

Counter-Discourses and Alternative Knowledge: Rural Chinese Female Students Accommodating and Resisting the Discourse of Quality (*Suzhi*) at Higher Education Institutions in China

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*This article, based on a qualitative research study with 66 rural female students attending five public universities and one public college in China, examines how these students negotiated the dominant discourse of quality (*suzhi*), which represents them as lacking in capacity and knowledge. Since the 1980s when China started implementing its economic reforms, the Chinese state has constructed the discourse of quality to ascribe China's underdevelopment to the low quality of its population, said to hinder China's attempts to catch up with the more advanced Western economies. My research findings show how these students have been systematically marginalized and discriminated against by this discourse that is often intertwined with that of urban-rural inequalities and patriarchy.¹ Recognizing this, they developed counter-discourses to make meaning of their plight, and created alternative forms of knowledge to resist the dominant discourse in multiple ways.*

The Urban-Rural Divide in China

During the 1950s and 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 using rural resources, including land and human and economic capital, to support urban capital accumulation. As Tamara Jacka and Arianne M. Gaetano (2004) state, when the Mao government was "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" (pp. 15-16). The Mao government also guaranteed secure jobs, government funded housing, welfare, and benefits to urban residents (Jacka & Gaetano, 2004; Whyte, 2010; Yan, 2003); but those who lived in rural areas could not receive these benefits, and they had to rely only on what their communities could provide (Whyte, 2010, p. 9). As a result, before the 1980s transition from a centrally-planned to a market-oriented economy, "capital goods were excessively concentrated in

urban areas” (Yang, 1999, p. 308), and rural residents’ incomes lagged far behind those of their urban equivalents.

After Mao died, Deng Xiaoping took power and carried out reform and open-up policies in the late 1970s and 1980s. Since then, China has experienced increasing economic growth—along with growing inequality between rural and urban areas. From the 1980s to the 1990s, the Chinese central government implemented financial transfer programs favoring the urban sector, which further widened the urban-rural 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)

During the late 1990s, the central government supported health, housing, and education for urban citizens while ignoring the needs of rural people (Wang & Zuo, 1999), though they paid heavy taxes to the government. Scholars have noted the increasing income inequality between rural and urban China since the 1980s when the reform started. 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, 2005, p. 42).²

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). The consumerism-driven ideology of the Chinese society, together with the urban-rural divide, enforces the dichotomy of urban superiority versus rural inferiority: “urban” representing advanced, cultured, and superior, and “rural” meaning backward, “uncultured,” and inferior (Whyte, 2010, p. 16). A rural status or identity is often marked “in clothes, speech, conduct—considered undesirable traits by urban dwellers” (Hu & Salazar, 2008, p. 4).

The internal residence system, *hukou* (commonly translated as household registration), regulates and sustains the urban-rural divide. According to Kam Wing Chan and Li Zhang (1999), the *hukou* system was set up in cities in 1951 and extended to rural areas in 1955. At first, its purpose was to monitor, not to control, population migration and movements (Chan & Zhang, 1999). But in the later 1950s, as many peasants moved to cities looking for jobs, *hukou* legislation was introduced to control these citizens’ “geographical mobility through a system of

migration permits and recruitment and enrollment certificates” (Chan & Zhang, 1999, p. 820). This legislation formed the foundation of the current *hukou* system, in which a *hukou* booklet (*hukou bo*) indicates the status—whether rural or urban—of each citizen.

One’s *hukou* status is not determined by where s/he was born, but is inherited from the father or mother. 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), intended to keep rural people on the bottom rung of the stratum.

The urban-rural divide and the *hukou* system strictly circumscribe the life of rural Chinese students. Because of *hukou* regulations, rural students cannot have equal access to city public schooling; 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 not in the school district. This institutionalized discrimination prevents most rural *hukou* students from entering urban public schools and forces them to receive education either in rural public schools or rural migrant children’s schools, which generally are not as well funded and supplied as their urban equivalents (Hannum & Wang, 2006; Han, 2010; Ma & Wang, 2015). Thus, rural Chinese students face systematic barriers to obtaining urban public education.

Discourse of Quality (Suzhi)

The Chinese state uses the discourse of *suzhi* to promote its national development: to keep up with the “more economically advanced West” and realize its modernization (Anagnost, 2004; Gaetano, 2004, p. 41). Although the discourse of quality is applied to the whole Chinese population, lower-status groups are thought to need special remediation (Murphy, 2004). Because of the urban-rural divide and deeply entrenched patriarchy, rural females are valued less than urbanites and rural males. Thus, the *suzhi* discourse is intertwined with that of urban-rural inequality and patriarchy to designate rural females as inferior to urbanites and rural males.

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 qualified human bodies from the unqualified “through embodied

capacities acquired through intensified child nurture, educational inputs, and training” (Anagnost, 2004, p. 193).

Suzhi is a form of what Pierre Bourdieu (1977) calls cultural capital, the “set of actual usable resources and powers—economic, cultural and social—that distinguish the major classes of the conditions of existence” (p. 114). In contemporary China, those with more cultural capital are urban: their urban experiences, knowledge, culture, lifestyles, and values are deemed to have higher quality or value.

This 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, vision, and social skills.

Often Chinese scholars use this discourse to interpret the difficulties that rural Chinese students encounter at higher education institutions in China. Xu Xinlin (2007), for example, in his “Cultural Clash and Socialization of University Students from Rural Areas,” writes:

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)

Within this *suzhi* discourse, “rural culture” or “rural students’ quality” is blamed for the structural problems inherent in China’s urban-rural divide. The *suzhi* discourse, as Feng Xu (2000) aptly contends, “translates structural problems into depoliticized individual ones” (p. 38). It diverts attention from the structural inequalities to the need to improve rural people’s quality.

My interviews with 66 rural female students at six urban higher education institutions in China revealed how they had internalized this discourse; however, they did not simply accept the

idea of themselves as inferior people needing to be improved. Rather they used counter-discourses to negotiate and/or counteract the dominant discourse and consequent discrimination. While the powerful discourse of *suzhi* shaped their educational trajectory as well as their motivations and aspirations, they exercised agency by actively making meaning of their lived experiences with this discourse and developing strategies to negotiate it.

Research Methods, Contexts, and Participants

I conducted this empirical research in China from June 2011 to February 2012. I held 108 in-depth individual interviews with 66 participants: with one participant I had three interviews; with 40 participants I had two interviews, and with 25 participants I had one interview. Each interview lasted between 1.5 and 4 hours. All these interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese, the language that my participants could speak most proficiently. I also transcribed the interviews in Chinese, but I translated into English the quotes that I subsequently used in my findings.

Among the 66 participants, 14 were from the two most elite Chinese universities (10 from Zhonghua University, and 4 from Huaxia University); 31 participants were from the two highly acclaimed national universities in Beijing (23 from Zhonghua Normal University, and 8 from Huaxia University of China); 11 were from Huabei Provincial University, a provincial university funded and run by the Hebei provincial government; and 10 were from Huabei Municipal College, a community associate college funded and run by the municipal government.³

These six schools are public institutions located in urban areas. In China almost all higher education institutions are urban. Rural students make up 10% of students at Zhonghua University; 17% at Huaxia University; about 30% at both Zhonghua Normal University and Huaxia University of China; 50% at Huabei Provincial University; and 80% at Huabei Municipal College. These percentages show that rural students are underrepresented in national elite universities in China; most rural students are concentrated in regional or provincial universities and associate colleges. Their underrepresentation at national elite universities is alarming especially because rural people make up the majority of the population of China.

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 the second to

the fourth year. All the participants self-identified as rural female students, based either on their rural household registration (*hukou*) status prior to attending a higher education institution or on their rural upbringing.⁴

Theoretical Framework

Michel Foucault's theory of counter-discourse informs my analysis of data in this article. Counter-discourse 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). I also draw upon Lila Abu-Lughod's and Arianne M. Gaetano's expansion of Foucault's theory of power: that counter-discourse need not be divided from the dominant discourse or simply opposed to it; rather it can simultaneously accommodate and resist the dominant discourse (Abu-Lughod, 1990; Gaetano, 2004).

Negotiating the Discourse of Suzhi and Cultural Capital

The discourse of *suzhi*, compounded by worsening urban-rural inequalities, has been driving rural people to pursue education and/or migration. All my participants, born between 1978 and 1992, were expected by their parents and sometimes their teachers to get into higher education—their only means of upward mobility. Rural-to-urban migration in itself can hardly provide rural people 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. Higher education leads to the accumulation of cultural capital, and the discourse of *suzhi* normalizes these educational motivations and expectations.

The rural female students I interviewed were not merely subject to this discourse; they also exerted their agency to make meaning of it and to navigate their marginalization. Stuart Hall (1996) explains that agency, as elucidated by Arianne M. Gaetano (2004), "is located in the process of a subject's willful identification with forms of power that construct identities and create the 'knowing' subject" (Hall, 1996, p. 5; Gaetano, 2004, p. 42).

Developing Counter-Discourses

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, September 23, 2011, p. 35)

In the above discourse, Shaoshi Fang, a sophomore majoring in Chinese literature and language at Zhonghua Normal University, challenged the dominant discourse. She took Tsinghua University's Independent Admission Exam and failed it because it tested for a lot of knowledge to which she had never been exposed. She attributed her failure to the urban-rural disparity of educational resources.

The Chinese government adopted the Independent Admission Exam in the early 2000s as part of their 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 a university's Independent Admission Exam and on-site interviews will 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' communication 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; Ma & Wang, 2015), 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; Ma & Wang, 2015). Thus, most precollege education fails to prepare students for the demand. Students in major cities and from well-to-do families are more likely to have opportunities to hone presentation and communication skills than students from rural and poor families (Ma & Wang, 2015).

By arguing that she had “no opportunities to broaden my horizon,” Shaoshi was accommodating the dominant discourse—perceiving her horizon as being in need of broadening. Though Shaoshi’s discursive strategy challenged the dominant discourse, such discourse circulated “without changing [its] form from one strategy to another,” but there existed “different and even contradictory discourses within the same strategy”; both dominant discourse and counter-discourse came into play simultaneously (Foucault, 1978, p. 102).

Erbai Shi, a sophomore majoring in economics at Zhonghua University, had no access to computers in her rural home and school. When she went to the university, her computer teacher did not help her learn the basics, even how to turn on and off the computer. Therefore, she had to fumble by herself, and she needed much more time than the urban students to complete her homework on the computer. As Arianne M. 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)

When Erbai saw how her lack of urban cultural capital marginalized her and placed her on unequal footing in relation to her urban classmates, she recognized that it was not her fault but rather 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 is “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 her lack of urban cultural capital marginalized her constituted a form of knowledge.

Challenging and Redefining the Meaning of Quality in Quality Education

Some of my participants challenged the dominant meaning of quality education, or well-roundedness. They shared the view that the *quality* in quality education mostly refers to computer know-how, public speaking, social and communication skills, and knowledge of music

and fine arts, which they had lacked opportunities to learn. The attributes, knowledge, skills, and experiences that rural students did have, such as independence, caring, farming, cooking, and doing housework, were not valued.

Tian Di, a junior in English at Zhonghua University, asked, “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” (Third Interview with Tian, September 11, 2011, p. 10).

Rang Guo, a senior in radio and television editing and directing at Zhonghua University, stated, “If the rural-urban disparity doesn’t get improved, rural students will never have equal opportunities to foster their abilities and talents” (First Interview with Rang, September 17, 2011, p. 4).

Tian and Rang recognized that the rural-urban disparity and the concept of quality education deprived rural students of equal opportunities to learn valued skills and knowledge, and marginalized them for not having those skills and knowledge. This understanding allowed them to disrupt the dominant discourse of quality education.

Some participants redefined *quality* in quality education and gave new meaning to it. For example, Xianzhi Yi, a sophomore majoring in nuclear engineering and technology at Huaxia University, called the areas of so-called quality education—music, fine arts, and dancing—“floating clouds.” For her, well-roundedness meant knowing how to be an honest and happy human being. She said that, unlike her urban university classmates, whose childhoods were full of stress and competition to acquire such skills, she had been able to play in nature. Her childhood memories were very happy and rich. Because of her parents’ financial hardships, she had developed “diligence,” “caring,” “independence,” and a “strong sense of responsibility.” But these qualities were not valued by the discourse of quality education.

Like Xianzhi, Qiao He, a junior in political science at Zhonghua Normal University, said that from her rural experiences she had developed such attributes as sincerity and honesty, and a pure, calm, and peaceful mind. She also asserted that higher education should consider such attributes when evaluating students, instead of pressuring them to compete with each other.

Thus, both Xianzhi and Qiao redefined quality in quality education. They gave new meaning to quality education and developed counter-discourses to represent quality differently.

Decentering the Superiority of Urban Knowledge and Culture

Some participants took pride in their rural experiences, knowledge, skills, and identity as a way to resist the dominant culture at the urban university settings. They appeared to decenter, or deconstruct, the supposed superiority of urban-contextualized knowledge. For example, Gai Ci, a junior in information management and technology at Huabei Provincial University, stated, "Since my childhood I have been 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. . . . When [some of them] saw spinach, they said, 'What is this?'" (First Interview with Gai, September 12, 2011, p. 30)

Cheng Sui, a senior in ethnic minority language and literature at Huaxia University of China, also insisted on the value of the knowledge and skills that she had developed from her rural upbringing. She described her experience of being excluded from activities on the university campus that valued abilities in music, fine arts, drawing, and dancing, which she had had no opportunities to foster prior to university. She saw that the university granted privileges to urban students while marginalizing rural students.

Nevertheless, 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 rural identity. 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 her whole family ever since she was seven or eight years old. In the first year after she entered the university, she helped her urban roommates put on a quilt cover and fix a bench when it was broken. In addition, she also knew what herbs treat what kind of disease because she learned it when her father was sick. She remarked 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.

Zhiduo Shi, a third-year master's student in journalism and communication at Zhonghua University, observed that "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," "compromising and submissive to care about everybody else's interests."

Yet in urban areas she found that people were expected to express and advocate for themselves, and strive for their own benefits.

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 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 the situation of rural people. She said, “This society is already so unfair for them. If you add discrimination to them, you reinforce the unfairness” (second Interview with Zhiduo, November 18, 2011, p. 26).

Negotiating Internalized Inferiority

In contrast to pride in rural status and moral values that participants expressed in the above section, some other participants candidly stated that they felt inferior (*zibei*) about their rural status or identity at some moments after they entered the urban higher education institutions. For example, Yin Yue, a sophomore in chemistry at Huabei 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. . . . For example, when I just came here, I heard urban students talk about modern things such as computers, games, popular and fashionable clothes. . . . I was like, “This thing I have never seen. This word I have never heard. This game I have never played.” (First Interview with Yin, September 3, 2011, p. 24)

Erqian Bai, a junior in economics at Zhonghua University, shared Yin’s feeling of inferiority. She stated the reason why, after entering the university, she lacked the confidence to participate in campus activities such as performances and contests:

Because I felt that I didn’t have their vision. I didn’t get 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 have 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. (First Interview with Erqian, October 4, 2011, p. 17)

Both Yin and Erqian had internalized the dominant discourse of quality to judge themselves as lacking in knowledge, vision, and a well-rounded education. This discourse disciplined and subjected them.

Yet, in spite of the inferiority that Yin and Erqian expressed, I argue that it does not follow that they were mere victims; rather, they exercised their agency to make changes in their lives to get over the sense of inferiority. They both aspired to get into graduate schools so that they could widen their knowledge and strengthen their capacities.

My participants saw getting into graduate school as the most effective way to accumulate capital and overcome their sense of inferiority. For example, Shiyou Qin, a second-year master's student majoring in accounting at Zhonghua Normal University, stated,

I feel that now I have jumped out of the inferiority, 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 with myself. So I don't feel inferior now. (Second Interview with Shiyou, February 5, 2012, p. 27)

Like Shiyou, Yi You, a third-year master's student majoring in psychology at Zhonghua Normal University, said that during her undergraduate years she felt so inferior that she tried to hide her rural identity and act "urban" among her urban classmates. As she said,

At that time I felt so embarrassed. I thought that after graduating from the undergraduate study, I must look for a very good job in a city and make as much money as I can. I wanted to change my life as quickly as possible. I wanted to wash away that kind of rural identity in my body and cover it. (First interview with Yi, July 2, 2011, p. 39)

She was studying at Changsha at that time, and the urban women spoke Mandarin with Changsha accent and dialects, which she imitated in order to "wash away" her rural identity.

Now, as a master's student at Zhonghua Normal University, Yi said that she could accept her rural identity and regard it as part of herself:

Now at the graduate level, I realized, why should I cover the attributes in my body? These attributes, even if they are earthy and even stupid, are parts of myself. They constitute me, a unique me. . . . When interacting with other people now I tell them

frankly that I am from the countryside. . . . I can also accept the fact that my family is poorer than that of my urban classmates. (First interview with Yi, July 2, 2011, p. 40)

When I asked her what happened that made her change her view about her rural identity, she said,

My view of value changed a lot. Now I gradually found that money, that is, economic status, cannot indicate a person's social status. What's fundamental about a person's status is your view of value. That is, whether you are useful to other people and society, and whether you are warm to other people and a reliable person for other people to count on. (First interview with Yi, July 2, 2011, pp. 40–41)

She then explained that her master's academic advisor had helped her change her perspective on value in life. Her advisor not only recognized her strength and value as a rural woman, but also provided her with opportunities to work as a research assistant and recommended her for doctoral study.

Yin, Erqian, Shiyong, and Yi's stories show how, by upgrading their academic degrees and accumulating academic and cultural capital, they were able to overcome the inferiority they felt. Though their accumulation of cultural capital accommodated the dominant discourse that represented them as lacking in knowledge, it also challenged that discourse, which reduced rural students to mere victims with little capacity to improve themselves. These students effectively counteracted the dominant discourse.

Conclusion

The rural Chinese female students that I interviewed revealed how they negotiated the dominant discourse of quality in multiple ways. They saw how the urban-rural disparity and emphasis on urban cultural capital positioned them as lacking in capacity and knowledge. Some took pride in their rural identity and characteristics, and drew upon their rural community culture and values to combat the discrimination. Some challenged the limitations of the prevailing notion of quality education in higher education; they redefined and gave new meaning to *quality* by drawing upon their rural experiences and understanding of humanity. By doing so, these participants developed counter-discourses. Foucault suggests that counter-discourses “produce new knowledge, speak new truths, and so constitute new powers” (Ramazanoglu, 1993, p. 23). The counter-discourses regarding the urban-rural disparity, rural community culture and values,

and the redefinition of quality education that these students developed constitute alternative forms of knowledge that challenge the standardized forms of knowledge in Chinese higher education.

Some participants in this research internalized the inferiority that the dominant social discourse perpetrated upon them; they made sense of their feelings of inferiority, and focused on academic advancement to get over them. They accumulated academic and cultural capital to climb the social ladder and become upwardly mobile, simultaneously resisting the marginalization and accommodating the notion of cultural capital. Abu-Lughod (1990) and Gaetano (2005), expanding on Foucault's concepts of power and resistance, assert that agency can involve subjection and accommodation as much as defiance and resistance to power. My research findings complement this theoretical claim in that my research participants simultaneously accommodated and resisted the discourse of quality and cultural capital by which they felt marginalized.

Notes

1. This article draws upon part of my dissertation on how rural female higher education students in China navigated the test-oriented precollege educational system, which tended to repress their critical thinking; how they conceptualized their lived experiences with the urban-rural divide and gender; how they negotiated the discourse of quality, within which they were considered inferior; and how they reformulated their identities when they encountered different, and sometimes contradictory, forms of patriarchy across their rural and urban contexts. My research revealed that the discourse of quality is often intertwined with that of the urban-rural divide and patriarchy to construct rural females as inferior. Many participants expressed that since childhood they had experienced gender discrimination; they were regarded as less valuable, capable, and useful than males. Many also reported that they had encountered discrimination from urban people after arriving at the urban spaces, because these urban people presumed that rural students had received less childhood education and educational investment and thus had lower or less well-rounded quality than urban students. The discourse of quality, therefore, is interwoven with gender and urban-rural inequalities to perpetrate multiple oppressions upon rural females. Due to the limitation of space, this article focuses on how these students negotiated the discourse of quality, instead of how the discourse intersects with the discourse of gender and the urban-rural divide to oppress them. Neither does it focus on how these students negotiated gender inequity and urban-rural divide that they viewed limited their life chances and social mobility, which is discussed in another article of mine.

2. Since 2002 when President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao took office, they had conducted a series of reforms to address the long-standing disadvantages of the rural population. Under Hu's slogan of establishing a "harmonious society," the new leadership has made efforts to abolish educational surcharges (*jiaoyu fujiao fei*) in 2003 (Park, 2008, p. 54), and from 2003-2006 to "phase out agricultural land taxes and rural school tuition fees and to have 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 state-funded schools were established for the children of rural migrants who live and work in cities. However, despite the improved conditions, the socioeconomic inequality between urban and rural China has persisted until the present. The institutional discrimination toward people with rural household registration status is still palpable (Whyte, 2010; Hu & Salazar, 2008). Access to any urban jobs and public schools, and accompanying resources and opportunities is still restricted to city natives (Whyte, 2010).

3. In order to protect the identities of my participants, I used pseudonyms for their names, and also for the names of their university or college.

4. Among the 66 participants, two (Wenxi Neng and Rang Guo) had had urban *hukou* since they were born, but they did not identify themselves as urban because they had spent most of their childhood and teenage lives in rural areas.

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