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'When everyone plays it safe': disaggregating youth agency among elite university students in China

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ABSTRACT

Across many societies, youth transitions to adulthood are increasingly shaped by structural uncertainty. Economic restructuring, credential inflation, precarious employment, and slowing social mobility have weakened previously predictable pathways into the future, prompting renewed attention to how young people navigate uncertainty through agency. Building on the Capability Approach, we conceptualize agency as socially situated and develop a disaggregated framework comprising three interconnected dimensions: aspiration, adaptation, and influence. Drawing on in-depth interviews with students at one of China's elite universities, we show that structural uncertainty reorganizes youth agency unevenly across these dimensions. Students recalibrate their aspirations toward stability and risk management, intensify adaptation to institutionally sanctioned pathways of achievement, and increasingly relocate, rescale, and defer their capacity to shape broader social conditions. More importantly, structural uncertainty reorganizes agency through substitution rather than mutual reinforcement across these dimensions. As adaptation becomes more central to agency, the influence dimension contracts, even among young people who possess considerable educational and institutional advantages, raising broader questions about the long-term consequences of structural uncertainty for social change.

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Introduction

Young people across many societies are navigating transitions to adulthood under increasingly uncertain conditions. Economic restructuring, credential inflation, precarious employment, and slowing upward mobility have weakened the predictability of educational and occupational pathways that once promised relatively stable futures (Adkins, Cooper, and Konings 2020; Bessant, Farthing, and Watts 2017; Standing 2012). The once-familiar narrative of upward mobility in expansive periods – often imagined as an 'escalator' carrying individuals steadily toward economic security and social advancement – has become increasingly fragile or stalled (Putnam 2016). These transformations have generated growing scholarly interest in how young people exercise agency under conditions of structural uncertainty: how they navigate changing

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opportunity structures, recalibrate expectations, and engage in politics (Cuzzocrea and Mandich 2016; de Almeida Alves 2024; Roberts 2023; Vasileva 2025). Existing research has focused primarily on socio-economically disadvantaged youth, whose precarious transitions most visibly reveal the uneven effects of broader political-economic change (Bryant and Ellard 2015; Johnson and Gilligan 2021; Kallinen and Häikiö 2021; Rikala 2020; Tom 2024). By contrast, far less attention has been paid to how structural uncertainty is experienced by institutionally advantaged groups, such as students in elite universities. Yet structural uncertainty becomes especially revealing when it is observed among those who appear most protected from it. If even elite university students must navigate increasingly uncertain futures, then the central issue is no longer simply unequal access to opportunity, but how agency itself is reorganized when previously reliable pathways to the future become uncertain.

China's elite university students provide a particularly illuminating case. Elite universities have long represented the highest tier of educational success, and admission has traditionally signified both academic excellence and privileged access to future opportunities (Wu 2017). Yet as China's economic growth has slowed, particularly in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, young people have increasingly embraced the notion of *neijuan* ('involution'), referring to an escalating cycle of intense competition with diminishing returns (Chen and Hong 2024; Huang 2021).[1] This discourse echoes widespread concerns about increasingly uncertain youth transitions around the world. Our fieldwork shows that elite university students are not immune to these pressures. Instead, it reveals a striking paradox: elite university students remain highly advantaged, yet that advantage must now be continuously maintained, strategically converted, and repeatedly secured amid growing uncertainty. This raises a central question: how should we understand youth agency when educational advantage persists but no longer reliably translates into secure or desirable futures?

The Capability Approach and its extensions in theories of agency (Bazzani 2023; Gangas 2016; Hvinden and Halvorsen 2018; Sen 1993, 1999) provide a useful starting point for addressing this question because they distinguish between the resources individuals possess and the capabilities they are actually able to realize. Instead of assuming that educational advantages automatically translate into effective action, this approach directs analytical attention to the institutional, social, and personal processes through which resources are converted into capabilities (Bazzani 2023; Hvinden and Halvorsen 2018). This shift moves the central question from whether young people possess advantages to how those advantages are transformed into particular forms of action under specific social conditions. For youth studies, this insight has an important implication: if resources are converted into capabilities unevenly, agency cannot be understood as a singular or universal capacity. Nor can youth agency be reduced to reflexivity alone, since reflexive awareness does not necessarily generate the capacity to act. The analytical task, therefore, is to examine how different dimensions of agency are enabled, constrained, and reorganized across social contexts. We conceptualize youth agency as comprising three analytically distinct but interconnected dimensions: aspiration, adaptation, and influence. Drawing on in-depth interviews with students at one of China's elite universities, we show that structural uncertainty reorganizes agency unevenly across these dimensions. Students recalibrate aspirations toward stability and risk management,

intensify adaptation to institutionally sanctioned pathways, and increasingly relocate, rescale, and defer their capacity to shape broader social conditions.

The remainder of the article proceeds as follows. The next section develops the theoretical framework and explains how the Capability Approach informs a disaggregated conceptualization of youth agency. The following section outlines the empirical material and analytical approach. The analysis then examines how aspiration, adaptation, and influence are negotiated by elite university students facing uncertain futures. The article concludes by reflecting on the broader implications of these findings for understanding youth transitions under conditions of global uncertainty.

Disaggregating youth agency

The concept of agency, despite its widespread use, remains theoretically diffuse. Longstanding theoretical debates in sociology have sought to clarify what is agency (Emirbayer and Mische 1998). The analytical challenge is particularly acute in youth research (Evans 2002), where agency is often treated as a 'black box' (Coffey and Farrugia 2014) for explaining action without specifying its mechanisms, boundaries, and forms.

One influential approach to youth agency emerges from the individualization thesis. Beck (1992) and Giddens (1991) argue that the weakening of traditional institutions has expanded individual choice and destabilized standardized life-course transitions. As youth transitions become increasingly uncertain and fragmented, young people are required to actively manage risks and opportunities (Furlong and Cartmel 1997). Within this framework, biographies are described as 'choice biographies' instead of 'normal biographies' anchored in institutional sequences (du Bois-Reymond 1998), and agency is closely associated with reflexive decision-making (Woodman 2009). However, this perspective largely treats agency as a unified individual capacity, paying limited attention to the possibility that its different dimensions may develop unevenly under changing social conditions.

Renewed attention to political economy has challenged overly individualized accounts of youth transitions. The expansion of precarious employment and inequality has redirected attention to how macro-level transformations shape young people's experiences and expectations (Côté 2014, 2016; France and Threadgold 2016; Kelly 2018; Roberts 2023). Côté (2014) critiques the liberal tendency in youth studies to emphasize subjectivities, coping strategies, and lifestyle adaptations while neglecting the structural conditions that produce exploitation and underemployment. Building on this critique, he argues that reflexive self-management is nearly universal and therefore insufficient for distinguishing variations in youth agency. Instead, he calls for greater attention to political agency, understood not as a fixed characteristic but as an empirical question encompassing recognition, resistance, and reproduction of dominant ideologies (Côté 2016). In doing so, he departs from earlier political economy approaches that largely viewed youth as a revolutionary force against capitalism (e.g. Bowles and Gintis 1976), arguing instead that political agency should be examined empirically rather than assumed.

Recent scholarship increasingly recognizes that agency is heterogeneous rather than singular. Studies have distinguished multiple forms of agency, ranging from everyday coping and adaptation to efforts to reshape broader social environments (Côté 2016; Fuchs 2001; Spencer and Doull 2015). Spencer and Doull (2015), for example, distinguish

between agency as affect – the potential producer of power, reflected in young people's subjective feelings and perceptions of power – and agency as effect – the actual outcomes of that power. Other scholars further emphasize that the forms agency takes depend on the institutional and social contexts in which young people act. Political ecology perspectives, for example, argue that agency is embedded in historically structured power relations and unequal access to resources (France and Threadgold 2016). Similarly, the concept of transitional regimes highlights how national configurations of education, labour markets, and welfare systems shape youth transitions and opportunities for participation (Soler-i-Martí and Ferrer-Fons 2015). Together, this literature suggests that youth agency is socially situated and internally differentiated. Yet existing approaches provide limited purchase for explaining how different forms of agency relate to one another and why they become unevenly activated under changing conditions.

This article advances this discussion by disaggregating youth agency into analytically distinct dimensions. Drawing on the Capability Approach and subsequent developments in agency research (Bazzani 2023; Gangas 2016; Hvinden and Halvorsen 2018; Sen 1993, 1999), we first distinguish between the resources individuals possess and the capabilities they are able to realize. Agency is therefore not a fixed individual attribute but emerges through the conversion of resources into action under specific institutional, social, and personal conditions (Bazzani 2023). We further conceptualize youth agency as comprising three analytically distinct but empirically interconnected dimensions: aspiration, adaptation, and influence. This framework builds on Sen's emphasis on 'well-being', 'agency', and 'democracy' and Bazzani's (2023) refinement of agency outcomes into 'adaptation', 'autonomy', and 'influence.'

Aspiration refers how young people imagine and orient oneself toward possible futures. The sociology of agency and future-making, rooted in the pragmatist tradition (Mead 1932), examines the cognitive processes through which individuals actively construct the future (Emirbayer and Mische 1998; Tavory and Eliasoph 2013). Aspirations shape how young people interpret opportunities, assess risks, and make educational and career decisions (Carabelli and Lyon 2016; Cuzzocrea and Mandich 2016; Kogler, Vogl, and Astleithner 2024). Recent work on the 'capacity to aspire' and 'capability to aspire' further highlights that aspirations are socially, culturally, and economically conditioned, while remaining open to development and change (Appadurai 2004; Baillergeau and Duyvendak 2022). Zimmermann (2024) conceptualizes the capacity to aspire as a socially accumulated reservoir of resources and the capability to aspire as the effective freedom to mobilize those resources in forming and articulating aspirations. Aspiration in this sense links subjective orientations toward the future to socially conditioned horizons of possibility.

Adaptation refers to how young people become embedded within social institutions and groups while navigating their expectations. Membership and role performance are important processes through which individuals construct and sustain a sense of self in relation to others (Bazzani 2023; Goffman 1963). Adaptation is therefore an active process of learning how to operate within environments that structure opportunities and constraints. Entering new social and institutional contexts can involve particularly demanding forms of adaptation, as individuals learn to navigate unfamiliar expectations and establish themselves within existing social relationships and institutional arrangements, as illustrated by immigrant generations negotiating social incorporation (Choi,

Yeoh, and Lam 2019; Portes, Fernández-Kelly, and Haller 2009) and young scholars seeking recognition within academic communities (Bazzani 2023). Such demands become particularly pronounced under conditions of uncertainty, as individuals seek to maintain identity stability while responding to shifting expectations. Research on Japanese youth, for example, shows how they respond to mismatches between persistent cultural expectations of stable careers and declining institutional rewards by developing alternative pathways in the context of globalization (Toivonen, Norasakkunkit, and Uchida 2011).

Influence refers to how young people seek to shape the social contexts within which they act. Such influence can take the form of conventional political participation, including party politics and social movements (Dugan and Reger 2006; Lipset 1967; McAdam 1986), but also through localized forms of collective action and efforts to alter rules and social environments (Cleaver 2007; Ostrom 1990). Even relatively small groups of actors can contribute to broader institutional transformations by mobilizing resources, creating new practices, and challenging existing institutional arrangements (Battilana, Leca, and Boxenbaum 2009). At the same time, the exercise of influence depends on the resources and conversion factors that shape individuals' opportunities for action, including personal characteristics, political regimes, power structures, and institutional arrangements (Bazzani 2023; Brady, Verba, and Schlozman 1995; Hitlin and Elder 2007; Hvinden and Halvorsen 2018).

These three dimensions are analytically distinct but closely interconnected. Their relationships may generate spillover or substitution effects across domains of agency (Bazzani 2023). Under favorable conditions, aspirations may translate into adaptive strategies and influence-oriented action. Under heightened uncertainty, however, agency may be redistributed through substitution rather than accumulated across dimensions.

Field and methods

China's elite universities provide a strategic setting for examining how educational advantage is converted into agency under conditions of growing structural uncertainty. As the most selective institutions in China's higher education system, they concentrate educational resources, prestige, and opportunities for social mobility (Wu 2017). Studying students in this setting allows us to examine how young people with substantial institutional advantages navigate an increasingly uncertain social environment.

We conducted qualitative fieldwork between 2022 and 2024 at Y University, an elite university in Beijing. The study is based on in-depth biographical interviews, a method well suited to examining how individuals interpret their life trajectories within specific social contexts (Atkinson 1998; Chamberlayne, Bornat, and Wengraf 2000; Roberts 2002). Interviews explored participants' educational trajectories, family backgrounds, university experiences, postgraduate and career planning, perceptions of structural opportunities and constraints, and understandings of social and political participation. Particular attention was paid to how participants connected past experiences, present institutional conditions, and imagined futures, allowing us to analyze youth transition as a temporally structured process instead of a discrete life stage (Worth 2009).

We conducted 24 interviews with undergraduate and graduate students from a range of disciplines. Participants were recruited primarily through a university BBS platform,

supplemented by snowball sampling to ensure variation in disciplinary background and family origin. Interviews lasted between one and six hours (averaging approximately two hours), generating detailed life narratives. All participants provided informed consent and are identified by pseudonyms. Interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English by the authors. For readability, some colloquial or fragmented expressions were lightly edited without altering their meaning. To ensure accuracy and preserve contextual nuance, translated quotations were carefully checked against the original transcripts through the writing process.

Table 1 summarizes the demographic characteristics of the participants. Twenty-two respondents come from middle-class backgrounds and two from working-class backgrounds. We define middle-class background as having at least one parent employed in professional or managerial occupations, such as finance, law, academia, or corporate management. Approximately half had parents employed in the state or quasi-state sector, reflecting a distinctive pattern of middle-class formation in China characterized by relatively stable employment and institutional protection. We refer to this group as the 'state-sector middle class.' Participants also represented a range of urban and rural backgrounds.

Analysis proceeded iteratively between empirical material and theoretical interpretation. Initial open coding identified recurring themes related to university experience, career planning, and perceptions of social and political life. Through focused comparison across cases, these themes were progressively refined into three analytical dimensions – aspiration, adaptation, and influence. This abductive process allowed theoretical refinement to emerge through engagement with the empirical material instead of being imposed in advance.

Table 1. Interviewees' demographics.

Pseudonym	Year of Birth	Gender	Major	Place of Origin	Family Background
Moxue	2000	M	Business	First-tier city	State-sector middle class
Yangyan	2004	M	Science	First-tier city	Middle class
Xining	1999	F	Social Science	Second-tier city	Middle class
Qingcheng	2001	F	Business	Second-tier city	State-sector middle class
Yuxin	2000	M	Science	Second-tier city	State-sector middle class
Chenyi	2002	F	Humanities	Second-tier city	State-sector middle class
Zhenyan	2002	F	Law	First-tier city	State-sector middle class
Weixin	2002	F	Social Science	First-tier city	State-sector middle class
Yunxue	2002	F	Law	Third-tier city and below	Working class
Xinwei	2003	F	Law	Third-tier city and below	State-sector middle class
Xiaoxian	2002	M	Science	First tier city	State-sector middle class
Gehan	2001	M	Engineering	Third-tier city and below	Lower-middle class
Jiangyan	2002	F	Law	Third-tier city and below	State-sector middle class
Gongqing	2004	F	Law	Second-tier city	Middle class
Yeran	2000	M	Engineering	Second-tier city	Lower-middle class
Tucha	2000	F	Law	Third-tier city and below	State-sector middle class
Wenting	2002	F	Social Science	Rural area	Working class
Weijing	2003	F	Social Science	Second-tier city	Middle class
Weisi	2000	F	Humanities	Third-tier city and below	Middle class
Yaxuan	2004	F	Law	First-tier city	State-sector middle class
Luopei	2002	F	Social Science	Third-tier city and below	Middle class
Zhehan	2002	M	Law	First-tier city	Upper-middle class
Qiuye	2004	F	Law	Third-tier city and below	State-sector middle class
Ouyang	2002	M	Social Science	Third-tier city and below	State-sector middle class

Findings

Aspire: recalibrating future horizons

Elite universities are typically associated with pathways to upward mobility and with preparing students to become high achievers in society. Yet students in our study describe a significant recalibration of their future horizons. This shift reflects the changing relationship between educational credentials and mobility opportunities. Since the massification of higher education began in 1999, university enrolment has expanded dramatically, contributing to credential inflation and gradually eroding the educational premium once associated with a college degree (Bai 2006; Dong 2026; Kang and Mok 2022). While educational success remains valuable, it no longer guarantees the upward mobility it once promised.

> The expansion of college enrollment in the early years has compressed employment pressure into the present moment. Our generation is the one that faces this pressure. We feel very clearly the gap between the expectations we grew up with – that if you study hard, you will find a good job – and the reality of how difficult it has become to do so. (Xining)

This changing value of education reflects a broader shift in China's developmental trajectory. Many students perceive themselves as entering a historical moment of declining mobility prospects. After decades of rapid growth following market reforms, China has entered a period of slower economic expansion officially described as the 'new normal' (*xinchangtai*) (Xinhua News Agency 2014). During the high-growth era, educational achievement was widely expected to translate into upward mobility and expanding life chances. Today, however, slower growth and what Chinese commentators describe as 'involution' (*neijuan*) (Chen and Hong 2024; Huang 2021) – intensified competition within an increasingly saturated opportunity structure – have made the returns to educational effort appear more uncertain and uneven. Against this backdrop, memories of an earlier period of expanding opportunities and predictable mobility further sharpen students' sense of historical contrast and loss.

> I feel that the biggest difference lies in our expectations for future development. People once believed the future would offer a relatively favorable environment for growth, where each generation could do better than the previous one. Now, even if everything goes well, life in the next 10 or 20 years may not bring the kind of improvement we once expected. (Moxue)

The future is no longer imagined as an expanding field of opportunity but as a constrained horizon. Aspiration therefore shifts from pursuing the most ambitious possible trajectories toward identifying futures that appear stable and realistically attainable. Many students we interviewed now describe their aspirations in terms of becoming 'ordinary people' (*putongren*) instead of future elites (Zhenyan, Jiangyan, Yunxue, Weixin, Chenyi). They increasingly distance themselves from the image of the exceptional individual they once hoped to become, recognizing that highly successful figures admired by others represent a small minority and no longer an achievable norm.

> In the 1990s and early 2000s, people probably thought that getting into Y University guaranteed a highly respectable job. But now, few live up to that elite image. Most of us feel ordinary … After all, most people are bound to be ordinary – by definition, exceptional refers to a small minority. … Many of us just do not feel as confident as our predecessors used to. (Zhenyan)

This recalibration of aspiration also transforms how students define a desirable life. Increasingly, they prioritize stability, predictability, and a sustainable life trajectory over exceptional achievement. This shift is reflected in changing career preferences. High-paying private-sector industries such as finance, law and IT are increasingly viewed as offering diminishing returns relative to the effort and pressure they require. By contrast, government agencies and state-owned enterprises – once regarded as more conservative choices – have become increasingly attractive because they provide institutional security and longer-term stability (see Wang, Xu, and Zhang 2025; Zhang 2025). Yunxue's trajectory illustrates this transformation. She initially aspired to a high-paying legal career but gradually shifted toward public-sector employment after observing the personal costs associated with the profession:

> Through interactions and observing the day-to-day routine at law firms, I realized that earning a high salary requires extraordinary effort and sacrifices, including compromised health from long hours and constant stress. I slowly came to appreciate that a comfortable and balanced life could be more fulfilling than chasing a high salary. By my junior year, I decided to pursue a career in the public sector for stability and work-life balance. (Yunxue)

Once future-making becomes oriented toward managing uncertainty, students increasingly pursue strategies that reduce exposure to labour-market risks and preserve future flexibility. Under these conditions, they seek buffered pathways that provide temporal or institutional protection. Graduate education, for example, is frequently described as a means of postponing uncertainty and creating protection against an unpredictable labour market.

> The economy is not as strong as it was before the pandemic. Even if it improves, it may take several years. So the safest option is to pursue a master's degree first as a buffer. After that, it is more secure to look for stable employment. If something unexpected happens again, at least you have some protection. (Yunxue)

As we can see, economic deceleration and pandemic disruptions have narrowed the futures that students perceive as attainable. Although elite university students continue to encounter powerful narratives of success and opportunity, their capability to aspire is increasingly shaped by a more constrained horizon of possibility. Aspiration is therefore recalibrated toward securing stability and preserving a respectable standard of living amid an uncertain future.

Adapt: navigating institutional requirements

During an era of structural uncertainty, adaptation within elite universities has been reorganized around increasingly complex and demanding institutional demands. Students entering elite universities encounter an environment sharply different from the high school settings in which they previously excelled. The transition involves a shift from a single, exam-based definition of merit to a multidimensional evaluative regime in which achievement is assessed through academic performance, extracurricular participation, leadership roles, and self-presentation (Yu and Xie 2026; Zhu 2025). At the same time, elite universities concentrate top academic performers from across the country within a shared institutional space, intensifying peer comparison and redefining what counts as excellence. Many students – often among the highest achievers in their

home regions – describe a profound sense of disorientation upon arrival, as they find themselves surrounded by peers who are equally accomplished or even more well-rounded (Gongqing, Qiuye, Yeran).

As students learn to navigate this complex evaluative environment, they also begin to identify which institutional track matter most for securing future opportunities. Among these, the Graduate Study Recommendation Program (*baoyan*) gradually emerges as the dominant objective. Its growing centrality reflects broader institutional transformations. Introduced in 1985, the Graduate Study Recommendation Program allows top-performing students to bypass the national postgraduate entrance examination and gain direct admission to graduate programs (Luo 2011). Although the program has existed for decades, it has become increasingly central to undergraduate life for elite university students in recent years. As credential inflation reduces the differentiation value of undergraduate degrees and postgraduate qualifications become increasingly important for labor-market positioning, *baoyan* has emerged as a critical institutional track for maintaining future opportunities. Earlier studies of post-college outcomes of elite university students show that students with stronger academic records are more likely to pursue *baoyan* or graduate studies outside mainland China instead of entering the labor market directly after graduation (Niu, Zheng, and Yang 2020). Yet overseas study – once regarded as a superior alternative – has itself become increasingly uncertain because of the COVID-19 pandemic and growing geopolitical tensions (Xining, Xiaoxian, Moxue, Weixin).

> In recent years, there has been increasing decoupling, especially from the Western world … If I continued in this field and returned to China later, would overseas experience be an advantage or a disadvantage? It's hard to say. (Xining)

As alternative pathways became less predictable and attractive, *baoyan* increasingly emerged as a relatively low-risk 'buffer' strategy, preferred over overseas study, the national postgraduate entrance examination,[2] or immediate employment.

Applications for *baoyan* take place at the end of the junior year, with final results typically announced at the beginning of the senior year. Yet preparation for this route begins much earlier. From the beginning of university life, students are repeatedly exposed to the importance of *baoyan* through administrative communications, institutional rankings, and peer discussions. Even those who initially pay little attention to it gradually come to regard *baoyan* as the default channel of academic success. As Qiuye recalled: 'At first I didn't think much about *baoyan*, but seeing how much importance the school places on it, I started to feel it's something I should work toward.'

At the university we studied, approximately half of undergraduates eventually receive a *baoyan* offer, making the option simultaneously widely accessible and intensely competitive. Students distinguish carefully among different *baoyan* outcomes: remaining at their home institution, transferring to another elite university, or moving to universities that are prestigious but not necessarily an equivalent elite one. Within this roughly 50 percent *baoyan* rate, securing a place at one's home university is particularly valued (Wenting, Xinwei, Tucha), further intensifying competition for these slots.

Competition over these outcomes is structured by a demanding evaluation system. Academic performance remains the foundation of *baoyan* selection and organizes much of undergraduate life. Students closely monitor their GPA and make strategic

decisions about course selection, often choosing classes perceived to have more favorable grading standards. Many devote extraordinary effort to assignments, sometimes overinvesting simply to maximize their grades (Qiuye, Ouyang). Because a single low grade can significantly reduce a student's chances of securing a *baoyan* offer, students describe living under constant pressure to maintain their academic standing. Those who eventually fall out of the competition often speak of achieving 'GPA freedom' (*jidian ziyou*), marking an exit from the continuous ranking and comparison that structures much of undergraduate life (Ouyang).

Yet GPA is only the foundation of the baoyan evaluation regime. Across departments, it remains the dominant criterion, while the weight assigned to additional achievements – such as student research competitions or academic publications – varies. Beyond departmental selection, the university also provides separate recommendation pathways through student affairs positions (*xuegong*). Because students cannot know in advance which route will prove most advantageous, many respond by accumulating multiple forms of achievement simultaneously. As Ouyang summarized, 'You have to accumulate points by any means possible.' Undergraduate life thus becomes organized around maintaining a high GPA while simultaneously participating in research competitions, joining student organizations, and sometimes pursuing academic publication (Luopei, Yeran, Gehan, Tucha). Importantly, this institutional logic extends beyond students who ultimately pursue *baoyan*. Even those who later choose overseas study or immediate employment organize much of their undergraduate experience around its requirements, because *baoyan* functions as the institutional benchmark against which alternative pathways are evaluated.

Such intensive adaptation generates reflection on the meaning of elite education itself. Gehan, who successfully secured a *baoyan* offer, described his undergraduate experience as an extension of high school:

> I was buried in assignments, constantly feeling like I was just managing to stay afloat … If at university you only know how to work on exams, it's somewhat of a waste. A better model would be to balance study, social life, and research earlier. But at the time, I had no choice; I first had to make sure I could get a baoyan offer.

To outside observers, elite university students may appear to possess abundant opportunities and freedom of choice. Gehan's experience reveals a different reality: once embedded within this institutional setting, *baoyan* is experienced not simply as one possible pathway but as a requirement for securing future stability. Students often recognize the limitations and even arbitrariness of the system, yet feel unable to disengage from it. As Weijing reflected: 'We don't even know what we're striving for or what we can gain from such intense competition. We just keep pushing ourselves down this path.' This dynamic produces a pervasive sense of disorientation. Students pursue numerous activities not necessarily because they find them meaningful, but because the system rewards accumulation and penalizes falling behind.

Students' comparisons with earlier cohorts at the same university further reveal how the meaning of choice and freedom has transformed over time. As Zhenyan explained:

> Our professor told us that there was no *baoyan* anxiety when he was in college. There were only a very small number of graduate school places, so most students simply never expected to get one. In a sense, it felt freer, because most students accepted that they would be the

> 'denominator' for the few top performers and pursued other opportunities. Now students are breaking their necks for *baoyan*.

These accounts point to a broader transformation in how educational opportunity is experienced. In earlier periods, graduate education was defined by scarcity: because places were so limited, most students regarded them as unattainable and pursued alternative pathways. Today, expansion has made postgraduate education sufficiently accessible to encourage widespread aspiration, yet sufficiently competitive to generate continuous pressure. As a state-sponsored mobility channel, *baoyan* offers elite university students a relatively secure means of navigating uncertainty and thus constitutes an important institutional advantage. Yet this advantage comes at a cost. Securing a *baoyan* offer demands sustained adaptation, making it a central organizer of undergraduate life and absorbing students' time, energy, and attention.

Influence: reconfiguring possibilities for shaping society

Influence refers to how young people seek to shape the broader social environments within which their futures unfold and their adaptive strategies are formed. We begin with its most conventional expression: political participation, including engagement in formal politics and social movements. Higher education is often associated with stronger civic awareness, greater engagement in political discussion, and orientations toward self-expression (Brady, Verba, and Schlozman 1995; Inglehart and Welzel 2005). In China, elite universities have also historically served as important sites of political critique and activism (Zhao 2004). However, following the student movements of the late 1980s, universities increasingly became important sites of intensified political education and institutional management (Yan 2014).

Our interviews suggest that university life nevertheless broadens students' critical awareness by exposing them to new intellectual debates, diverse peer groups, and public events that encourage reflection on previously taken-for-granted assumptions. As Xiaoxian recalled:

> What we've grown up with is a set of propaganda that is unreflective. Once we start to reflect on it, we're bound to question what we've been taught before, asking questions about the nature of the regime.

Students were often critical of specific government policies, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. As the Zero-COVID strategy continued longer than many expected, some increasingly questioned its rationale. Qingcheng commented: 'I don't think the policy was scientific at all.' Yet heightened critical awareness rarely translated into collective mobilization. Students were acutely aware of both the risks of political action and the limited efficacy of individual intervention within China's political environment. As Yunxue explained, 'When it comes to political actions, I tend to be cautious … What if I got arrested? What if it affected my chances of joining the Party or other aspects of my future?' Beyond concerns about political risk, many questioned whether ordinary individuals could meaningfully transform society at all. Major social change was seen as requiring actors with exceptional authority or institutional power.

> Even students from our university, who are relatively elite, feel powerless. Change may only come if someone ascends to high-ranking positions, becomes extraordinarily wealthy, or gains significant power – like the Politburo. (Weixin)

As students' confidence in their own capacity to shape society diminished, influence was increasingly relocated to other sites. Three patterns emerged. First, the state becomes the primary agent of change. Recent official narratives – including the China Dream, Chinese-style modernization, and the China Model – reinforced students' perception of the Party-state as the actor best positioned to achieve long-term social transformation.

> I think the fact that we've enjoyed such peaceful and rapid development for so many years is already a miracle. … Sometimes I think about how, in the past, there were frequent wars, the Cultural Revolution, and all kinds of political events. Compared to those eras, I feel fortunate to live in relatively peaceful times, even if the economy isn't great. (Weixin)

Second, some students seek influence through the state. For some students, political participation therefore meant engagement with, rather than opposition to, the Party-state. A key form of such participation is joining the Communist Party, which many students viewed as a pathway to participate more closely in state institutions. Students' motivations for applying to join the Party varied, ranging from pragmatic considerations – such as improving access to state-sector employment – to a genuine belief in the Party's role in promoting national development (Weixin, Xiaoxian, Zhenyan, Yeran, Chenyi). Xinwei illustrates this combination of critical reflection and institutional engagement. Although she expressed skepticism toward some government policies, she also believed political improvement would be gradual. Consistent with this view, she became a Party member during her junior year.

Others relocated influence to more immediate domains of everyday life. Xiaoxian emphasized that social improvement could begin through maintaining personal integrity and acting according to one's own principles, even within constrained institutional environments:

> I have to stick to my own sense of right and wrong. Sometimes, when I first enter a system – like when a supervisor insists on doing things a certain way – I may have no choice but to go along. But I keep in mind that some of these practices are wrong. And if I ever become a leader, I hope to break that cycle rather than pass it on. (Xiaoxian)

Similarly, Gehan reflected: 'There is very little we can do from a macro perspective. The most we can do is protect ourselves and help influence those around us.' This orientation reflects a broader reconfiguration of influence under constraint. Notably, Gehan invokes a well-known Confucian classical maxim from Mencius – 'maintain one's integrity in times of hardship, and contribute to the world when in a position to do so' (*qiongze dushanqishen, daze jianjitianxia*), reinterpreting social influence through personal cultivation and future responsibility.

These findings suggest that elite university students – who are often expected to become future leaders and agents of social change – experience a profound reorganization of influence as a dimension of agency. Influence is increasingly rescaled from broad ambitions of social transformation toward more immediate and attainable domains, including engagement with state institutions, interpersonal relationships, professional practice, and ethical self-cultivation. At the same time, it is increasingly deferred from the present to an imagined future, when accumulated authority, expertise, or institutional position may provide greater opportunities to shape society.

This reorganization also generates psychological strain. Students remain acutely aware of the expectation that graduates of elite universities should become agents of social change, yet increasingly perceive themselves as unable to fulfill that role. The gap between socially assigned expectations and their own sense of efficacy produces frustration.

> When you graduate from Y University, people assume you should be able to change things. But we know we may not. Sometimes you remember believing you could change something, but realizing how difficult it is makes you feel powerless. That feeling is painful. (Gehan)

Some students also reflected on the broader social consequences of this shift. As Moxue observed,

> Students from elite universities no longer flood into innovative entrepreneurship; instead, they tend to pursue more conservative positions. They can see where the risks are higher and turn to positions that are less risky … . If everyone is just pursuing a safe and conservative path, that's not only a personal risk – it's dangerous for society as a whole.

Her reflection captures a broader paradox: responses that are individually rational under conditions of uncertainty – prioritizing stability, minimizing risk, and following institutionally sanctioned pathways – may collectively produce a society that is less innovative, less dynamic, and less willing to experiment.

As we can see, students remain attentive to social problems and continue to care about the future of society, but increasingly question their own capacity to shape it. In this context, what contracts is not awareness itself but the perceived ability to translate awareness into meaningful social influence.

Conclusion and discussion

This study of elite university students in China invites a reconsideration of how youth agency is conceptualized under conditions of structural uncertainty. Drawing on the Capability Approach, we argue that understanding youth agency requires attention not only to the resources young people possess but also to the institutional and social conditions that enable those resources to be converted into capabilities. By disaggregating agency into aspiration, adaptation, and influence, we show that structural uncertainty does not simply diminish agency; it redistributes it across different domains of action. In our case, elite university students recalibrate their aspirations toward stability, intensify adaptation to institutionally sanctioned pathways, and increasingly relocate, rescale, and defer their efforts to shape broader social conditions. These patterns emerge from the interaction between China's political institutions, educational system, developmental trajectory, and the institutional logic of elite universities.

More importantly, our findings suggest that this reorganization is characterized by substitution rather than mutual reinforcement across the dimensions of agency. As uncertainty intensifies, the growing demands of adaptation absorb the time, attention, and emotional investment that might otherwise support broader forms of influence. The growing orientation toward adaptation narrows the space young people perceive for shaping broader social conditions, even among those who possess considerable educational and institutional advantages.

This disaggregated understanding of agency also has broader comparative implications. Political agency and political orientations constitute one important component of the influence dimension, allowing our framework to speak to growing debates on changing youth political orientations across different national contexts. While youth have historically been associated with progressive engagement and social transformation (Inglehart and Welzel 2005; Lipset 1967; McAdam 1986), recent research documents increasingly fragmented responses, including political withdrawal, pragmatic accommodation, and support for exclusionary or radical movements (Abrahams and Brooks 2019; Mieriņa and Koroļeva 2015; Roh and Kim 2026). Our framework suggests that these diverse responses are better understood as different configurations of the influence dimension of agency than simply as ideological shifts. The influence dimension is itself shaped by aspiration – the futures young people imagine – and by adaptation – the institutional environments through which they pursue those futures.

A striking finding of our study is elite university students' repeated insistence that they are ultimately 'ordinary people' whose primary task is to adapt successfully and secure a stable life, while perceiving only limited capacity to reshape society. This raises a broader question: if even young people with substantial educational and institutional advantages increasingly scale back their expectations of influencing society, what possibilities remain for those with fewer resources and opportunities? Elite universities continue to cultivate strong adaptive capacities, equipping students to navigate increasingly competitive institutional environments. Yet our findings suggest a growing divergence between adaptation and influence: a generation that becomes increasingly adept at navigating existing institutions may also become progressively less confident in reshaping them. The challenge posed by structural uncertainty therefore extends beyond young people's individual life chances to the kinds of societies that become possible when adaptation increasingly comes at the expense of influence. Supporting young people requires more than expanding educational opportunities or encouraging resilience. It requires institutional conditions that enable young people to develop and exercise a broader range of capabilities – not only to aspire and adapt, but also to influence the societies they inhabit. The future of a society depends on whether its young people can successfully adapt to the world they inherit while retaining the capability – and the confidence – to reshape it.

Our findings also open several avenues for future research. Because this study draws on a relatively small sample from a single elite university during and immediately after the pandemic, we do not claim that these patterns characterize all young people in China or remain constant over time. Future research should examine how aspiration, adaptation, and influence are configured across different groups of young people, historical periods, and national contexts, thereby clarifying the broader applicability of the framework developed here.

Notes

1. Originally coined by anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1968) to describe agricultural labor that intensifies without corresponding productivity gains, the concept has been reappropriated in contemporary China to capture a sense of hyper-competition where individuals are compelled to exert ever more effort simply to maintain their standing, with little hope of advancement.

2. Recommendation quotas are disproportionately concentrated in top-tier universities, creating a structurally advantaged pathway for students at elite institutions. Consequently, to get into postgraduate programs, students at these universities rarely consider taking the national postgraduate entrance examination, given its lengthy preparation period and intense competition (Niu, Zheng, and Yang 2020).

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