” to mark it as strong. Yet, a female who acts strong is labeled as “female strong person” because the term “female person” or “woman” (女人 nüren) in Chinese equals weak, and a “female strong person” challenges such a norm that “male equals strong and female
equals weak”; thus it is marked as abnormal (Attane, 2012). Since 女强人 nü qiangren has been commonly translated as “strong woman” by scholars (Johansson, 2001; Xu, 2000; Schaffer & Xianlin, 2007), I use this English term in this dissertation for the sake of convenience of understanding.

The eight participants’ rejection of the model of the “strong woman” to a certain extent confirms previous scholars’ statements that a “strong woman” in China has been “stigmatized in this patriarchal society” as “single—either never married or divorced—and unhappy” (Xu, 2000, p. 56); seducing, manipulating, and stealing men’s prowess (Schaffer & Xianlin, 2007, p. 23); “threaten[ing] the traditional image of masculine superiority” (Lu, 1995, p. 183; Xu, 2000, p. 195); and “signifying . . . definitely not feminine” (Johansson, 2001, p. 107). Xu (2000) suggests that the term “strong woman” in China resembles the label “feminist” in the West, and some Chinese women refuse to “associate themselves with such labels” (p. 195).

Ziqin Fu at Provincial University explained that she must be independent, but being independent did not mean that she would be a “strong woman.” As she said,

**Ziqin:** I must be independent, but don’t have to be a “strong woman.” That is, you must have the capacity to do your career well, but you don’t have to put all your effort into it [the career]. I feel that women should first manage the housework well.

**Lifang:** Who influenced you, or what happened that made you think that you must be independent but don’t have to be a strong woman?

**Ziqin:** It was formed at the university. After getting into the university, I felt that as a woman being outside [the home] all by myself, I would feel so much suffering and be tired. So I want to relax and don’t like the type of strong woman’s life that is full
The strong woman’s life, in Ziqin’s view, was so stressful and tiring that she could hardly have any time to manage the housework and take care of her family. So she objected to this kind of life, and hoped that in the future, she could have her own career yet make her family the priority. She insisted that she must be independent and have her own career to support herself because of the high rate of divorce in society, yet she also maintained that if a woman has her own career and is financially independent, but has no time to take care of her family, she may face the criticism from her husband and the society for not fulfilling her responsibility. Thus, Ziqin asserted that she must have her own career in the future and be financially independent, but she would always put her family before her career.

She explained that she did not form this idea until entering the university because prior to the university she solely focused on her study. After getting into the university in the city, she started to learn about the increasing number of men, particularly wealthy men or men with power, who seek mistresses beyond their marriages. Thus, she developed a sense of insecurity regarding marriage, and decided that she could not depend on the man in the marriage, but must have her own independent career. However, she did not want to be a strong woman because this type of woman, in her mind, always lived a tiring and stressful life, had no time for her family, and was denounced by society. In this sense, she seemed to be aware of the society’s devaluation of a strong woman while she internalized the stereotype of the strong woman image as living a stressful life.

Like Ziqin, Qiao He at Non-Elite National University 1 commented that she must be independent in her career, but does not want to be a strong woman. As she said,
Qiao: In the modern society, I feel that independence is a must, but it’s not an absolute thing. That is, you can be independent in career, but you’d better not be a “strong woman.” I tend to emphasize my family more. On the scale between career and family, I would like the scale to be tilted to my family. I feel that it’s better for me to be a good wife and kind mother (贤妻良母 xianqiliangmu). . . . I am a more traditional woman. I don’t have such strong ambition to pursue my career. I like a more calm and peaceful life. But I don’t want to be a full-time housewife because I feel that the modern society changes so fast. If you have a stable job, you have a strong support in your mind and you won’t feel bored in life either.

Lifang: Why don’t you want to be a strong woman in your career?

Qiao: I feel that I don’t have such capacity. I don’t like it too as I feel that a strong woman lives a tiring life.

Lifang: What does a strong woman look like for you?

Qiao: That is, she commands the world in the workplace. She has a very high position, like the senior manager portrayed in TV.

Lifang: Can you specify what she looks like for you and which TV program you watched?

Qiao: Often there are some, some CEOs. . . . I am not sure which TV program it is, but many TV programs have that kind of general manager, that kind of strong women. . . . They don’t have their family life, but they are single even after they are over 30 or 40 years old. They just bury themselves in work all the time. (Second Interview with Qiao, 09/10/2011)
She continued that she hoped to be a good wife rather than a strong woman particularly because of her mother’s expectation and other people’s influence on her in her rural area. Since her childhood her mother constantly taught her that as a woman the most important thing for her is to find a good man to marry and be a good wife in the future. What’s worth mentioning is that, unlike Ziqin, who is Han, Qiao is Tujia. However, she stressed that the ethnicity of Tujia did not affect her life except that it gave her the advantage of a 10-point bonus to enter the university. For her, the urban-rural divide intersecting with her gender seemed to have more significantly affected her life than her ethnicity. She specified that in her rural area women must get married. If a woman did not get married before age 25, she would be nagged or gossiped about by other people. People in her rural area never accept a woman who does not get married but just focuses on her career or who prioritizes her career over her family. Qiao had internalized this gendered ideology since her childhood and said that she would rather be a “traditional woman,” who takes marriage and family as the priority over her career than a modern “strong woman,” who puts most of her attention to a career.

Despite her insistence on getting married and being a good traditional wife, she commented that she would not want to live the kind of life that women in her village lived. According to her, these rural women mostly did not have their own careers but had to shoulder housework and childcare all by themselves. Her dislike of rural women’s lives was one of the most important reasons that motivated her to get into a university, as it was the only way for her to leave her rural area and avoid living the typical rural women’s life. She hoped that, after graduating from the university, she could have her own work to support herself and have the housework and child care divided between her future husband and
herself. Her village experience, therefore, seemed to have shaped her ideology of wanting to be a good traditional woman prioritizing her future family over her career, and her consciousness of pursuing independence through receiving education and getting a career. The media portrayal of the strong women’s lifestyle affected Qiao’s life plan not to be a strong woman in her career and pushed her to redeem her traditional role of being a good wife.

Similar to Zi Qin and Qiao, Erqian Bai at Elite National University 1 commented that she must be “strong” (坚强 jianqiang) and “independent” (独立 duli), but she strongly objected to the image of the strong woman. She expressed that she did not have any idea of being independent until last semester when she happened to know from her older brother that she was not the biological daughter of her parents but was adopted by them. Since then she decided that she could not depend on her parents any more, but she should make her own living by working part-time on and off campus. She was very proud of her ability to support herself after getting to know the truth of her life; however, she emphasized that she disliked the image of the strong woman that some women in the city seemed to pursue. She gave the example of her roommate who wanted to pursue her doctoral degree but worried that she could not find a man to marry after graduating with the doctorate. In Erqian’s view, it was unnecessary for a woman to pursue such a high degree, and what was most important for a woman, as she said, “is that she should take care of her family very well.” She continued,

I particularly like the type of women who give full attention to their family. I feel that they are virtuous (贤惠 xianhui). If a woman is concerned about her career all day like a man, I don’t think it’s good unless her husband is not able to earn money.
Anyway, I feel that it’s not good for a woman to put her attention outside her home unless her husband is not capable [to support the family]. (First Interview with Erqian, 10/04/2011)

Like Ziqin and Qiao, Erqian thought that she should give priority to managing her future family instead of her career. But unlike Ziqin and Qiao, she did not think a career was important for her.

Erqian: The life I want is that after marriage with my boyfriend, I will live a common life. That is, he works to earn money, and I sometimes work too if necessary. I feel what’s most important for me is that I can be a good assistant to my boyfriend and help him whenever appropriate. If I ever face the choice of whether I should stay at home to take care of my family or go out to work, I would rather stay at home if my husband wants me to. Many things shaped my ideas. I feel that a woman’s success lies in how well she can take care of her family.

Lifang: Just now when you said that many things shaped your ideas, what do you mean?

Erqian: For example, as I mentioned just now, maybe my family, my mother, and my religious belief too. The different duties between men and women. The thing I like most about our Christianity is the idea that God arranges the woman to attach herself to man not because men are superior and women are inferior, but because God arranged different duties for men and women. Like, men should take care of women by leading them. Women should attach to men not because women are inferior, but their relationship is like between security guard and principal. When the principal
walks in the door, the security guard says that you must present your certificate. Then the principal must present it. This doesn’t mean that the security guard is superior over the principal, but because the school arranged different duties for the security guard and the principal. This is similar to the relationship between men and women. They don’t have a superior and inferior relationship but just different duties.

(First Interview with Erqian, 10/04/2011)

Unlike Ziqin, Qiao, and most other participants who did not claim any religious beliefs, Erqian grew up in a rural Christian family. The Christian teachings of her mother, who was baptized when Erqian was at primary school, seemed to have profoundly affected Erqian’s view about what type of woman she wanted to be. Since Erqian’s childhood, her mother had been using the Christian doctrine to teach Erqian that “women are affiliated to men” and the standard of being a good woman should be “keeping her head down.” “If a woman likes to get into the limelight,” in her mother’s words, “she is not a good woman” (First Interview with Erqian, 10/04/2011).

According to Erqian, her mother significantly affected her gender view, particularly in terms of dealing with the relationship with men. She said that she learned from her mother that she should always act “soft and submissive” (柔顺 roushun) to her boyfriend or future husband. She gave a specific example that when she went with her boyfriend to attend social gatherings with his classmates, she made herself act like a little woman. As her boyfriend was 1.73m and she was 1.69m, she could be taller than him when she wore high-heel shoes. In this case, she intentionally bent down or lowered her head to hold his arm, “in order to give other people the feeling that I am relying on him” (Second Interview with Erqian,
Erqian did not just want herself to be a strong woman, but also did not like the image of a strong woman. In her view, a strong woman is “aggressive” (she used this English term), and “too domineering” (太强势 tai qiangshi). 太强势 tai qiangshi comprises three Chinese characters: 太 tai means too; 强势 qiangshi the two characters joined together means strong, dominant, powerful, or domineering. In the Chinese language, 强势 qiangshi is usually used to describe a person who acts too assertive or “forceful,” or to describe a culture that is dominant. When it is used to describe a woman, it always carries negative meaning, so I translate it to “domineering.”

Erqian gave an example to show what a strong woman was like for her. When she attended an interview to join a speech association, she said that she was suppressed by such a strong woman. The interviewers mentioned a case about an airplane in an accident in a desert, and had all interviewees divided into two debating groups to argue against each other about what things should be left in the plane and what things should be thrown away to lighten its weight. Erqian responded first by saying that the parachute could be thrown away, but before she had any chance to explain, this woman cut in immediately and rebutted something like, “You cannot throw away the parachute because to survive in the desert, the parachute can work as a tent” (First Interview with Erqian, 10/04/2011). Erqian felt so intimidated by being cut off that she dared not to speak any more. Reflecting on this case, she said that this woman who was so “aggressive” was what she had in her mind as the image of a strong woman. She remarked that she hated this type of a “strong woman,” and she herself would never become such a woman as she was more “gentle and soft than such a type of woman” (Second
Interview with Erqian, 11/24/2011). In doing so, she seemed to impose the “aggressive” stereotypes on strong women and construct an arbitrary binary between her gentle and soft self and the stereotypical image of strong women in her mind.

Jianwen Ci, a first-year master’s student majoring in education at Elite National University 2, was similar to Ziqin and Qiao in that she adopted the traditional gender roles, and also resonated with Erqian in that she internalized the image of the “strong woman” as “too domineering” (太强势 tai qiangshi). She mentioned that she did not want to be a strong woman because she inherited her mother’s “traditional idea of men managing external affairs and women internal” (女主内男主外的传统观念 nü zhunei nan zhuwai de chuantong guannian). She gave the example that whenever the electric appliances at home broke down, her mother never fixed them herself. Neither did her mother ask Jianwen, but usually asked Jianwen’s father or Jianwen’s younger brother to fix them. She recounted that her mother kept on telling her that this is “the tradition, this kind of men managing external affairs and women internal.” Jianwen thought that this was normal and there was nothing wrong with it. When I asked her what kind of woman she would want to be, she replied that she must have her own independent life, be able to support herself, and cannot rely on anybody. But she also emphasized that she must not be “too domineering” (太强势 tai qiangshi) like a “strong woman,” in her words.

Buyan Jiao and Shiyou Qin, both at Non-Elite National University 1, remarked that they did not want to be a “strong woman,” for different reasons from the above four participants. They both said that they used to want to be a “strong woman,” but now they thought that they could not be such a woman. As Buyan said, “I used to admire many strong
women such as Wu Yi [the previous vice premier of the State Council], but later I found that it’s unrealistic for me to become such a woman, because only a small number of women can be like that, not for ordinary women. I also feel that that kind of woman must have a higher starting point than we rural women. They grew up in a better environment and have higher social status.” Buyan pointed out the class difference between “strong women” and herself as a woman of rural status. For her, not everybody can become a “strong woman,” which is only applicable to those who “grew up in a better environment and have higher social status.”

Shiyu also commented that she did not want to become a “strong woman” as she used to, because, as she said, “I accept everything as it is now and am content with what I have. I work as hard as I can, but don’t plan too ambitiously. Like I planned many things in the past, but now everything changed [and I cannot fulfil my plans].” She sighed out with deep sadness that her advisor treated her “very coldly” (很冷 hen leng) and “disdained to spare a glance for me” (对我不屑一顾 dui wo buxieyigu), unlike the way she treated her urban students. She gave two examples to indicate this. One example was that when she was giving the first class presentation after she entered the graduate school, she was hoping that her advisor sitting in the front of the class could show some encouragement like what this advisor did to an urban female student who presented before her; yet before she spoke, not only did this advisor not give her any encouragement, but she noticed the disdain in her advisor’s face, which, as she said, “then made my heart cold” (当时我心就凉了 dangshi wo xin jiu liang le). According to her, she did not present well as she planned, which further disappointed this advisor. The second example was that after the presentation when this advisor met her and this urban female student, this advisor turned her back to Shiyu even though Shiyu greeted
her, and only talked to that urban female student. As Shiyou said, “She never looked at me, but only spoke with that student, keeping on praising her how well she presented. . . . She [the advisor] said to her [that urban female student] that she would invite her to dinner, but never spoke a single word with me.” From then on, as she remarked, “I felt that I lost hope. Before, no matter what happened, I had a flame in my heart, which I felt was bright. From then on, I felt that that flame went out. It turned into darkness with no hope.” She elaborated that before the events with her advisor, she still thought that her graduate study could give her hope for a bright future, but her hope was turned off by her advisor’s coldness. This might have affected her view that she could not “plan too ambitiously,” for example, to be a “strong woman.”

In sum, participants like Ziqin, Qiao, Erqian, and Jianwen seemed to have internalized the patriarchal perception of gender that women should always put family before career—the notion that family (or future family) is more a priority for women than men, and career is more a priority for men than women. They regarded the “strong woman” model as subverting this traditional gender role and strongly objected to it. Shiyou and Buyan thought that the model of the successful “strong woman” was unrealistic for them to follow because of their low rural status, which inhibited them from achieving goals.

**Embracing the Model of the “Strong Woman”**

In contrast with the above eight participants who rejected the model of the “strong woman,” nine other participants in my study expressed their desire to be such a woman despite its social stigma. Xu (2000) states that some women in China “come to admire this stigmatized model” of the “strong woman” (195). While Xu did not elaborate why and how
this happens, my research indicates that some rural female students embraced the image of
the “strong woman” not simply because they admired it, but because of complicated reasons,
such as being better prepared to fight against bullying and discrimination; they were
influenced in favor of that image by their mothers; and/or they were aware of their social
location as rural women who had to be strong, independent, and ambitious in order to combat
the inequalities created by the urban-rural divide and gender hierarchy.

For instance, Chen at Provincial University developed the attributes of strength and
fearlessness from her experiences fighting against various forms of discrimination that she
had encountered since childhood. She was adopted by her parents as the only child in the
family. Because of her adopted status, many villagers and children bullied her and her mother.
As she said,

They always said that I was not born by my mom and said that I might leave my
mom someday. . . . Many children also knew this and said those things every time
when I quarreled with them. I felt miserable. (Second Interview with Chen,
09/03/2011)

Since she was three or four years old she had been hearing villagers say that she was
not born to her parents. What annoyed her was that these villagers sometimes bugged her
mother and said that Chen might leave and abandon her mother some day. Since then, she
decided that she must grow up to be strong and protect her parents.

Attending school at four years old, she was bullied by some boys. She learned to fight
back against the bullying through hitting back, since the teachers did not effectively restrain
these boys. Besides fighting against male bullies, she also experienced discrimination from
her math teacher who preferred boys to girls as this teacher thought that boys were cleverer at studying math than girls. This teacher apparently held the patriarchal view that girls were intellectually inferior to boys, which intersected with the discourse of *suzhi* to render rural girls as less capable and valuable than boys. The teacher’s discrimination did not beat Chen down, but stimulated her to study very hard, as discussed in Chapter 4. To fight against this teacher’s stereotype, she studied very hard on math and earned very good results.

She also experienced overt discrimination from her urban classmates when she left her home to study and live in an urban boarding junior-secondary school. She and her cousin were the only two rural girls in the class. Her urban classmates ridiculed them as “countryside eggs” and laughed at their accents and clothes. Chen learned to fight back and prove them wrong by developing strength and achieving academic success.

Arriving at the urban university campus, however, when she showed her ambition to be a strong and successful career woman, Chen found that many people, including her male classmates and female roommates, denigrated her and regarded her as “not like a girl” (不像女孩子 *buxiang nühaizi*) and “weird” (另类 *linglei*).

Chen: I have many good male friends here [on campus]. But they never treated me as a girl. This made me very angry.

Lifang: How did they treat you?

Chen: They said that I am not like a girl (不像女孩子 *buxiang nühaizi*).

Lifang: Can you give an example of who said that you are not like a girl?

Chen: For example, I have a very good male friend here. When we had lunch one day, I said that I must be strong and successful in the future because my parents need
me to protect and support them. During my childhood they suffered so much bullying from other villagers that I made up my mind to protect them. I also said that it’s my responsibility to support my parents. Then this friend said, “You are not like a girl.” (Second Interview with Chen, 09/03/2011)

Her female roommates also called her “weird” (另类 linglei) when she showed her strong and independent identity. As she said,

I remember a lot of times when I was talking with [my roommates], they said, “In the future after I graduate, I will just marry a good man. Then I will be very content.” But I don’t think like this. I just want to make my own effort to make the money that I want. If I want to live in a good apartment, then I will earn money to buy it by myself, instead of depending on men. Then they said that I am weird (另类 linglei). . . . In their view, my temper and other aspects are not like what girls should have. For example, I don’t like shopping. You see, girls all like to go shopping, but I don’t like this. I just like to do what I am interested in, like organizing events with my classmates. I don’t like other people to lead me, but I like to organize things by myself. Because when you follow other people, you cannot learn things. Only if you do things by yourself, you can learn the most. As long as I want to do something, I want to try, regardless of whether it will fail or succeed. (First Interview with Chen, 11/10/2010)

Chen was labelled 另类 linglei by her roommates because she was not like them. 另类 linglei comprises 另 ling which means other, and 类 lei which means kind or type. 另类 linglei is commonly translated as weird, special, or different.
In Chen’s dorm, among six people, five were from rural villages and one was from a small town. This indicates that rural women sometimes perpetrate oppression upon other rural women. Chen’s roommates internalized the gender norms and used them to perpetrate oppression upon Chen by labeling her “weird” when she did not follow their norms of what a girl should be like.

Even though Chen felt sad about these remarks, she persisted in being a “strong woman” because she realized that as a rural woman who had no networks in the city, she had to be strong and fearless to both survive and provide financial and emotional support to her rural parents who suffered poverty, hardship, and discrimination.

Like Chen, Buxue Zi at Non-Elite National University 2 insisted that as a woman she must be strong and independent, despite the culture at the university that did not seem to value such an image. She developed a strong and independent personality, particularly because she witnessed how her mother suffered from patriarchy and poverty at home. Her father had an extramarital affair with another woman and constantly abused her mother when Buxue was in seventh grade. Her mother had been living a painful life since then but had no way out, for if she chose to divorce, she could not raise Buxue and Buxue’s brother as she had no livelihood except for farming. Thus, her mother had to bear with her father due to her economic dependence on him. Her mother’s experience convinced Buxue that she must gain economic and spiritual independence through education. As she said,

I learned from my mother that as a woman I must depend on myself. Then one day when a man doesn’t want you, you can just leave him without any fear. . . . Then it won’t happen that you cannot live without a man. You cannot depend on a man,
either spiritually or financially. I feel that women must be independent. When he loves you, you can love him. But when he doesn’t love you anymore, you can just walk away elegantly. (First Interview with Buxue, 08/17/2011)

Painful experience motivated Buxue to study hard to get into a university as a way to pursue independence. However, like Chen, when Buxue arrived at the university she found that the ideal image of a woman that she had developed in her mind was devalued. She had been longing to become an entrepreneur after graduating from the university. Sharing this dream with her roommates, she found that they regarded her dream as unrealistic because to them being an entrepreneur did not seem normal for a woman. In their minds a female entrepreneur must be a “strong woman” (nǚ qiangren), as Buxue described, which carried the negative stereotypes of being “too domineering” (太强势 tai qiangshi) and made it hard to find a man for marriage. Despite the negative stereotypes, Buxue insisted that she dared to be a “strong woman” so that she could support her mother and let her live a more free and happy life in the future. For her, “love or marriage between a man and a woman is not that important.” As she said, “It doesn’t matter whether there is a man for me or not” (Second Interview with Buxue, 10/03/2011). The most important thing for her was that she could make her own living without having to depend on any man.

Shi Zhi at Elite National University 2 was like Chen and Buxue in that she also wanted to be a strong woman despite the negative stereotypes associated with it. She recalled that, since her childhood, she was taught by her parents to be strong and ambitious so that she could be successful and someone for her parents and siblings to rely on in the future. She saw that, as rural people, her parents lived at the bottom of the society and were regularly ignored
or belittled by urban residents. Internalizing her parents’ expectations and aspiring to change her own destiny, she studied hard to get into Elite National University 2, one of the most elite universities in China. She realized that her hard work, strength, and ambition resulted in educational achievement as well as recognition from society of her value. This inspired her to continue to be strong and ambitious after entering university.

Shi’s acceptance of the image of the “strong woman” also revealed her resistance to the institutional power of patriarchy. She said that, although the male-dominated environment at the elite university did not seem to value strong women, she had a good friend in her dorm, also from a rural area, who valued strength and independence. As Shi said,

When we chatted about what kind of person we want to become in the future, she said that she would rather not get married if after marriage she would have to be suppressed by a man. So she wants to be independent and free from the bonds of a man. Me too. In my mind, there has always been an image of a strong woman. She dares to dream and dares to do. . . . She has little dependence on anybody. . . . She never prevents herself from doing something just because she is a woman. She never depends on men. (First Interview with Shi, 08/21/2011)

Thus, for rural female students like Shi, Buxue, and Chen, being a “strong woman” meant resisting the patriarchal power that constrains and subordinates women. The intersectionality of the urban-rural divide and patriarchy had shaped their identity. They had been channeled into becoming “strong women” by the intersectional oppression of the urban-rural divide and gender hierarchy in that only by being strong they could get out of the hardship. Then they found themselves discredited by urban patriarchy, which stigmatizes
such women. But instead of succumbing to patriarchy, they dared to challenge and resist it.

**Transgressing the Strong/Weak Dichotomy**

While the six above-mentioned participants, Gai, Dao, Xiang, Shaoshi, Wuchang, and Liangshu learned to hide their strength in urban spaces and particularly in the presence of males, six other participants found that their strength was given credit in certain circumstances, and/or they deconstructed the strong/weak binary of femininity. They chose to transgress the boundary and remarked that they were just being themselves (做自己 zuo ziji).

Yi You, a third-year master’s student at Non-Elite National University 1, mentioned that her academic advisor, who was an urban woman, said to Yi that she liked rural students and particularly appreciated the attributes that Yi possessed as a rural student such as her “sincerity,” “diligence,” and “capacity to endure hardships and work hard.” She praised Yi for her strong, tough, and hard-working characteristics. Yi said that it was due to the recognition and appraisal of her advisor that she gradually walked out of the shadow of inferiority which haunted her before. Now she could accept her rural status as part of her identity and did not have to worry about imitating urban students.

Similarly, Renzi Wei, a third-year master’s student at Non-Elite National University 2, said that she got recognition of her strength from her advisor with whom she shared a rural background. As the only rural student among her advisor’s graduate students, Renzi said that her advisor treated her “the best.” This advisor told her that he liked her the best because she was sunny, bold, warm-hearted, and had some common rural characteristics such as diligence and perseverance.

Her advisor’s recognition of her strength was very important to Renzi in the urban
environment where her characteristics and capacities were not always valued. Like Dao and Xiang, mentioned above, Renzi experienced a double-sided femininity when she first arrived at Non-Elite National University 2 as an undergraduate student. She saw that many people in urban areas did not want or expect women to be strong because strong women had difficulties finding marriage partners. She gave her previous boyfriend as an example. When they broke up, he said frankly to her, “I think you are more excellent than I. I cannot dominate you (镇不住你 zhenbuzhu ni). So we are not a good match anyway” (Second Interview with Renzi, 09/18/2011). This puzzled Renzi because her parents had taught her since childhood to be strong, independent, and, above all, excellent so that she could flourish amidst rural-urban inequalities.

After she became her advisor’s graduate student, her advisor recognized and gave credit to her for her strength and independence. According to Renzi, her advisor’s recognition of her strength played an important role in increasing her confidence, accepting her rural female identity, and helping her be herself without having to worry about acting too strong.

Tian at Elite National University 1 negotiated the strong/weak binary in a different way from Renzi and Yi, because she had experienced contradictory expectations in her rural home. Of the 66 participants, Tian was the only one whose parents had received a higher education. Her father graduated from a medical university and her mother graduated from a nursing college, but their hukou remained rural. They ran a private school and a clinic in the village. Like Dao, Tian encountered gender discrimination as early as when she was in her mother’s womb. Her parents had expected a boy after Tian’s older sister. After finding out through ultrasound that she was a girl, they had wanted to abort her. However, they were persuaded to
keep Tian by Tian’s paternal grandmother. Since childhood, she had experienced gender oppression from her father. He required her to be ladylike, obedient, and good at doing housework. But Tian did not follow this requirement as she thought that it violated her nature, so she rebelled against her father.

A contradiction for Tian was that her father required her to look like a lady but never considered her needs as a girl. He asked Tian and her older sister to do, in Tian’s words, “manly” work such as lifting heavy sand and dirt from the ground to repair the building. When Tian was scared of heights and did not want to lift the sand and dirt to the roof of the building, her father scolded her as “lazy” and “parasitic.”

Tian understood that this contradiction was based on her father’s need to use her free labor, on the one hand, and his worry about saving “his own face,” on the other. As she stated,

It all depends on his needs. When he requires you to behave like a lady, you should do so. Actually he requires this of you from other people’s eyes. What he is concerned about is not your personal or your individual needs, but [saving] his own face, and how other people see you. He said, “Only by behaving like a lady can you be married out and can there be somebody who wants you in the future.” (Second Interview with Tian, 07/29/2011)

Thus, Tian understood that her father required her to be a lady not because he was concerned about her, but because he worried about saving “his own face.” If Tian could not behave like a lady, he worried that nobody would want to marry her and, subsequently, it would mean a loss of face for him. With this critical understanding, Tian sometimes resisted her father’s expectations. For example, when her father required her to walk elegantly and quietly, she
would jump. However, she also tried to accommodate her father by complying with his expectations, only to find that she could not meet them no matter how hard she tried. As she said,

The reason why I studied so hard [prior to university] was that I wanted to get away from home and go to big cities like Beijing. I wanted to have a different life. . . . I felt that my living at home was so bad, and my relationship with my parents was very bad. My parents always said that I knew nothing about housework. They liked to use some other girls in the village as examples: “This girl is even younger than you, but she can take care of the house so well when her parents are not at home. But you can do nothing.” But when I sometimes did help them but was getting extremely tired and wanting to have some rest, they immediately said that I was selfish and inconsiderate. Anyway, this awful life pushed me to study extremely hard because I was eager to pursue a new life. (Third Interview with Tian, 09/11/2011)

Thus, like Dao, pursuing educational excellence so that she could leave her oppressive home motivated her to study hard to get into a university. After attending Elite National University 1, Tian found that the expectations for what constituted normal womanhood were different from, and even contradictory to, those she had faced at home. While her father required her to lift heavy loads, build houses, and repair sewers, she found that this type of work was regarded as “manly” and that it was not appropriate for a normal woman on an urban campus. When the sewer stuck at home, it was not uncommon for her father to ask her to use her hands to pull the dirt out. Yet, when she found the sewer stuck at the dorm and was attempting to pull the dirt out with her hands, all her roommates (who were all urban)
covered their noses with their hands and walked away, implying that the work she was doing, and the woman who was doing it, were dirty. As Tian said,

They don’t want to touch those dirty things as to them these things are disgusting.

But their behavior gave me another feeling, which is that when they say that those things are dirty and disgusting or when they show that they are afraid of those things, they imply their pride that they are a clean person. They sometimes criticized like this, “Who is so unsanitary that stuck the sewer.” When they show that they are afraid of the dirty things, they want to prove that they are clean, sanitary people.

(Third Interview with Tian, 09/11/2011)

Tian connected this example to another about battling cockroaches. While it was nothing for a woman in her rural area to battle cockroaches, all her university roommates screamed at the sight of cockroaches and dared not battle them. One day, a classmate (a rural female student) who saw her battle a cockroach taught her not to do this again, as she may be regarded as an abnormal woman by both males and females. She told Tian that she also had battled cockroaches when she started at the university, but now she did not. Instead, she also screamed whenever she saw a cockroach. Otherwise, female students would think she was “strange” and male students would think she was “unwomanly,” since a normal woman’s reaction to cockroaches should be to be scared and to scream. She taught Tian that Tian should “learn to act as a woman.” Yet Tian was strongly resistant to this notion. As she said,

I am intrinsically a woman. Why should I learn to act as a woman? Actually, the so-called learning-to-act-as-a-woman is a sort of learning to pretend, learning to pretend [to be] weak (装弱 zhuanruo). . . . This is sort of how society makes you
Tian understood that this tendency of teaching women to act as women serves as a tool for the patriarchal society to mold women to “become the weak” so they can be subordinated. Realizing this, she refused to “pretend [to be] weak” when she saw cockroaches, but just acted like herself, despite the fact that she could be mocked and regarded as abnormal by society.

In this section, I used three examples from Yi, Renzi, and Tian to indicate that some participants in my study went beyond the strong/weak double-sided femininity that constrained some other participants. Yi and Renzi as graduate students got recognition of their strength as rural students by their advisors, so they could be themselves. Tian experienced conflicting gendered expectations in her rural home that required her to be simultaneously tough and ladylike. She understood that these expectations were derived from two different sources, neither of which was concerned about her: On the one hand, her father used her for free labor; on the other hand, he was trying to save his own reputation by cultivating a daughter who could meet society’s norm. Now, as a university student in the urban environment, she accurately observed that the gender norm was different from and sometimes even the reverse of the norm at home. While the patriarchy of her rural home both enabled her to become strong and punished her for not being ladylike, patriarchy on her urban campus rendered her as “strange” and “unwomanly” when she did “manly” work and expressed herself strongly. While she had to learn the gender norm that constituted normal womanhood in the urban environment, she tended to challenge, critique, and deconstruct the
strong/weak double-sided femininity that was necessitated by different and complex forms of patriarchy across rural and urban settings.

**Aspiring to Be Independent and/or Strong**

Almost all my participants, including those who rejected the model of the “strong woman” and those who developed a double-sided identity, commented that they wanted to be “independent” (独立 duli) and/or “strong” (坚强 jianqiang). They all lived in residential dorms at high schools or junior secondary schools. These residential experiences of living away from home fostered their independence and ability to take care of themselves. Other than four participants Chen, Rang, Juyang, and Guangzhe, the rest 62 participants had one to four siblings at home. Many of them said that they developed their independent identity through taking care of their younger siblings and/or through doing housework. Yet many also pointed out various and complicated reasons why they pursued independence, including parents’ gender-egalitarian views—especially those of mothers—experiencing hardship and discrimination or seeing rural women suffering, proving their value as devalued rural females, realizing that they had no networks in cities and so had to depend on themselves, and feeling insecure about marriage.

**Parents’ Gender Egalitarianism and Mothers as Role Models**

Thirty-two participants out of 66 talked about their parents, who they said held the view that boys and girls are the same, particularly their mothers who either taught them to be strong and/or independent or served as role models for them to follow. Shuihuo Yue at Municipal College, the second child in her family with an older sister and a younger brother, said that her parents treated all three children equally. She especially pointed out that her
mother was a “strong,” “independent,” and “capable” role model for her to follow. As she said,

Shuihuo: Since childhood I have fostered the characteristics of being strong and independent. I cannot play the woman, say soft words, and pretend to be weak. I am the type of woman who is very capable.

Lifang: What experiences fostered your characteristics of being strong and independent during your childhood?

Shuihuo: That is, my mother’s characteristics. My mother is a very capable woman. She did whatever men did. I learned it from my mother during my childhood. People [in the village] said, “Look at Shuihuo. She is so capable that she arranges tasks for her older sister to do.” I was the one who assigned tasks for my older sister. My older sister has soft characteristic like my father, but I am more assertive and stronger like my mother. I don’t know how I fostered this, but since childhood I have loved to guide and lead people. My mother feels it is good that my older sister is soft and I am assertive. She thinks that if both of us were assertive, we would fight a lot.

(Interview with Shuihuo, 10/29/2011)

Later Shuihuo said that since her father ran a wholesale store in a nearby town and was not always at home, her mother took care of everything at home and in the farmland. Her mother also owned and managed the finances at home while her father earned money to give to her mother. For Shuihuo, her mother did the same work as men such as fixing the agricultural machines and farming, so she thought that her mother was “especially capable,” “independent,” and “strong, both physically and mentally.” Obviously, Shuihuo admired her
mother’s strong and independent characteristics, and the villagers, in Shuihuo’s eyes, also praised such characteristics. Thus, she followed her mother as a role model.

Similarly, Jizhu at Non-Elite National University 2, the oldest child of her family, with a younger brother, mentioned that her parents treated her and her brother the same, and her mother had taught her to be independent since her childhood. Her mother required her to do housework as early as when Jizhu was four or five years old, which, as she said, “fostered my independent living ability.” Besides, her mother also constantly taught her such things as, “As a woman, you must be able to support yourself. If you cannot do so, but always rely on other people, nobody will love and respect you.”

Like Shuihuo and Jizhu, Juyang Ming at Elite National University 1, the only child in her family, said that her independent “view of value” was influenced by her mother. As she commented,

My view of value is consistent with that of my mom, highly consistent. That is, for everything you must depend on yourself. You cannot expect a male to help you just because you are a female. For example, when a male and I eat out together, I cannot expect this male to pay for me. I cannot also expect anyone to support me in the future. I must be independent financially. Without a man, I must be able to live all by myself.

(Interview with Juyang, 11/25/2011)

In this section, I used three examples to show how, from my participants’ perspectives, their parents’ gender-equalitarian views, particularly their mothers’ views about independence, shaped their idea or “view of value” that being a woman they cannot depend on men.

Shuihuo’s case also indicates that some rural people praise the “independent,” “strong,” and
“capable” characteristics of women.

**Rural Hardship and/or Gender Discrimination**

Twenty participants commented that they experienced hardship and/or discrimination and realized that they had no choice but to be strong and independent in order to survive. Similar to Buxue, discussed above, who saw how her mother suffered domestic violence that pushed Buxue to pursue independence through education, Tui Wei at Elite National University 1 narrated that her mother committed suicide when Tui was in grade 7. As Tui recounted, her mother and father never quarreled, but her paternal grandparents lived together with them, and her grandpa was an alcoholic and sometimes lost his temper at her mother and criticized her mother for not doing housework well. During Tui’s childhood she saw her mother do the housework without resting, taking care of the big family (including Tui’s grandparents, Tui’s older sister, older brother, and Tui) and farming, while Tui’s father worked as a migrant worker away from home. Tui said that she could understand how, as a rural woman, her mother could not see any hope and prospect despite her hard work and bitter endurance with her father-in-law, so she ended her life. Her mother’s suffering and suicide shaped Tui’s perspective that she must be independent, spiritually and financially. As she said,

I feel that as a woman, I must be independent, first spiritually. That is, you should have a mentality that in this world you can still live on without anybody else. This is the spiritual aspect. That is, you must not have a single idea of depending on anybody, but should use your own capacity to deal with things. Second, you must be independent financially, because if you depend on other people financially,
inevitably you will need other people, and this will affect your spiritual 

independence. (Second Interview with Tui, 11/11/2011)

Likewise, Hua Cheng at Non-Elite National University 1 also saw how her mother 
suffered bitterly, but unlike Tui, she experienced gender discrimination from her father. 

According to Hua, her father had disliked her ever since she was born because he expected a 
boy after Hua’s older sister. From Hua’s perspective, her father held the “conservative” or 
“feudal” view that girls should focus on housework such as cooking rather than receiving 
education, so he strongly objected to her going to school, and sometimes slapped her because 
of her insistence on pursuing education. Yet, Hua’s mother understood how hard it was for 
Hua to live in the rural area if Hua could not receive education and get into a university, so 
she strongly supported her, and in Hua’s words, “always quarreled with my father for 
supporting me going to school.” These painful experiences motivated her to study hard to get 
into a university as a way to get away from the miserable life at home and seek independence. 

As she said,

I felt that I had no other way out than pursuing education. I was very fearful that I 
would stay inside the mountain to live a life like my mom. I also hoped that after 
graduating from the university I could get a job to support myself and my mother so I 
could let her get away from suffering and live more comfortably. (First Interview with 
Hua, 07/28/2011)

In this section, my participants, such as Hua and Tui, demonstrated how experiencing 

gender discrimination or seeing their mothers suffer motivated them to pursue an independent 
life through receiving education. For Hua, independence meant being able to support herself
and her mother economically, while for Tui, independence was also spiritual, perhaps because her mother’s suffering because of male authority in the patriarchal and patrilineal family structure and her consequent suicide shaped Tui’s mentality that in this world she must be able to live all by herself without depending on anybody.

**Proving the Value of a Devalued Rural Female Identity**

Twelve participants demonstrated that they had to prove their value as females who were not regarded as useful, capable, and valuable as males at home. Xing Ci at Municipal College, the youngest in the family with an older sister, recounted that during her childhood her mother wished that Xing was a boy because her mother thought that a boy would be more useful and could help her more with agricultural work as Xing’s father worked away from home. Xing pushed herself, in her words, to “do the same agricultural work as boys” and “help my mom in the farmland as best as I could.” Because of this, her mother praised her for being “bold” and “capable.” According to Xing, this experience shaped her perspective that she must be independent and capable so that as she said, “I can get respect from other people.”

Rongwen, also at Municipal College, the oldest in the family with a younger sister, mentioned that her father wished he had a boy because, as Rongwen said, “he felt boys are more capable in careers.” She was trying to prove to her father that she “can be more capable than boys” and can also be successful in her career. As she said,

I want my father to know that I, as a girl, can be more capable than boys, and I can also be successful in my career and support my parents. I want to prove that his thoughts are wrong. (Second Interview with Rongwen, 12/11/2011)
Xue Ren at Non-Elite National University 1, the youngest of four children in the family with two older brothers and one older sister, like Rongwen wanted to prove her value to her father, who, as she said, “preferred boys to girls” and said that “girls will be married out someday, and then they are like water poured out.” According to Xue, her father thought that she as a girl could not support her parents in the future because she will be married out and will not be a member of her natal family anymore. Yet Xue thought that her father was looking down upon her with his view, so she rebutted him by saying that his thoughts were wrong, and “no matter whether I marry out or not, I will still be your daughter.” As she continued,

I felt so unfair that he said it. He favored his sons so much and looked down upon girls. At that time, I was very rebellious. I felt his thoughts were wrong. I must study hard and well. I must get into a university. I want to prove to him that as a girl I can also get into a university and have prospects after I grow up. I can do whatever boys can. I said this to him. (Second Interview with Xue, 09/10/2011)

Xue’s older sister and second older brother had to drop out of school due to financial difficulties. Xue was once afraid that she would have to drop out, yet fortunately her older sister was willing to earn money to pay for her education.

In this section, I discussed how participants Xue, Xing, and Rongwen had to prove their value to their parent(s) who held gender bias against girls. Getting into a university meant a way for them to gain independence and prove that their parent(s)’ bias was wrong.

**Having No Networks in Cities**

Eighteen participants emphasized that they had no connections or networks (关系
guanxi) in the city, or no wealthy parents or relatives in power to rely on unlike their urban equivalents, so they must depend on themselves for everything in the city.

Benshan Xing at Non-Elite National University 1 commented:

My parents are both ordinary peasants. My relatives are all in rural areas. They are all authentic peasants with no power, money, and social networks. So I have to depend on myself to deal with everything here. (Second Interview with Benshan, 07/26/2011)

Similarly, Shi at Elite National University 2 also remarked that she had to be strong and independent, because she realized that she had no networks in the city and must depend on herself for everything so that she could survive and provide her parents and siblings with support.

**Feeling Insecure about Marriage**

Eight participants pointed out that they felt insecure about marriage, so they decided that they must be independent.

Like Ziqin, discussed earlier, who mentioned that she must have her own career to support herself because of the increasing divorce rate in society, Renyi Yue at Municipal College commented on the insecurity she felt about marriage. But unlike Ziqin who regarded her career as secondary to her marriage, Renyi thought that career was most important and provided her “the best security.” As she said,

I feel that as women we must be independent. It is very important [to be independent]. I saw that some women now are so busy with seeking marriage partners. But I feel that I must first get my own job to support myself. I cannot always depend on my parents. I can also not depend on my husband in the future, because after all there are
many problems, for example, marriage problems. There exists crisis in marriage. For example, at this time two people have a good relationship and get married, but after several years they may get divorced [she giggled]. So in my view I must have my own work. This is the best security for myself. (Interview with Renyi, 10/20/2011)

Liyan Wu at Provincial University was similar to Renyi Yue in that she could not feel secure to depend on a man for fear of divorce. As she said,

If I would not be independent and not have the ability to support and live by myself, but solely would depend on my future husband, I would not have anything after divorce. So I feel that I must be independent economically. I cannot rely on other people. (Second Interview with Liyan, 12/15/2011)

Likewise, Rang at Elite National University commented that in the current society men are not reliable. “Only getting an independent career,” as she said, “I can feel secure.”

In this section, I discussed how my participants aspired to be independent and/or strong for multiple reasons. Some were influenced by their mothers who either taught them or acted as role models for them to follow. Some witnessed or experienced hardship and/or discrimination at home and were driven to be independent. Some experienced gender bias or discrimination and wanted to prove wrong the ideas that devalued them. Some realized that they had no networks in the city and had to depend on themselves. Some felt insecure about marriage and decided that they could not depend on any men in the future.

**Conclusion**

Jacka (2006) states that “there are major inequalities and differences in lifestyles and values, especially those relating to gender and sexuality, between rural and urban China” (p.
8). My research findings, provided in this chapter, confirm this statement by revealing the inequalities and differences that rural Chinese female students experienced across rural and urban contexts. My participants negotiated gender in subtle, complex, and multiple ways, as indicated in the following table.

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Negotiating Femininity Across Rural-Urban Spaces</th>
<th>Elite National University 1</th>
<th>Elite National University 2</th>
<th>Non-Elite National University 1</th>
<th>Non-Elite National University 2</th>
<th>Provincial University 1</th>
<th>Municipal College 1</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing a double-sided identity</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rejecting the model of the “strong woman”</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embracing the model</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of the “strong woman”</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Transgressing the strong/weak dichotomy</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mothers as independent role models</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiencing/seeing hardship/discrimination</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proving values</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having no networks in cities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Six participants revealed that they had to conform to part of the gender norms in urban settings that required them to pretend to be weak, and they developed a double-sided femininity, performing their gender differently in urban versus rural spaces. Eight participants rejected the idea of the “strong woman” due to their internalization of the patriarchal gender expectation or the stereotypical image of the “strong woman” or acknowledgment of their low status being rural female, even though they stated that they should be independent. Nine persisted in being “strong women” despite negative stereotypes against such women. Six developed more complicated perspectives, going beyond the strong/weak dichotomy of femininity and deconstructing the different gender norms foisted upon them. Almost all participants stated that they wanted to be independent and/or strong, and specified multiple reasons, including being taught by or following their mothers as role models, experiencing or seeing rural women experience hardship or discrimination, proving their value as rural females who had been devalued, realizing they had no networks in cities (so they had to depend on themselves for everything), and feeling insecure about marriage.

Diverse factors came into play in shaping my participants’ perspectives about gender and independence, including their parents’—particularly their mothers’—gender views, the media, the increasing divorce rate, different village cultures, and high school and higher education experiences. Most participants commented that their mothers’ views or experiences
significantly affected them. Thirty-two said that their mothers either taught them or showed them as role models to be independent and/or strong. Three other participants, such as Erqian, Qiao, and Jianwen, stated that their mothers’ traditional gender views of being a good wife and mother shaped their ideas of what kind of women they wanted to be. Qiao and Juyang’s cases show how the different cultures of gender in their villages shaped their views. According to Qiao, people in her village held the traditional view that women must first be good wives and mothers, yet from Juyang’s perspective, people in her village praised women’s characteristics of being independent, strong, and capable.

City high schools that two participants, Gai and Wuchang, attended also shaped their gender perspectives. According to Gai, the high school she attended in the capital of Hebei Province regulated her to be “quiet,” “submissive,” “passive,” and “ladylike,” yet through interacting with her rural peers, listening to her mother’s advice, and attending Provincial University where rural students took up almost half of the student population, she started to examine how these urbanized feminine characteristics restrained her. In the city high school that Wuchang attended when repeating her 12th grade, she heard that women should pretend to be weak in front of males, yet after attending Municipal College and interacting with male students, she found that these males did not require women to do so; instead they admired excellent and capable women. This may be because Municipal College has a high percentage of rural students, and the males that Wuchang interacted with were mostly rural. Gai and Wuchang’s experiences at city high schools (where urban students predominated) and local higher education institutions (where rural students concentrated) corroborate the perspectives of Dao and Xiang: that they had to experience a double-sided identity across the urban-rural
social spaces between Beijing and their rural homes; they had to pretend to be weak in Beijing, whereas in their rural homes they had to be independent and strong. The differences between countryside and metropolitan city were expressed by participant Xiangjin, a master’s student at Elite National University 1:

I feel that actually rural areas require females to be laborers. Females are identified just as laborers, with no difference from males. That is, males reap wheat, and she also reaps wheat. Males do some heavy labor, such as carrying buckets of water and manure on a shoulder pole, and she also does so. Especially when there is no male laborer at home, she does everything. Nobody speaks against it. This is very normal. But it is different in cities, I think. The cities identify a female not only by whether she can support herself independently and her accomplishment in the workplace, working, or career, that is, by her financial independence, but also [by the standards that] she must fulfil her traditional responsibility as a good wife and kind mother (贤妻良母 xianqiliangmu). That is, she must have feminine characteristics. She must be very womanly (很女人 hen nüren). . . . By feminine characteristics I mean soft (温柔 wenrou), kind (善良 shanliang), and beautiful (美丽 meili). Beautiful means that she must have disposition (有气质 you qizhi), be considerate (体贴 titie), and understanding (善解人意 shanjierenyi). (Second Interview with Xiangjin, 11/26/2011)

My participants expressed the heterogeneities, fluidities, ambivalences, or contradictions of their own perspectives about gender or those of rural people. While Shuihuo and Jizhu stated that their parents had gender-equalitarian views, Hua and Xue pointed out that
their fathers had a gender bias that “a woman without knowledge is virtuous” and “a daughter married out is like water poured out,” and Dao and Xing commented that their parents thought that girls were less valuable, useful, and capable than boys. While Shi’s rural female roommate motivated Shi to fearlessly pursue the model of the “strong woman,” Tian’s rural female classmate taught her to “learn to act as a woman” and pretend to be weak; and Chen’s rural roommates and classmates regarded her as “weird” and “not like a girl” when she transgressed the boundary of what a girl should look like by showing her ambition to be a strong and successful career women. Dao and Xiang had to be independent and strong in order to prove their value and provide support to their parents in their rural homes, but after arriving at the urban spaces they learned that they had to pretend to be weak in front of males, thus developing a fluid and contradictory double-sided identity. Erqian said that she should be independent and be able to support herself, but when she interacted with her boyfriend, she meticulously showed dependence on him by holding his arm, thus showing ambivalence and contradiction. For Erqian, her mother’s idea that females should act “soft and submissive” and gendered interpretation of Christianity significantly affected Erqian’s view, while her realization of her adopted status in the family pushed her to be independent. Ziqin, Qiao, Liangshu, and Xiangjin also expressed contradictions regarding independence. They stated that they must be independent and get a career to make their own living; however, they worried that being too independent and putting too much emphasis on their careers would jeopardize their future marriages because they would not fulfill their family responsibility of being “a good wife and kind mother.” Tian narrated that her father had contradictory requirements for her to be “tough” on one side, and “ladylike” on the other side. Jianwen
pointed out that her mother held the “traditional idea of men managing external affairs and women internal,” even though her mother taught and motivated Jianwen to pursue economic independence through education.

These heterogeneities, fluidities, and contradictions imply that rural Chinese people encounter a complex matrix of patriarchal traditions based on Confucian patriarchal beliefs, historical ideas of femaleness, and patrilocal and patrilineal family structures, compounded by the legacy of Maoist ideology, post-Mao gender discourses, the urban-rural division that regards urban culture as superior, the demands of the market economy, and the influence of Western thoughts and belief systems. Thus, some rural people have inherited the historical ideas of female roles or patriarchal norms of subordinating women to men, or have taken on the gender values of urban elite culture to require feminine characteristics of females. Yet some carry on the gender-egalitarian ideology that “men and women are the same.” Some require feminine characteristics of females, but in the meantime expect them to be independent and strong for individual and family survival and to thrive in the increasingly competitive society driven by the market economy and by the state’s modernization policies.
Chapter 7: Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore the perspectives of rural Chinese female students about their educational and social experiences from their childhood to their university lives. I conducted 108 open-ended, in-depth interviews with 66 rural female higher education students in northern China to understand how these students experienced and made sense of their educational process, the urban-rural divide, and gender.

My participants demonstrated various forms of agency as they negotiated multiple power systems (Appendix E quantifies the types of agency). Most of them realized that they would have limited life chances in their rural areas, and that getting into higher education provided them the only means of upward mobility. Thus they worked extremely hard on achieving educational excellence. Yet their educational paths were not smooth as they encountered the institutional barrier of hukou, which excluded them from accessing urban public schooling, especially in cities. Therefore, most of them ended up studying at rural schools that were disadvantaged in teaching quality, school facilities, and other educational resources. Some students who traveled with their parents migrating to work in cities still could not access city public schools because of their rural hukou. They had to attend schools for rural migrant children, whose facilities and teaching qualifications were inferior to those of city public schools. Some city public schools did recruit some outstanding rural students to upgrade their enrollment rate; however, the recruitment criteria for rural students was much higher than those for urban students. They required rural students to earn much higher scores on entrance exams and/or required their parents to pay extra fees to the school before their enrollment because of their rural hukou status. Hence, it took more effort, ability, and
resources for rural students to get into the city public schools than it did for students with local city hukou to get into those same schools.

The National Higher Education Entrance Exam—gaokao, which is a standardized test that almost every student needs to take in order to enter institutions of higher learning—appears to be fair in providing everyone an equal opportunity to perform. However, there is definitely not an equal opportunity for each student to access higher education. This is because the geographically-specific hukou system regulates higher education admission in that universities located at each different region give preference to students with that region’s hukou. Since most prestigious universities are located in such major cities as Beijing and Shanghai, students with Beijing and Shanghai hukou are given preferential treatment over students from other regions.

The rural female students that I interviewed were aware of some of these barriers that they encountered, but they reported that they had no say or power to change the unequal situations facing them. This does not mean that they presented themselves solely as victims; instead, they enacted their agency to negotiate the power systems whenever they could. Some of them recognized the double bind that caught them, even though they did not use the exact term. For example, Yuqin, Yin, and Xianzhi all commented that in order to pass gaokao and get the opportunity to go to a university, they chose to compromise their independent and critical thinking. They forced themselves to write in conformity with the gaokao format, that is, to write positively and not to critique the Communist Party, government, and negative political atmosphere, even though they realized that not doing so was against what they really thought and wanted to do. In this way, they were caught in what Frye (1983) conceptualized
as the “double bind—situations in which options are reduced to a very few and all of them expose one to penalty, censure or deprivation” (p. 2). If they chose to critique the system, they would have to face the punishment of failing the exam and losing their only means of upward mobility. To survive and succeed in their education, they had to repress or withhold their genuine thoughts and reproduce the accepted views in their essays. In doing so they were penalized in another way in that their critical thinking was repressed and they were subjected to being complicit in reinforcing the system. Either way they were punished and could not win.

Hence, double bind as an analysis of power structures has helped me make sense of the life situations in which my participants were situated. Using this concept does not mean that I do not acknowledge my participants’ agency; rather, I recognize that their agency needs to be understood in relation to power structures that constrained their conditions of existence. My participants exercised their agency to employ strategies such as working extra hard, repeating grades, and relocating to schools of better quality to respond to the urban-rural inequality that discriminated against them. Even though they left the power structures intact, they exhibited their resilient resistance and navigational capital to survive and succeed through the educational pipeline.

Their agency, however, did not always happen at their individual level, but was situated in their familial and social situations, which I call familial and social capital. Forty-nine participants said that their families provided them financial support and emotional motivation and inspiration to pursue education. Twenty-nine said that their social networks and teachers helped them to enroll in better quality schools or obtain educational achievements.
Different high schools that participants attended also affected their paths to enter universities. Participants who attended city high schools mostly did not have to repeat their 12th grade in order to get into elite national universities, non-elite national universities, and Provincial University; but participants who attended high schools in their rural towns or counties of origin mostly had to repeat their 12th grade in order to make up for their educational disadvantages. This means that city high schools provide students with a head start to join universities; and students with city hukou have this unearned structural privilege.

**Complex Forms of Agency in Negotiating Dominant Cultural Capital and Discourse of Quality (Suzhi)**

After arriving at the urban settings, my participants experienced marginalization and/or developed feelings of inferiority due to the dominant cultural capital, which centers on urban experiences, knowledge, lifestyles and values, and on the discourse of suzhi, which represents rural students as less knowledgeable and capable than urban students. My participants showed various forms of agency in responding to the cultural capital and suzhi discourse. Twenty-one participants completely accepted the suzhi discourse without showing any resistance to it. Acceptance itself, I would argue, is a form of agency that my participants demonstrated. Twenty-seven seemed to accept part of the discourse—that they had less well-rounded knowledge and capacity than urban students—and resist it when it was used to negatively judge their rural identity as inferior. These participants, together with the above 21, expressed a fluid understanding of suzhi: that they can raise their quality through their individual efforts to acquire knowledge, widen their vision, and strengthen their capacity. These participants showed a complex form of agency in simultaneously accepting the suzhi
discourse, resisting it when it was associated with their rural identity, and combatting their low status.

Eight participants critiqued and redefined the meaning of quality in quality education. Eighteen developed counter-discourses of the urban-rural disparity to counteract the marginalization they experienced on urban campuses. Sixteen took pride in their rural identity or moral values, showing the value of their rural capital to challenge the dominant notion of cultural capital. Twenty-two accumulated dominant cultural capital to combat an internalized negative rural identity.

From comparing the numbers of participants in each institution and doing a deeper analysis, I found that hierarchical levels of higher education institutions shaped the participants’ perspectives about the suzhi discourse and cultural capital. Most participants at the two elite national universities developed counter-discourses and subverted the meaning of quality education; yet most at Provincial University and Municipal College expressed feelings of inferiority about their rural identity or status. This disparity is perhaps because participants at the elite universities experienced the most severe marginalization on their campuses where rural female students were underrepresented, so they developed radical resistance to the suzhi discourse and dominant cultural capital; and also, as students of elite universities, they tended to think that they had upgraded their status. Thus they seldom expressed feelings of inferiority. In contrast, participants at Provincial University and Municipal College experienced less marginalization due to the significant number of rural students surrounding them, but mostly accepted and internalized the suzhi discourse that their quality was low. So most of them expressed their desire to enter graduate schools at better
universities, as a way to improve their suzhi and raise their low status. The perspectives of my graduate participants prove that getting into graduate schools was the most effective way for them to gain dominant cultural capital and upgrade their status.

City high schools that some participants attended also seemed to have shaped their understanding of the suzhi discourse. Those participants expressed fewer feelings of inferiority or less sense of marginalization after attending universities than students who attended rural, town, or county high schools, perhaps because city high schools prepared them with more dominant cultural capital such as computer and presentation skills. Yet some, such as Liyan, internalized this discourse and spoke against rural people as needing to be educated about improving their quality.

**Negotiating Femininity in a “Double-Double Bind”**

Almost all my participants commented that they must be independent and/or strong, yet negotiated gender in such multiple ways as performing their femaleness differently in urban and rural spaces, persisting in embracing the model of the “strong woman” despite its social stigmas, holding an ambivalent view about independence, transgressing the dichotomy of “being strong” and “pretending to be weak,” or deconstructing the different forms of gender norms foisted upon them. They exhibited heterogeneous, fluid, and sometimes contradictory forms of agency in negotiating femininity across the border of rural and urban spaces.

Analysis of the data shows that a variety of factors came into play in shaping their heterogeneous, fluid, and sometimes contradictory perspectives about independence and/or the “strong woman” image. The main factors include but are not limited to media, the increasing divorce rate, village cultures, the urban-rural divide that deprives rural female
students of resources and networks in cities, their high school and higher education experiences, and parents, particularly mothers who played a significant role in their lives.

Qiao and Liangshu stated that the media impacted their perspectives so that they would not want to be a “strong woman” because such a woman is portrayed living a stressful and unhappy life. Ziqin, Renzi, Liyan, and Rang all expressed their sense of insecurity about future marriages because of the increasing divorce rate; so they held the view that they must have an independent career to support themselves. Qiao and Juyang showed how their village cultures of gender affected their views. Qiao stated that people in her village expected women to be good wives and mothers instead of focusing on their careers; yet Juyang said that people in her village endorsed independent, strong, and capable women. Thus Qiao rejected the model of the “strong woman,” but Juyang embraced it. Benshan and Shi commented that, as children of peasants, they had no networks in cities, so had to be independent to strive for everything.

Different high school and higher education experiences also affected some participants’ perspectives about gender. Two participants, Gai and Wuchang, said that the city high schools they attended socialized or expected them to be “ladylike,” “quiet,” “submissive,” or to “pretend to be weak.” Yet Provincial University and Municipal College, which have a significant number of rural students and which they were attending, did not have such norms. Some rural males, as Wuchang reflected, would love women to be excellent and capable. The urban elite culture expects women to be weak and submissive, whereas the rural culture does not seem to pose such limitations, even though some rural people still carry on the historical ideas of positioning females as subordinate to males, which are mainly reflected in such
traditional patriarchal sayings as “a daughter married out is like water poured out” and “a woman without knowledge is virtuous” and in traditional ideas of evaluating females by how well they do housework and take care of their families.

University experiences, particularly experiences of the distinct class division in Beijing, also changed some women’s gender views. Two women, Shiyou and Buyan at Non-Elite National University 1, had admired the model of the “strong woman,” which stimulated them to become strong and competitive; yet after arriving at the university, they realized that it was unrealistic for them to become successful “strong women” with career ambitions and that only urban women have such a luxury. This is because after arriving at the urban settings, they realized their unequal status with urban women, especially those from wealthy families and larger cities, which deprived them of resources and opportunities to achieve their ambition in careers, so they conceived of themselves as less likely to be ambitious strong women than their urban equivalents.

Some other participants experienced a similar tension after arriving at universities in Beijing, yet it was due to different reasons. In their case they chose different ways of performing their femaleness. For example, Dao at Non-Elite National University 1 and Xing at Elite National University 1 encountered urban patriarchal norms that required them to act differently from the ways they acted in their rural homes; thus they ended up developing a double-sided identity: pretending to be weak in front of males in urban settings and performing as strong in their rural homes. Participants such as Tian at Elite National University 1, Yi at Non-Elite National University 1, and Renzi at Non-Elite National University 2, facing similar contradictory norms as Dao and Xing, chose to critique and
transgress such a strong/weak dichotomy by persisting in being themselves. Shiyou, Buyuan, Dao, Xing, Tian, Yi, and Renzi’s different perspectives demonstrated their subtly different forms of agency due to their different university experiences and the choices they made.

Most participants stated that their parents’, particularly their mothers’, gender views significantly affected them. For some participants, such as Jizhu, Shuihuo, and Juyang, their mothers’ ideas that as women they must be independent, capable, and strong shaped them to follow the model of the independent or “strong woman.” For some, such as Erqian and Qiao, their mothers’ gender views that they must act soft and submissive or be a good mother and wife shaped their perspective that they cannot be a completely independent or “strong woman” and must put their future marriage over their career. However, they also realized that in modern society they cannot be dependent on anybody, but they have to be independent; thus, they had contradictory and ambivalent views about independence. Tian also shared some contradictory views from her parents, who required her to be strong and tough on one side, and soft and ladylike on the other side.

The ambivalences and contradictions together with the tensions that some women, such as Shiyou, Buyan, Dao, Xing, Yi, and Renzi, faced at universities in Beijing indicate the complicated matrix that rural Chinese people encounter in contemporary China, which comprises urban-rural socioeconomic and cultural inequalities; “traditional patriarchy, which still insists on equating femininity with submission”; the urban modern (post-Mao) elite culture of requiring feminine characteristics from females; the legacy of Maoist gender egalitarianism; the demands of the market economy that women be competitive; and the state policy for modernization, which “encourages a woman to become as ‘useful’ as men in her
career” (Lu, 1995, p. 182). Lu (1995) states that Chinese women now face “a double-bind situation” in which they are “torn between two contradictory demands—to compete with men in the public sector and to remain inferior to men in private spaces” (p. 182). My research shows that rural Chinese women in urban China face a “double-double bind” (Applebaum, 2014), in which, in both the public and private sectors, they are torn between two contradictory gazes: the urban male gaze that requires them to pretend to be weak and the rural gaze that has shaped or expected them to be strong.

**Rurality in Intersection with Regionality, Ethnicity, and Gender**

Even though the urban-rural divide was the most significant form of stratification that my participants experienced, their particular regional origin compounded the discrimination against them. Xiangjin’s advisor stigmatized peasants from her province as ordinary people with no “culture and suzhi.” Shuji reported how her rural status in intersection with her original origin (Yunnan), ethnicity, and gender prompted a Han rural migrant woman to stereotype her, as a rural ethnic minority woman from Yunnan Province, as “poor,” “barbarous,” “backward,” and “uncivilized.”

Among my 66 participants, 12 were rural female students with ethnic minority backgrounds. My interviews with these students demonstrated that they not only had to experience marginalization due to the urban-rural divide, but they sometimes also faced discrimination due to their intersectional identity of being a rural ethnic minority female, as shown by Shuji above. Among my 12 participants with ethnic minority backgrounds, Shuji is the only one who said that she experienced discrimination as a higher education student. Seven out of the other 11 ethnic minority participants commented that ethnicity did not affect
their lives as much as their rural status, and four, Buxue, Linchu, Ying and Liangshu, said that they encountered discrimination when they were studying in primary or secondary schools, due to their languages, clothes, and socioeconomic status. For example, Buxue, a Hani ethnic at Non-Elite National University 2, described the discrimination and exclusion she experienced when she attended a suburban primary school in second grade after her father moved the whole family from the village to a suburban area of a county so that Buxue and her brother could receive a better education. Buxue had spoken Hani in her village and never learned the Han (Mandarin) language. Thus, when she first entered the suburban Han primary school, she said that she was discriminated against and excluded by her Han classmates who thought that she was weird because she could not speak the Han language; they regarded her as dirty and insanitary as a rural girl because of her worn clothes, and they refused to play with her at recess.

Nevertheless, after arriving at higher education institutions, these four participants said that they were most affected by the urban-rural disparity, as did the seven other participants who did not think that their ethnicity affected them as significantly as their rural status. For example, Linchu remarked that she did not have a strong identification with her ethnicity, but that “the urban-rural gap” significantly affected her daily life at the university. As she said,

About my ethnicity, actually I don’t have a strong idea, because I left my village very early and I don’t have any difference from Han students in terms of language. So I cannot see any difference about my ethnicity from that of Han students. But when I just arrived at the university, I strongly sensed the urban-rural gap. Before, I did not have a strong sense, but at the university since everybody is so excellent, I
feel that I lagged so far behind urban people in concepts, knowledge, vision, and thoughts about things. (First Interview with Linchu, 08/17/2011)

In second grade, Linchu left her village to study at a Han rural migrant children’s primary school at a city in Guizhou Province when her parents moved to work in that city. Like Buxue above, she experienced discrimination from Han students when she had just entered that school. Yet as time went on, she learned the Han language. Now, as a university student, she did not think of herself as different from Han students. Yet she commented that she faced marginalization on the urban higher education campus as a rural student, and she internalized the dominant discourse of suzhi, regarding herself as lagging behind urban people in knowledge and vision.

These findings seem to confirm current scholarship that in China the urban-rural divide is the most salient form of social stratification and that ethnicity does not trump rural status (Hu & Salazar, 2008). However, a deeper analysis of my interview data with rural female students from the Han ethnic majority group indicates that these students embraced ethnic privilege to perpetrate ethnic oppression upon ethnic minorities. This fact suggests the subtle forms of oppression that ethnic minority students face in their daily lives, which has not been examined in scholarship on ethnicity in China.

Xianzhi Yi at Elite National University 2 expressed her perspective about the bonus points that ethnic minority students in her class enjoyed when they applied for universities. She said that this preferential treatment is reasonable because “their education quality is not good” (Second Interview with Xianzhi, 10/02/2011). Similarly, Guangzhe San at Provincial University also said, “There must be a reason for it that the nation provides them the bonus. It
must be because ethnic minorities generally live in backward areas and their educational level is low” (First Interview with Guangzhe, 07/02/2011). Shaoshi Fang at Non-Elite National University 1 commented that ethnic minority students should have the bonus points. Otherwise, as she said, “they could not get into universities with their actual test scores” (First Interview with Shaoshi, 07/22/2011). These views were well intentioned; however, they were based on the stereotypes that ethnic minority students were from “backward” areas, received a low quality of education, and thus were not as capable and competitive as Han students. In holding these views, Xianzhi, Guangzhe, and Shaoshi seemed to embrace their Han superiority.

This Han superiority tended to produce discrimination toward ethnic minorities, which can be illustrated by Shaoshi’s experience of interacting with Dong ethnic and Uighur ethnic minority students in her class at the university. She said that the Dong ethnic student in her class, who is a male from a rural area in Guizhou Province, is “friendly and kind” (First Interview with Shaoshi, 07/22/2011). She compared this Dong ethnic student with Uighur ethnic students. She said that she felt very comfortable when interacting with this Dong ethnic student, because he had been “completely assimilated into the Han ethnic majority” (First Interview with Shaoshi, 07/22/2011), but the Uighur students seldom interacted with Han students. She asserted that these Uighur students “don’t belong to my group” (First Interview with Shaoshi, 07/22/2011). She was implying that this Dong ethnic minority student who had been assimilated into the Han qualified to belong to her group, but the Uighur students who seldom interacted with the Han did not qualify to be included in her group.
The irony is that even though she included the Dong ethnic student in her group, she sometimes tended to put him down to build herself up. For example, when this Dong ethnic student asked Shaoshi how she thought about him as an ethnic minority, she replied that she had no special view about him except that he joined this university with the 20 bonus points added to his gaokao scores, but that she made it based on her gaokao scores only. By saying this, Shaoshi conveyed the message that this Dong ethnic student would not have gotten into the same university as she if he had not been given the 20 bonus points as an ethnic minority. When I asked Shaoshi how this Dong ethnic student responded to her, she said, “He was very generous and just laughed” (First Interview with Shaoshi, 07/22/2011).

Shaoshi’s narrative about her interaction with the Dong ethnic minority student showed that she did not regard this student as equal to herself. She was using the ethnic affirmative action to deride this Dong ethnic student as less capable than herself, because in her perception, he had to depend on the bonus points to get into the university, while she herself made it all by herself. In so doing, she put herself in a superior position, embracing this privilege to judge the Dong ethnic student as inferior to herself, thus perpetuating ethnic oppression and deficit discourses.

My above research findings about Han students’ perspectives about and experiences with ethnic minorities show that ethnic minority students do face deficit discourses that represent them as less capable than Han students in their day-to-day lives. Regrettably, little research has been done about this. Due to the time and space limitations of this dissertation, I have only focused on how rural female students navigated the educational institutions, the urban-rural divide, and gender. My limited data with ethnicity suggests that future research
needs to be done to address rural Chinese female ethnic minority students’ experiences with ethnicity, rurality, gender, and other social markers. More in-depth research also needs to be done to examine the ethnic privilege that Han students embrace as well as their deficit ways of thinking and speaking about ethnic minority students.

**Implications and Recommendations for Policies and Practices**

**Abolishing Discriminatory Policies Based on the Hukou System**

The *hukou* system of household registration, which divides Chinese people into rural and urban classes and further stratifies people into hierarchical levels by such categories as big city, medium-size city, small city, county, township, and village, is the root of many social problems. The Chinese government has realized this. Recently (in July 2014), the State Council issued “Opinions on Further Promoting Reform of the Household Registration System,” which aims to eliminate the segregation of rural and urban residency, and abolish rural *hukou* by 2020. Ironically, this policy only means to abolish rural *hukou* and integrate rural people into urban areas. It does not intend to abolish the whole system of *hukou*, which means that the hierarchical levels of *hukou*, such as big city, medium-size city, small city, county, and township, will still exist. People will still be stratified by the geographic specificity of the *hukou*.

This notion of *hukou* reform evoked fervent media discussions. Some argued that the abolition of rural *hukou* will enfranchise the rural class and provide rural migrant workers with access to the urban social welfare, education, and services which the *hukou* system has denied them in the past decades. Yet some contended that abolishing *hukou* is a means for the Chinese party-state to urbanize its rural residents and increase economic growth. It will also
provide a legitimate excuse for the government to take away land from farmers without compensating them properly, as the land in China is never owned by the farmers but leased to them by the government. Zhang Lifan (2014), independent commentator in Beijing, states that, based on a website survey, 90 percent of the Chinese farmers don’t want to accept this policy and don’t want to change their hukou from rural to urban because they worry about their livelihood if they were to leave their agricultural land.

I would argue that, before implementing the policy to abolish the rural hukou, the Chinese government and policymakers should consider rural people’s interests and needs. The government should give rural people the right and freedom to choose whether they want to keep their rural hukou or change it to urban hukou, and whether they want to keep their land.

Given the fact that students with rural hukou have been excluded from public schools in cities, the government should make policies to allow rural students to enter the same public schools as urban children. The Education Law, which was passed in 1995, states, “Citizens of the People’s Republic of China shall have the right and obligation to receive an education. All citizens, regardless of ethnic group, race, sex, occupation, property status, or religious belief, etc., shall enjoy equal educational opportunities according to law” (Article 9). This article should be revised or an article should be added to the Education Law that all citizens, regardless of their hukou status, shall enjoy equal educational opportunities according to law. The law should regulate urban public schools to accept rural students based on their living addresses, not based on their hukou. The urban schools must not raise the enrollment bar and charge extra fees to rural students.
The current higher education admission is based on the regional hukou of students. Each year, every higher education institution follows the guidance of the central government to assign different quotas to each different region to recruit students who have taken gaokao—the National Higher Education Entrance Exam. This has caused regional discrimination against students from populous regions such as Henan, Hebei, and Hunan. If the government were to abolish the rural hukou of rural people, it must abolish the quota system based on hukou in higher education admission. Higher education institutions should recruit students based on their academic performance and merits, instead of where their hukou is.

**Challenging and Disrupting Deficit Discourses**

My participants insisted that they did not want themselves to be seen as lacking. Some emphasized the unequal educational resources and opportunities that need to be focused on. This means that these students have critical consciousness that they themselves should not be blamed, but that the unequal structures should be questioned and changed. This suggests two recommendations: First, deficit discourses about rural students should be examined, challenged, and disrupted. Second, social justice demands that equal learning opportunities be provided to rural students.

**Learning and Examining Urban Privilege**

Urban people need to become aware of their privilege before they can examine it. According to the students in my study, many urban people don’t think of themselves as privileged, yet they have been misusing their privilege to discriminate against rural people. For example, instead of seeing themselves as privileged due to the urban-rural inequality, they see
rural people and students as lacking in capacity and value. Thus, urban people need to be taught
to examine the privilege that they are carrying, and to challenge the ways that the urban-rural
divide, gender, and other bases for subordination oppress marginalized groups.

Cultivating Navigational Skills and Resilience

Given that rural female students’ navigational skills and resilience are essential for
them to achieve academic success to enter higher education, schools and teachers should
“help nurture [their] social and psychological critical navigational skills” (Yosso, 2006, p. 43)
and develop their resilience. As Yosso (2006) suggests, resilient students are academically
invulnerable. They do not fit in the self-defeating ideology of dropping out, or the dominant
norm that represents them as academically vulnerable, but rather they perceive academic
success as a way to become empowered and to resist the dominant norm.

Taking Rural Students’ Knowledge into Account

My research findings show that students who got recognition of the value associated
with their rural knowledge and identities tended to have high self-esteem and advance more
smoothly in their educational trajectory. For example, Yi You commented that it was due to
her advisor’s recognition of her strength and value as a rural woman that she overcame the
inferiority that she used to feel. University faculty and administrators should acknowledge
and value the experiences, abilities, skills, and knowledge that rural students possess.

Forming Rural Students or Rural Female Students’ Associations

Rural female higher education students should form their own associations. In the five
universities and one college where I conducted my research, there was no rural students’ or
rural female students’ association, even though there were some town fellow groups and
associations based on students’ interests. Rural female students should set up their own associations to provide social and emotional support to each other.

**Disrupting Gender Norms**

Rural female students should be aware that the gender norms that require them to pretend to be weak, particularly in front of males, is a way for patriarchal society to make them weak, as some of my participants such as Tian recognized. They should challenge and disrupt these gender norms, in alliance with people who have feminist consciousness to resist the patriarchal oppression, as Shi did with her roommate.

**Assisting Rural Students with Computer Skills**

My research findings indicate that many rural students had little access to computers and the Internet before they entered higher education. They were at a disadvantage when they were required to use computers to complete assignments in college or university. Literature also shows that in China today, the Internet is largely a mystery in many rural areas but no longer in big cities (Osnos, 2014, p. 30). As Osnos (2014) points out, “By 2012 a Chinese person was going online for the first time every two seconds—still, barely half the population was using the Web” (p. 273). Those people who barely use the Web are mostly rural people with no access to computers and the Internet. Therefore, higher education institutions must assist rural students in acquiring necessary computer and Internet skills.

**Implications for Theories and Methodology**

This dissertation gains insight from Foucault’s theory of power and enriches the literature about agency by insisting that agency is not simply resistance to power; it can involve subjection and accommodation as much as disruption and defiance of power. For
instance, the participants in my research were strictly constrained by the urban-rural divide and patriarchy. The household registration system, urban-rural inequalities, and gender discrimination limited their life chances and social mobility so that getting into higher education was their only means of upward mobility. Some of them recognized this and worked extra hard to gain educational achievement in order to enter higher education. Yet the precollege educational system repressed their critical thinking and forbade them from writing their genuine thoughts, particularly those that critiqued the Communist Party, the government, and the negative political atmosphere. To survive such education, they had to conceal their critical thoughts and only write accepted views on tests, thus accommodating the power of the educational system. They were aware of the tension between what they wanted and what they had to do to survive, and revealed their resistance to the system during the interviews. Their discourses about the urban-rural divide, patriarchy, and the educational system manifested their complex agency in simultaneously accommodating and resisting multiple levels of power.

Their complex agency also lay in their negotiation with the suzhi discourse in multiple and complicated ways in that some accepted the suzhi discourse, meanwhile showing pride in gaining parity with their urban equivalents through their individual efforts; some simultaneously accepted the suzhi discourse in education that represents rural students as having less well-rounded knowledge or capacity than urban students, and resisted it when they realized it went against their rural identity; some simultaneously accommodated the suzhi discourse by accumulating dominant cultural capital and combatted their internalized inferior rural identity. These participants’ experiences with the suzhi discourse and dominant
cultural capital reify Foucault’s theory of power in that power is not solely negating, repressing, top down, or power over, but it also reproduces itself as it circulates through the discourses and practices, as was the case with these students.

Building upon the work of Yosso (2005, 2006), this dissertation also advances the theory of cultural capital since not only dominant groups have cultural capital; non-dominant groups also inherit from their own families and communities various forms of capital that are not always recognized by the educational institutions. For example, my participants brought navigational, familial, and social capital that helped them navigate the institutional barriers of education and achieve academic success to enter higher education.

My participants’ heterogeneous perspectives on their experiences of negotiating the interlocking power structures of the urban-rural divide and patriarchy challenge the current literature, which depicts rural female university students as homogeneous, inferior, or deficient victims whose abilities need to be improved. This literature either emphasizes the deficits of this group of students and proposes suggestions to improve their overall quality, or focuses on the unequal structures that victimize them—but it neglects the voices of the students themselves. This dissertation challenges this deficit paradigm and this one-dimensional victim representation by focusing on these students’ diverse perspectives and their agency in navigating multiple and intersecting systems of oppression.

This study also has methodological implications. Based on the unexpected obstacles that I encountered when I posed the interview questions, “How do you identify yourself?” and “How do you define your rural female identity?” as discussed in Chapter 3, I learned that the first question was provocative for some participants, but abstract and general for others.
When participants found it difficult to answer these questions, I reframed them as, “What does being a rural woman mean to you?” “How do you describe your identity as a rural woman?” etc. The reframed questions indeed inspire my participants to tell rich stories about how they negotiated their identities in relation to the dominant discourses. The question, “How do you define your rural female identity?” proved to be misleading and even brought discomfort to some participants because of the negative connotations imposed upon the rural female identity by the dominant discourse of suzhi in China. For this reason, any future research on rural women’s identity should take into consideration that questions related to the rural female identity should be carefully designed.
Notes

1. Rural students are denied access to urban public primary, middle, and high schools, especially in big cities, because they do not have urban local hukou. They are allowed to enter primary schools in their villages or in other villages nearby, middle schools in towns or townships, and high schools in towns or counties. Those middle schools in towns, and high schools in counties, recruit urban hukou students as well, but generally rural students make up the majority. Out of the 66 participants in my study, two (Wenxi Neng and Rang Guo) had urban hukou because they were born urban, but they did not self-identify as such because they had spent most of their childhood and teenage year in rural areas. The hukou of a third participant, Gai Ci, was transferred from the rural to the urban category when she was in primary school because her village was incorporated into a city, but she did not identify herself as urban because she lived in a rural village and her mother has been living and working on a farm. The other 63 participants all had rural hukou before getting into a university/college.

2. Barbara Applebaum (2014) refers to “double-double binds” that students of color experience in the social justice classroom in North American, in which “they are positioned to bear the burden of cross-cultural work and teaching white students about racism” on one hand, but “on the other hand, they must endure microagressions such as white denials of complicity, white distancing strategies and white talk,” and “when students of color point out the racism underlying such microagressions, they are dismissed and scorned for disrupting white comfort” (p. 1). In this dissertation, I modified the concept “double-double bind” to refer to the situation that rural Chinese female students face: urban patriarchy presents a
double bind within the already double-bind situation that urban women face of being “torn between two contradictory demands—to compete with men in the public sector and to remain inferior to men in private spaces” (Lu, 1995, p. 182). Rural women face a double-double bind because, in both the public and private sectors, they are, in addition, torn between two contradictory gazes—the urban male gaze that requires them to pretend to be weak and the rural gaze that has driven or expected them to be strong.
## Appendix A: Demographic Table of Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Made-Up Name</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Year of Birth</th>
<th>University or College</th>
<th>Major</th>
<th>Year&lt;sup&gt;1&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>Place of Origin</th>
<th>Parents’ Occupations</th>
<th>Parents’ Educational Levels</th>
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<td>Han</td>
<td>1991</td>
<td>Elite National University 1</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Fujian Province</td>
<td>Run a school and clinic in the village</td>
<td>Nurse at Tian’s father’s clinic</td>
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<td>Benshan Xing</td>
<td>Han</td>
<td>1986</td>
<td>Non-Elite National University 1</td>
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<td>Farmer</td>
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<td>Law</td>
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<td>Hunan Province</td>
<td>Farmer</td>
<td>Abandoned Xiang and the family</td>
</tr>
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<td>Gansu Province</td>
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<td>Finance</td>
<td>Senior</td>
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<td>Middle School Middle School</td>
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<td>Henan</td>
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Note: 1. Year refers to which school year they were in when I conducted the first interview with them.
Appendix B: Sample Interview Questions

♦ Introduction
1. Please tell me something about yourself (your name, where you are from, the program you are in, which year of the university you are in, and your ethnicity).
2. Please describe your family.
3. Please describe the educational levels and occupations of your parents, your siblings, and other family members.
4. Please tell me something about the village or area where you grew up.

♦ Experiences at primary and middle schools
5. How did your parents or family members talk about education when you were at primary and junior secondary schools? How did they participate in your education?
6. Can you describe your experiences at primary school, including your interaction with teachers, students, and friends?
7. Can you describe your experiences at middle school, including your interaction with teachers, students, and friends?

♦ Experiences at high school
8. Can you tell me something about your high school experiences?
9. Please describe your experiences with your teachers, classmates, and roommates.
10. How did your parents or family members participate in your education at high school?
11. What is your best memory at high school?
12. What is your worst memory at high school?

♦ Experiences at university
13. What factors motivated you to get into a university? When did you get the idea that you wanted to get into a university?
14. How did you end up studying in this university? How did you choose your major? Please describe your application process.
15. What was your life like when you first arrived at the university? What were the adjustments you made to university life when you first arrived on campus?
16. What was the difference between life at the university and that at your high school?
17. What were the difficulties or challenges that you encountered when you studied and lived here? How did you deal with these difficulties and challenges? Who did you speak with when you encountered difficulties and challenges on university campus?
18. Please describe your experiences at the university, including your classroom experiences, experiences with your teachers, academic offices, university staff, classmates, roommates, and friends.
19. What classes did you take last semester? What were the classes like for you?
20. What classes are you taking this semester? What experiences and reflections do you have about these classes?
21. What associations or organizations did you join at the university? Please describe your experiences with student associations or organizations at the university?
22. What are the graduation criteria for your program?
23. Please describe your part-time working experiences if you have any.
24. What is your best memory at the university?
25. What is your worst memory at the university?
26. What childhood experiences or memories came to your mind while you were on campus?
27. When did you go back home most recently? What did you experience? How did you feel about being at home with your family members?
28. How do your parents or family members participate in your university education? How did your university experiences affect your relationship with your parents or family members?

♦ Graduate experiences (for graduate students only)
29. Please describe the process of your application for the graduate school. How did you end up studying at this graduate school in this university?
30. What was your life like when you were an undergraduate? What was your life like when you first got into the graduate school?
31. What were the adaptations that you made to adjust to the graduate life?
32. How did you understand the urban-rural divide when you were an undergraduate? How do you understand it now as a graduate student?
33. How did the urban-rural divide affect your life during your undergraduate years? How does the urban-rural divide affect your life now as a graduate student?
34. How did your graduate experiences affect your relationship with your parents or family members?

♦ Identity and culture
35. How do you identify yourself?
36. How do you describe your identity as a rural woman?
37. What does being a rural woman mean to you?
38. Please describe some moments when you felt or were aware of your rural background.
39. Can you describe any particular experiences, people, or incidents that have significantly affected your journey, either positively or negatively?
40. What are the requirements of women in your rural area including dress, hairstyle, makeup, customs, shopping, and consumption, as well as interaction with people? What are the requirements of women here?
41. How do you understand women’s independence? What did you experience or what happened that made you think so? What experiences shaped or influenced your perspective?
42. How do you understand gender inequity? How did gender inequity affect you?
♦ Negotiations

43. What barriers or difficulties did you experience during your educational journey from your childhood up to the present? How did you deal with these barriers or difficulties?

44. From where did you get support during your educational journey? What strategies or methods did you use in order to get the support?

45. What does success mean for you? Why do you think so? Who influenced your idea? What strategies or methods did you use to achieve educational success? What factors influenced your educational success? What strategies or methods did you use to achieve social success? What factors influenced your success in social situations?

46. How did hukou influence your study and living? How did you act or react?

47. What is your plan after graduation? Please describe how you want to achieve your plan.
Appendix C: Recruitment Email

Dear All,

I am Lifang Wang, a doctoral student at the Department of Cultural Foundations of Education in the School of Education at Syracuse University in the United States. I am doing my dissertation on the educational and social experiences of rural Chinese women who are currently studying in Chinese universities and colleges. Newsweek recently reported that rural students in China have been facing various barriers in getting access to higher education institutions (especially selective universities). I am interested in interviewing rural Chinese female university or college students and studying their experiences of how they successfully managed to enter urban Chinese universities or colleges and how they adjust to university and urban life.

If you are a rural female university or college student and are willing to be interviewed, please email me at lwang11@syr.edu. I will need to interview you twice, each time approximately one or one and half hours. If you don’t have such a chunk of time, the interview can be divided to several small parts, each of which will take you about 15-30 minutes, depending on your availability. Each interview will be conducted in the location you choose.

This solicitation is solely for research purposes.

Thank you so much for your attention and cooperation!

Sincerely,

Lifang Wang
Doctoral Student
Cultural Foundations of Education
School of Education
Syracuse University
350 Huntington Hall
Syracuse NY 13244, USA
Email: lwang11@syr.edu
## Appendix D: Regional Admission Rate of Tsinghua University in 2011

<table>
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<th>Total Participating in Gaokao</th>
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Note: Data compiled by the authors. The source is from the Office of Admission in Tsinghua University.

Appendix E: Table Showing Participants’ Diverse Types of Agency

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<td>Transgressing the strong/weak dichotomy</td>
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<td>Mothers as independent role models</td>
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<td>Experiencing/seeing hardship/discrimination</td>
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<td>Proving values</td>
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<td>Having no networks in cities</td>
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<td>Feeling insecure about marriage</td>
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