Boudon’s positional theory is of particular relevance to understanding social inequality during the expansion of higher education in the era of globalization. Boudon’s positional theory is under-theorized and under-research in the sociology of education. This paper will make a start by extending Boudon’s theoretical standpoints to make sense of university choices in contemporary China in relation to social backgrounds, characteristics of higher education, and students’ choice-making processes in relation to their cultural and social identity, the transitions to labour market, and their life opportunities in the era of uncertainty. Boudon argues social reproduction occurs through secondary effects whereby the impact of parental cultural capital is mediated by choices (rational or otherwise) which students themselves make about their educational careers and which, in turn, influence their future educational achievements (Boudon, 1974). An education system with multiple ‘branching points’, for instance, will allow more room for students’ choices to impact on their ultimate achievements, thus increasing the ‘space’ for cultural capital to intensify the process of social reproduction.

The paper will use both quantitative and qualitative methods applied at different levels. The questionnaire survey, involving 2,425 undergraduates, investigates the effects of social origins on different choices. The 15 focus group interviews investigate, qualitatively, the strategies that student employ to navigate through the competition in their transition to higher education. For the quantitative analysis, I highlight the regression analysis of the main hypothesis concerning Boudon’s secondary effect (Boudon, 1974). Boudon’s thesis suggests that students from more privileged social and cultural backgrounds would be more confident in making educational choices and that they are more likely to over-estimate their academic performance and optimize their chances allowed by their performance. Therefore, a series of hypotheses can be formulated regarding the impact of socioeconomic backgrounds and socio-demographic characteristics ones’ estimated chances. The regression analysis suggests that geographical inequality is the main stratifier in distributing educational opportunities, which is consistent with other studies on access to higher education in contemporary China (Liu, 2015, 2013; Tam and Jiang, 2015).

There are three main themes from the qualitative interview data. First, students relate their sociocultural backgrounds to the choices in institutions and fields of study in different ways. Students from privileged socioeconomic status and metropolitan areas tend to rely on their parents for the final approval of their choices; however, these choices are not always correspondent to their parental occupational status. Students from less affluent families or rural areas are much more independent with the decision-making. They are certainly not bound to their cultural identity and they seem to adapt to the metropolitan and university life styles well. This finding is contrary to the studies elsewhere which argue that working-class students find themselves lost in the transition when they make educational choices outside their cultural identity (Duru-Bellat, 2010). Second, students make choices in relation to employment opportunities rather than expected wages. Student from all backgrounds seem to gather information on employment prospects of a particular field of study
prior to filling in the choices of higher education; but they do not seem to be too
calculating about the graduate wages by arguing that ‘the earning is a life-long
process’ and that ‘job opportunities and prospects really matter’. The ‘employment
rate’ (jiuyeliu) is the most frequently used word in the group interviews. This finding
is contrary to studies elsewhere which find that students’ choices are largely
motivated by an assessment of the earnings from a particular degree (Green and Zhu,
2010; Jerrim, 2011). Third, students from less affluent families and rural areas are
very strategic in terms of navigating through the complicated ‘three-choice’ systems
and maximizing their opportunities in the desired fields of study instead of choosing
top-ranked universities. These students tend not to select elite universities even when
their academic performance indicates they might be successful. This strategy will put
them in a stronger and more competitive position with regard to the second-tier
universities. They tend to choose the ‘popular’ fields of study with higher
employability at the second-tier universities. In other words, these students sacrifice
their elite opportunities in the most prestigious universities in order to secure a
position in a field with higher labour market returns at a less known institution.

This paper has a number of conclusions both at the theoretical and contextual
level. At the theoretical level, the modern cultural capital perspectives, namely, the
Bourdieuian theory on cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1974, 1977, 1983; Bourdieu and
Passeron [1977] 1990), do not seem to hold in the context of China. There is no
sufficient evidence on the strong and persistent impact of embodied and objectified
cultural capital on students’ chances in access to higher education. Boudon’s
positional theory, which argues that social reproduction also occurs through secondary
effects whereby the impact of parental cultural capital is mediated by students’
choices, makes more sense in higher education selection in China (Boudon, 1974).
Students from more educated families tend to be bolder and more confident in
predicting their chances in higher education than those from less educated families.
The contextual features, including the geographic origin and the quality of schooling,
play an important role of translating students’ academic performance into the chances
in higher education.

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