



# **An ordinary journey:**

Student self-formation at lower-tier higher education institutions in China

**YUSHAN XIE 谢雨杉**

Department of Education, University of Oxford  
[yushan.xie@education.ox.ac.uk](mailto:yushan.xie@education.ox.ac.uk)

# Contents

About the research

The ordinary self

Take-aways

## ABOUT THE RESEARCH

Exploring how marginalised youth in China navigate higher education as a pathway to reshaping their lives





**# rural/urban divide; social segmentation**



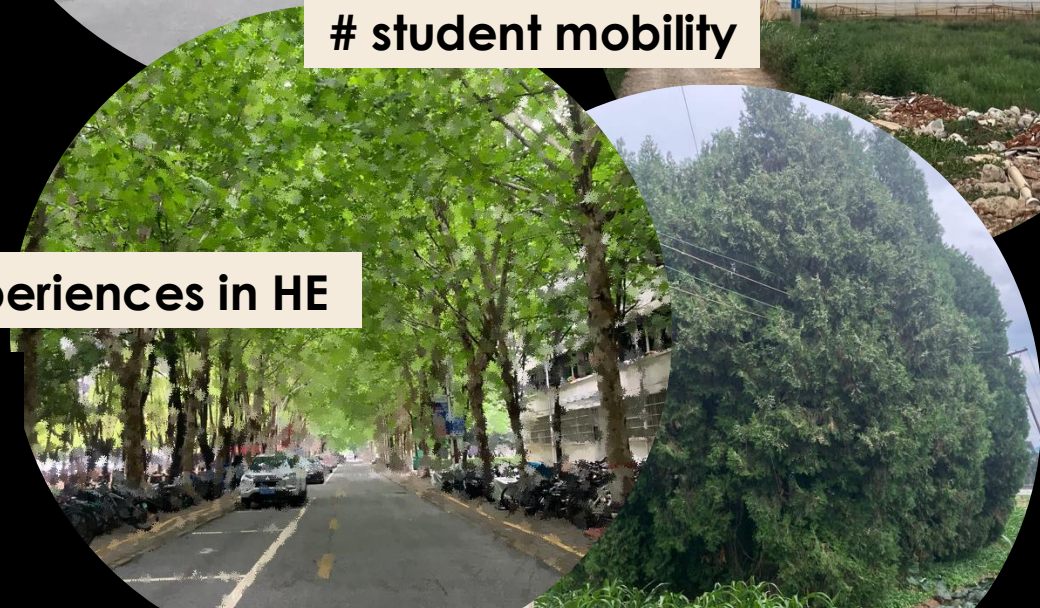
**# massification, credentialism, stratification**



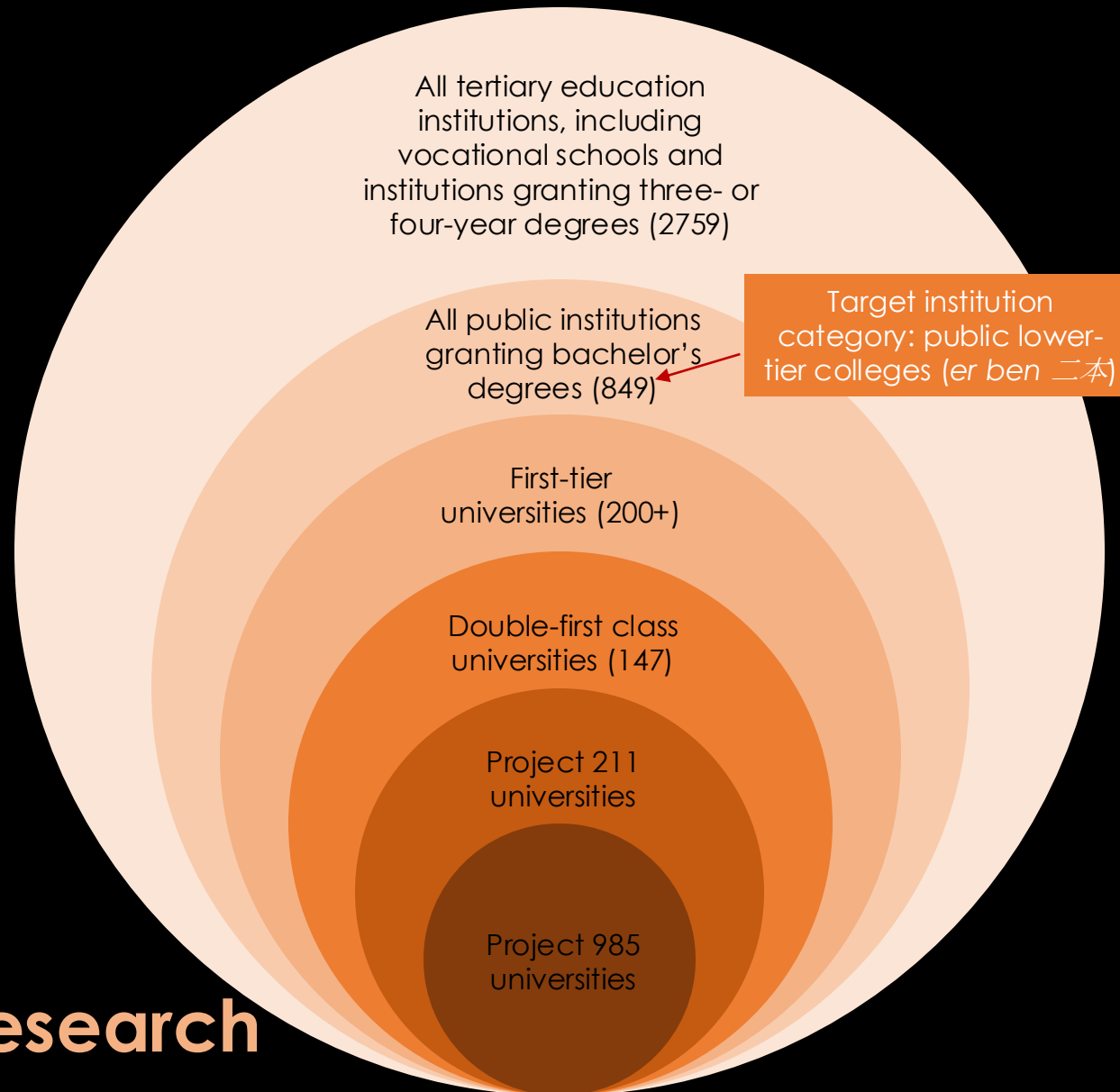
**# student mobility**



**# access & experiences in HE**



**About the research: background**



## About the research



**How do marginalised rural students understand and navigate their ongoing self-formation amid various power structures within and beyond lower-tier higher education institutions in China**

**About the research: the key inquiry**

# An intentional bricolage of interdisciplinary theories



***HE as self-formation*** (Marginson, 2014, 2018, 2024)

***Everyday forms of resistance*** (Scott, 1985)

***Affect theory*** (Ahmed, 2014; Berlant, 2011; Parla, 2019)

***Psychopolitics*** (Han, 2017, 2018)

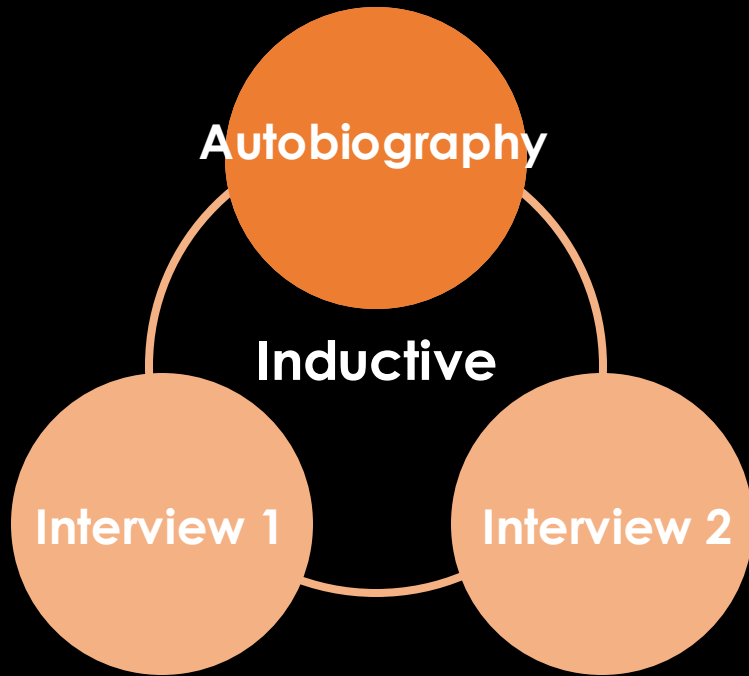
***Individual-state relationships*** (Yan, 2020; Zhang & Ong, 2008)



About the research



# A narrative-based inquiry based in three different lower-tier HE institutions in China



## About the research

┌ **3** *lower-tier\** colleges (xueyuan/ 学院)

**300~400<sup>th</sup>** in national ranking

**12-14** students at each HEIs, across academic years and disciplines

**37** individual student cases in total

**3** data collection points

Oct **2022** ~ Jul/Nov **2023**

\* All names used in this presentation are pseudonyms.



**The ordinary self**



I feel like I should stay in the middle tier and just make sure I don't slip below that.

[...]

If there had been more candidates, it definitely wouldn't have been me.

[...]

It was luck, 90% luck.

—Pearl Dew (F, 4th year, Humanities)

**The ordinary self**



But I'm always very confused. I don't know how to tell those who have hopes for me that I'm very **putong** and I might not be able to find a job.

—Tranquil Harmony (M, 2nd year, Social science)

**Purple Reverie:** [I am] just an ordinary college student.

**Yushan:** What do you mean by 'ordinary'?

**Purple Reverie:** Well, there are so many college students nowadays. It just feels like ... being one among the masses.

—Purple Reverie (M, 1st year, STEM)

## The ordinary self

The self perceived as being plain, as not standing out or being remarkable





I feel like I'm the kind of person who is neither here nor there, probably slightly above average, not good enough, but not too bad. [...] Maybe in all aspects, I give people the impression that I'm just hanging on at the lower tier.

—Ruby Elegance (M, 3rd year, Social science)

Now, I'm just an undergraduate, and there are already so many undergraduates out there. On top of that, I'm from an ordinary, non-prestigious university. It's not even a good lower-tier one. It's like, among the already ubiquitous, I'm on the weaker side. That's why I want to improve myself [through a postgraduate degree]. That's all.

—Floating Petals (F, 2nd year, STEM)

## The ordinary self

The sense of being ordinary is paradoxical, as it indicates the coexistence of privilege and marginality.

## Discussion & implications

- Student narratives contested the myth of neoliberal and meritocratic norms and a universal understanding of higher education.
- Contesting fetishisation of merit, elitism, and a social Darwinist form of competition



## References

Ahmed, S. (2014). *The cultural politics of emotion* (2nd ed.). Edinburgh University Press.

Berlant, L. (2011). *Cruel optimism*. Duke University Press.

Han, B.-C. (2017). *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and new technologies of power* (E. Butler, Trans.). Verso.

Han, B.-C. (2018). *What is power?* Polity.

Marginson, S. (2014). Student self-formation in international education. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 18(1), 6–22.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315313513036>

Marginson, S. (2018). *Higher education as self-formation*. UCL Institute of Education Press.

Marginson, S. (2024). Student self-formation: An emerging paradigm in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 49(4), 748–762.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2023.2252826>

Parla, A. (2019). *Precarious hope: Migration and the limits of belonging in Turkey*.

Scott, J. C. (1985). *Weapons of the weak: Everyday forms of peasant resistance*. Yale University Press.

Yan, Y. (2020). *The individualization of Chinese society*. Routledge.

Zhang, L., & Ong, A. (Eds.). (2008). *Privatizing China: Socialism from afar*. Cornell University Press.