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# "China's 'Bad Students'": Structural Harm and Silenced Voices in the Educational System

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**ABSTRACT**

In China, the examination-oriented education system prioritizes academic performance as the primary criterion for evaluating students. Academic achievement correlates closely with social mobility and is also considered indicative of the individual's moral virtues. Hence, students with poor academic performance are often labeled "bad students" and deemed needing correction. This study examines the school experiences of underachieving students in secondary education from a meritocracy perspective. From March 2022 to June 2023, this study uses data collected through interviews conducted in a secondary vocational school in Beijing. A sample of 12 students was selected for one-on-one in-depth interviews. The study found that at the individual level, students equate self-worth with academic performance, often leading to voluntary withdrawal from competitive opportunities, framed as a moral act of self-sacrifice. At the school level, negative labeling and structural discrimination reinforce their marginalization. At the familial level, parental emphasis on academic success results in emotional neglect and behavioral control. Despite exhibiting forms of agency, these students remain constrained by structural forces. This study extends the application of meritocracy theory, highlighting it not only grants privileged status to academic high achievers but also systematically constructs non-elite identities, thereby reinforcing the hierarchical structure within China's education system.

**KEYWORDS**

China; exam-oriented education system; meritocracy; underachievers

## Introduction

In China, the exam-oriented education system prioritizes academic performance as the primary criterion for evaluating students. Academic performance is closely linked to individual educational attainment, which is regarded as a crucial tool for achieving upward social mobility (Sheng 2017). Higher educational achievement increases the chances of securing respectable employment and a higher social status. Moreover, academic performance encapsulates and represents the entirety of social values for Chinese adolescents, reflecting a correlation between educational achievement and morality (Woronov 2015). Therefore, underachieving students in China's education

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system are inevitably marginalized, overlooked, and may be subject to stigmatization and harsh treatment.

However, most previous research on underachieving students has largely viewed them as problems needing "correction," with little attention given to their voices. Some studies have analyzed the reasons behind their poor academic performance from various perspectives and attempted to find ways to improve their grades (Udengwu 2014; Gilar-Corbi et al. 2019; Fong et al. 2023). Additionally, some scholars have developed concepts such as anti-school culture (Willis 2017), self-abandonment culture (Zhou 2011; Ding and Wang 2017), passive resistance (Ling 2015), and "passing time" (Woronov 2015) to explain the predicament of underachievers. Most research on underachieving students in China focuses on theoretical causes and policy solutions at the governmental level, with few studies using in-depth interviews to explore their experiences. Research often adopts a cultural reproduction perspective, mainly featuring students from rural or economically disadvantaged areas, linking underachievement to lower social classes and restrictive socioeconomic backgrounds. This focus on external factors overlooks how underachievers perceive their own experiences.

Thus, this study focuses on underachieving students in urban China, examining their real-life school experiences. Adopting the perspective of meritocracy, which highlights the core characteristics of the Chinese educational system, this study explores the challenges faced by students labeled as "bad students" within the school education process, giving voice to their stories and perspectives.

## *Meritocracy and China's Education System*

Meritocracy is a concept that emphasizes the allocation of social resources and status based on individual ability and effort. Alan Fox first introduced the term, defining it as a system where intelligence and effort determine one's social position (Littler 2017). Later, Michael Young expanded on this idea with the formula "Merit = IQ + Effort," while also critiquing how this ostensibly fair system ultimately reinforces social stratification, limiting mobility for the working class (Young 2017).

The exam-oriented approach and ranking structure within China's education system deeply reflect the characteristics of meritocracy. In China, a widely accepted consensus across different social strata and regions is that ranking adolescents based on their exam scores is natural and desirable (Woronov 2011). This reflects the logic of meritocracy, where those with higher achievements deserve greater rewards and recognition (Young 2017). Although condensing adolescents' value into a single exam score is an extremely narrow evaluation standard, it is commonly believed that this score is a key indicator of their diligence in completing school tasks and achieving upward mobility. This perspective has been deeply rationalized and legitimized through the support of social structures and systems (Woronov 2011; Kipnis 2019).

The limitations of meritocracy have been widely examined by scholars, with underachieving students often among its most affected groups. Sandel (2021) cautions that meritocracy can foster a form of tyranny in which the successful become complacent and arrogant, while those who struggle are left humiliated. Within the school system, meritocratic ideals are not only transmitted to students but are also reinforced through evaluation and selection mechanisms (Lie et al. 2024). This dynamic places

underachieving students in a morally precarious position, as their poor performance is frequently attributed to a perceived lack of intelligence or effort. As a result, in an educational environment where rewards and privileges are distributed based on academic achievement, underachieving students are particularly vulnerable to marginalization and inequitable treatment. However, there has been limited focus on the actual experiences of underachieving students within the education system through the lens of meritocracy.

## *Underachieving Students*

Underachievement among students is a complex and multifaceted issue that has been widely examined across various disciplines. Previous research has explored the underlying causes of underachievement from educational, biological, psychological, and sociological perspectives, leading to the development of various strategies aimed at enhancing students' academic performance. A meta-analysis of 125 studies, encompassing a sample of 56,640 students, found that underachieving students tend to exhibit a higher external locus of control and lower levels of competence beliefs, motivation, self-regulated learning strategies, and mastery goals compared to their higher-achieving peers (Fong et al. 2023). One of the primary challenges faced by underachieving students is their difficulty in establishing meaningful connections between personal agency and external support from teachers, parents, and peers. Research suggests that overcoming underachievement is largely contingent upon the development of these supportive relationships (Udengwu 2014).

Within the framework of social reproduction theory, previous research has largely demonstrated that underachieving students often reproduce their social status by "passing time" rather than actively engaging in academic advancement. Willis (1977) famously argued that working-class boys, or "lads" (poor-performing students), develop an anti-school culture as a response to their recognition of the limited mobility afforded to them within the education system. By rejecting formal schooling and its associated values, these students reinforce their social positioning, perpetuating the very inequalities that the system claims to overcome. This insight has been extended by scholars examining how underachievement is shaped by systemic exclusion and a sense of alienation from dominant educational norms (MacLeod 2009; Song 2023). Research suggests that many underachieving students disengage from academics not simply due to a lack of ability or motivation, but as a coping mechanism in response to an education system that systematically devalues their cultural capital and limits their opportunities for success (Reay 2006).

In meritocratic education systems, where success is ostensibly based on intelligence and effort, symbolic violence operates by obscuring the ways in which cultural capital privileges certain students while excluding others. As a result, underachieving students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, are more likely to experience academic stigmatization and marginalization, further reinforcing educational stratification (Reay 2004).

In China, many studies focusing on underachieving students have concentrated on those in vocational schools and their experiences with vocational education. For a long time, vocational schools have been perceived as havens for the "losers" of the

Chinese education system, with vocational students representing a group of "problematic students" due to the frequent association teachers make between poor academic performance and misbehavior (Ling 2015). Vocational students are also labeled as "stupid and lazy" (Woronov 2015), as they are perceived to have failed in completing their school tasks due to a lack of effort, leading to stigmatization at the individual level.

To sum up, Existing research on underachieving students has predominantly adopted a macro-structural perspective, emphasizing how educational institutions and broader social structures contribute to the reproduction of social inequality. Studies informed by cultural reproduction have explored how institutional mechanisms, such as school tracking, curriculum design, and assessment policies, reinforce existing social hierarchies (Reay 2006; MacLeod 2009). However, while these studies provide valuable insights into systemic constraints, they often neglect the lived experiences of underachieving students and their agency in navigating the education system. Additionally, research applying the meritocracy framework has primarily focused on higher education, examining university admissions and social mobility (Liu 2011; Yao, Zhang, and Cheng 2024), thereby overlooking its impact on primary and secondary education, where meritocratic evaluation and selection mechanisms may exacerbate early educational marginalization. Given that meritocracy is deeply embedded in school structures from an early stage, further research is needed to examine how it shapes the educational trajectories of younger students, particularly those who struggle academically.

## Methods

This study selects students from vocational high schools as the research subjects to explore their learning experiences and school life before entering vocational high school. In China's schools, especially in primary and secondary schools, the criteria for defining underachievers are relatively straightforward: low exam scores. However, there is no clear standard for how low a score or ranking qualifies a student as an underachiever. Given the educational dividing system in China, students ranked in the bottom 30% to 50% (with varying proportions across different provinces and cities) in the High School Entrance Exam (HSEE) cannot enter regular high schools after graduating from junior high. Students who enter regular high schools have a greater opportunity to pursue higher education, which secures their upward mobility (Yang 2006), while other students are often perceived as "educational failures" (Lixu 2004). In other words, students who fall into the vocational education track are systematically labeled as "bad students."

In a vocational high school in Beijing, this study employed a convenience sampling method to select 12 students for one-on-one in-depth interviews, with an average interview time of 90 minutes for each participant. The sample consisted of six male and six female students, aged between 16 and 18, with seven students newly entering grade 10. All participants enrolled in vocational high school due to their low performance on the high school entrance examination. However, despite their academic struggles, all had prior experience with extracurricular tutoring, with their families investing significant financial resources in these supplementary lessons. Each student's tutoring expenses exceeded 10,000 RMB (approximately 1,400 USD), while three participants reported that their parents had spent several hundred thousand RMB

(approximately 40,000–70,000 USD) on their tutoring. Most participants came from working-class families, with household monthly incomes ranging between 10,000 and 20,000 RMB (approximately 1,400–2,800 USD). However, two participants had a higher socioeconomic background, with family incomes exceeding 40,000 RMB (approximately 5,500 USD) per month. Among the 12 participants, two had divorced parents, one had lost her father, and six were only children. Additionally, seven students had had temporarily withdrawn from school during their junior high school years. The interview content primarily focused on retrospective discussions, covering participants' schooling experiences, teacher-student relationships, and peer relationships. With participants' consent, the researcher audio-recorded the interviews, transcribed them verbatim, and proofread the transcripts. Any identifying information, such as students' names, was anonymized.

The interview data analysis process was facilitated by Nvivo 12, a software tool specifically designed for qualitative data analysis, and thematic analysis (Clarke and Braun 2013) was used as a framework for data analysis. The analysis followed a multi-stage approach, beginning with data familiarization and line-by-line coding, where both inductive and deductive coding strategies were employed. Initial codes were categorized into broader themes based on prevalence, significance, and internal coherence, resulting in three overarching themes: Individual Level: Internalized Pressure and Voluntary Abandonment, School Level: Discriminatory Treatment and Deprivation of Opportunities, and Family Level: Academic Supremacy and Emotional Neglect. For instance, in the case of individual-level pressures, initial codes included "self-imposed pressure," "perceived failure," and "role expectations within the family." In school-level experiences, codes such as "teacher bias," "bullying," and "exclusion from academic opportunities" were identified. Similarly, in family-level dynamics, codes emerged around "parental disappointment," "academic comparison," and "emotional neglect." NVivo's node classification and clustering tools facilitated theme refinement, while thematic saturation and reflexivity ensured analytical rigor and reliability.

## Results

In an education system dominated by meritocracy and a society that highly values academic achievement, the experience of being labeled an underachiever is far from pleasant. These students face the pressure of being labeled as "underachievers" at school, which can lead them to internalize this stress and even voluntarily forgo certain opportunities. At school, they are more likely to experience discriminatory treatment from teachers and bullying from peers related to their low academic performance. In their families, they may also lack parental support, endure constant comparisons, and in some cases, suffer domestic violence.

### *Individual Level: Internalized Pressure and Voluntary Abandonment*

Underachieving students tend to internalize meritocratic standards, using them to endure or rationalize the harm they experience. Xuan's grades placed him in the best class, consistently ranking in the top ten in seventh grade. His teachers were confident he'd qualify for a key regular high school. However, his performance began to suffer

when he had to study at home during COVID-19. With no supervision, he initially followed online classes but soon lost focus, struggled with poor interaction, and started skipping assignments. By the time he returned to school, he was falling behind and feeling demoralized; his teachers' disappointment and the sight of former peers surpassing him deepened his stress. Eventually, Xuan refused to attend school, isolating himself for a year and a half despite his father's and teachers' encouragement. When he finally returned to take the high school entrance exam, his scores were only for entry into a vocational high school. Reflecting on that "dark" period, Xuan explained his refusal to attend school in this way.

> I put too much pressure on myself then and felt that I had let down my teachers and family. I thought that if I didn't work hard, I was essentially freeloading at home. I believed that everyone in the family had to contribute, and during this stage, my role was to study, graduate, find a job, and then support the family. However, my grades were poor, and I wouldn't be able to find a good job in the future. In this situation, I would still need to eat, which meant there was just one more mouth to feed at home without contributing anything.

Meritocratic ideology not only influences the broader educational system but also profoundly affects individual cognition and behavior. Xuan recognizes the importance of grades, which makes it difficult for him to accept becoming a "bad student." His concern about becoming a burden to his family reflects his belief that his value is tied to his academic performance.

However, after entering vocational high school, the influence of meritocratic ideology did not disappear. Although the academic pressure was significantly reduced and the course content was relatively simple, Xuan did not feel relieved. On the contrary, he felt that he had "*become stupid*." Despite consistently ranking first in every exam, he attributed his success to the courses' simplicity and his classmates' poor performance. About a year after enrolling, Xuan refused to attend school again.

Underachieving students also develop an internal motivation to give up voluntarily. However, unlike the self-abandonment driven by structural exclusion or limited resources discussed in previous research, participants in this study conferred righteousness to their abandonment.

Han comes from a relatively affluent socioeconomic background, and with the help of her family's resources, she was able to enroll in the best junior high school and the top class in her area. When Han first started school, her lively and outgoing personality was recognized by her homeroom teacher, and appointed as the class monitor. However, she could not shake the psychological burden of the mismatch between being a low-achieving student and holding the position of the class monitor, and eventually decided to give up the position.

> The homeroom teacher assumed that any student in the top class would have good grades. Since I was outgoing, he chose me as the class monitor. But being the class monitor was stressful for me because, in reality, my grades were at the bottom of the class, ranking around fourth from last. It felt inappropriate for someone with low grades to be the class monitor, and some classmates even made fun of me. Later, we got a new homeroom teacher who didn't know much about our class. When he asked who the

> class monitor was, I stayed quiet. The new homeroom teacher, thinking there was no class monitor, picked someone else for the role. I felt relieved that things turned out that way.

Han's voluntary resignation from the class monitor position was rooted in her acceptance of meritocratic principles. She believed that the role should be assigned to a more capable peer, specifically one with better academic performance. In the meritocracy-dominated stage of basic education, Han accepted the legitimacy of using academic performance as the sole measure of ability, entirely overlooking her own strengths in non-cognitive skills, such as the personality traits that initially led the teacher to choose her for the role.

At the critical juncture of regular and vocational tracking, most underachievers will, from a psychological perspective, consciously forgo their opportunity to enter the regular education track before the HSEE. In ninth grade, Yang, whose grades were slightly below average, struggled to decide whether to give up on taking the HSEE. The homeroom teacher's repeated persuasion made Yang lose confidence in her chances of succeeding in the Dividing System. After a monthly exam, Yang found a justified reason for her decision to give up.

> We were assigned exam rooms based on our previous rankings during the monthly exam. I noticed that some students seated in front of me, had already gone for interviews at vocational high schools. That made me think I might as well give up on the HSEE too. I didn't want to take the risk since I wasn't confident about achieving the requirements of regular high schools.

This mindset wasn't uncommon among participants. Some underachieving students even viewed the homeroom teacher's persuasion as having a positive significance based on this reasoning. Quan viewed the homeroom teacher's persuasion as a sign of the teacher's responsibility. He felt that the teacher was offering practical advice tailored to his situation for his future development. After all, Quan believed that, given his academic performance, even if he managed to enter a regular high school through the HSEE, it would be difficult for him to get into a university. This aligned with the teacher's warning that choosing a regular high school would only be a "waste of time and money" for him.

In this study, the participants' voluntary decision to forgo the opportunity to compete for admission to regular high schools differs from the institutional self-abandonment described in previous research. Research has found that the children of migrant workers in public schools often experience institutional exclusion, leading them to resist learning and adopt a form of "self-abandonment" as a means of rebellion (Ding and Wang 2017). Additionally, in the context of insufficient educational resources and poor teaching quality, some students engage in behaviors that reflect "resistance without counterculture" to express their dissatisfaction with what they perceive as their schools' meaningless management and curriculum (Ling 2015). However, in this study, the self-abandonment of underachieving students is framed as a justified "sacrifice." They were not systematically denied the opportunity to participate in the HSEE, but chose to self-abandon for the legitimate reason that poor grades should not be a waste of resources. This represents a form of righteous self-abandonment.

Ziao's voluntary abandonment experience demonstrates justice and emotion, as he chose to skip the English exam during the HSEE out of loyalty to his homeroom teacher. In junior high school, he was the typical "troublemaker": he never did his homework, slept in class, frequently got into fights, and even once chased his art teacher around the playground with a bench. To Ziao, his homeroom teacher was like a reliable older brother who "protected" him. In return, Ziao took on all the chores in the teacher's office for three years, including cleaning the office, fetching meals from the cafeteria for the teacher, getting water from the water room, and moving things around.

> My homeroom teacher truly cared for me. Without him, I would have gotten a lot of punishments in junior high school. For example, once I had an argument with a boy in the water boiler room on the second floor of the school building, and I kicked him in the stomach and he fell out of the window onto the playground. When the homeroom teacher arrived at the scene, he knew that the other boy had provoked me first, so he aimed to downplay the situation. In the end, my dad compensated the boy twenty thousand yuan, and the teacher didn't punish me but made me clean the classroom for a month.

As the HSEE approached, Ziao made an early decision to skip the English exam. This choice meant giving up the chance to pursue an academic education, but Ziao justified it as a righteous act to protect his homeroom teacher's work performance.

> My homeroom teacher was our English teacher, and I knew that if I scored particularly low, it would definitely affect him. My parents also agreed, they felt that my homeroom teacher had already helped me out of many troubles. I would feel embarrassed if I did not do well and lower the class's average English score.

Ziao's decision to skip the exam was closely related to the care he had received from his homeroom teacher over the years, highlighting the significant role of the emotional capital the teacher had accumulated. Emotional capital is often considered a resource more commonly held by women, particularly in mothers' emotional investment in their children's education within the family (Reay 2000). However, in this study, it is evident that emotional capital also plays a significant role within the public sphere of the school environment. Nowotny, building on Bourdieu's concept of social capital, defines emotional capital as knowledge, contacts, relations, and access to emotionally valuable skills and assets (Nowotny 2018). Allatt expanded this concept by including emotional resources such as care, attention, concern, time investment, support, and patience, all of which can accumulate over time (Allatt 1993). In Ziao's view, without the care and protection from his homeroom teacher, he might have been disciplined or even suspended by the school long ago. Therefore, his voluntary abandonment carries a strong sense of righteousness, as it serves as a repayment to his teacher. Whether the teacher's care for Ziao was an intentional strategy—using loyalty to better manage a "troublemaker" like him—remains unclear. However, what is certain is that the teacher's accumulated emotional capital paid off, ensuring that Ziao's behavior would not negatively impact the teacher's work performance. Thus, Ziao's abandonment can be seen as an emotionally driven decision, a type of voluntary renunciation that might be less likely to occur among high-achieving students.

For these participants, escape may have become a common strategy for coping with the pressures of meritocratic education. In this study, seven out of twelve interviewees

had voluntarily or involuntarily taken a leave of absence during middle school, with durations ranging from one semester to two years. The primary reasons for their leave included mental health issues (two cases of depression), difficulties in school adjustment (two cases), excessive academic pressure (two cases), and physical health concerns (one case). This collective phenomenon of "escape" not only reflects the structural oppression that meritocracy imposes on disadvantaged students within the educational field but also exposes the absence of an effective support system—when faced with adversity, taking a leave of absence appears to be a crucial form of self-preservation for these students. Drawing on Scott's (1985) theory of "weapons of the weak," this seemingly passive act of withdrawal can be understood as a form of implicit resistance by marginalized groups against the alienation imposed by the education system.

### *School Level: Discriminatory Treatment and Deprivation of Opportunities*

In basic education, students labeled as "bad students" often face a series of discriminatory treatments. The testing system constructs typically, poor-performing students as a demoralized group, with low scores associated with moral deficiencies (Woronov 2011). Teachers tend to attribute students' academic failures to personal shortcomings such as stupidity, laziness, and lack of willpower or ability, rather than considering structural factors (Willis 2017). As a result, underachieving students may be subjected to more humiliating treatment by teachers as a punishment for their "laziness" and may even be considered undeserving of romantic relationships or friendships.

Han was repeatedly made to stand outside the classroom by her physics teacher due to her poor performance in physics, where she was forced to do her assignments on the windowsill. Additionally, her homeroom teacher privately urged Han's boyfriend to break up with her.

> Our homeroom teacher, who also taught English, was biased against me. He assumed that I was a bad student because of my weak English. At the time, I was in a relationship, and my boyfriend had good English grades. When the homeroom teacher found out, he spoke to my boyfriend twice, telling him that my poor grades would hold him back and urging him to break up with me.

Ran's social life was also interfered with by her homeroom teacher. She was a cheerful and outgoing girl, well-liked by her classmates, and many of the top-ranking students were willing to befriend her and even help her with her studies. However, because her academic performance was near the bottom of the class, the homeroom teacher believed that her poor grades would negatively affect her friends.

> My friends were particularly good in their studies, so the homeroom teacher called them away for a chat and told them that I was a "poisoned apple," and that if they continued to play with me, none of them could pass the HSEE. Another time, he called my friend's mother and said, 'Why does your kid always wait for Ran to leave together after school?'

Ran was stigmatized as a "poisonous apple" by her teacher, which seems to be related to Lazear's "bad apple" mechanism. Lazear argues that one or a few low-ability students in a class can have negative effects on the entire class (Lazear 2001), a view supported by other studies (Huang and Zhu 2020). If homeroom teachers believe in

this mechanism, it's not surprising that they treat "bad students" differently and may even encourage other students to isolate low-performing peers. This practice, which to some extent contradicts professional ethics and educational equality, is widespread in real schools.

Teachers who treat both high-achieving and low-achieving students equally are seen as outliers. For example, Bo described his favorite teacher in junior high this way:

> I liked my English teacher the most because he was the only teacher who cared about me. When I asked him a question, he would answer it. He was an out-of-the-box teacher, unlike all the other teachers who ignored me due to my poor grades, he was willing to respond to me.

It is important to note that when teachers legitimize discriminatory treatment, it can lead to bullying of underachieving students by their peers. In the fourth grade, Zhao transferred to a better elementary school at his father's arrangement. However, the improved educational resources brought him not academic success, but a nightmarish experience of bullying.

> The new homeroom teacher disliked me from the start. He would often berate me in front of the entire class, saying my test scores were below average and that I was dragging down the class's overall performance. As a result, the other students' perception of me worsened. It began with one boy kicking me whenever he passed by during breaks. I didn't know how to react, so I did nothing. Because I didn't fight back, more and more students started to join in, until there were 12 of them. Later on, some students would throw paper balls at me during class. The teacher saw this but only scolded me, believing I was the one disrupting the class. By fifth grade, the bullying escalated—they didn't just hit and kick me, they tore up my textbooks and vandalized my desk. For those three years, my clothes were never clean, and I cried almost every day.

Zhao's difficult situation continued until his final year of elementary school. It wasn't until his uncle, who was a leader at the local police station, was invited to give a speech at the school that things began to change. After that, the homeroom teacher's attitude toward Zhao softened, and his classmates gradually stopped bullying him. Reflecting on his experience, Zhao is clear about what happened: "*The homeroom teacher was the most at fault. If the teacher hadn't condoned it, how would the other students have dared to treat me like that?*" However, the damage caused by that bullying experience was irreparable for Zhao. After entering junior high school, determined to avoid being bullied again, he started associating with people outside of school, forming cliques and gangs. As a result, his once decent grades plummeted, and he ultimately had no choice but to enroll in a vocational high school.

Yang was also bullied and isolated by classmates during junior high. When she tried to seek help from her homeroom teacher, all she received was the question, "Why do they only bully you and not others?" Feeling helpless and unsupported, Yang developed symptoms of stiffness in her limbs and an inability to move, eventually being diagnosed with depression and taking a leave of absence from school. However, when reflecting on her situation at that time, Yang attributed it simply to her "poor coping ability."

Furthermore, discriminatory treatment also manifests in the educational opportunities students receive when faced with the academic-vocational streaming process. China's educational dividing system is a policy that channels students into either the regular education track or the vocational education track based on their HSEE scores. However,

in practice, many underachieving students face pressure from their homeroom teachers before the HSEE, encouraging them to forgo the HSEE and choose a vocational school early. Homeroom teachers may use repeated persuasion, take up students' class time, and even require students to sign agreements to pressure underachievers into accepting their "fate" of being excluded from mainstream education early on. Ran's story reflects this situation.

> At the beginning of my third year in junior high, my homeroom teacher started pressuring me to choose the vocational education track. He wouldn't let me attend classes and instead made me sit in his office, constantly talking about the benefits of choosing vocational high schools. He wanted me to sign an agreement to give up the HSEE. This way, I wouldn't bring down the class's average score.

Most underachieving students face sustained pressure from their teachers before the HSEE, which can impact their mental well-being and even infringe on their rights and educational opportunities. Meanwhile, their higher-performing peers only need to focus on their studies and fully prepare for the exam.

Another, more subtle form of differentiation—ability grouping—also affects the educational resources and opportunities available to underachieving students. Nearly all participants experienced being placed in low-ability classes during their junior high school years. This was often accompanied by inferior teaching staff, limited educational resources, and even completely laissez-faire teaching arrangements.

In eighth grade, Xiaoyu experienced a reorganization of classes and was placed in the lowest level, Class C. Her former teachers were reassigned to teach Classes A or B, causing her to undergo a long adjustment period. She felt completely unable to understand the new teacher's lessons. A similar situation occurred with Ran. The reorganization of classes in eighth grade caused her to lose her favorite homeroom teacher, who was the best in the entire grade and thus reassigned to teach the high-ability classes. Furthermore, in ninth grade, Ran was forcibly placed into the Vocational-school class by her teachers, who believed she could not get into a regular high school. In the Vocational-school class, almost no teachers genuinely taught the content during class, and students were even allowed to "legally" arrive late and leave early.

> In ninth grade, I was assigned to the vocational-school class, which had almost no classes and where the students just watched movies every day. During that semester, I looked like a fool because I arrived at school at 9:00 a.m. every day and started watching movies, while the other students in regular classes arrived at school at 7:50 a.m. After lunch, our teachers let us go home from school at 3:00 p.m., but the students in regular classes would not be dismissed until 9:00 p.m. During lessons, most teachers wouldn't teach us anything, only a few responsible teachers would hand out papers for us to do, but they wouldn't take our cell phones, so we'd use them to cheat and they didn't care.

Another participant, Meng, although not forced into the special class like that, was inexplicably assigned to the music class in ninth grade—a class composed entirely of students with musical talents, except for him. It was evident that the teachers assigned Meng, who had no musical talents, to the music class to avoid lowering the average exam scores. The teaching arrangements in the music class differed from those in the regular classes because students with special talents could enter regular high schools

with lower exam scores. However, for Meng, this arrangement was tantamount to an early declaration of his failure in the HSEE.

However, underachieving students are not entirely passive within the school environment. They actively seek peer support and adjust their behavioral strategies to improve their circumstances. While struggling students may experience peer bullying, the peer group simultaneously serves as an essential resource for obtaining support and constructing agency. In this study, some participants developed close friendships to gain emotional support. For example, Ran maintained strong interactions with a group of friends who continued to stand by her despite the homeroom teacher labeling her a "poisoned apple." This allowed Ran to redefine her self-worth through her perceived social popularity. This phenomenon aligns with Goffman's (2009) theory of stigma management, which suggests that individuals resist negative labels by emphasizing other strengths. Another illustrative case is Yang, who, after experiencing peer isolation and developing depression, actively sought comfort from friends. Encouraged by them, she eventually fought back against her bullies, an experience that she later viewed as a significant milestone in her personal growth. This highlights the protective role of social support in mental well-being. Research indicates that students who experience school bullying are more likely to adopt active coping strategies—such as resisting rather than withdrawing—when they receive peer support (Holt and Espelage 2007).

It is also noteworthy that some students adopt more proactive defensive strategies. A case in point is Zhao, who, upon entering junior high school, began "forming cliques" and established himself as "Brother Zhao," a figure feared by his peers. While this behavior may appear aggressive, it functioned as a coping mechanism to navigate his marginalized position in school, reflecting a distinct way for underachieving students to preserve their self-esteem. Willis's (2017) study on working-class "lads" found that marginalized students often develop anti-school subcultures—such as challenging authority and embracing violence—as a means of maintaining self-respect. Similarly, Zhao's transformation into "Brother Zhao" can be seen as both an imitation of existing bullying structures and a self-protection strategy.

### *Family Level: Academic Supremacy and Emotional Neglect*

The experience of being constantly compared to others is a recurring theme among underachieving students. Within the family, academic performance becomes a primary metric of self-worth, shaping parental expectations and children's self-perceptions. Jie, for instance, comes from a highly educated family where both parents and grandparents hold undergraduate or graduate degrees, and her cousins excel academically. However, Jie struggled in school and ultimately entered a vocational high school after failing to secure a place in an academic track.

> They (my parents) not only dislike me going to this school (vocational high school), but they don't like me. I feel like I've made them feel embarrassed. Both my parents are elites in their fields, and I'm just a failure. They always talk about how excellent their colleagues' kids are—same age as me, much better grades, getting into top high schools—while I'm just not worth mentioning.

The persistent pressure of comparison has led Jie to develop conflicting coping mechanisms. When confronted with direct comparisons, she retaliates aggressively, rejecting her parents' authority: "If they're so great, make them your child instead. If you don't want me, let's end this father-daughter relationship!" Yet, in moments of solitude, she resorts to self-deprecation, calling herself a "low-level human" and habitually apologizing.

Miao's experience reflects a different manifestation of parental disappointment. He perceives that his parents have shifted their expectations entirely to his younger brother:

> Actually, I haven't done well academically since elementary school. Then my parents had my younger brother, and it feels like they've given up on me.

Meritocracy, as a widely recognized societal value, establishes a positive connection between merit and social expectations, such as income, power, and prestige (Krauze and Slomczynski 1985). However, the influence of meritocracy extends beyond talent selection and social management. At the family level, particularly regarding parental educational expectations, the logic of meritocracy plays a significant role. A child's perceived excellence largely shapes parents' perceptions and evaluations of them, which in turn affects the child's self-view.

Additionally, parenting styles are also influenced by meritocratic pressures. In participants' accounts, their parents prioritize schooling and academic performance even more than their mental health and physical well-being. In seventh grade, Ying suffered severe cyberbullying because her classmates believed she was "unworthy of liking the same celebrity as they did." Without her knowledge, she was added to an online chatroom where about half of her classmates gathered and subjected her to hours of relentless verbal abuse. Ying was later diagnosed with major depression. She told her father she didn't want to go to school, but he refused, fearing it would affect her studies. Her grandmother was also concerned that missing classes might lead to her being held back a grade and becoming the subject of neighborhood gossip, so she insisted that Ying return to school.

Reluctantly, Ying continued attending school. Not long after, she took some sleeping pills between classes.

> No one at school cared about me, so I took a ten-day supply of sleeping pills by myself. I just felt like I didn't matter, like the world would be the same whether I was in it or not. It all seemed so meaningless. Later, a classmate noticed something was wrong with me, and the teacher called my dad, who took me home. My dad said that getting my stomach pumped would be really painful, so he didn't take me to the hospital. When we got home, I slept for more than a day. For the next week, my hands couldn't stop shaking uncontrollably.

Under the dominance of meritocratic ideals in education, Ying interpreted her suffering as a consequence of her poor grades, making her feel unworthy of support. This internalization of failure, reinforced by both family and school environments, ultimately led her to self-harm as a means of escape.

Beyond emotional neglect, some students also experienced extreme parental control and physical punishment linked to academic underperformance. Reflecting on experiences from elementary to middle school, Jie described herself as her parents' "*puppet on a string*." To control her, her father would lock her in her room all day on weekends

to prevent her from "goofing off," allowing her only to do homework. In middle school, when she suddenly developed a fever at school, her mother picked her up but scolded her the entire time, believing it was wrong to skip class over a "minor illness." After that, even if she felt unwell at school, she avoided asking the teacher to call her parents. Moreover, as her grades continued to fall short of parental expectations, Jie's social life became increasingly restricted, and she even endured physical punishment.

> I often get slapped or kicked for talking back. Once, I went to celebrate our class monitor's birthday, and everyone was playing a game of "Truth or Dare," so I recorded a video. Later, when I got home, my dad went through my phone, saw the video, and hit me. He took scissors and cut my hair. When I tried to protect my hair with my hands, he ended up cutting my hand instead.

While meritocratic discourse legitimizes educational expectations, these experiences highlight how broader socio-cultural factors—such as authoritarian parenting norms, intergenerational discipline practices, and societal pressures surrounding reputation—intersect with the ideology of academic supremacy. In the family domain, underachieving students may experience emotional neglect and control, which are closely related to authoritarian parenting. Previous studies have demonstrated that parenting styles in Asian families are shaped by collectivist cultural orientations, often characterized by authoritarian educational practices (Yim 2022). These practices emphasize conformity to social norms—acknowledging and adhering to societal expectations, norms, and practices—as well as the attainment of family recognition through achievement, where individual success reflects family status (Kim, Atkinson, and Yang 1999; Ng and Wang 2019). Among the four parenting styles proposed by Baumrind (1978), authoritarian parenting is distinguished by strict disciplinary control, a strong emphasis on obedience, and insensitivity to children's emotional needs (Ang and Goh 2006; Rudy and Grusec 2006). Existing research further suggests that parents in Asian societies typically demand a high degree of obedience from their children and interact with family members based on hierarchical, status-oriented rules (Dwairy and Achoui 2010).

Moreover, the manifestation of meritocracy within the family domain is closely intertwined with Chinese socio-cultural values. Chinese parents place significant emphasis on academic achievement when disciplining their children (Chao 1996; Shek and Chan 1999). Amy Chua, an Asian American mother, asserted that her high expectations for her children's academic success aligned with the traditional Chinese cultural emphasis on educational achievement. Consequently, some scholars have criticized Chinese parents for pressuring their children to attain high exam scores, thereby fostering performance anxiety (Tong and Lam 2011; Ng, Pomerantz, and Deng 2014) and emphasizing the instrumental value of college admission in their children's lives (Wang and Lu 2016). Many studies attribute this cultural value to the historical imperial examination (*keju*) system and the modern-day National College Entrance Examination (*gaokao*) (Tao and Hong 2014; Qu, Pomerantz, and Deng 2016; Wang and Rao 2019; Wang 2022). Scholars argue that this reflects a pragmatic orientation toward education in Chinese society, where education is regarded as a primary means of upward social mobility (Li 2006; Tao and Hong 2014).

The responses of underachieving students to academic supremacy, emotional neglect, and strict parental control can also be understood as forms of resistance. Previous

research has interpreted children's disobedience toward their parents as a form of resistance, as it reflects their ability to assert autonomy within parent–child relationships (Kuczynski and Hildebrandt 1997). Scholars have distinguished between skillful resistance strategies—such as polite refusal, negotiation, and reasoning—and unskilled resistance, which includes direct defiance (Kuczynski and Kochanska 1990; Power et al. 1994). Moreover, covert or indirect resistance has been recognized as an alternative strategy when open defiance is deemed unwise. In such cases, children may signal that their compliance is involuntary or engage in superficial compliance as a means of implicit resistance (Kuczynski 2003). In this study, participants rarely engaged in direct defiance when facing parental or familial judgment. Most, like Ying and Miao, employed more passive and implicit means to maintain their sense of agency. Constrained by the logic of meritocracy and the cultural emphasis on academic achievement, they struggled to openly resist these pressures and instead resorted to indirect resistance, such as feigning indifference or even engaging in self-harm. Parkin and Kuczynski (2012) notes that adolescents rarely engage in outright defiant rejection; rather, they are more likely to seek solutions that take parental expectations into account. Additionally, adolescents may resort to covert deviance as a means of achieving their goals or express cognitive resistance in a concealed manner (Goffman 1961; Ashforth and Mael 1998; Parkin and Kuczynski 2012). However, some participants, such as Jie, consistently refused to fully submit to parental authority despite facing strict parental control. Jie's persistent verbal retorts to her parents resemble unskilled resistance, which often leads to more negative consequences, such as corporal punishment. Research has linked unskilled resistance to negative outcomes in early childhood (Crockenberg and Litman 1990; Drabick, Strassberg, and Kees 2001) and adolescence (Cavell and Strand 2003). In the context of this study, such direct resistance may stem from underachieving students' lack of the cognitive or social resources necessary to counteract the dominant cultural values and parental authority they confront.

However, these expressions of agency are highly constrained by structural forces, including rigid familial hierarchies, deeply embedded meritocratic values, and broader societal expectations. While students exercise their agency in resisting or adapting to these pressures, their actions often fail to disrupt the dominant educational discourse or alter parental perceptions, leading to a cycle of resistance, frustration, conformity, and self-doubt. For instance, the participants in this study did not blame their parents for the harm they experienced; instead, they attributed their experiences to their own "insufficiency." This suggests that in highly regulated educational and familial environments, student agency is not absent but rather manifests in restricted, implicit, and often self-destructive ways.

It is essential to interpret the parental control behaviors in this study within their specific sociocultural context. Chao (1994) has highlighted the cultural differences between Western and Chinese conceptualizations of "control" and "love." In the Chinese cultural context, the term "control," carries a dual meaning: it not only signifies management and discipline but also conveys a deeper sense of care and nurturance. A growing body of research suggests that Chinese parents' controlling behaviors are often rooted in a desire to protect their children from harm and to facilitate their success (Ang and Goh 2006; Mousavi and Juhari 2019). This parenting approach integrates

expressions of affection, responsiveness to children's needs, active involvement in their development, and comprehensive support—elements that contrast sharply with the predominantly negative interpretations of parental control in Western research (Sorkhabi 2005; Xu et al. 2005).

## Conclusion and Discussion

This study, grounded in the theoretical perspective of elitism, employs in-depth interviews to systematically examine the educational and lived experiences of underachieving students during their basic education years. The research aims to uncover the conditions of this group within China's educational environment and the multifaceted impacts they endure. Findings indicate that despite their lower academic performance, these students have nonetheless internalized the dominant meritocratic evaluation standards. This internalization results in significant negative effects on their personal development, school experiences, and family interactions.

At the individual level, underachieving students internalize meritocratic values as a self-evaluation system, measuring their self-worth through academic performance, which often leads to tendencies of self-denial. Meanwhile, the meritocratic logic of distributing resources, opportunities, and rewards based on individual ability profoundly reshapes their cognitive framework and behavioral patterns, fostering a morally justified mechanism of voluntary abandonment. Based on their academic performance, these students proactively relinquish class leadership positions, forgo opportunities to enter regular high schools, and even opt out of the High School Entrance Examination (HSEE). Unlike existing studies that attribute "self-abandonment" to institutional exclusion (Ding and Wang 2017) or a lack of educational resources (Ling 2015), this study finds that low-achieving students construct their voluntary abandonment as a legitimate act of "sacrifice"—not only accepting this choice but also imbuing it with moral justification.

At the school level, underachieving students are often inevitably subjected to negative labeling associated with moral judgment (Woronov 2011). These students are frequently stereotyped as "lazy" or "not putting in enough effort," which in turn exposes them to a series of discriminatory practices based on academic performance—ranging from persistent negative evaluations by teachers to outright bullying. More notably, such biases extend to the implicit deprivation of educational opportunities. Although no explicit institutional restrictions exist, cognitive biases lead teachers to be more inclined to persuade these students to forgo general high school in favor of vocational education or to place them in lower-track classes through ability grouping mechanisms. This form of structural discrimination ultimately results in a mechanism of opportunity deprivation for so-called "bad students."

At the familial level, academic performance significantly shapes students' perceptions of their parents' attitudes. Consistent with previous research, academically struggling students are highly aware of their parents' emphasis on academic achievement. Adolescents in mainland China generally face intense parental pressure to excel in school (Quach et al. 2015). As a result, underachieving students may experience emotional neglect or behavioral control within the family. For instance, these students often endure strict parental oversight and apply pressure through frequent comparisons

with higher-achieving peers. Furthermore, the influence of broader sociocultural values reinforces this pressure, trapping struggling students in a cycle of self-doubt and frustration. In such an environment, parental expectations, rather than serving as motivation, may instead exacerbate students' sense of inadequacy, further alienating them from both their families and the education system.

Furthermore, underachieving students exhibit various forms of agency in response to the pressures of meritocratic education, yet their resistance remains highly constrained by structural forces. Many engage in withdrawal as a means of self-preservation, reflecting both the psychological toll of academic demands and the absence of effective institutional support. Others rely on peer networks to construct alternative identities and sources of self-worth, demonstrating the dual role of peer relationships in both reinforcing exclusion and fostering resilience. Within the family, students employ indirect resistance strategies, such as superficial compliance or emotional withdrawal, to navigate strict parental expectations, though some engage in overt defiance, often leading to negative consequences. However, these forms of agency rarely disrupt dominant educational and societal norms. Instead, students frequently internalize their struggles as personal failure, highlighting the paradox of resistance within a rigid system—where attempts to assert autonomy often reinforce, rather than challenge, their marginalized position.

By focusing on underachieving students, the study highlights how meritocracy not only legitimizes the dominance of the academically successful but also stigmatizes those who fail to meet its standards. First, the research reveals how students internalize meritocratic values, leading them to perceive academic failure as a personal deficiency rather than a structural issue. This process aligns with elitist theories that emphasize the ideological power of meritocracy in justifying social hierarchy. The study further extends this discussion by showing how underachieving students, despite their marginalization, actively engage in forms of agency—whether through implicit resistance, peer support, or adaptation strategies—yet remain trapped within a system that defines success and legitimacy in narrow, exclusionary terms. Second, the study advances the understanding of elitism by illustrating how school structures and educators play a crucial role in maintaining elite advantages. While previous research on elitism has largely focused on institutional privileges and access to elite education, this study shifts attention to the ways in which the schooling process itself systematically marginalizes certain students. The implicit exclusion of underachieving students—whether through tracking mechanisms, biased teacher perceptions, or limited access to resources—demonstrates how the education system not only selects elites but also actively constructs non-elite identities. Finally, by incorporating insights from resistance theory, the study challenges the traditional view of elite formation as a purely top-down process. It shows that while disadvantaged students attempt to resist the system, their efforts often reinforce existing hierarchies rather than dismantle them. This dialectical tension between agency and structural constraint deepens the theoretical discourse on elitism by revealing how non-elites participate—consciously or unconsciously—in reproducing elite dominance.

Incorporating Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence provides a deeper understanding of the position of underachieving students within a meritocracy-driven education system. Symbolic violence leads individuals to accept the legitimacy of

dominant norms—even when these norms disadvantage them (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). By positioning academic success as the sole valid measure of worth, the education system ensures that underachieving students perceive their shortcomings as natural and justified rather than questioning the broader mechanisms that produce educational inequalities. Moreover, teachers, school policies, and institutional practices reinforce symbolic violence by subtly discouraging underachieving students from pursuing elite educational pathways. In particular, low teacher expectations and implicit biases direct certain students toward vocational education or nonacademic roles, depriving them of the same opportunities as their higher-achieving peers. This institutional marginalization extends beyond the school environment into the family sphere, where underachieving students often face emotional neglect and behavioral control. Parents, often unconsciously, reinforce dominant educational values, further embedding the legitimacy of meritocratic hierarchies in the students' self-perception.

It is crucial to clarify that the term "bad students" in this study is fundamentally a structural product of China's educational tracking system. According to data from the Ministry of Education, approximately 30% to 50% of junior high school graduates (with significant regional variations) are systematically tracked into vocational education based on their performance in the HSEE (*zhongkao*). This standardized, exam-driven selection mechanism objectively constructs a stigmatized student category, despite the fact that these students may possess unquantified strengths in areas such as cognitive ability and practical skills. Labeling theory (Becker 1963) provides a critical lens for understanding this phenomenon. When the education system assigns students the label of "underachievers" through institutionalized selection processes—including placement exams, teacher evaluations, and academic tracking—this constitutes a ritualized act of social classification (Goffman 2009). The imposition of such labels is often reinforced by multiple actors: teachers, under pressure to improve school performance metrics; parents, anxious about the credential-driven nature of social mobility; and the labor market, which continues to impose rigid educational qualifications as a prerequisite for employment. Once imposed, these labels may trigger a self-fulfilling prophecy (Rosenthal and Jacobson 1968), wherein students subjected to persistently low expectations gradually internalize an identity of "academic incompetence," leading them to exhibit disengaged or self-defeating behaviors. Consequently, the identity of underachieving students may originate as an externally imposed label but can, through ongoing social interactions, become internalized as a self-perception.

This study has the following limitations. First, although this study attempts to reveal the subjective agency of underachieving students in the meritocratic education system, it only shows the process of their being held hostage to a certain extent. In the future, the study can further introduce the perspective of resistance theory to explore the resistance strategies and practices of underachieving students in the Chinese educational context. Second, the study mainly focused on the impact of the identity of "bad students" and did not sufficiently explore institutional factors (e.g., the household registration system). Third, the data collection mainly relied on students' self-reports and lacked the complementary perspectives of teachers. And fourth, the study failed to adequately incorporate the perspective of social class analysis. Although this study

focuses on revealing the systemic harm of the meritocratic education system on underachieving students, which is not only reflected in the social class dimension, the social class perspective does provide a deeper analytical framework for understanding educational inequality. Future research should emphasize these neglected dimensions to more fully grasp the complex power relations in the educational arena.

## Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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