



“I rely on myself”: the sense of belonging among Chinese rural female undergraduates at non-elite universities

Bin Zhao^{1,3} · Chanjuan Peng^{2,4}

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Abstract

Sense of belonging is a pivotal concept in higher education discourses on diversity, equity, and inclusion. While existing scholarship has predominantly examined disadvantaged groups within elite universities and focused on women in STEM fields, this study shifts attention to non-elite institutional contexts. Through a qualitative inquiry, it explores how the sense of belonging is experienced and negotiated by 13 rural female undergraduates in China. Findings indicate that these students, conceptualised as incomplete urbanites, experienced a persistent erosion of affective recognition. Although they benefited from the tuition-waiver policy, an institutional form of legal recognition, the university’s geographical marginality and perceived lower status undermined their sense of full institutional validation. In response to these structural challenges, participants adopted strategies of self-reliance to attain social esteem and to cultivate a fragile yet agentic sense of belonging. The study highlights the interplay between institutional, class and gendered dimensions in shaping the sense of belonging of rural female students in non-elite higher education settings.

Keywords Rural female undergraduates · Sense of belonging · Non-elite university · Recognition theory; capital theory

Introduction

Higher education is widely recognised across diverse cultural context as a pivotal means of improving career opportunities, advancing social mobility, and increasing long-term earning potential (Ertem & Gokalp, 2019). A successful transition to university life is critical,

✉ Chanjuan Peng
pengchanj@163.com

Bin Zhao
binzhao@stu.edu.cn

¹ Higher Education Research Institute, Shantou University, Shantou, China

² Faculty of Education, Shenzhen University, Shenzhen, China

³ No. 5 Cuifeng Road, Shantou 515821, Guangdong, P.R. China

⁴ No. 3688 Nanhai Avenue, Nanshan District, Shenzhen, Guangdong, P.R. China

particularly as students' ability to establish a sense of belonging within academic institutions has emerged as central theme in contemporary higher education research (Chiu et al., 2025). For undergraduate students, fostering meaningful peer relationships and cultivating a strong sense of belonging remain essential challenges, significantly influencing their academic and social experiences (Strayhorn, 2018). Extensive studies have demonstrated that sense of belonging not only enhances social integration and academic engagement but also plays a foundational role in students' self-confidence, psychological well-being, and overall educational success (Fisher et al., 2015; Allen et al., 2024).

Amid the ongoing expansion of higher education, access opportunities have progressively increased. But this widening participation does not automatically lead to equitable experiences throughout students' academic journeys (Simpfenderfer & Mitic, 2026). Although all students may encounter challenges in developing a sense of belonging, marginalised and disadvantaged groups face disproportionately systemic barriers. Research indicates that higher education operates as a stratification system, underpinned by an implicit recognition of homologous capital and habitus. Within this framework, students' socioeconomic backgrounds play a fundamental role in shaping their sense of belonging (Habel et al., 2016). Students from privileged backgrounds benefit from multifaceted familial support, which enhances their academic engagement, fosters institutionally valued competencies, and cultivates attitudes and behaviours conducive to success in higher education (Ahn & Davis, 2023). These advantages collectively contribute to improved educational outcomes, while also facilitating more effective social integration. Such integration is further reinforced through access to supportive networks that offer academic recognition, social acceptance and respect (van Gijn-Grosvenor & Huisman, 2020). Cumulatively, the evidence indicates a clear positive correlation between familial socioeconomic status and the strength of students' perceived belonging within universities, underscoring the ways in which structural advantages become embedded and reproduced within institutional environments (Cepeda et al., 2021).

Meanwhile, existing scholarship has predominantly examined the challenges to belonging experienced by disadvantaged groups within elite universities, including ethnic minorities and first-generation students (Strayhorn, 2023; O'Shea, 2021). For these students, belonging is often an ongoing process of negotiation. They must continually navigate institutional cultures and perceived expectations to establish meaningful connections within the academic community (Holmegaard et al., 2014). To be further, these individuals often encounter cultural dissonance and institutional alienation upon entering prestigious higher education settings. Such experiences typically arise from a lack of cultural capital, limited familiarity with dominant academic norms and implicit institutional codes, and even a perceived hostility within the institutional culture (Buckley, 2023; Meehan & Howells, 2018; Pedler et al., 2021). These barriers systematically erode their sense of belonging, frequently provoking existential doubts regarding their legitimate place within such academic environments (Schachner et al., 2019). Crucially, the prevailing culture of elitism and meritocracy within elite universities predominantly serves students from upper-middle-class professional backgrounds. This dynamic not only perpetuates entrenched class stratification but also enables institutions to sustain their exclusivity (Wong & Chiu, 2019).

Consequently, students from disadvantaged backgrounds always face substantial barriers in developing a sense of belonging in elite universities. On the one hand, social networks, relationships and peer interactions function as vital forms of social capital that profoundly

influence belonging. However, they frequently struggle to identify staff, faculty, or peers who share comparable socioeconomic experiences. This inability further exacerbates their isolation within these elite settings (Joseph, 2023). On the other hand, elitist and exclusionary academic norms impose heightened academic challenges on disadvantaged students. Many encounter difficulty in gaining recognition for their abilities, resulting in self-doubt and a persistent perception of being outsiders in such privileged environments (Guyotte et al., 2021; Winstone et al., 2022).

The existing body of research has predominantly examined disadvantaged students within elite institutions through a deficit lens, employing theoretical frameworks centred on social class and capital to analyse their experiences of cultural dislocation and marginalisation as they navigate unfamiliar academic and social environments. These studies have also explored their continuous negotiation of identity and belonging within such settings. However, studies in this area can be further developed in the following two aspects. First, the entrenched elitism and exclusionary practices of elite universities constitute optimal research setting for examining disadvantaged students' trajectories. It is noteworthy that within the context of widening participation in higher education, while enrolment rates among disadvantaged student groups have increased, this growth has occurred predominantly within non-elite institutions, owing to persistent structural barriers within the education system (Bennett & Southgate, 2014). The institutional stratification raises important questions regarding potential variations in students' sense of belonging across different university tiers. In particular, the specific manifestations and characteristics of belonging as experienced by disadvantaged students within non-elite universities warrant further scholarly investigation.

Second, alongside socioeconomic status, gender also plays a critical role in shaping sense of belonging. It is particularly important to note that factors such as class and gender may intersect, further compounding the challenges faced by disadvantaged female students in forming a sense of belonging within higher education. Accordingly, addressing gender equality in this context requires a dual focus: not only examining women's access to institutions, but also critically analysing their lived experiences within these academic spaces. Existing research has explored female students' sense of belonging in STEM disciplines, highlighting key issues such as their underrepresentation in male-dominated fields, the intersectional barriers faced by women from ethnic minority backgrounds, and the compounded effects of racial and gender marginalisation (Johnson, 2012; Murphy et al., 2007; Ong et al., 2011). However, these studies remain largely concentrated on STEM subjects and lack in-depth exploration of the sense of belonging among disadvantaged female students in non-elite universities. Crucially, they have not sufficiently examined the interplay between socioeconomic status, gender and institutional type.

This study focuses specifically on Chinese rural female undergraduates as an empirical case, providing a contextualised examination of how intersecting disadvantages shape the sense of belonging in non-elite higher education settings. The paper is structured as follows: first, the Chinese context is outlined to engage directly with existing scholarship on rural-urban inequalities and belonging in higher education. Next, the theoretical framework, integrating Honneth's recognition theory and Bourdieu's capital theory. The methodology then details participant recruitment, data collection, and analysis procedures. The findings section examines the impact of recognition deficits on students' sense of belonging and identifies the adaptive strategies they employ. Building on these findings, the discussion

synthesises the analysis and engages into dialogue with existing literature on the limitations of homogeneous friendship, the exclusionary dynamics of consumer-oriented campus culture, and the dual role of university as both a site of stratification and a potential source of support. Finally, the conclusion summarises the study, proposes practical measures to enhance belonging among rural female undergraduates in non-elite universities, and suggests directions for future research.

The context in China

China's higher education system has undergone a profound transformation over the past two decades, evolving from massification towards universal access and now constituting the world's largest tertiary education sector (Xiong et al., 2022). This expansion has contributed to notable progress in gender equity. Female students now represent over 50% of total enrolments, degree recipients, and current cohorts (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2025). However, structural inequalities persist. Notably, rural students remain significantly underrepresented in elite institutions. Anchored by the National College Entrance Examination (Gaokao), China's higher education system admits fewer than 5% of rural students into elite universities, despite the examination's ostensibly meritocratic design (Hu & Wu, 2021). For rural women, this disparity is compounded by intersecting economic and gender-based barriers. Consequently, the majority are channeled into non-elite higher education institutions (Luo et al., 2021). Even within these settings, they continue to face disproportionate institutional obstacles in both academic and social domains (Gao et al., 2020).

Empirical research specifically examining the sense of belonging among female students, particularly those from rural backgrounds, remains markedly scarce. Existing scholarship on belonging within Chinese higher education has predominantly centred on rural students in elite universities, often adopting a deficit perspective. These studies typically employ theoretical frameworks rooted in social class and cultural capital to analyse experiences of cultural dislocation, marginalisation, and ongoing identity negotiation within unfamiliar academic and cultural environments (Yan & Wu, 2020; Xie & Reay, 2020; Jin & Ball, 2020, 2021; Li, 2013; Wu, 2025; Wang & Li, 2025). As a result, the experiences of rural female students in non-elite universities, where the majority actually enroll, remain under-researched and poorly understood.

Theoretical framework

This study primarily employs Axel Honneth's theory of recognition as its core analytical framework. Honneth (2015) conceptualises recognition as the affirmation and respect accorded by the social environment, viewing it as essential to subjectivity and a primary source of social conflict when denied. Central to his thesis is the conception of recognition as "the I in We", which highlights how the self is constituted through intersubjective relations. Honneth (2015) identifies three forms of recognition. The first form, which pertains to one's being or personal identity, aligns with what Honneth conceptualises as love, an institutionalised mode of recognition grounded in emotional attachment and care. The second form relates to one's capacity for action and is associated with legal recognition, wherein individuals are accorded rights and treated as autonomous moral agents. The third form con-

cerns one's accomplishments and corresponds to social esteem, through with contributions to shared goals are publicly valued. Honneth (2021) maintains that critical theory should assess individuals' capacity for self-realisation within societal structures. For disadvantaged groups, social recognition is key to achieving dignity, thereby fostering belonging and supporting self-identity formation.

Higher education is uniquely formative, with student experience integrally shaped by disciplinary engagement, extracurricular participation, and interpersonal relationships (Marginson, 2023). Campus life is thus a form of community ideally built on reciprocal recognition. Using Honneth's theory, three key analytical dimensions of students belonging can be identified. First, affective recognition is experienced through emotional support within primary relationships. A sense of belonging in this dimension is characterised by: (1) the need for regular personal interactions that generate emotional satisfaction and positive affect, and (2) the importance of meaningful connections with institutional members, particularly through high-quality engagement with both academics and peers (Bao et al., 2023). These elements converge into two core components of belonging: teacher-student interaction and social acceptance, the latter referring specifically to mutual respect and inclusion within peer networks (Freeman et al., 2007). Second, legal recognition pertains to how students experience institutional support and regulations. Equitable policies, accessible resources, and fair procedural arrangements from the university's formal recognition system, shaping students' sense of institutional belonging. Third, social esteem at university stems from academic achievement and extracurricular involvement, which earn peer and institutional respect. Active participation in scholarly endeavors and campus activities as visibly demonstrates contribution, facilitating recognition as valued community members (De Sisto et al., 2021). This framework shows how affective recognition fosters emotional security, legal recognition underpins institutional equity, and social esteem validates student agency, collectively constituting the basis for sense of belonging within higher education.

To complement Honneth's focus on intersubjective experience and moral agency, this study incorporates Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of capital and field. Honneth's framework illuminates the subjective and normative dimensions of belonging, revealing how students experience misrecognition and actively seek dignity. In contrast, Bourdieu's theory provides analytical tools to map the objective, structural conditions that fundamentally shape those lived experiences. Bourdieu (1986) conceptualises capital not only in economic terms but as multidimensional resources, including economic capital, cultural capital and social capital. And these forms of capital are unevenly distributed and are mobilised within specific fields, which are structured social spaces characterised by particular rules, hierarchies, and stakes (Bourdieu, 1986). In this study, the Chinese higher education landscape constitutes a distinct field in which urban and rural students enter with markedly different endowments of capital (Xie & Reay, 2020). Rural female undergraduates often enter university with relatively limited forms of capital. Their economic capital tends to be constrained by modest family financial resources. In terms of cultural capital, they frequently possess less institutionalised knowledge and familiarity with urban middle-class lifestyles. Furthermore, their social capital is often more circumscribed, characterised by networks that offer fewer connections to academic and professional opportunities. Meanwhile, the non-elite university itself occupies a specific position within the broader field of higher education, typically endowed with fewer institutional resources and symbolic prestige compared with elite

institutions (Carpentier, 2021). This positional disadvantage further shapes the conversion potential of the capital that students bring or seek to accumulate.

This dual-focus framework provides a more comprehensive analytical lens (Fig. 1), and enables the study to analyse both the lived, meaning-making agency of rural female undergraduates and the structural constraints that contour their journeys. It acknowledges that the struggle for recognition and belonging unfolds within a field shaped by pre-existing inequalities in capital distribution. Consequently, the framework not only serves as a diagnostic tool for identifying multidimensional deficits in belonging but also grounds the analysis in the material and symbolic realities of educational inequality.

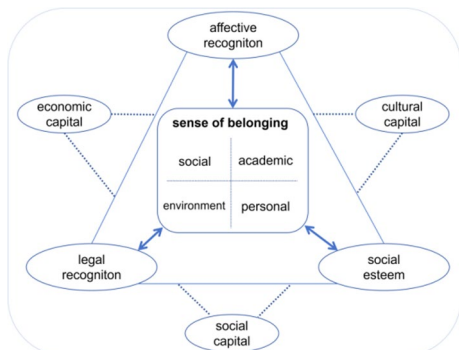
Methodology

Research site and participants

As of 2024, China has 1,257 regular undergraduate institutions, of which only 42 are “Double First-Class” universities (a status widely recognised as elite universities) (MOE, 2025). Despite the substantial number of non-elite universities in China, significant hierarchical differentiation exists within this category. The selection of University S as the research site is guided by two key considerations. First, although University S occupies a relatively modest position in national rankings and exhibits lower research output intensity, it has become a significant recipient of students from rural backgrounds under China’s higher education expansion policy. Second, while situated within an urban area of a southeastern province, the university is located in a less developed regional context. This geographical location and institutional positioning have resulted in relatively constrained provincial funding allocations and the enrolment of students with comparatively lower academic entry profiles, aligning with its applied and teaching-oriented mission. It is also noteworthy that University S receives supplementary funding from a private foundation, which implemented a tuition-free policy for undergraduate students between 2018 and 2022. This initiative functioned as a financial incentive that was particularly attractive to students from rural and socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds.

The study was conducted between April 2023 and October 2024. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling based on two core criteria. First, prior to entering university, their registered household residence (hukou) must have been located in a rural

Fig. 1 Theoretical framework



area outside county-level city centres or county towns. Given that some individuals, despite retaining a rural hukou, may have lived as accompanying children in urban areas and thus gained significant urban life experience, a second criterion was introduced: their primary upbringing and formal education up to secondary level should have taken place within the same category of rural areas. Initially, five participants who met the research criteria were identified through routine interactions and fieldwork. Subsequently, seven additional participants were recruited via a university forum advertisement. Although all participants were assured anonymity and confidentiality in line with ethical research standards, one student withdrew from the study. Two further participants were selected through snowball sampling, resulting in a final sample of 13 rural female undergraduates (see Table 1). A well-documented gender disparity in disciplinary choice, observed both in Western and Chinese contexts (Xie et al., 2015), is reflected in the participant cohort: only four were enrolled in STEM programmes, with the majority pursuing humanities. All participants were born after 2000, during the enforcement period of China's one-child policy. Notably, each participant had at least one sibling, with three families having three to four children. Eleven participants completed their primary and secondary education in rural areas, while the other two attended urban schools for children of migrant workers, having relocated with their parents due to employment. Due to restrictions on school progression linked to hukou, these two participants spent only approximately two years in urban settings, with the majority of their upbringing taking place in rural areas. Academically, the participants were generally high achievers, having been admitted to county- or city-level high schools. Parental educational attainment was generally low. Only two fathers and one mother held associate degrees, and one father and one mother had completed senior high school. The remaining parents had received only junior high school or primary education.

Research data

This study is grounded in an interpretivist epistemology, facilitating an in-depth exploration of the lived experiences and meaning-making processes of rural female undergraduates at University S throughout their academic journeys. A qualitative research strategy was employed, utilising semi-structured interviews that enabled participants to narrate their

Table 1 Participants' basic information

Number	Pseudonym	Discipline	Age
1	Xiao Zhu	Art & humanities	22
2	Lu Ying	Art & humanities	19
3	Ren Ying	Art & humanities	20
4	Lu Yue	Science	21
5	Yu Qing	Art & humanities	21
6	Chang Qing	Art & humanities	22
7	Li Yan	Engineering	20
8	Cai Yi	Engineering	22
9	Yao Wen	Engineering	20
10	Pei Jia	Art & humanities	20
11	Hong Jia	Art & humanities	19
12	Xin Jie	Art & humanities	19
13	Ling Long	Art & humanities	21

experiences freely while maintaining thematic coherence through broadly framed guiding questions (Bryman, 2004). The interview protocol was organised around four key dimensions of belonging: social, academic, personal, and environmental (Ahn & Davis, 2020). The social domain encompassed aspects such as peer relationships, involvement in student societies, and perceptions of solidarity. The academic dimension addressed educational engagement and institutional integration. The environmental domain incorporated geographical context, natural surroundings, living conditions, and cultural influences. Lastly, the personal dimension explored aspects of self-identity and life satisfaction. A total of 28 interviews were conducted, with each participant interviewed between one and three times. Each session lasted between 60 and 100 min. The majority of interviews ($n=21$) were conducted face-to-face on campus; the remaining ($n=7$) were held remotely via WeChat or Tencent Meeting to accommodate participants who were absent due to holidays, internships, or employment-seeking activities in other cities. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' prior consent, and the resulting transcripts were utilised for subsequent analysis.

Data analysis employed both inductive and deductive approaches. The inductive phase, involved multiple close readings of all transcribed interview texts to identify emerging themes and categories, following Creswell's (2013) staged model of qualitative data analysis. During the initial immersion stage, we developed familiarity with the data through repeated engagement with the transcripts. Subsequently, the interview transcripts were broken into analytically meaningful units, such as individual words, complete sentences, or coherent paragraphs, each representing distinct ideas or phenomena. Thematic analysis was then conducted through systematic coding of the transcripts using iterative cycles of coding and recoding to identify salient themes. By analysing, synthesising, and comparing relationships among codes within the theoretical framework, we developed three core themes: "incomplete urbanites", "rural beneficiaries" and "self-reliance strategies", along with associated sub-themes such as "leisure mobility", "conflict between imagination and reality", "isomorphism circles". The final stage employed a deductive approach, situating the participants' experiences within broader social contexts through critical engagement with relevant academic literature. This enabled the construction of coherent and compelling narratives, supported by contextualised descriptive accounts and illustrative textual extracts, thereby presenting a rigorously grounded analytical storyline that remains firmly rooted in the empirical data.

Findings

The analysis reveals how rural Chinese female undergraduates navigate their sense of belonging within an institutional and cultural milieu that offers upward mobility opportunities whilst simultaneously perpetuating their marginalisation. Interpreted through analytical framework, their narratives demonstrate ongoing deficits in recognition that undermine their belonging. Concurrently, these highlighting the adaptive strategies through which students attempt to restore dignity and affirm their own sense of belonging.

Incomplete urbanites: the erosion of affective recognition

The most acute challenges to belonging manifest in peer interactions where affective recognition is systematically withheld. Rural female undergraduates described their urban peers as confident and cosmopolitan. While they described themselves as “incomplete urbanites” who are hesitant and concerned about potential missteps in social interactions. This relational divide is particularly evident in two interrelated areas: consumption patterns and leisure mobility. Both domains can be understood through the lens of unevenly distributed economic and cultural capital.

Urban female undergraduates engage in expenditure on manicures, fashion, and K-pop merchandise represents more than personal preference. It is a strategic use of economic capital to acquire and display embodied cultural capital. These consumption practices serve as particularly conspicuous markers of distinction, “They epitomise a polished femininity, consistently well-groomed and naturally attractive. Their everyday conversations flow effortlessly around leisure consumption, whether discussing new manicure designs, recent hairstyle changes, or the latest fashion purchases.” (Xiao Zhu) This daily performance of aesthetic labour and shared consumer practices is a way of affective recognition, where the validation of individual’s identity and worth is sought through informal emotional endorsement and mutual appreciation within their peer culture. By contrast, rural female undergraduates’ practice of strict budgeting reflect their limited economic capital, “I adhere to strict daily budgets even for essential expenses such as cafeteria meals. When purchasing clothing, my primary criterion is absolute affordability rather than quality. I have bought several basic T-shirts for just 10 yuan each on Pinduoduo.” (Ren Jing) This necessary frugality restricts their access to the cultural capital embedded in the consumption patterns that facilitate peer bonding. Although participants may reinterpret frugality as a moral virtue, this does not change its social function as a distinguishing marker within the campus environment. Thus, such fundamental divergence in consumption values and practices engendered multiple layers of social separation, reinforcing symbolic boundaries that restricted opportunities for mutual recognition (Lamont et al., 2015). The resulting disparity between rural and urban female students accentuated a palpable cultural divide, ultimately impeding meaningful social integration.

Patterns of leisure mobility further demonstrate this capital-based stratification. The daily routines of rural female undergraduates are typically confined to a highly circumscribed spatial pattern, characterised by movement between a constrained triad of campus settings such as dormitories, classrooms and canteens. Beyond academic obligations, their leisure activities are predominantly mediated through smartphone usage, with minimal participation in off campus exploration. While their urban counterparts engage in broader geographical exploration, including intercity and international travel. Such mobility requires not only economic resources but also the cultural capital to navigate unfamiliar environments. As Lu Yue reflected regarding her roommate: “We share remarkably few common interests. She actively follows male idol groups and willingly spends substantial sums supporting them. I presume her family background is relatively privileged, given that she not only follows K-pop groups but has also traveled to South Korea on multiple occasions.” The deficit in affective recognition experienced by rural undergraduates thus stems not only from interpersonal dynamics but from their structural position in a social field where peer acceptance depends on capital-intensive forms of social participation. They frequently recounted

instances in which casual remarks from urban peers, such as exclamations of “What? You’ve never heard of this?”, carried unmistakable value judgements. Such encounters reinforced the rural female undergraduates’ sense of being misrecognised, thereby accentuating their perceived marginality within the campus social environment. “It’s not that they intentionally mock us, but their surprised reactions serve as subtle yet potent reminders of exclusion.” (Xiao Zhu) Therefore, their identity as incomplete urbanites emerge at the intersection of their desire for recognition and the structural constraints they face, particularly their limited access to resources that enable social integration.

Rural beneficiaries: negotiating the precarious terrain of legal recognition

The tuition-waiver policy functioned as a decisive institutional mechanism that facilitated access to higher education through essential financial relief. For all participants, it served as the primary university selection criterion. This reflects how severe constraints in economic capital fundamentally shape educational pathways for students from rural backgrounds. This constrained agency is further illustrated by Yao Wen: “Fundamentally, I was reluctant to burden my parents financially. My university choices were necessarily limited to institutions with minimal or no tuition fees, based entirely on my College Entrance Examination scores.” Furthermore, financial precarity was frequently exacerbated by multi-child family structures, “Given our strained financial circumstances, with my younger brother also attending university, the fee waiver schemes substantially alleviated my family’s economic pressure.” (Cai Yi) In this sense, the policy thus operated as a critical form of redistributive intervention, directly addressing a stark deficit in familial economic capital. Beyond its pragmatic function, this institutional mechanism constitutes a form of legal recognition, representing a procedural affirmation of disadvantaged students’ right to education. Participants frequently reinterpreted the policy not only as a solution to economic constraints but also as a marker of validation. “The tuition exemption brought my father prolonged happiness. It represented an academic honor. Being selected for free university education carried significant prestige.” (Li Yan) Here, legal recognition was narratively recast as a source of familial honor and personal dignity. This aligns with Nancy Fraser’s (1995) insight that redistribution-based measures can acquire recognitional dimensions when interpreted within local moral frameworks, thereby transcending their purely economic function to assume deeper sociocultural meaning.

Yet, this form of recognition remained profoundly ambivalent. Although participants reinterpreted tuition exemption as an honorable outcome that rewarded parental sacrifice, this narrative coexisted with a growing sense of disillusionment regarding the university’s institutional and geographical limitations in the broader field of higher education. Situated in a less developed city despite its formal designation as a Special Economic Zone (SEZ), University S failed to deliver the cosmopolitan environment participants had anticipated. This geographical and institutional reality meant that students entered an academic field with relatively limited urban cultural capital, “The university failed to offer a compelling attraction. The city itself provides little incentive to stay. Its replaceability is high. Despite its Special Economic Zone status, the chaotic urban infrastructure contradicts my expectations.” (Chang Qing) Such reflections were widespread among participants, who consistently reported limited recreational facilities and an absence of metropolitan vibrancy. Thus, a central paradox emerges. The tuition-waiver scheme constituted an official form of

legal and institutional validation by acknowledging rural female undergraduates' academic merit and alleviating financial hardship. However, the underdeveloped urban environment and deficient cultural infrastructure reinforced their perceived placement in an inferior segment of the educational hierarchy. Consequently, the very mechanism that enabled inclusion through economic redistribution also perpetuated a form of exclusion by situating them in a field where the potential to acquire the cultural and social capital essential for full integration and future mobility remains constrained. In the end, recognition mediated through financial assistance failed to cultivate a robust sense of institutional belonging; instead, it underscored their perceived placement within a stratified educational landscape defined by entrenched spatial and cultural inequalities.

Self-reliance as a quest for social esteem

Faced with insufficient affective recognition and the ambivalent legal recognition, participants increasingly turned to self-reliance as a strategy to secure social esteem. This pursuit must be understood within the broader field of higher education, where their capacity to accumulate and convert various forms of capital is structurally limited. Their efforts to cultivate esteem through autonomy therefore represent a pragmatic, yet circumscribed, response to a position defined by capital scarcity.

Friendship networks emerged as a significant strategy in the pursuit of recognition. Excluded from dominant urban peer cultures, rural female students actively cultivated bonds with peers from comparable socioeconomic backgrounds. These relationships, grounded in shared rural upbringing, functioned as critical sources of social capital, providing mutual understanding and validation, "When I consider something too expensive, she invariably shares that perspective. Our judgments consistently coincide." (Cai Yi) These networks provided a protective space of solidarity, a form of peer-based esteem that partly compensated for their marginalisation. However, this social capital remained primarily bonding in nature, reinforcing existing ties within a homogeneous group rather than extending networks into new spheres. Moreover, this strategy was characterised by persistent emotional withholding. As illustrated by Ling Long that she concealed her family background even from her boyfriend, participants often presented themselves as self-sufficient, thereby shielding their vulnerabilities but also foreclosing opportunities for deeper emotional connection. Consequently, while these networks provided essential solidarity and social esteem, they proved insufficient in securing full affective recognition, leaving an underlying sense of existential solitude largely intact. The resulting ethic of solitary thus produced ambivalent outcomes: it conferred a sense of dignity and peer-based esteem, yet simultaneously engendered relational isolation. Wherein the need for emotional affirmation was displaced by self-reliant practices that, while protective of one's social dignity, ultimately perpetuated emotional isolation.

Even with tuition fees waived, the persistent shortage of economic capital remained a defining condition. Participants are always unwilling to depend on their families: "Knowing that I still depend on my family for living expenses makes me feel guilty. I worry it adds to my parents' burdens." (Hong Jia) To alleviate these guilty feelings, many engaged in part-time jobs, taking on roles such as food delivery, private tutoring and canteen cleaning, even when such labour resulted in time poverty (Wladis et al., 2024), exacerbating academic and personal strain. The extreme self-imposed austerity highlights how material limitations are

actively structured into a strict personal discipline, “There were times when I had barely 50 yuan left to last a week until my next payment. I became extremely frugal, cutting down on meals. Though I could have asked my parents for money, I refused to do so.” (Ren Jing) They attempted to convert a deficit in economic capital into a form of symbolic moral capital, reframing material restraint as evidence of strength and self-discipline. Thus, the acts of frugality and self-supported consumption were reinterpreted as demonstration of personal capability. These practices functioned as attempts to secure social esteem by converting experiences of deprivation into virtue of resilience and self-determination. Meanwhile, the ethos of self-reliance was distinctly gendered. Rural female undergraduates prefer to choose autonomy rather than another form of dependence, “Some affluent male students have shown interest in me, and I’m fully aware that being in a relationship with them would significantly reduce my financial pressures. But I choose to rely on myself.” (Yu Qing) Such decisions were rooted in an acute consciousness of gendered precarity, many rural girls realise early on they must take full responsibility for their own futures as a way to counter pervasive social devaluation: “Society constantly imposes pressure on us, telling us we’re not good enough in this or that aspect, so we feel compelled to push ourselves harder to prove our worth.” (Li Yan) Thus, within conditions of structural disadvantage, self-reliance emerges not merely as an economic necessity, but as a gendered moral project, representing a conscious claim to dignity and self-esteem through the assertion of autonomy in the face of intersecting financial and social pressure.

Despite encountering numerous challenges in their pursuit of belonging, rural female undergraduates consistently perceived their university as a sanctuary that offering vital institutional support. Within the university field, they strategically utilised academic diligence as a primary mechanism for accumulating institutional cultural capital and gaining recognition. For example, Ren Jing’s top ranking in a comprehensive assessment transformed her from being relatively unnoticed to receiving formal acknowledgement. This shift highlights the role of formal evaluation in conferring visibility and worth. Scholarships functions as a clear embodiment of institutional recognition. All participants received scholarships at various levels, with two obtaining the prestigious National Encouragement Scholarship. These awards represent a form of legal recognition, wherein the institution formally acknowledges students as right-bearing subjects entitled to material support, “Scholarships represent selective recognition... The university’s financial endorsement enabled me to achieve partial economic independence.” (Lu Ying) Thus, beyond essential injections of economic capital, this recognition validates their merit and legitimacy within the academic community. Furthermore, structured assistantship roles provided another critical avenue for recognition, combining symbolic affirmation with material benefits. This position also created opportunities to acquire practical cultural capital, such as professional skills and experience, and to expand their social capital through closer engagement with faculty. For instance, Chang Qing described how her role as an event planning assistant enhanced her employability profile, while Hong Jia emphasised how serving as an advisor’s assistant facilitated access to research opportunities. Additionally, these roles occasionally facilitated micro-level acts of affective recognition from faculty, such as when one participant received food and supplies from a professor aware of her financial difficulties. These gestures, though small, effectively integrated elements of affective recognition within institutional framework.

Discussion

To further unpack how capital inequalities and recognitive struggles jointly shape belonging, the discussion focuses on three key dimensions evident in the data: friendship formation, consumption practices, and institutional engagement. Each dimension reveals distinct dynamics through which rural female undergraduates negotiate inclusion and identity within the university environment, while also highlighting the structural characters influence their pursuit of belonging.

Friendship plays a fundamental role in facilitating a successful university experience and sense of belonging (Read et al., 2018). For rural female undergraduates in non-elite universities, however, the establishment of meaningful cross-class friendships is often hindered by significant cultural and economic dissonance. Authentic friendship requires reciprocity and shared expectations (Laursen & Hartup, 2002). The tension between their frugal lifestyles and the dominant urban consumer culture prevalent on campus can render such mutuality difficult. Thereby heightening awareness of pre-existing socioeconomic inequalities and strain interpersonal interactions (Lee, 2016). In response, many rural female undergraduates prefer to restrict friendship networks exclusively to peers from similar socioeconomic backgrounds. This strategy represents a pragmatic adaptation to a field in which their forms of cultural capital and economic capital are not devalued.

While this strategy may offer temporary immediate affective recognition and a sense of solidarity, it simultaneously limits access to bridging social capital in the long-term (Chetty et al., 2022). Kauppinen (2008) pointed out that a heterogeneous student composition within educational settings has also been shown to play a significant role in fostering environments conducive to educational mobility. Thus, heterogeneous friendships typically provide exposure to upper class cultural capital, institutional knowledge, and professional networks that can facilitate upward mobility (Gurzo et al., 2023). By remaining within homogeneous circles, rural female undergraduates are less able to acquire these complementary resources, thereby unintentionally reproducing the very capital deficits that their strategy seeks to manage. Furthermore, this dynamic perpetuates structural inequality, as university-based social networks often shape post-graduation trajectories through job referrals and information access (De Schepper et al., 2023). Many participants intuitively recognise these limitations, as illustrated by one participant's resigned expectation that their limited interaction with urban peers would not extend beyond graduation. Such pessimistic outlooks frequently become self-fulfilling prophecies. When students from disadvantaged backgrounds fail to cultivate diverse social networks during university, deficits in social capital often persist into their professional lives, potentially impairing both career advancement and long-term social mobility. Therefore, the homogeneous friendship network emerges as a double-edged mechanism of recognition. It satisfies an immediate need for affective belonging and dignifies the rural female undergraduates' existing capital within a safe peer field. While by forgoing opportunities to accumulate bridging capital and unfamiliar cultural resources, it may also constrain their potential for social and academic mobility.

The consumption patterns of urban female students, which often revolve around beauty and fashion as forms of social currency, inadvertently create visible socioeconomic markers that distinguish them from their rural counterparts. These patterns not only shape everyday social interactions but also influence the form of longer-term social networks. Due to constrained economic capital, rural female undergraduates' lifestyles and consumption patterns

do not fully align with the consumerist culture prevalent within the campus environment. The necessary frugality limits their participation in those shared consumption practices, leading to mutually unintelligible social worlds. This divergence reflects deeper disparities in values and lived experiences, reinforcing symbolic boundaries that impede meaningful social integration. Thus, the limited involvement in consumption-oriented bonding activities restricts their access to certain peer groups, narrowing their opportunities of accumulating and consolidating social capital. University consumer culture thus becomes a primary site where economic background is translated into daily practices of inclusion and exclusion. To be further, their constrained economic capital and social capital inhibits their ability to construct a positive identity, leading to their perception as deficient participants within the campus environment. As a consequence, they may experience not only material deprivation but also profound identity-related distress (Bauman, 2004).

Building directly upon this dynamic of consumer-driven stratification, the question of belonging extends beyond mere inclusion to encompass deeper processes of recognition and identity validation. The concept of belonging also encompasses the political processes that govern inclusion and exclusion within institutional spaces and communities (Antonsich, 2010). Rural female undergraduates' lifestyles and value choices struggle to attain equal social esteem and often receive insufficient affective recognition in everyday interactions. Yet, as the consumer culture on campus illustrates, the critical dimension of recognition justice remains inadequately addressed (Honneth, 2004). Recognition justice emphasizes the importance of social differences and identity formation, arguing that the acknowledgement and respect of group distinctions can serve as both a mechanism for empowerment and as a pathway towards reducing structural inequalities (Patfield et al., 2024). On university campuses, consumer culture operates as a key site where recognition is either granted or denied. When rural female undergraduates are excluded from consumption-based social rituals, they are not only materially marginalised but also symbolically misrecognised. Their identity and worth are systematically devalued within the dominant framework of capital evaluation. This form of injustice is relational in nature, arising directly from interpersonal encounters and group dynamics within consumer-oriented environments. Authentic recognition emerges through the relational fabric of social interaction, and requires attentiveness to the micro level process through which identities are valued or devalued. The interpersonal dimension of campus belonging, which is strongly shaped by participation in or exclusion from consumer practices, becomes a concrete manifestation of recognition justice. Consequently, consumption-based stratification is not merely an economic issue but a mutually reinforcing cycle of capital inequality and recognition deficits.

University function not merely as educational institutions but as powerful relational and symbolic systems that actively shape students' sense of belonging. An essential dimension of this process is the university's role as an institutional medium that refracts pre-existing social inequalities in complex ways, thereby directly influencing who feels included and who remains at the margins. Students enter into tertiary education with uneven distributions of economic, cultural and social capital, which are re-evaluated and often re-stratified within the academic environment. Disadvantaged students often experience outsider anxiety. This psychological state is marked by persistent self-doubt and acute awareness of cultural difference, significantly obstructing their sense of belonging (Yu & Xie, 2025). Thus, the university exerts a dual influence: it can reproduce exclusion by legitimising certain forms of capital while devaluing others, yet it also holds the potential to act as a compensatory

mechanism that actively foster inclusion and recognition (Condrón et al., 2021). An institution's capacity to translate structural support into embodied experiences of recognition and inclusion ultimately determines whether it can fulfill its promise as an engine of equitable participation and social mobility (Sporn & Godonoga, 2024).

In the Chinese context, multi-tiered support systems have been developed to facilitate material integration and strengthen marginalised students' sense of legitimacy and membership within university. At the national level, schemes such as the National Encouragement Scholarship target high-achieving students from impoverished backgrounds. Beyond providing essential economic capital, these awards convey recognition of students' capability and potential, mitigating stigma and strengthening their identification as legitimate members in academic community. This aligns with social esteem, where institutional acknowledgment validates individual effort and contributes to a positive self-formation. At the institutional-level, interventions such as the tuition waiver policy in University S substantially alleviate financial pressures, enabling fuller participation in campus life. Such policies function as instruments of legal recognition that affirm students' right to higher education and provide a material foundation for sense of belonging. However, it is noteworthy that within the broader field of higher education, the non-elite university's relatively limited institutional capital may constrain the transformative potential of its economic support, a tension reflected in students' ambivalent experiences of legal recognition. Equally important are the assistantship programmes, which combine financial support with structured skill development. Besides supplying economic capital and facilitating cultural capital, these programmes create intentional spaces for meaningful faculty-student interaction, facilitating the accumulation of social capital. Participants reported that engagement in these programmes led to more regular and authentic communication with academics, offering not only practical guidance but also affirming their value in the university, a key element in constructing epistemic belonging. This corresponds to the intersubjective dimension of affective recognition, where relational validation fosters emotional security and a sense of belonging. Therefore, belonging is an ongoing process mediated by institutional structures, interpersonal relationships, and symbolic practices.

While existing scholarship has yielded critical insights into the belonging struggles of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, its overwhelming focus on elite universities has generated a particular narrative, one often centred on cultural shock in high-pressure academic environments, competition with global elites, and the dual nature of institutional prestige as both a resource and a burden (van Gijn-Grosvenor & Huisman, 2020; Holmegaard et al., 2014). This study situated in a non-elite university reveals a different set of dynamics and challenges. First, students of disadvantaged background from elite university often feel academically unprepared or culturally distant from cosmopolitan peer norms (Buckley, 2023; Guyotte et al., 2021; Winstone et al., 2022; Xie & Reay, 2020). While for rural female undergraduates from non-elite university, their sense of belonging is less about competing at the academic pinnacle and more about navigating a pervasive consumer-based peer culture. Thus, the primary boundary is not intellectual but socio-symbolic. Second, in non-elite universities, while support mechanisms such as tuition waivers are critical for access, they do not confer the same degree of institutional symbolic capital with elite university. The ambivalent experiences of legal recognition become more pronounced. Students may feel formally admitted yet socially and symbolically sidelined due to the position of non-elite university within broader higher education field, which is a paradox less highlighted in

elite-institution literature. Third, students from disadvantaged background in elite universities may adopt a toned habitus to assimilate into competitive and elitist cultures, thereby seeking to enhance their sense of belonging (Jin & Ball, 2020, 2021). In this non-elite setting, students' adaptive practices are oriented more toward moral reframing of frugality and the cultivation of selective homogeneous friendships. Their agency is directed not toward elite integration, but toward crafting recognition and belonging within an institution that itself occupies a modest position in the higher education hierarchy. These contrasts reveal how institutional position mediates belonging, demonstrating that structural inequalities are refracted differently within the stratified higher education system.

Conclusion

Sense of belonging has emerged as a critical pillar of diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education (Peck et al., 2022). Situated within the Chinese context, this study employs an intersectional lens to integrate institutional, class and gendered dimensions into its analysis of students' sense of belonging. It is evident that these students experience sustained deficits in affective and legal recognition, while actively seeking social esteem through strategies of self-reliance. Their identity as incomplete urbanites reflect a persistent erosion of affective recognition, manifested in everyday social and consumption practices that reinforce symbolic boundaries between rural and urban peers. Although redistributive policies such as tuition-waivers provide legal recognition and access, the geographical marginality of their university and its lower status within the higher education hierarchy undermine a sense of full institutional validation. Consequently, inclusion achieved through economic support is often offset by exclusion resulting from spatial and cultural devaluation. In response, students employ self-reliance strategies, such as selective solidarities within isomorphic circles, practicing extreme budgeting, asserting a gendered refusal of dependency, pursuing academic diligence, and utilising institutional resources, thus to reclaim social esteem and dignity. However, many of these strategies remain double-edged: fostering resilience and strengthen self-worth, they may also entrench emotional isolation and inadvertently reproduce the very structural constraints they seek to overcome.

Sense of belonging is neither a singular feeling nor a matter of policy alone. Rather, it constitutes a dynamic configuration of relationships, environments and practices, which can be enhanced through intentional activity and cultural design (Wang, 2025). Based on the findings of this study, the following approaches could be adopted to enhance the sense of belonging among rural female undergraduates in non-elite universities. First, while current financial support mechanisms primarily serve redistributive justice, they often remain confined to the level of legal recognition. Moving forward, more formalised institutional recognition practices should be introduced to transform material assistance into a visible expression of social esteem. This would ensure that supported students are not only acknowledged in terms of rights but are also publicly affirmed in terms of their value. Second, in response to the emotional alienation and peer avoidance observed among those who see themselves as incomplete urbanites, there is a need to actively cultivate low-risk, high-affirmation social spaces. This could include establishing support groups facilitated by counselling professionals for students from similar backgrounds, providing a secure environment for emotional expression and vulnerability. Additionally, designing non-competi-

tive campus activities that do not require financial capacity as a prerequisite for participation would help foster emotional connections between urban and rural students through shared experiences. Finally, the study reveals that rural female students often reframe qualities such as frugality and diligence as moral strengths and sources of self-worth. Diversified narratives of success should be systematically incorporated into curricula and campus media, publicly recognising the resilience and sense of responsibility demonstrated by students from diverse backgrounds. This would integrate such qualities into the campus culture of recognition.

We need to admit that this study is limited by its focus on a single non-elite university in a southern Chinese province. The choice of research site and participants may constrain the generalisability of the findings. Future research could expand to include non-elite universities in other parts of China and employ quantitative or mixed-method approaches to yield more broadly applicable conclusions. Additionally, conducting comparative case studies across different types of higher education institutions would help to construct a more comprehensive understanding of the sense of belonging among rural female undergraduates within diverse educational contexts.

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