RESEARCH ARTICLE – Original Field Study

Education, Opportunity, and Choice in Diverse Chinese Settings: An Exploratory Field Inquiry

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Abstract

Building on my earlier review of social influences on gender differences in academic performance, I conducted an exploratory field inquiry in China to examine how factors identified in the Review appeared in a non-Western setting and in individual experiences. During the summer of 2026, the inquiry involved interviews, classroom observations, and a career-aspiration activity in Wuhan, Xishui, and Fengyan Village. The inquiry also included conversations with student and teacher volunteers from Shanghai.

Participants generally described the Gaokao as procedurally fair, but they also pointed to disparities in preparation, educational resources, and information. Several participants described stronger practical incentives associated with science pathways, including a wider range of university majors and career opportunities, even when students preferred or performed better in humanities subjects. Gender differences were less visible in formal educational participation before college but appeared more clearly in later stages, including college-major selection, career choices, and family roles.

Participants also identified socioeconomic differences between rural and urban settings, including financial resources, work-related migration by rural parents, extracurricular opportunities, and access to information. Feedback from parents and teachers, along with school evaluation practices, also appeared to shape students' confidence and perceptions of achievement.

The field study led to two concepts: **Opportunity to Discover**, the chance to encounter possible interests before making important choices, and **Negotiated Influence**, the process through which students weigh outside expectations against their own interests and circumstances. Together, these ideas led to a more interactive model that includes feedback from students to their social environment.

Keywords:

educational opportunity; Gaokao; student aspirations; academic choice; educational inequality; confidence and achievement; gender expectations; China

Introduction

My earlier literature review, *Social Influences on Gender Differences in Academic Performance: A Review*[1] (hereafter, the Review), examined how social factors, such as family, teachers, schools, cultural and socioeconomic conditions, and labor-market expectations, may contribute to gender differences in academic performance. The Review identified three limitations: 1) most of the research was based on Western settings; 2) there was a lack of research on more specific cultural and socioeconomic groups; and 3) few studies followed students over time.

These limitations inspired my field inquiry in China. I wanted to see how the mechanisms identified in the Review appeared in real-world settings and how the field evidence compared with the findings of the Review. I was particularly interested in understanding individual circumstances through conversations, which could reveal details that population-level research might miss.

I also did not want to treat China as one uniform setting. Therefore, I chose different field settings: a large city, a remote rural village, and small county towns. The groups were small and could not provide statistically generalizable results. Nevertheless, they could provide qualitative insight and raise questions for future study.

As I interviewed people and observed students, four questions became especially important: 1) how the Gaokao shapes educational opportunities and choices; 2) how school evaluation and teacher feedback affect confidence and perceptions of achievement; 3) how opportunities and choices differ across economic and geographic settings; and 4) where gender differences become most visible.

Methods

This qualitative field study, conducted during June–July 2026, involved interviews, impromptu conversations, classroom observations, and a career-aspiration activity. The inquiry was designed to develop a qualitative understanding of individual circumstances rather than establish general patterns. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and translated where necessary.

The fieldwork involved Central China Normal University in Wuhan, Hubei; a teaching volunteer program in Fengyan Village, Gongcheng, Guangxi; Xishui County, Hubei; and a group of student and teacher volunteers from Shanghai. Participants included students, volunteer program managers, teachers, and parents. Table 1 summarizes the field settings and the participants.

Table 1. Field Settings and Participants

Setting	Participants / context	Main evidence
CCNU / Wuhan	1 undergraduate; 1 graduate student; 1 university staff member	Gaokao; academic/career choice; educational opportunity; international exposure
Fengyan / Gongcheng	School-age students (Grades 1-7); volunteer program owner/manager; 2 local community members	Classroom observations; interviews; 41-student aspiration activity; place-based English teaching
Xishui	High-school teacher; retired elementary math teacher; parent; middle-school student; college student; recent graduate entering teaching	Subject choice; confidence; family/teacher influence; gender
Shanghai volunteers in Fengyan	4 middle-school students; 1 graduating high-school student; 1 teacher/team leader	Achievement; extracurricular exposure; aspirations; Gaokao

In Fengyan, a career-aspiration activity with 41 students collected students' drawings of their intended occupations and geographic preferences. Students were also interviewed about their drawings.

The Gaokao and China's Educational Context

China's National College Entrance Examination, or Gaokao (高考), is the principal pathway to ordinary academic undergraduate admission. In 2025, approximately 13.35 million students registered for the examination, while ordinary academic undergraduate programs enrolled about 5.04 million new students. Unlike the holistic admissions used by many U.S. colleges, college admission in China centers primarily on Gaokao scores and rankings, including whether students meet provincial admission-control lines for different categories of institutions. As historical context, competitive examinations also have deep roots in China through the imperial civil-service examination system, or keju (科举).[2,3]

Interviews with students and teachers raised several questions about this centrally important system, which are discussed in the following subsections.

Procedural Fairness, Unequal Preparation, and Science Pathways

This was one of the most frequently discussed questions in the fieldwork. On the one hand, participants described the Gaokao as offering a "relatively equal opportunity," as "one of the fairest parts of the education system," as the "best solution at the moment," or as "relatively fair in its procedure." According to Lulu, the manager of the Fengyan volunteer program, the Gaokao gives students a relatively equal opportunity to compete through the same examination. A rural student who is talented in mathematics, Chinese, English, or another subject can use that ability to earn a place at a university. Huo Minglu, a master's student in Management Science and Engineering at CCNU, echoed this view: students take the examination and compete for university places based largely on their scores and rankings. National data also show broad expansion in educational participation. In 2025, China's nine-year compulsory-education consolidation rate was 96.1%, the senior-secondary gross enrollment rate was 92.0%, and the higher-education gross enrollment rate was 61.3%.[3]

However, beneath this procedural fairness, the interviews revealed two complications: perceived advantages associated with science pathways and disparities in preparation and educational resources.

Huo Minglu perceived advantages associated with science pathways and believed that science students had access to a broader range of career opportunities. He also felt that humanities fields received relatively less attention and fewer resources. A mother from Xishui, who has two daughters, similarly argued that China's emphasis on rapid technological development can favor science-oriented pathways, which she viewed as unfair to her daughters because they were stronger in humanities subjects. Huo Minglu advocated for a better balance between science and humanities and less rigid boundaries between the two fields.

Teacher Qin pointed out, "The larger problem is not necessarily the examination itself. It is the unequal distribution of educational resources before students ever reach the examination." Zuo Qing, a graduating student at CCNU, similarly stated that differences in information, opportunities, and resources can make it difficult for rural students to compete at the same level as urban students, even though some outstanding rural students still enter elite universities. Historical evidence from Tsinghua University also showed disparities in elite college access: rural students made up 21.9% of the study sample in 2010 and 16.9% in 2016, while urban students' relative access was estimated at about 3.5–4.2 times that of rural students after adjustment for population shares.[11]

Policies have emerged over time to address unequal opportunities. Minority preparatory programs (少数民族预科班) provide additional admission pathways for eligible ethnic-minority students from designated areas, including Gongcheng, while Guangxi also provides additional Gaokao points under specified

eligibility conditions. In 2026, the Special-Post Teacher Plan (特岗教师计划) authorized the recruitment of 8,594 teachers for rural compulsory-education schools.[7,9]

Table 2. Main Questions Raised About Gaokao Fairness

Dimension	Evidence from the inquiry	Question raised
Procedural access	Participants described the Gaokao as relatively fair and based on a common examination, scores, and ranking.	How equal is the formal procedure?
Preparation	Teacher Qin and Zuo Qing described differences in schools, teachers, information, opportunities, and resources.	Do students reach the same examination with comparable preparation?
Science/humanities pathway	Huo Minglu and the Xishui mother described stronger resources or future opportunities associated with science.	Do subject pathways carry different practical incentives?
Targeted support	Minority preparatory programs, preferential policies, and the Special-Post Teacher Plan.	How do policies address unequal opportunities?

Why the Science Pathway?

For subject selection, Hubei and Guangxi use a 3+1+2 system in which Chinese, mathematics, and a foreign language are required. Students then choose either physics or history and two additional subjects from biology, geography, chemistry, and politics. Shanghai uses a 3+3 system. In addition to the three required subjects, students can choose any three of the other six subjects without first choosing between physics and history.[4–6]

Table 3. Gaokao Subject-Selection Structures Discussed in the Inquiry

Setting	Model	Required subjects	Additional subject choices
Hubei / Guangxi	3+1+2	Chinese, math, foreign language	Physics or history + 2 of biology, geography, chemistry, politics
Shanghai	3+3	Chinese, math, foreign language	Any 3 of politics, history, geography, physics, chemistry, biology

The science pathway became a recurring topic in the interviews, so I asked students and teachers why it was often viewed as the more practical choice. Teacher Zhou, a high-school Chinese teacher in Xishui, said that when students weigh personal interest against the possibility of higher Gaokao scores, they often give more weight to scores. She also described students as sometimes being in a passive position when making these choices because they "follow the crowd," which often means choosing the science pathway. Zipei, a recent university graduate, explained her own experience: "I chose the science pathway in high school and I really regretted it; that was not where my interests lay. Why did I do that? I think I was influenced by the prevailing view that the science pathway would offer more job opportunities and a wider selection of university majors. I also believed that, as a humanities-track student, I would need a higher score to enter the same university." Qiuzi, a rising college senior, echoed Zipei: "I originally really wanted to choose humanities, but I ended up with science because my parents, friends, and relatives convinced me that science would offer better career prospects."

Zuo Qing, a rising graduate student, offered her perspective: "China is leaning towards a collectivist society where people tend to refer to others' choices when they make their own choices."

Confidence and Meaning of Achievement

One theme that caught my attention throughout the interviews was how parents, teachers, and institutional practices affected students' confidence and perceptions of achievement.

Lulu pushed back on describing Fengyan students simply as "shy." She connected some students' reluctance to speak with confidence, family circumstances, and fear of being wrong. She explained that many students did not live with their parents and instead lived with relatives who did not always have time to listen closely to their concerns, which could make the students more cautious. "There is also a strong idea that every question has one standard answer. A student may know the answer to a question but still be afraid to speak because someone might make fun of the answer." She encouraged volunteers to welcome imagination and students' genuine thoughts.

Tongtong, a rising 9th grade middle school student, described the impact of her school's practice of posting exam rankings on bulletin boards. She felt proud when she performed well because others could see her result, but after weaker performance she tried to avoid the ranking board. She said, "I would like to have the ranking-board policy removed." Teacher Zhou similarly described school evaluation as "a very powerful mechanism." She felt that an excessive focus on test scores could overlook other abilities that students should have recognized. "When students thought of themselves as mediocre, they would feel sad and run into mental difficulties," she explained. "I would help the students discover their own unique strengths—talents that are not evaluated by the school but are still worth noticing."

A question was asked in the field study about achievement: "*Would receiving a perfect score still feel like an achievement if nobody else ever knew about it?"*

Tongtong, Qiuzi, and Zipei, who are all from a small town, answered "No" without hesitation. Tongtong said, "Every time I did well, I shared the good scores with my teachers and parents because I wanted them to be proud of me. If I had a perfect score and could not share it with them, I would find it meaningless." Zipei echoed Tongtong: "If I have nowhere to share my perfect score, such a perfect score would carry no value." The answers varied among the Shanghai students: two agreed with Tongtong, one said "yes," one was not sure, and one said "yes" but cautioned that such an achievement could bring greater pressure in the future.

Gender Expectations: From Formal Access to Downstream Choices

Not all participants acknowledged gender stereotypes in academics. Tongtong remembered teachers saying that boys were better at mathematics and telling boys to ask girls for help with Chinese, while Teacher Zhou pushed back on these ideas, arguing that such differences were shaped by social and cultural factors. She specifically rejected the idea that boys succeed because of talent while girls succeed mainly because of effort.

Gender disparities in formal educational participation have narrowed substantially over time. Women accounted for 23.4% of higher-education students in 1980 and 50.8% in 2024. Figure 1 shows this historical change.[8,16]

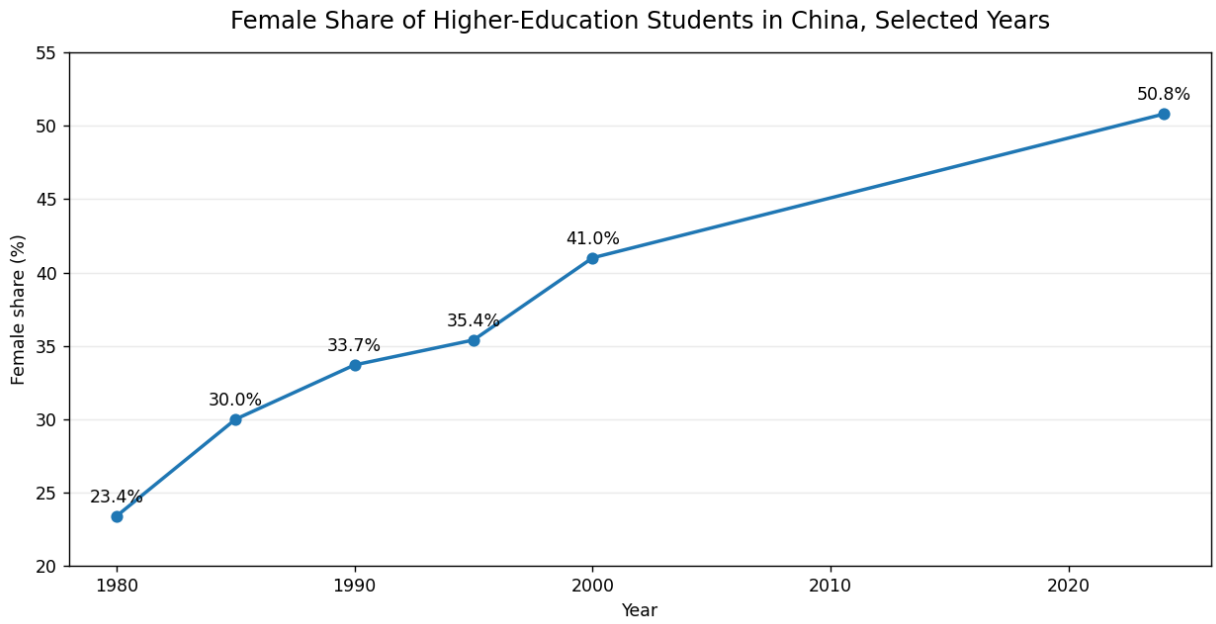


Figure 1. Female Share of Higher-Education Students in China, Selected Years (1980–2024)

Participants generally described gender differences in formal access to education as relatively small before college. Gender differences appeared more clearly at later stages, particularly in university-major selection, employment, career choices, and family roles. As one participant explained, “Before college, it was basically the same. We received the same education and faced the same Gaokao. Once in college, the differences became more obvious. Some majors will have more male students than others, or vice versa.” Both Qiuzi and Zipei agreed that gender differences were more prominent in the job market. Qiuzi also acknowledged that, as a girl, she felt more inclined to take responsibility for family matters. The Xishui mother, while emphasizing that the final decisions belonged to her daughters, said, “Because they are girls, I do hope that they find stable jobs and stay somewhere I can see them.” This view was echoed by other parent participants and by students’ descriptions of their own parents.

Teacher Qin also described the expectation that boys should travel farther for opportunities while girls remain closer to home as gradually weakening. Qiuzi and Zipei similarly argued that girls should not be limited to family roles and should have the freedom to develop their own careers.

Different Places, Different Experiences

China is socioeconomically and geographically diverse. Although the field study does not establish statistical comparisons, the qualitative findings suggest that rural–urban differences deserve further study. National income data provide one part of the context. In 2025, per-capita disposable income was RMB 56,502 for urban residents and RMB 24,456 for rural residents, an urban–rural ratio of 2.31. Per-capita spending on education, culture, and recreation was RMB 4,298 in urban areas and RMB 2,322 in rural areas, indicating different household capacities to pursue educational opportunities. China has also experienced rapid urbanization over the past several decades. The rural share of the population fell from 82.1% in 1978 to 32.1% in 2025.[10,14,15]

Table 4. Selected Urban-Rural Economic Context, 2025

Measure	Urban	Rural
Per-capita disposable income	RMB 56,502	RMB 24,456
Per-capita spending on education, culture, and recreation	RMB 4,298	RMB 2,322

In terms of English education, Teacher Qin said that some rural students saw English mainly as another examination subject because they had few immediate opportunities to use it, whereas urban students with more exposure to foreign teachers and cultures might see English more as a form of communication. The Shanghai volunteers also appeared more comfortable using spoken English than the Fengyan students, although the groups differed in age and setting and were not designed for direct comparison. The Xishui mother also pointed to differences in spoken English between students from her town and students from Wuhan, the capital of Hubei Province. I conducted place-based English-learning classes in Fengyan. Although the activity was not designed to test changes in interest, it illustrated one way additional exposure could be created.

One related phenomenon discussed by participants was work-related migration, in which some parents from rural areas moved to larger cities for employment while their children remained with relatives. Lulu associated changes in parental presence with students' confidence. According to Lulu, students from major cities such as Shanghai, Shenzhen, and Guangzhou were often more confident about speaking and sharing their ideas. She also cautioned, however, that reduced physical presence did not necessarily mean a lack of involvement, since parents could remain in frequent contact and provide financial support. She noted that parents working in larger cities could also bring new ideas and broader exposure back to their children. Teacher Qin similarly emphasized that physical absence did not necessarily mean disengagement. Guangxi reported 13.27 million migrant workers in 2025, including 9.20 million working outside their home township. The Ministry of Education's 2026 admissions initiative also sought to simplify documentation and expand public-school access for children who move with migrant parents.[12,13]

In addition to work-related migration by parents, Teacher Qin discussed families moving children toward stronger schools, from Fengyan Village to Gongcheng County, from Gongcheng County to Guilin, and from Guilin toward the provincial capital. Family resources enabled or constrained such ambitions, making each rural family's circumstances different. A Fengyan shop owner hoped her granddaughter could attend a better school but faced financial limitations.

Teacher Zhou's daughter moved from county elementary and middle schools in Xishui to a strong high school in Wuhan. Zhou was struck by urban students' greater exposure to public-service activities, study tours, tutoring, reading materials, and other developmental opportunities. She associated this "larger world" with more opportunities to develop internal motivation, while describing county students as more often oriented toward externally defined goals such as examination success, university admission, employment, and better living conditions.

The Fengyan aspiration activity and Shanghai interviews also revealed diverse ideas about future careers; these are discussed in the next section.

Fengyan Aspiration Activity

The 41-student Fengyan career-aspiration activity asked students to draw possible future occupations. Education was the largest category, chosen by 14 students (34.1%), while the remaining aspirations were distributed across 11 other categories. Figure 2 shows the range and distribution of career aspirations reported by the 41 students.

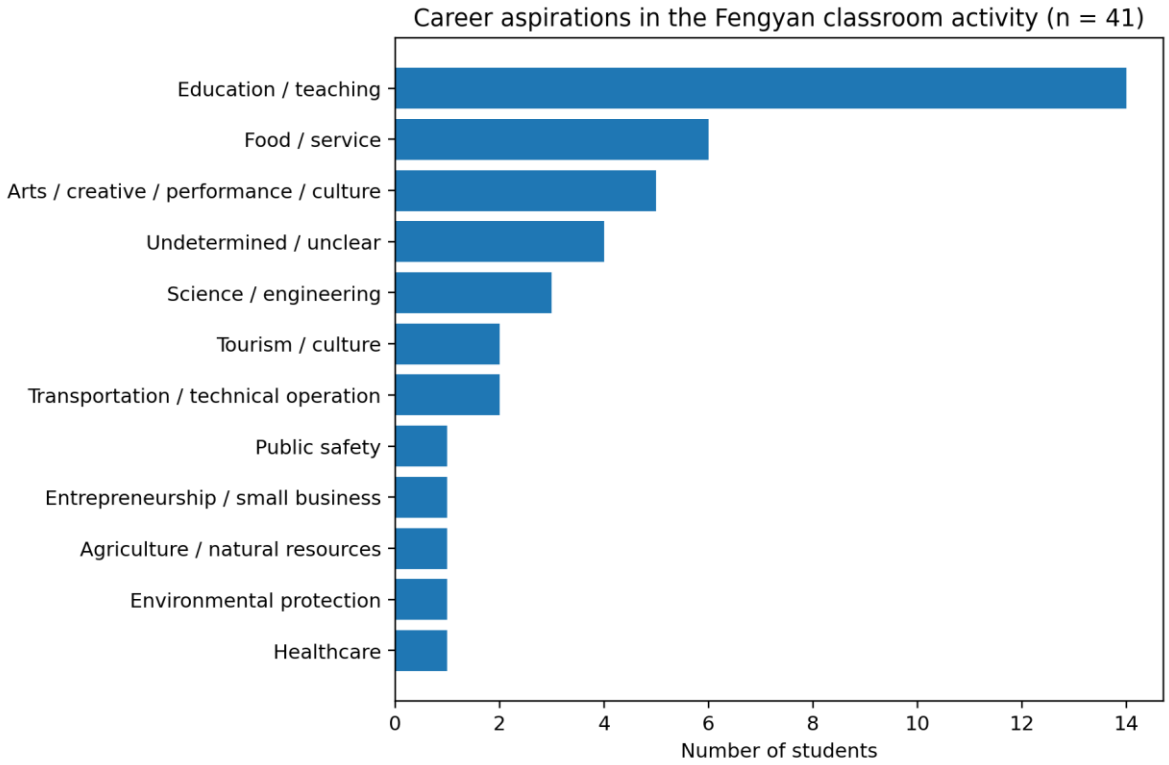


Figure 2. Career Aspirations in the Fengyan Classroom Activity (n = 41)

Note. Exploratory convenience sample; categories describe this classroom only and are not representative of rural Chinese students.

Twenty-two students provided enough information to code at least one reason for their aspirations. Personal interests or perceived strengths appeared most often, followed by service, community, culture, exploration, and cross-cultural interests.

Table 5. Coded Motivations in the Fengyan Career-Aspiration Activity

Motivation code	Coded students
Personal interest / perceived strength	15
Service to home / community	6
Helping others / social service	5
Exploration / learning / innovation	5
Culture / identity	4
Cross-cultural exchange	4
Environmental protection	1

Note. Twenty-two students provided sufficient evidence for at least one motivation code. Categories were non-mutually exclusive; 12 students received more than one code.

The Shanghai interviews provided an illustrative contrast. Students considered careers including screenwriting, teaching, law, transportation management, animal training, and civil service. They cited interests, teacher feedback, employment stability, and benefits as reasons for their choices. Several students also expressed interest in studying overseas. As the age of the students, the size of the groups and the style of the interviews are different, this contrast is only illustrative rather than a formal comparison.

The Fengyan activity also asked about students' geographic preferences. Five students preferred to stay locally or return, six preferred to leave or develop elsewhere, 27 were open to either, and three did not state a preference. Figure 3 shows the geographic preferences associated with the 41 Fengyan students' aspirations.

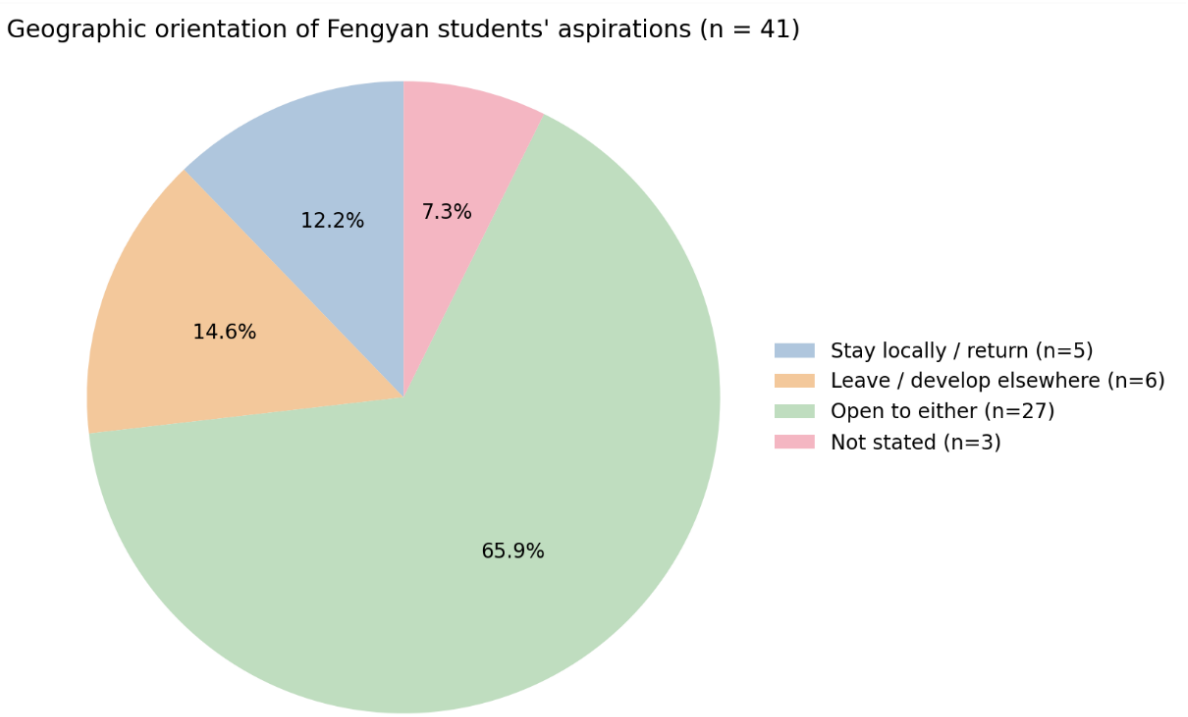


Figure 3. Geographic Orientation of Fengyan Students' Aspirations (n = 41)
Note. Descriptive classroom data only; categories should not be interpreted as long-term migration intentions.

Discussion

The discussion begins by comparing the field evidence with the mechanisms identified in the Review. It then considers two ideas that became especially important through the inquiry: Opportunity to Discover and Negotiated Influence. Table 6 summarizes the comparison between the field inquiry and the Review.

Table 6. Comparison Between the Review and the Field Inquiry

Mechanism in the Review	Field evidence	What the field inquiry added
Parents influence academic and career choices	Shanghai students; Qiuzi; Zipei; Xishui mother	Forms of guidance differed by family, age, and individual circumstances.
Teacher feedback affects confidence and motivation	Zipei; Teacher Zhou; Teacher Qin; Tongtong	Praise, small interactions, rankings, and evaluation appeared in individual experiences.
Socioeconomic resources affect educational opportunity	Rural/urban resources; school mobility; English exposure	Differences also appeared through information and exposure, not only formal access.
Institutions and career expectations shape choices	Gaokao subject system; science pathway; employment expectations	Perceived practicality and future options entered subject choice.
Gender norms shape educational experiences	Near-parity participation before college; later differences in majors, employment, and family roles	Gender differences appeared more clearly in later choices than in formal participation.

The field inquiry supported several factors identified in the Review. Parents played important roles through managing activities, giving advice, and serving as role models. Teachers influenced students through role modeling, encouragement, evaluation, and feedback. Institutional influences included the Gaokao, school ranking systems, university-major requirements, and labor-market opportunities. Socioeconomic conditions and cultural values were also related to financial resources, access to information, and exposure to extracurricular activities.

These factors did not function separately. Parental advice, teacher feedback, school rankings, university-major requirements, and career expectations could jointly shape students' subject choices, while parents' expectations, teacher responses, and school evaluation systems also appeared together in students' confidence and interpretations of achievement. Together, these mechanisms formed an interacting social environment around students' educational development.

Two ideas became especially important in understanding individual differences: **Opportunity to Discover** and **Negotiated Influence**.

Opportunity to Discover

Formal opportunities and pathways may be available to students, but formal freedom to choose does not mean that every student starts with the same range of possibilities in mind. "What resources and information a student encounters can affect their future choices in a big way," said Zuo Qing. Teacher Zhou distinguished between internal and external motivation and connected these differences to students' exposure to information and activities, which could shape their perceptions of what was possible and the goals they pursued.

The Fengyan program provides one example of how exposure and information could broaden what students encounter. "The influence can come in many forms. Children may admire a volunteer's confidence, appearance, personality, teaching style, or way of communicating. The volunteers bring experiences that are different from the children's daily lives and from the people they usually meet. Little by little, that exposure can broaden the children's ideas about what is possible," Teacher Qin explained.

At Central China Normal University, Teacher Fang described international scholarships and the biennial Guizishan International Cultural Festival, which created direct cultural exchange among Chinese and

international students. These examples show how institutions can deliberately create opportunities for exposure and help students broaden their horizons.

Negotiated Influence

The individual circumstances in the field inquiry indicated that social factors did not shape all students in the same way. Different students could interpret and weigh these influences against their own interests in different ways. Understanding these individual experiences therefore requires a model that includes students' responses and allows their feedback to affect the social environment around them. Figure 4 presents the revised model, which adds opportunity, interpretation, negotiation, and feedback to the original framework in the Review.

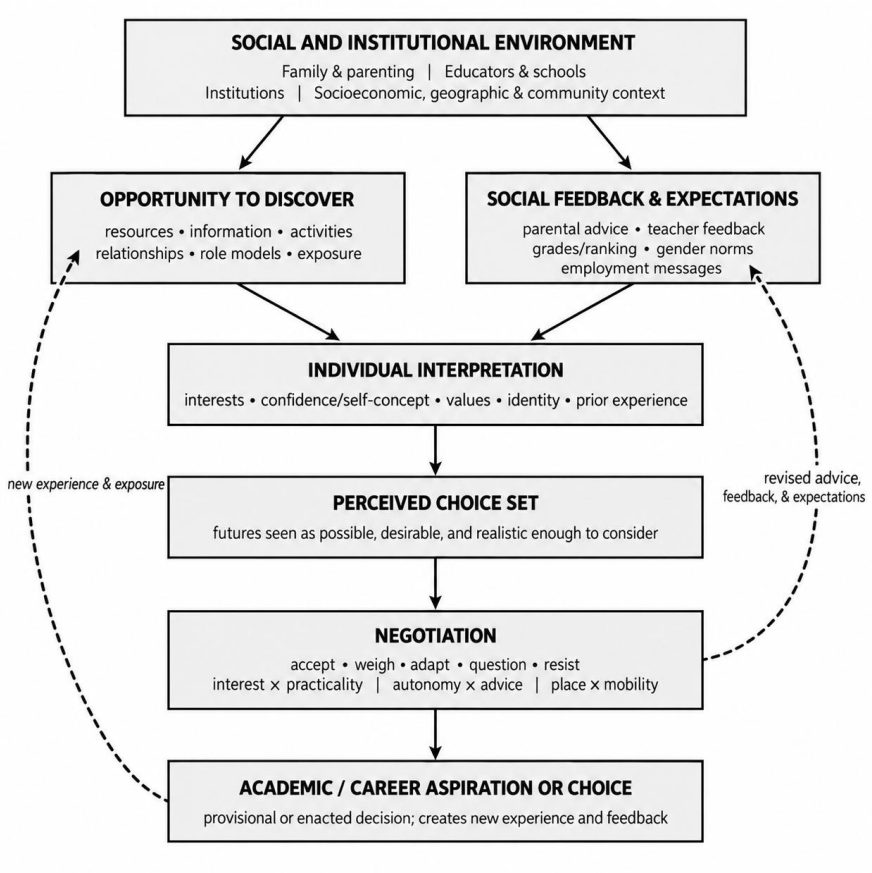


Figure 4. Negotiated Model of Social Influence in Academic and Career Aspiration or Choice

The new model has two central concepts. The first is **Opportunity to Discover**: what students encounter shapes which possibilities they see as available in the first place. The second is **Negotiated Influence**: students evaluate the influences around them against their own interests and aspirations.

Limitations

During the inquiry, participants were selected through convenience sampling rather than random sampling. Therefore, the study does not represent China or support formal comparisons among rural,

county, and urban populations. The Fengyan students were generally younger than the Shanghai volunteers. Fengyan activities and interviews took place mainly in a classroom setting, whereas the Shanghai interviews were informal conversations, including conversations at a dinner table. These differences limit direct comparison between the groups. Participants also came from different age groups and generations. Although their accounts provided perspectives on change, they cannot replace a longitudinal study that follows the same participants over time. Translation between Chinese and English may also have affected wording and interpretation. Because participants' ethnic identities were not systematically collected in Gongcheng, the report does not assume that individual participants were Yao or attribute their experiences to ethnicity.

Conclusion

I began this field study to examine how social factors identified in the Review appeared in relation to gender differences in academic performance in China. However, the fieldwork led to a broader set of questions about the Gaokao, student confidence, the meaning of achievement, and educational choices across different socioeconomic contexts.

On the one hand, this field study supports the idea that social factors generally shape students' opportunities, confidence, and academic choices. On the other hand, the study suggests that individual circumstances also need to be understood by examining how students respond to the influences around them.

Participants generally described the Gaokao as relatively fair in procedure. However, they also indicated that a common formal procedure does not guarantee equal preparation because students differ in the resources and information available to them. What students encounter shapes what they believe is possible in the first place. Rural, county/town, and urban settings offer different forms of exposure, while individuals within each setting still vary considerably. Gender differences were less visible before college but became more prominent in participants' accounts of later stages, including university-major selection, career choices, and family roles. China is diverse and rapidly changing in both socioeconomic and demographic conditions.

Instead of looking only at which social factors are associated with educational outcomes, I would also ask what students have had the chance to discover, how they understand the choices available to them, and how those choices develop over time.

AI Acknowledgement

During the preparation of this work, the author(s) used ChatGPT to check for grammar mistakes, improve readability and generate figures. After using this tool, the author reviewed and edited the resulting content as necessary and takes full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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