



# Undergraduate's self-formation in NGO-provided education: A comparison between first-generation and non-first-generation students in China

Yunyu Jiang

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## ABSTRACT

This study investigates university students' self-formation in non-formal education programs provided by NGOs, and compares the differences between first-generation and non-first-generation university students. Two rounds of semi-structured interviews were carried out with ten first-generation and ten non-first-generation students. The participants took part in a wide variety of NGO programs on discipline-related or extracurricular topics. The findings reveal two patterns of self-formation. First-generation students were inside-out motivated for self-change, and achieved rapid transformation through constant negotiation, self-reflection and proactive practices in NGOs; while non-first-generation students were outside-in motivated and conducted progressive self-formation in participating in NGO programs. Both groups of students exercised their agency in negotiating their self-positioning, self-images and life projects with the external environment of the university, NGOs and the society. This research adds to previous studies on the roles of NGOs in the provision of higher education by presenting students' perspectives. It also demonstrates the applicability of the self-formation theory in the context of non-formal education. In general, first-generation participants showed more activeness and a deeper level of self-formation in NGO program participation than their non-first-generation counterparts, which could possibly indicate a compensatory function of NGOs in facilitating education equity.

**Key words:** first-generation university students; non-first-generation-university students; self-formation; student agency; non-formal education

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<b>Abbreviations</b>	<b>Phrase</b>
FGS	First-generation university students
NFGS	Non-first-generation university students
NGO	Non-governmental organisation

# CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Research background

### 1.1.1 Education programs for university students provided by NGOs in China

Non-formal education takes place beyond formal institutions like schools and universities, it is pre-arranged but usually highly adaptable, intrinsically motivated and learner-centred (Dib, 1988; Eshach, 2007; Romi & Schmida, 2009; Johnson & Majewska, 2022). In Chinese higher education, an increasing number of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have been dedicated to providing university students with a variety of education activities and programs. These NGO-provided education opportunities could be deemed as a form of non-formal education.

The use of the term NGO was inconsistent in previous research, as there was not only a lack of consensus on the definition and scope of NGO, but also blurred boundaries between NGO and similar terminologies such as non-profit organisation (NPO), third sector organisations, charities and so on (Vakil, 1997; Kuruvila, 2015). Vakil (1997) argued that the core characteristics of NGOs are their private and self-governing nature, while the difference between NGOs and NPOs is that, even though NGOs do not aim at generating profits, profit-making might be a by-product of their operation. He then proposed NGOs as “self-governing, private, not-for-profit organisations that are geared to improving the quality of life of disadvantaged people” (ibid, p. 2060). Some scholars suggested that NGOs should be formally registered as compared to informal, community-based organisations (Salamon & Anheier, 1992; Kuruvila, 2015). However, other scholars supposed that there are also grassroots NGOs which are not registered with the government, ostensibly illegal and more bottom-up than top-down (Panda, 2007; Spires, 2011; Spires et al., 2014). In China, a large number of NGOs remain unregistered due to strict registration restrictions, but these grassroots NGOs maintain a complicated symbiotic relationship with the government (Spires, 2011; Spires et al., 2014; Zhang, 2017). Therefore, this research adopts Vakil’s (1997) definition of NGO and includes grassroots NGOs into the category.

The typology of NGOs is also complicated. Vakil (1997, p. 2063) pointed out six orientations of NGOs: “welfare, development, advocacy, development education, networking

and research”, and he further emphasised that most NGOs have multiple orientations. According to the *China Civil Affairs Statistical Yearbook (2022)*, in 2021, educational NGOs make up the largest proportion (31.97%) of Chinese social organisations, with a total of 288341 institutions (Huang et al., 2022). However, not all educational NGOs fall into the scope of this research, nor all the NGOs discussed in this study belong to educational NGOs. This study particularly looks at NGOs that offer university students education opportunities, such as summer schools, courses, research programs, practical programs and study tours. Thus, on the one hand, these NGOs neither include organisations that only provide education for non-university students, nor do they encompass those that commit to providing access to higher education, assuring the quality of university learning (Tryma, 2019), advising on university teaching and administration (Xu & Lu, 2016) or making connections between the university and government (Wang & Qiao, 2017). On the other, education may not be the primary aim of the NGOs involved in this research, as activities organised for students might only be a small part of their business.

The education provided by NGOs has a variety of focuses. For example, programs of environmental education (Haigh, 2006) and citizenship education (Aksit et al., 2008; Xiong & Li, 2020) have been widely discussed in previous literature. In addition to these aspects, this research also found Chinese NGOs that provide education in entrepreneurship, employability, research capacity, disciplinary knowledge and professional practices. NGO-provided education programs are mostly free of charge or only cost a minimum fee. They are also rich in resources (most of which are implicit, informal and need to be actively sought by participants), flat in structures, flexible in schedules, harmonious in atmosphere and allowing participants adequate freedom. More specific descriptions of the NGO programs will be discussed in the findings section.

### **1.1.2 Theoretical concern**

First-generation university students (FGS) usually refer to college students whose parents do not have a bachelor’s degree, and the first-generation status is often combined with a lower-income or working-class family background (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013). Considering that

some students might not be raised mainly by their parents, this study defines FGS as university students whose parents (including biological, step, foster and adoptive parents) or primary caregivers do not have a bachelor's degree or higher. Previous literature has shown that FGS underperform non-first-generation university students (NFGS) both academically and socially in the university (e.g. Grayson, 2011; Lu & Hu, 2015; Zhang et al., 2016; Aruguete, 2017). However, compared with the abundance of studies in the university context, there was much less research on the education taken outside of the university. The body of research discussing non-formal education and education provided by NGOs are primarily grounded in the institutional and organisational perspectives (e.g. Eshach, 2007; Rose, 2009; Leitch et al., 2016; Tryma & Salnikova, 2020). In existing Chinese higher education studies, NGOs were mainly discussed under the framework of higher education governance (e.g. Long et al., 2010; Wang & Qiao, 2017). Therefore, there is still a lack of research on students' perceptions and their agentic practices in non-formal higher education contexts.

## **1.2 Research questions**

This research aims to study university students' experiences in non-formal education provided by NGOs in China. Compared with receiving mandatory, formal higher education in the university context, students actively seek and seize education opportunities from NGOs. It is thus vital to understand how students, as active agents, navigate their learning in such non-formal contexts, and what role such non-formal education experiences play in transforming students' selves, redefining their life projects and reconstructing their subjectivity. Therefore, this research attempts to answer how the self-formation process and outcome of FGS and NFGS vary in NGO-provided education. More specifically:

1. How do FGS and NFGS form themselves differently through their family, schooling, and university experiences?
2. What structural constraints are felt by FGS and NFGS in the university and NGOs, how do they perceive these challenges and what strategies do they take to address them? Specifically in NGOs, how do FGS and NFGS navigate the complexity, informality and mobility of resources differently? Such as how they engage with

tutors and lecturers, reach out to external resources and take advantage of the NGO education experience for their future study and work.

3. How do the experiences in NGO education programs reshape FGS and NFGS's motivation, reflection on self and the external society, self-perceptions, future plans and life pursuits?

## **CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

This chapter discusses previous literature from three aspects: the comparison between FGS and NFGS, non-formal education and student self-formation. FGS were usually found to be at a disadvantage compared to NFGS in higher education. The reproduction theory takes a structural stance in explaining this disparity, while studies of student agency focus on how students proactively respond to structural constraints and build their personal strength. NGO-provided education could be regarded as non-formal education. Therefore, the second section discusses education in non-formal contexts and identifies the lack of research from the student's perspective. The third section focuses on student self-formation and proposes an analytical framework for this study.

### **2.1 Comparing first-generation students (FGS) and non-first-generation students (NFGS) in higher education**

#### **2.1.1 Unequal access, engagement and learning outcome**

##### ***Enrolment***

The higher education enrolment rates of FGS and NFGS have been historically different. With the massification of higher education around the world, a growing number of FGS entered universities in the past two decades (Bell & Santamaría, 2018). However, compared with their non-first-generation counterparts, the share of FGS in higher education institutions remains low (Center for First-generation Student Success, 2021; 2024). According to OECD (2015), among younger adults aged between 23-34 whose parents completed below upper secondary degrees, 23% of whom completed higher education, in comparison to 65% for those whose parents have higher degree levels. Data also has shown that this gap between the enrolment rates of FGS and NFGS has not been narrowed within the past 30 years (OECD, 2015).

In China, resulted from the significantly lower-than-average higher education rate during the 1950s-1990s and the rapid expansion of higher education since the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the proportion of FGS among all university students is at a higher percentage (over 70%) (Zhang et al., 2016). However, this does not indicate more equity between the enrolment of FGS and

NFGS. According to the *Chinese College Students Survey*, a larger proportion of FGS enter second/third-tier universities, take normal *Gaokao*<sup>1</sup> instead of guaranteed admission or independent recruitment<sup>2</sup>, and take *Gaokao* more than once, compared with NFGS (Zhang et al., 2022a). While the percentage of FGS across all universities averages over 70% (Zhang et al., 2016), only 59.3% of the students in 985 universities<sup>3</sup> are FGS (Zhao et al., 2014). In universities in megacities this percentage is even lower. For example, statistics from universities in Shanghai show that merely 30.1% of the students in first-tier universities are FGS, and this number declined annually from 2008 to 2015 (Lin et al., 2016). Therefore, although FGS generally outnumber NFGS in Chinese universities, the quality of higher education accessed by FGS is remarkably lower than that of NFGS.

### ***Adaptation***

Studies about both international and Chinese higher education show that FGS face more difficulties in adapting to the university life than their NFGS peers. Unlike NFGS who integrate more easily and smoothly into the university environment, FGS face unique challenges of finding similarities between the university environment and their original communities (Bell & Santamaría, 2018). Meanwhile, FGS are found to have fewer developmental resources in terms of external support and internal abilities, positive values and self-affirmation (Wu & Chen, 2023). Thus, they are more likely to have trouble understanding and fulfilling their college roles (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013), experiencing stress overload (Amirkhan et al., 2023), feeling a sense of bewilderment and isolation (O'Shea, 2007), thus developing lower self-esteem (Liu, 2013) and lower sense of belonging (Zhu & Han, 2018). Besides suffering from being cultural outsiders, some FGS face class stigmas that lead to identity confusion, resulting in background concealment behaviours that further impede their construction of new identities (Veldman, 2023; Granfield, 1991). This could probably explain why in contrast to NFGS whose subject sense of fit become stronger over time, FGS' sense of belonging remains low throughout their four years

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1 The College entrance examination in China

2 Students who are admitted through guaranteed admission or independent recruitment of elite universities are considered very talented in certain aspects, thus could be exempted from *Gaokao* and directly enter higher education

3 The project 985 universities are 39 universities selected by the Chinese government as top-tier universities in China

of college life (Phillips et al., 2020; Tibbetts et al., 2016). The economic burden is another factor that hinders the adaptation of FGS, for these students need to spend a vast amount of time on part-time employment at the expense of engaging in social and academic activities (Pratt et al., 2019; Grayson, 2011; Zhang et al., 2016).

### ***Academic performance***

With regard to academic performance, FGS are often found to have lower GPAs (Grayson, 1997; Grayson, 2011) and lower levels of critical thinking skills (Aruguete, 2017). FGS also reported encountering more obstacles in their academic endeavours as compared to their NFGS counterparts (Stebbleton & Soria, 2013). Previous studies also suggested that FGS tend to be more concerned about whether they are inferior to others, therefore, they are more inclined to adopt performance-avoidance goals which focus on the avoidance of manifesting poor academic behaviours; nevertheless, such achievement goals inadvertently reinforce FGS' disadvantage in the highly selective higher education environment (Jury et al., 2015a; 2015b).

Studies about Chinese higher education show similar findings that the self-reported academic achievement of FGS is considerably lower (Zhang et al., 2016), and there is a positive relationship between parents' education degree and students' learning ability (Du et al., 2020). Some studies, however, argue that there is no significant difference between FGS and NFGS in some indicators of academic performance. For example, Guo's study (2020), using data collected from the *China College Teaching & Learning Survey*, found no difference between FGS and NFGS in terms of exam failure rates, GPA rankings and scholarship attainment. Wang and Ma (2022) claimed that while FGS in elite universities are at a disadvantage in creativity and self-perception, they are as good as NFGS in critical thinking and perseverance. Qu et al. (2023) revealed that compared with the more homogenous group of NFGS, there is a greater disparity in academic achievement within FGS, as a portion of FGS achieved high GPAs while another portion suffered from learning difficulties. This internal division might be related to different types of universities. According to Li and Guo (2021), family background plays an important role in student achievement in non-elite Chinese universities, while in elite universities, it is the rule of capability rather than cultural reproduction that explains student

performance, which means that FGS who work harder and are more talented are more likely to succeed – as they have won the fierce competition with NFGS who process more education resources.

### *Academic engagement*

Even though in-depth engagement with academic contexts has greater positive impacts on FGS than NFGS (Lu & Hu, 2015), FGS present limited engagement with authority figures and narrow involvement in academic activities. For instance, in the classroom setting, FGS rarely interact with faculty and contribute less to class discussions (Soria & Stebleton, 2012). Besides, they usually report the least positive classroom experiences (Grayson, 2011). Furthermore, FGS tend to engage little with informal academic contexts. Existing literature found that students whose parents attended university are more likely to participate in faculty's research projects, reaching out to faculty after class and being satisfied with their relationship with authority figures (Kin & Sax, 2009; Murphy & Hicks, 2006), while FGS tend to have minimal contact with faculty (Aruguete, 2017; Zhang et al., 2016) and attend fewer non-mandatory academic events, such as guest lectures and library visits (Grayson, 1997). Such differences have been shown to be stable across college life (Ji & Du, 2021) or become worse between year one and year three (Grayson, 2011). Moreover, contrary to NFGS who are willing to take part in exchange programs and transfer to different universities before graduation, FGS are more likely to stay at one institution throughout their undergraduate (Murphy & Hicks, 2006).

Studies in the Chinese context echo findings in other countries. However, a unique situation is that in China, on tasks related to mandatory requirements and general studying, such as class behaviours, time spent on reading course materials and learning motivation, FGS manifest little difference from NFGS (Zhai et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2016; Guo et al., 2020). Despite this, FGS are found to be significantly less proactive in participating in research-oriented, creativity-intensive and resource-driven academic activities (Zhai et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2016).

### ***Social engagement***

Literature suggests that FGS are also less involved in social activities on campus. On the one hand, they display less interest in extracurricular activities, including student clubs, cultural events and sports (Grayson, 1997; Pascarella et al., 2004). Data from 2015 to 2016 in the US shows that 46% of FGS participated in an extracurricular club, while the proportion in NFGS was 65% (Center for First-generation Student Success, 2021). On the other hand, FGS usually make fewer friends and interact with peers less frequently compared with NFGS (Pascarella et al., 2004; Grayson, 2011; Ji & Du, 2021; Lu & Hu, 2015).

FGS in Chinese universities manifest a larger gap with NFGS in social engagement than academic engagement (Zhang et al., 2022a), and this gap is even larger in elite universities (Zhang et al., 2016). This could probably be explained by Chinese FGS' worship of learning and their high valuing of grades (Zhang et al., 2022a). Within extracurricular activities, however, Chinese FGS are more inclined to attend ideological growth activities, social services and sports, while participating less in public speech contests, debates and entrepreneurial projects (Wang & Pan, 2023).

### ***Graduation and employment***

FGS experience the cooling out function after entering higher education, which means that although they were successfully admitted by universities, due to the limited opportunities they are more likely to face denial and failure; universities employ a series of hard and soft responses to dismiss a student or provide them with a second-best option (Clark, 1963). As a result, more FGS, being forced or out of their own will, leave higher education without earning a credential (Cataldi et al., 2018; Soria & Stebleton, 2012). However, no Chinese studies mentioned the disparity between FGS and NFGS in graduation rate, perhaps because of the high overall graduation rates at Chinese universities.

After graduation, distinctions still exist between FGS and NFGS. Although research has agreed that personal education level has a greater impact on employment rates and earnings than parents' education (OECD, 2015; Cataldi et al., 2018), NFGS are 4% more likely than FGS to earn among the highest 25% salaries, which indicates a lasting effect of family's

education level (OECD, 2015). In terms of employability, compared with NFGS who excel at transforming ascribed advantages to personal achievement (Hu, 2020), FGS are weaker in non-cognitive abilities (Yang & Yue, 2024). Previous literature also suggested that FGS harbour more false beliefs about the job market and suffer from difficulties in accessing occupational information (Luo, 2020). The difference in post-graduation is also shown in further education, as more NFGS choose to pursue a master's or doctoral degree (Cataldi et al., 2018; Zhang et al., 2016; Yang & Yue, 2024) and study abroad (Sun & Liang, 2021).

### **2.1.2 Cultural capital, class reproduction and the deficit model**

One explanation for the statistical distinctions between FGS and NFGS is cultural reproduction. Bourdieu (1986) indicated three forms of cultural capital. The embodied state of cultural capital is the “long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body”, therefore it is deeply entrenched in an individual's personality, taste and habitus; the objectified capital is in the form of extrinsic cultural goods, such as books, machines and instruments; while the institutionalised cultural capital is manifested in qualifications and certifications guaranteed by a socially recognised institution (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 17). Cultural capital could be derived from and converted into economic and social capital, but a transformation is “at the cost of a more or less great effort”, because the effectiveness and power of different capital is uneven in different fields (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 21). The distinction of capital amongst different social groups reinforces the distinction of social status (Bourdieu, 1984).

Education, though being conceived as a ladder for social mobility, serves as a critical mediator for class reproduction. For example, cultural capital manifests in different families' child-rearing methods. Middle-class families tend to raise their children with the logic of “concerted cultivation”, which emphasises children's personal development. As such, middle-class parents commit to providing children with age-specific leisure activities, offering them equal chances of negotiation and actively participating in the schooling process. Working-class families, on the other hand, conform to the logic of “accomplishment of natural growth”, which focuses narrowly on children's physical needs. Parents thus pay less attention to children's leisure time, utilise physical discipline in case of disagreements, and rely on school authorities

to take full charge of their children's learning (Lareau & Weininger, 2008, pp. 123-124). Due to different cultural capital inherited from families and habitus nurtured in their communities of origin, NFGS master their lives in the university while FGS find themselves uncomfortable, marginalised and segregated (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Following Bourdieu, scholars (Ivemark & Ambrose, 2021; Jack, 2016) further stressed that the acquisition of cultural capital happens throughout individuals' life course. A wider range of social contexts other than family, such as high school settings, could create dramatic divergence within the population of FGs (Jack, 2016).

Applying the theory of cultural reproduction, some empirical research focuses on FGS' deficiency in particular cultural, economic and social capital (Spengen, 2013). Collier and Morgan (2008) found that FGS lack the implicit knowledge required to succeed in higher education institutions, as their expectations related to assignments, problem-solving and communication are incompatible with those of the university. Therefore, they regarded role mastery as a particular form of cultural capital that creates discrepancies between FGS and NFGS' academic engagement and satisfaction. The unique environment of higher education makes some cultural abilities extremely useful but usually hard to achieve by FG, such as help-seeking strategies (Richards, 2022), language proficiency and IT skills (Qin & Li, 2014). Meanwhile, the lack of economic capital indirectly impedes FGS' academic and social involvement by restricting their capabilities to pay for an urban lifestyle (Qin & Li, 2014).

FGS are also considered to be disadvantaged by certain cultural habitus inherited from their original communities. For instance, in her qualitative research with first-generation female university students, Lu (2018) noted that the inveterate belief in traditional gender roles largely restricted these students' motivation to persist in an academic path or seek employment after graduation. An institutional cause of the restricting effect of FGS' cultural habitus is the cultural mismatch. Independent norms are valued and institutionalised in universities; students are encouraged to take full responsibility for their own development, while FGS are more used to the interdependent norms prevalent in working-class communities (Stephens et al., 2012a; 2012b). This discrepancy in cultural expectation is enduring throughout the undergraduate journey and is associated with negative psychological status, lower GPA and self-esteem

(Phillips et al., 2020). Another cultural mismatch appears between the elitism culture that dominates the university discourse and the working-class culture that always be ignored and belittled. FGS reported continuously receiving derogatory and devaluating messages, which remind them that their experiences and opinions are insignificant at the institution (DeRosa & Dolby, 2014). In the Chinese context, there is a particular cultural mismatch between the universities' elitism culture and FGS' pro-school culture. The authority of schools and teachers is unquestionably recognised in Chinese K-12 education system. Those who are hard-working and follow teachers' instructions carefully are more likely to do well in exams and be considered as good students. However, such pro-school characters of obedience, perseverance and diligence are inconsistent with the university culture that highlights criticality, creativity and extracurricular engagement. As a result, this cultural mismatch triggers class reproduction during higher education (Wang et al., 2023).

### **2.1.3 Agency theory and agentic engagement**

Although the theories of cultural capital and class reproduction provide explanations for FGS' disadvantaged status in their competition with NFGS, it is limited by viewing FGS as passively accepting the structural inequality and being forced to withdraw from the majority of higher education opportunities. Another trend in research focuses on student agency instead of structural constraints.

Bandura (1986) argued that agents have the positive freedom to exercise their self-influence on a desired aim. The reason for this freedom lies in people's belief in their self-efficacy, that is, the awareness of their personal competence to achieve an expected future. Thus, the level of agency varies among people, with the more capable and self-efficacious people developing more freedom over events. Archer (2003) further proposed that individuals consciously reflect on the external world and make internal conversations to react to structural constraints and enablement. Thus, reflexivity serves as a mediating mechanism between structure and agency (Lockett & Lockett, 2009). According to Archer (2007, p. 168), people with communicative reflexivity tend to "externalise their deliberations", relying on relationships with significant others and connections to original communities to gain self-worth.

Therefore, they are “active agents in producing their own lack of social mobility” (Archer, 2007, p. 190). On the contrary, autonomous reflexives have sufficient confidence in their internal dialogue and “stand at some distance from their social context” (Archer, 2007, p. 193). As a result, autonomous reflexivity could help individuals break through cultural distinctions (Archer, 2007). It could be inferred from Archer’s argument that regardless of the success of FGS in adapting to the university environment, they are proactive agents who make decisions and act out of their own will; therefore, it is essential to pay attention to different students’ agency beyond structure.

Klemenčič (2015, p. 6) conceptualised student agency as “a process of student’s self-reflective and intentional actions and interactions during studentship”, which encompasses two aspects: agentic orientation referring to students’ will to act, and agentic possibility referring to students’ power to reach desired outcomes. Klemenčič (2015) further noted that student agency may be stronger or weaker, and is embedded in time, contexts and interpersonal relationships. Student agency could be categorised through various dimensions. For example, if divided through time, there is “a configuration of influences from the past, orientations towards the future and engagement with the present” (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, as cited in Biesta & Tedder, 2007, p. 135); if divided through contexts, there are needs-response agency, agency as struggle and resistance, relational agency and agency for becoming (Nguyen & Robertson, 2022; Tran & Vu, 2018); and if divided through subjects, there are personal, proxy and collective agency (Klemenčič, 2015).

FGS enact their agency in preparation for higher education. Through interactions with structures, FGS become aware of their impoverished family status, the hardship undergone by other community members and the gap between themselves and the advantaged class (Holley & Gardner, 2012; Ellery & Baxen, 2015; Cheng, 2019). Furthermore, they consciously experience both structural constraints and structural affordances. The former includes, for example, the financial burdens of continuing high school (Ellery & Baxen, 2015) and the family’s questioning of FGS’ academic objectives (Holley & Gardner, 2012), while the latter consists of familial supports such as encouraging FGS to take control of their own destiny (Patfield et al., 2021) and the atmosphere of implicit love and inclusive collaboration (Zeng,

2019). In response to their structural awareness FGS engage in the ongoing reflexive deliberation to make decisions about higher education. Some students construct their understanding of higher education as an opportunity to improve life conditions and a reward for hard work at school (Zeng, 2019; Patfield et al., 2021). The sense of responsibility to family and younger siblings constitutes a crucial motivation to prepare for college (Capannola & Johnson, 2022; Tian, 2021; Keppens et al., 2023). Reflections on schooling experiences also impact students' perceptions of their intellectual potential (Kutty, 2014). The combination of agentic reflections, motivations and self-perceptions produces unique advantages for FGS in pursuing higher education. For instance, in Cheng's (2019) research with poor rural students in elite Chinese universities, the author pointed out that those students actively constructed three types of under-class cultural capital: the inherent motivation of fighting against fate, the moral-based mindset that views education as an ethical affair, and the sense of intimacy built around the school life that fosters diligence and passion for knowledge. Thus, far from being restricted by their socioeconomic background and surrendering to the harsh reality, FGS are proactive agents who transform their disadvantaged status from an impediment to an enabler. It is then not surprising that FGS frequently take pride in their background and perceive it as a main contributor to their success (Holley & Gardner, 2012).

Although statistical studies illustrated that FGS are less engaged in college than NFGS, research on student agency pointed out that FGS also proactively develop their university lives after admission. Firstly, they act strategically to compensate for their disadvantaged status in comparison to NFGS. Patfield et al. (2022, p. 1145) described a particular group of first-generation opportunists who excel at assembling "their own social capital from within their schools and communities". In response to cultural barriers, FGS actively accustom their habitus to the middle-class tastes while maintaining sophisticated allegiance to their working-class roots (Lehmann, 2014). Secondly, FGS develop their unique advantages to achieve success in higher education. Lehmann (2009, p. 631) remarked that FGS draw on working-class morals of "strong work ethic, maturity, responsibility and real-life experiences" in pursuit of becoming middle class. Successful FGS in the university exercise persistence, determination, strong self-motivation and optimism when encountering frustrations (Ricks & Warren, 2021; O'Shea, 2016)

and progressively deepen their interactions with the environment (Demetriou et al., 2017). The definition of success is also re-evaluated by FGS as encompassing a broader range of personal fulfilment than grades and employment (Li et al., 2024). Moreover, FGS exert agency during academic engagement. For instance, Park (2023) indicated that FGS' academic writing is informed by their subjectivities and self-identities in relation to their class and racial background. Through engaging in disciplinary study, FGS also develop new identities and post-college ambitions (Verdin, 2020; Verdin & Godwin, 2019).

### **2.1.4 Summary**

Scholars have provided abundant evidence on the distinctions between FGS and NFGS. A wealth of statistical data suggests that compared to NFGS, FGS are more vulnerable in higher education enrolment, adaptation, engagement and graduation. Studies drawn upon the theory of cultural capital and reproduction offer a structural explanation for such differences. On the opposite, another branch of research concerns more about individual's agency, emphasising students' proactive responses and interactions with structural constraints. There seems to be a trend in the research of student agency to focus on the experiences of successful FGS – those who are considered as having the strongest agency. However, the scope of agency would be narrowed if it is merely used as a means to disprove class reproduction. Additionally, the diversity of education contexts seems to be ignored, as most studies focus on the academic context or students' engagement with the general campus environment.

## **2.2 NGOs as non-formal higher education providers**

### **2.2.1 Non-formal education: definitions, characteristics and providers**

Education could take place in multiple contexts. Formal education mainly occurs in officially legitimised institutions such as schools and universities, with organised curriculum systems, explicit norms and regulations, as well as the authority to issue degrees and certifications (Dib, 1988; Johnson & Majewska, 2022). Informal education, on the other hand, is the unstructured learning process that happens everywhere at every moment, as learners conduct informal learning unconsciously in their continuous interactions with the daily life

(Eshach, 2007; Johnson & Majewska, 2022). Thus, informal education is reflected in all aspects of social participation. Non-formal education falls between formal and informal education with a rather ambiguous definition. Table 1 is a comparison of formal, non-formal and informal learning proposed by Eshach (2007). It could be seen that although non-formal education is provided by organisations and teachers in a somehow systematic manner (which is different from informal education), it does not take place in traditional education institutions like schools and universities. Students take larger control over their own learning processes in non-formal education as it is more flexible in content and more adaptable to personal needs as compared to formal education. Scholars also noted that non-formal education is mostly non-presential and non-synchronous (Dib, 1988), and that the knowledge taught and produced in non-formal education is both propositional and procedural (Johnson & Majewska, 2022).

The figure originally presented here cannot be made freely available via ORA because of copyright.

The figure was sourced at Eshach, H. (2007). Bridging in-school and out-of-school learning: Formal, non-formal, and informal education. *Journal of science education and technology*, 16, 171-190. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10956-006-9027-1>

Providers of non-formal education encompass a wide variety of institutions beyond traditional schools and universities, such as voluntary and community organisations (Moreland, 2019), museums and science centres (Eshach, 2007; Zhang et al., 2018), as well as alternative higher education providers without degree-awarding powers (Evans, 2018). Due to their flexibility in terms of initial objectives (Dib, 1988) and their pedagogical approach that concerns life-long contexts and values-situated learning (Romi & Schmida, 2009), non-formal education providers are considered to be better at meeting individual expectations (Dib, 1988),

arising learning interests and enhancing academic performance (Eshach, 2007). The ample diversity of non-formal education institutions also creates a space for learners to exercise their freedom, make autonomous choices, explore various developmental possibilities and form personal identities (Romi & Schmida, 2009).

The development of non-formal education in China originated from the national reform of quality-oriented education in the 1990s. To compensate for the exam-focused and teaching-oriented formal education system, non-formal education institutions were encouraged by the government to provide diverse, student-centred education beyond the school (Su et al., 2015). After-school training companies constitute the majority of the Chinese non-formal education industry, providing subject-based tutoring and charging high tuition fees with the aim of getting students higher scores (Zhu, 2020). Instead of fostering personalised development, these for-profit institutions carrying out strictly exam-focused education further exacerbated anxiety and restricted students' free explorations (Zhu, 2020). Moreover, the participation rates in after-school training between children from higher and lower-income families constantly widened (Wei & Xue, 2021). Therefore, the emergence of non-formal education not only failed to shift the dominant status of traditional exam-based schooling, but also reinforced inequality and rigidity in education. In response to this, the Chinese government implemented the *Double Reduction* policy in 2021 to reduce burdens of off-campus training on students (Lin, 2022), signifying the suppression of pecuniary logic in non-formal education provision (Zhang et al., 2022b).

### **2.2.2 NGOs as non-formal education providers**

NGOs serve as a key provider of non-formal education. The not-for-profit nature of NGOs allows them to avoid the economic logic as applied by after-school training institutions. In conjunction with the *Double Reduction* policy, NGOs present a growing influence on the Chinese non-formal education industry.

#### ***Complementary or compensatory***

Similar to other forms of non-formal education, NGO-provided education acts as an

additional resource to formal education. Research has shown that NGO-provided education opportunities are essential in complementing formal higher education provided by universities. As one of the main stakeholders in higher education, NGOs are expected to cooperate with universities and local communities in developing educational activities such as conferences and employment instructions, enhancing the quality of higher education (Tryma & Salnikova, 2020; Tryma, 2019). Supplementing the theoretical training in the universities, NGOs help provide practical and specialised experiences for students and allow them to build networks with like-minded individuals (Haigh, 2006). Moreover, scholars argue that the civil nature of NGOs makes them crucial in promoting citizenship education, developing students' critical competence and global identities (Aksit et al., 2008).

Other than their complementary functions, a unique benefit of NGO education providers is their compensatory role to state and market provision. Some NGOs directly replace schools in providing education to students excluded from the formal education system; however, because of their lack of legitimacy they are always treated as a second-best alternative (Rose, 2009). Most of the NGOs provide extra support for disadvantaged students outside of schools, such as disciplinary courses (He, 2007) and life-long learning programs that nurture confidence, open-mindedness and charitable awareness among under-class students (Leitch et al., 2016). Some NGOs focus particularly on higher education division. For example, Paster (2014) indicated that NGO-provided university preparatory services, such as academic advising, test preparation courses and higher education community introduction, effectively remove basic education and information barriers for disenfranchised students.

Despite the fact that NGOs are usually considered more student-centred, accountable and cost-effective than formal education providers, some studies have revealed their incompetence in bridging the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students. Due to the lack of external monitoring and resources, some NGO education programs have been noted to be limited to a standard package of basic teaching (Rose, 2009). Bano (2008) further argued that the dependence on external funding makes NGOs prioritise donors' interests over students. The frequent changes in donation patterns further cause discontinuity in program types and target communities, resulting in decreased learning outcomes and additional monetary burdens (Bano,

2008). It is therefore still uncertain whether education provided by NGOs could effectively benefit disadvantaged students.

### ***The Chinese model of social governance***

In Chinese higher education studies, NGOs are mainly discussed under the framework of social governance. In response to the development of market economy and the emergence of civil society, the governance of Chinese higher education has changed from a state monopoly to a multi-centred governance model (Long et al., 2010). NGOs, as one of the governance parties and stakeholders, serve as additional education providers independent from, cooperating with or accountable to formal higher education institutions (Wang & Qiao, 2017; Xu & Lu, 2016; Xiao, 2013). Previous literature has elaborated on NGOs' functions of consolidating academic and social resources, bridging multiple stakeholders, mitigating conflicts between the government and universities, constraining monopolistic powers, meeting diversified requirements and addressing contractual failures (Wang & Qiao, 2017; Long et al., 2010; Xu & Lu, 2016; Zhang, 2005). However, as suggested by Snape (2019), the Chinese social governance framework is essentially top-down, since it is the state that pushes the society to do self-governance. As a result, Chinese NGOs face particular challenges. On the one hand, their autonomy is largely suppressed by excessive government intervention (Chen, 2015; Zhang, 2005), 34% of all educational NGOs remain unregistered due to political restrictions (Xiong & Zhang, 2011). On the other, NGOs hardly get access to resources outside the government, causing low service quality and poor organisational management (Chen, 2015).

### **2.2.3 The lack of students' perspective in discussing non-formal education**

Compared with the plenty of studies discussing non-formal education from the institutional and national levels, there is still little research focusing on the micro-interactions in non-formal education activities, especially how students reflect on and benefit from their participation. Only a few studies shed light on students' perspectives in non-formal education. For example, Norqvist and Leffler (2017) investigated students' motivation, perceptions of learning and self-assessment in a non-formal education program, as well as their understanding

of the relationship between formal and non-formal education. Gutiérrez-Santiuste et al. (2015) compared students' satisfaction and dissatisfaction with formal and non-formal education, indicating the lack of community experiences in non-formal online education programs. On the contrary, Madjar and Cohen-Malayev (2013) remarked that students perceive the environment of non-formal education settings as more supportive in exploring their identities.

It could be seen that the aforementioned studies mainly focused on making comparisons between formal and non-formal education; the differences among students, however, have been neglected. With the growing influence of non-formal education on students' life-long development and the deepening intertwining between formal and non-formal education contexts, it is significant to examine how different students exercise their agency and subjectivity, strategically interact with non-formal learning environments and construct new cognitions. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds deserve particular attention, as non-formal education opportunities may serve as a key resource to build personal strength. Thus, this research seeks to answer how students from different socioeconomic backgrounds (FGS and NFGS) engage in non-formal education provided by NGOs, and whether such educational activities and programs could become compensatory opportunities for FGS.

## **2.3 Analytical framework: student self-formation**

### **2.3.1 Marginson's self-formation theory**

Self-formation is the “ongoing self-making, grounded in self-aware agency, that continues through life” (Marginson, 2023a, p. 62). Higher education is “a concentrated period of self-formation within the life course” (Marginson, 2023a, p. 63), as the unique exposure to the density of knowledge, pedagogies that foster reflection, communicative social relations, extracurricular activities and the institutional settings of freedom in higher education have the potential to make a rapid self-transformation (Marginson, 2023b). Thus, higher education is an appropriate context to discuss self-formation. Self-formation encompasses the entirety of higher education; as Marginson (2023b, p. 42) argued, it is “a condition of higher education, its central process, and most importantly, its outcome”. This inclusive nature renders self-formation a suitable instrument to look into students' experiences and perceptions in the higher

education process.

Marginson (2023a, 2023b) suggested four elements of higher education as self-formation: autonomy, the will to learn, reflexive agency and immersion in knowledge. Autonomy is the agency freedom and capability of an individual to conduct “self-directed and conscious action” and “apply their will to their own objectives”, as compared to the negative freedom of avoiding external threats (Marginson, 2023b, p. 41). The will to learn is based on the assumption that learning is intrinsically motivated, for students are people “with a will, agency, a drive to learn” (Marginson, 2023a, p. 62). Even though such wills could be triggered by external environments, they must go through an internal process for learning to occur. Reflexive agency refers to “the continuing process of critical self-monitoring, self-evaluation, self-criticism and self-regulation” (Marginson, 2023b, pp. 41-42). Reflexivity is central to self-formation because it is through inner conversations that students’ knowledge and reactions are transferred to their understandings of self. Finally, the immersion in knowledge is a unique component of self-formation in the higher education domain (Marginson, 2023a, 2023b). During higher education, students are able to delve deeply into disciplinary and extracurricular knowledge, thereby securing “bottomless techniques and resources for the work of the self on the self” (Marginson, 2024, p. 8). It could be seen that these four elements are facilitated by both external environments and inner mental processes, but human mentality plays the core role in the enaction of autonomy, reflexivity, motivation and conscious knowledge immersion.

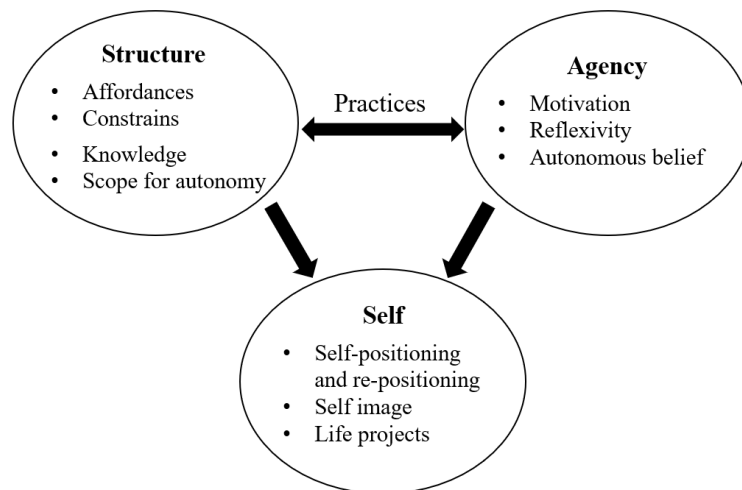
Self-formation has strong explanatory power on students’ agency when examining equity and justice in higher education. Instead of focusing on the external conditions and viewing students as formed by the environment, institutions and teaching, self-formation emphasises student’s inner self-negotiation, reflection and self-construction that help them proactively respond to structural constraints, navigate the education process and construct their life projects (Marginson, 2014; 2023a; 2023b; 2024). This is to say, through the lens of student self-formation, we could analyse how structural disadvantage can be mitigated or compensated by individual agency and reflexivity, and further explore the way to equity in higher education and border social contexts.

The NGO-provided education activities and programs for university students is an

essential context of student self-formation. These experiences belong to the beyond-classroom domain of self-formation (Marginson, 2024). Higher education does not merely take place in disciplinary learning, the openness of extracurricular sphere is very likely to “broaden the scope for students’ personal projects” (Marginson, 2024, p. 9). Previous research on international students has indicated that mobility could potentially foster intensive self-formation because those students need to endeavour to pilot their lives through changes and difficulties in the foreign culture (Marginson, 2014). Marginson (2023a) further argued that intensive transformation, such as being the first university student in the family and moving from rural to urban areas to pursue higher education, could lead to concentrated self-formation. Similarly, moving from formal education provided by the universities to informal education contexts in NGOs means that students need to actively accommodate to the new social rules, navigate through the complexity, informality and mobility of resources and adapt to NGOs’ culture to acquire the most out of this experience. Therefore, participation in NGO education may also make a unique contribution to students’ self-formation. Moreover, examining students’ self-formation in the NGO setting is a proper means to evaluate the compensatory function of non-formal education. As argued by Marginson (2024, p. 9), sociability beyond the classroom bears the potential to bring about “experience in which prior differences in students’ resources and capabilities are partly flattened out”. As students participate in NGO education programs voluntarily, it could be assumed that they have a high level of agency in seeking extra-curriculum learning and research opportunities. It is therefore important to answer whether through such agentic engagement FGS could get rid of the previous disadvantaged status and achieve more success in higher education.

### **2.3.2 The mechanism and outcome of self-formation: an analytical framework**

Drawing on the review of the literature, particularly on student agency and self-formation, this research employs both inductive and deductive strategies to develop an analytical framework for students’ self-formation in NGO-provided higher education (see Figure 1). This framework encompasses two interrelated parts, the mechanism of self-formation and the outcome of the constantly constructed self.



**Figure 1. An analytical framework of student self-formation**

Firstly, self is continuously formed through the interaction between structure and agency led by self-aware agents. Different from Giddens who believes that personal reflection is largely unconscious and therefore agency and structure are interdependent and inseparable, Archer argues that agents consciously respond to the pre-given structure, these responses are what “triggers self-formation that can heighten agency” (Marginson, 2024, p. 5). Thus, Marginson (2018) stated that a student’s self is constantly produced in a changeable combination of material conditions, social relations, agency freedom and active will. A number of previous empirical studies have deconstructed the student self-formation process as the combined impact of structural and agential factors. In discussing international students’ self and identity formation in English-speaking countries, Matsunaga et al. (2020) discussed structural elements of community environment and disciplinary power, as well as students’ agency in adjustment and resistance. They also stressed that students make meanings through their practices in the classroom community. Lee (2021) regarded contextual constraints and affordances as the resources for self-formation, and student agency and reflexivity as the condition for self-formation, together creating a new self as the product of self-formation. In the context of Chinese universities and NGOs, students encounter both structural barriers and enablement that make them reconsider their roles, value beliefs and future ambitions, construct new motivations and develop personal strategies of practice. The knowledge learned and the autonomy granted in formal curriculum and NGOs programs greatly vary, leading to different reflections on the self and external world.

Secondly, the continuously constructed self consists of three elements, self-positioning and re-positioning, self-image and life projects. People's perception of self could have two dimensions, a social-oriented self-conception dependent on interpersonal experiences and a rather inner-oriented self-conception developed from personal deliberations (Carlson, 1965). Students' positioning of self refers to how they see themselves as related to the community they belong. For example, Lin and Xu (2023) indicated that international master's students tend to re-evaluate their suitability as a researcher after experiencing rules in the academic fields and comparing their academic competence with the cohort. In Mili and Towers (2022)'s research, Chinese international students position themselves as others, because they notice that they are always silent in class discussions and other students tend to perceive them as contributing less to the group. Thus, self-positioning could be conceived as a social-oriented self-perception. The development of life projects, on the other hand, is more oriented from personal deliberations. Instead of accepting who they are based on other people's opinions and the evaluation standards prevalent in the university and society, students take a proactive role in reshape their objectives of life and decide who they want to be. Self-images, however, could be both social-oriented and inner-oriented. In this research, participants construct complicated self-images based on their dynamic interaction with the structure that consists constant reflexive considerations and agentic practices.

## **CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY**

This chapter discusses the methodology of this research. The first section elaborates on research design, including the philosophical underpinning, the choice of research method, participant recruitment procedures, data collection and data analysis strategies. The second section focuses on ethical considerations and the approaches taken to ensure confidentiality and participants' rights.

### **3.1 Research design**

#### **3.1.1 Philosophical stances**

The philosophical assumptions underpinning this research are a relativist ontology and a constructionist epistemology. Ontology refers to the theory of existence, concerning the nature of reality and what reality can be known (Lee, 2012; Berryman, 2019). With self-formation being the key concept of this study, the reality explored is students' selves. As argued by Archer, there is an ongoing interplay between external elements and an individual's inner agency, forming the selves of individuals dynamically and continuously (Archer, 1995). Since the self is constantly being generated through the interaction between human mentality and the social contexts they live in, it is a mental construction with endless possibilities. There would not be a single and definite truth regarding what kind of self-cognition would be produced under a similar occasion (in this study: the participation in NGO education), because each person has unique experiences and distinct mental reactions to those experiences. Therefore, the conceptualisation of self is in line with ontological relativism that suggests there are multiple realities constructed within human minds (Moon & Blackman, 2014), and "a universal understanding of psychological experiences cannot be obtained because they must always be understood within the contexts within which they are embedded" (Spencer et al., 2014, p. 82).

In line with the relativist ontology in terms of self, this research employs a constructivist epistemology. Epistemology is the theory about how realities are known (Berryman, 2019). There are two dimensions of knowledge in this research: participants' knowledge about their selves and the researcher's knowledge about participants' knowledge. For students who participate in NGO education, their knowledge of selves is derived from their active

interpretations of the NGO context and its relationship with formal higher education, their practices in the university and NGO programs, their reflective understandings of the first- or non-first-generation identities, and their agentic reflections on their beliefs, personalities and life projects. This is in coherence with the constructionist epistemology that emphasises the active construction of knowledge (Schwandt, 1994; Shannon-Baker, 2022) and meaning-making out of social engagement (Crotty, 1988; Moon & Blackman, 2014). Gaining knowledge about relative realities requires the interaction between consciousness and the world (Scotland, 2012). Therefore, learning about students' self-formation needs interaction with the participants. The endlessness of self (the reality) and its nature as a psychological construction make an individual's self only approachable through deep engagement with this individual. Meanwhile, researchers need to continuously reflect on their own experiences, conceptions and values to understand and interpret participants' experiences and thoughts (Plano Clark & Ivankova, 2016). Thus, the final knowledge about undergraduates' self-formation produced by this study is created, rather than revealed, by the researcher's active interaction with the participants, which indicates a constructivist epistemology (Spencer et al., 2014).

### **3.1.2 Interview**

Research with a relativist ontology and a constructivist epistemology focuses on the how and why questions, thus is often associated with qualitative methodology (Berryman, 2019; Shannon-Baker, 2022) that entitle participants more freedom and dominance over the research process than quantitative studies (Scotland, 2012). The research question of this study, namely "how the self-formation of FGS and NFGS vary in NGO-provided education", is essentially a how question as it requires looking into the self-formation processes of both FGS and NFGS, which encompasses the entanglement of students' mentality and their ongoing education experiences from family, universities to NGO-provided programs. Thus, the design of this research is built on a qualitative methodology.

Specifically, this study adopts semi-structured interviews as its research instrument. Interviews are especially useful in accessing the depth of insights and unexpected information (Rickinson, 2005), because it gives respondents the opportunity to elaborate on an issue in detail

(Adhabi & Anozie, 2017). From a constructionist conception, the interview is a dynamic interacting process when the interviewer and the interviewee co-construct data about the research topic (Roulston, 2010). Interview data are speakers' accounts about social orders, rather than reports that directly reflect minds or world contexts (Backer, 2004). Thus, how researchers make sense of the participants' narratives is an indispensable part of data creation and topic analysis (Roulston, 2010). These characteristics of interviews are believed to match the data collection orientation of this research. As aforementioned, approaching self-formation requires both participants' in-depth description of their life experiences and perceptions of education received in diversified institutions, as well as the researcher's agentic deconstruction and sense-making of the information acquired.

The rationale for adopting a semi-structured arrangement is that this approach could further promote in-depth understanding regarding self-formation. A semi-structured interview allows the researcher to generate follow-up questions according to previous responses, giving flexibility to both researchers and participants to enhance interactive communication (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Roulston, 2010). This allows for the coverage of signposting questions commonly indicative of the process and outcome of students' self-formation, while designating space for participants' elaboration on more personalised experiences and mental activities.

An interview protocol containing questions for two rounds of interviews was developed before the beginning of data collection (see Appendix A for interview questions). The development of interview questions was based on the phenomenological tradition. A phenomenological interview is conducted to "generate detailed information concerning human experiences as well as the participant's responses to the phenomenon of investigation"(Roulston, 2010, p. 16). Thus, the majority of its questions are open-ended questions which allow participants to formulate their answers autonomously (Roulston, 2010). As this study focuses on undergraduates' self-formation during NGO education activities and programs, the experiences, feelings and perceptions are core information to be collected. Consistent with the phenomenological tradition, interviews of this study used open questions such as "can you tell one experience of family education that you think had a great influence

on you?” and “why do you think you can achieve your objectives by participating in NGO education programs?”.

The first round of interview took 1 hour, focusing on two major topics. The first topic included undergraduates’ family, schooling and university experiences, their reflections, thoughts and feelings towards those experiences. The reason for setting this part of the question is that, an undergraduate’s self-formation in NGO education is assumed to be also affected by other education and life experiences because human self-consciousness is always flowing, and self-formation is happening throughout an individual’s life (Marginson, 2024). The second part was for collecting basic information about the NGO education programs students participated in, consisting of a brief description of each program, reasons why students sought NGO education and their original expectations and concerns. According to such information, the researcher could refocus and reorganise the questions for the second round of interview.

The second round of interview took approximately 1.5 hours. During the interview, detailed information in relation to students’ motivation for participation, engagement with organisations and personnel, strategies for navigating difficulties, feelings and reflections in NGO-provided education programs or activities were inquired. Most of the participants attended more than one NGO education program. In this case, 1-3 programs would be selected to discuss in detail according to the length and depth of participation.

### **3.1.3 Participant recruitment and selection**

Participants of this study were originally recruited through sending advertising posters to the participant’s WeChat groups of two educational NGOs. It is assumed that as non-formal education providers, NGOs create a special context, distinct from the formal university environment, for students’ self-formation. Therefore, one of the theoretical ambitions of this research is to understand undergraduates’ self-formation in non-formal education. It is thus necessary to investigate a variety of NGO programs to extract common characteristics of FGS and NFGS’ self-formation in education provided by NGOs. Based on this reason, the two NGOs selected for poster sending offer two separate kinds of education: teaching- and research-oriented programs. The first NGO was established in 2014 to provide free online sharing

sessions, in-person academic tours and online summer camps for college students. The second NGO was established in 2021, providing online and in-person research programs. Each program costs around 300-600¥ per student. However, this cost is almost negligible compared with research programs provided by Chinese after-school training companies, which usually cost over 10000¥ per person (How did “background enhancement” become a business? - Survey on the messy service of some study-abroad agents, 2022). Twelve suitable participants were recruited through poster sending. It is worth noting that not all of the NGO education experiences of these initial twelve participants came from the aforementioned NGOs, as most of them attended various education programs provided by different NGOs in their undergraduate lives. After the first round of recruitment, the author employed snowball sampling to recruit another eight qualified participants, thereby further enriching the types of NGO programs in the overall data.

Unqualified applicants were screened out by two inclusion criteria: 1) the participant is currently a Chinese undergraduate student in China or holding a Bachelor’s degree issued by a Chinese university within three years; 2) the participant has experiences in education programs or activities held by Chinese NGOs during undergraduate. The researcher asked all qualified applicants selection questions in terms of age, gender, university type, major, parent’s education level and the type of NGO programs they took part in. Through asking these questions, the researcher could select the most diverse group of applicants as final interviewees. Finally, ten FGS and ten NFGS were selected (see Appendix B for participant demographics).

### **3.1.4 Data collection**

The data collection of this study was carried out through online interviews, with the use of Microsoft Teams as the supporting platform. All the interviews were video/audio recorded. Nineteen interviews were done in Mandarin, one interviewee requested the interview to be conducted in English. Interview questions were not strictly followed as the researcher sometimes adjusted question sequence and added personalised questions to tailor the interviews for different participants. For each participant, there was an interval of roughly a week between the two rounds of interviews, which was supposed to be a reasonable length of time to relieve

participants' time pressure while not being too long to make them forget the first conversation. Transcripts were firstly generated automatically by Teams. The researcher then proofread the transcripts. An amount of 15£ in cash payment or an equivalent gift was given to each participant as an incentive to compensate for their time commitment to this study.

### **3.1.5 Data analysis**

This research combined deductive and inductive strategies in data analysis. A deductive process develops themes and explanations from previous literature, theories and concepts, while an inductive approach generates codes and interpretations driven by raw data (Ramanadhan et al., 2021). A framework of key themes was firstly developed through in-depth literature review on student self-formation. Following the deductive process, interview data was carefully analysed to revise the framework, identify new key themes and add sub-themes into to each key theme.

The researcher conducted inductive data analysis through the following steps. Firstly, a brief review of the transcript was carried out right after each interview, during which some answers of the respondents were highlighted and the fresh thoughts of the researcher were recorded. Secondly, the researcher read each transcript thoroughly, coded the data with different colours and made notes on the side of the document. In the second stage, similar codes were categorised into multiple sub-themes. The sub-themes were then put into the key themes extracted from the literature review. Some sub-themes were considered to be not compatible with any key themes from the initial framework, therefore new key themes were generated. To be noticed is that the inductive analysis is a recursive rather than a linear process (Chirstou, 2022). During theme generation, the researcher repeatedly returned to the coding phase to make more accurate interpretations.

## **3.2 Ethics**

Ethical considerations, which refer to “rules of conduct, typically to conformity to a code or set of principles”, are unavoidable in real-world research involving people, and they should be monitored throughout the process of research (Robson & McCartan, 2016, p. 208). The data

collection process followed a strict procedure of Informed consent. An information sheet was sent to each participant before the interview began. Participants were asked to sign a PDF written/oral consent form if they had made the decision to take part.

The researcher thought highly of confidentiality and anonymity during the study. To bring more autonomy to the participants, the participants were allowed to choose their own pseudonyms. Random pseudonyms were assigned to participants who did not want to think of a pseudonym by themselves. To protect private information, the hometown, university names and the names of the NGOs attended by participants were omitted from the text of this dissertation.

Another Ethical issue was participants' potential mental stress caused by the research. Education experiences were not pleasing and inspiring throughout participants' lives. The researcher was cognisant of the possible discomfort induced by some interview questions. Thus, the participants were informed of their right to suspend the interview at any time, withdraw from the research or withdraw any information they mentioned in the interviews before a deadline.

## CHAPTER 4. FINDINGS

This chapter discusses the key findings from interviews with FGS and NFGS. Since self-formation is a consecutive process happening throughout a person's life, students' construction of self in NGO-provided education are closely related to their education experiences in families, schools and universities. Thus, the first section presents students' experiences before participating in NGO programs, including their perceptions of structural constraints and affordances, their self-positioning in the university and motivations to join NGO education programs. The second section focuses on students' experiences in NGOs. A brief introduction of the NGO environment is given at the beginning of this section. Following this the researcher compares the different practicing strategies adopted by FGS and NFGS in NGO programs. The third and fourth parts of the second section illustrates students' development of self-images and their re-construction of life projects.

### 4.1 Students' experiences prior to NGO education

#### 4.1.1 Structural constraints and structural affordances

Previous literature has elaborated on the structural barriers throughout the education journey of FGS, such as the lack of family support (Gofen, 2009; Hodge & Mellin, 2010), inferior schooling environments (Putnam, 2016) and challenges in adapting to the university settings that favour middle-class habitus (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Stephens et al., 2012a). Although these are consistent with the findings in this research, interviews with both FGS and NFGS demonstrate that each group of students possesses unique structural advantages and faces particular structural restrictions in their university lives.

#### *First-generation students (FGS): class-based constraints and agency-based affordances*

Through their rugged and circuitous education experiences, FGS came to realise that compared to others, they could rely little on their families and must work harder to gain education resources on their own. As Lara stated:

“I know I can't totally rely on my parents, I can't rely on anyone else either. The only thing I can do is to improve my own skills of seeking information, or I would again and

again miss such opportunities for better resources”

The lack of family resources is usually combined with schooling that focuses on basic facts and skills instead of critical autonomous thinking and university preparation (Anyon, 1981). FGS attended strictly exam-oriented high schools in preparation for *Gaokao*. During interviews, FGS discussed their stressful and tedious experiences under the high pressure of exams. The suppressing and monotonous high school lives caused mental health issues to FGS, and resulted in their inferiority when competing with NFGS for academic and social opportunities in the university.

Heye identified himself as a “small town swot” (小镇做题家 *xiaozhen zuotijia*)<sup>4</sup> and his high school as a jail. After entering college, he found himself neither acting very well in class nor enjoying socialising in student organisations. The sophisticated social atmosphere in the university was strange and uncomfortable to Heye. Having been accustomed to pursuing one single objective set by the school (getting a high score in *Gaokao*), he felt a loss of direction in college. It could thus be seen that the structural constraints faced by FGS in family support and schooling experiences extend to college, creating obstacles for FGS to acquire education resources.

Despite noticing the restricting factors related to their first-generation identity, FGS were also aware of the variety of enablement in their living conditions that could help them overcome structural disadvantages. The enablement was sometimes simply the other side of the restrictions. Emotional support from family serves as a crucial driver of FGS’ psychological well-being and academic success (Roksa & Kinsley, 2019). Even though the parents of FGS had limited cultural capital, they respected their children’s own wills and interfered little in their personal decisions. This unconditional trust was regarded as a huge emotional comfort by several participants. Another affordance that interweaves with constraints was the urban environment. Although suffering from cultural shock, FGS were well aware that receiving higher education in big cities was a necessary pathway towards upward mobility. Therefore, having a chance to overcome structural constraints was in turn seen by FGS as a structural

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4 A Chinese internet slang emerged in 2020, describing students from under-developed regions of China who are very good at taking exams but lack cultural capital and the ability to critically solve complicated problems.

affordance.

Another structural resource emphasised by FGS was the free access to social media and the internet. For example, Evelyn highly appreciated *Zhihu* (知乎), a Chinese online discussion platform, for enlightening her as a middle school student. She underscored that the online postings in *Zhihu* informed her of things she would never know from her original background, broadened her horizons and prompted her to think about the meanings of life. Rather than proving digital divide (Banerjee, 2022; Peters, 2023), this research shows that students with strong agency and personal orientation could benefit from the internet to gain resources beyond their class limitation. When being asked how they came to know the NGO education programs they attended, first-generation participants identified purposeful online browsing as the main source of information. In contrast, the primary resources for NFGS were teacher, parents and peer recommendation.

### ***Non-first-generation students (NFGS): agency-based constraints and class-based affordances***

Although most NFGS tend to feel positive and at ease after entering college (Jack, 2016), Non-first-generation interviewees in this study proposed certain structural constraints. Firstly, after proactively seeking resources from the university, they realised that what available from formal higher education would not be sufficient for their future ambitions. Participants who mentioned this limitation of university had high expectations after graduation, such as studying abroad, getting a decent job in international organisations or becoming a company manager. Participants knew that such objectives could not be achieved merely through high GPAs and on-campus activities.

Another structural constraint brought up by non-first-generation participants was the hierarchical power relationship in the university that hinders autonomy. Several interviewees discussed their disappointment with university authorities preventing them from freely expressing themselves, organising student movements and activities. Joanna's mother has bachelor's degree and her father is a doctor. With enthusiasm in gender equality, she initiated a *Free Sanitary Towel* campaign in her college. However, this activity was severely warned by

the university administration. Joanna believed it was the bureaucracy and the abuse of power by university officials that caused the failure of her campaign, thus, she became frustrated with the university and decided to seek opportunities elsewhere.

Middle-class students usually receive more supportive parenting in terms of cultural habitus, structural resources and parental involvement in school (Lareau & Weininger, 2008; Sherman & Harris, 2012; Barg, 2019). NFGS in this research displayed high cognizant of their advantages over FGS in these aspects. Most participants reported being sent to elite schools with well-educated teachers, internationalised curriculum and abundant extracurricular activities. Due to the bountiful opportunities offered by schools and families, many participants discussed their engagement with NGOs before college. When being asked about the cultural norms in their families, participants introduced their familial tradition of book reading, time management and goals setting, and further pointed out that they benefited greatly from these habits.

Apart from family supports, NFGS reported having more access to private authority relationships in the university. Scholars have argued that students whose parents went to college make more faculty contacts (Zhang et al., 2016; Aruguete, 2017) and are more likely to satisfy from interactions with authority figures (Kim & Sax, 2009; Jack, 2016). Similarly, NFGS indicated that they received plenty of resource from teachers, including research assistantships, internship opportunities, social connections, referrals in competitions and informal guidance on academic and professional development. Being more experienced in positive upward socialisation, NFGS were more resourceful in obtaining benefits from authorities. For example, Jiayue had a philosophy of ‘remaining similar but different to others’ to be impressed by authority figures. She also strategically used her WeChat posters for self-advocacy.

#### **4.1.2 Positioning self in the higher education context**

Students’ expectations to college usually do not perfectly match with their college experiences (Smith & Wertlieb, 2005; Zafar, 2011), thus, they would keep revising their goals, adjusting practices and re-locating themselves in the university context. Both FGS and NFGS reported re-positioning themselves in relation to the other students, the university and society

after noticing their structural strengths and weaknesses. The process of negotiation and self-positioning was highly personalised, but common patterns were found in the FGS and NFGS groups respectively.

***First-generation students (FGS): dynamic, critical and multi-dimensional self-positioning***

Most first-generation participants did not have a clear clue of why pursuing higher education. They bluntly admitted that taking *Gaokao* was simply following the tide and their choices of major was random, or based on monetary rewards. With poor knowledge of the university environment and their fields of study, FGS found themselves isolated from the dominant campus culture and lagged behind their non-first-generation peers academically and socially. Participants reported themselves missing interviews for student union membership, having troubles understanding the teachers and having conflicts with classmates. Despite having been prepared for cultural shock, there were still circumstances which made FGS extremely frustrated, such as seeing a roommate getting an internship at a leading enterprise in the industry through family connections, or struggling to find a cheap place to live during vacations.

Practical experiences at the university made FGS recognise resource gaps and class differences, however, instead of simply accepting themselves as losers, participants explained their complicated self-positioning considerations. When Lara found herself in the middle of a fierce competition with 300 students in her cohort, she realised there were too few resources and she did not stand a chance. However, Lara believed that she could alter her status by finding extra opportunities outside of college:

“I knew that I was no one in this 300 people and I couldn’t see hope in this single track...I was so anxious but I told myself it’s okay, I could use my own effort to get information from outside...So I quickly turned to another track to enrich my extracurricular experiences, because they could complement my university performance and enhance my academic grades.”

J pointed out that she was excluded by the elitism culture of her university: “you see, I look a little silly and dumpy. I just can’t act like my elite friends who are obviously not in the same class as me”. J believed her lack of elite qualities caused her failures in every scholarship

selection; however, she reconciled her personal character with the social preference: “I don’t want my development to be tightly framed in this (elitism) framework...A common ground of elites is that they value profit more than anything, but never bare their heart to you”. J’s response illustrates a level of disagreement with the elitism values. Although not compatible with the university atmosphere, J believed her personal quality of truthfulness and sincerity was more superior than her elite peers. Eric expressed a stronger dissatisfaction by bluntly saying “I hold a grudge to the university education, it made me see a lot of irrational stuff”, because he believed competitions in the university has forced students to spend meaningless time on collective activities and curry favour with teachers to get resources.

Thus, we could see that FGS adopted a dynamic and multi-dimensional approach to position themselves in the university. They negotiated between who they wanted to be, where they currently stood and who they would become if following the path of formal higher education. Despite understanding their disadvantaged background vis-à-vis NFGS, they placed themselves positively in future competition, believing that they could fill the gap by seizing resources from beyond the scope of universities. Even though realising they might hardly exceed NFGS in the university environment, they established self-esteem by questioning the prevalent evaluation standards of success. Through these processes first-generation participants critically decided their relative status to other students, university norms and future possibilities. This process of self-positioning was teemed with agentic reflection, as Evelyn described: it was “the reborn from desperation (绝处逢生) to bring out self-awareness”.

### ***Non-first-generation students (NFGS): positioning self within and beyond the university***

Unlike FGS, the majority of NFGS chose their undergraduate majors based on a rather specific understanding of the field. They carefully considered their post-graduation goals before going to college. Therefore, upon entering college, they quickly located opportunities in line with their aims. Through active engagement in lessons and student societies, NFGS soon found themselves mastering the university life. Nine out of the ten non-first-generation participants indicated that they were straight-A students in their cohort, favoured by the faculty or won multiple professional competitions. Aside from academic performance, NFGS also wish to

excel in student organisations. In general, NFGS placed themselves highly among their fellow students by creating a desirable life in college and developing solid sense of belonging. In contrast, FGS usually find themselves drifting apart from the college community.

Despite managing their university lives proficiently, NFGS made reflections on success and the intense competition in higher education. Jessica ranked first within the cohort in her freshman year. However, she began to question her belief of meritocracy after achieving a large amount of credit from contests and exams:

“I began to think whether there is point in all of this, so I dropped out of a couple of national-level contests at the awarding stage, because I felt these were not anymore important to me.”

After realising that honours in college were not as essential as she thought, Jessica decided to “take this time to explore the world outside”.

Apart from participants like Jessica who doubted the university’s evaluation standards, other respondents realised that their success in college means little to the success they desired. Stella majored in English Literature, but she was determined to work in the education industry. Having been reading English novels since high school, she mastered her undergraduate courses. However, she knew that academic ranking was “not the only answer for me to go on”.

It could therefore be concluded that even though NFGS were aware of their advantages over the rest of their cohort, they did not fully position themselves as just a member of the university. In contrast, NFGS tended to place themselves beyond the scope of formal higher education, seeking for belongingness in broader social stages.

### **4.1.3 Motivations and purposes of participating in NGO education**

The perception of structural constraints and affordances, the understanding of self-status in the university and the vision of personal interest and future ambitions collectively shaped undergraduates’ will of attending NGO education. Compared with NFGS, FGS demonstrated obviously stronger motivation. Wordings like “definitely”, “must” and “crazily looked for” constantly appeared in conversations with FGS, while NFGS used more gentle descriptions such as “stumbled upon”, “happened to” and “made an attempt”.

### ***First-generation students (FGS): compensation and self-realisation***

The most cited reason for FGS to join NGO education programs was to make up for resource disadvantage. They presumed that as an outer platform, NGOs could broaden their connections beyond the university and bring them benefits even better than what their universities provide. For example, Evelyn described the process of gathering resources from NGOs as “fission”:

“You get contact with people in a different circle, this is when a fission starts. It’s like a snowballing process. They post a lot of events, if I click in, I can join another group, then I meet some more people. This is why there will be a fission after information exchange, you form a new social circle of your own.”

The second purpose reported by FGS was to look for desirable relationships outside of the university. As aforementioned, FGS reported unpleasant peer relationships and felt left behind in class and student activities. Thus, they regarded NGO education programs as a second chance to make friends with like-minded people. For FGS, reaching out to new people not only means relieving loneliness, but also finding people to work on a same interest. As Sam vividly described: “people always say *Gaokao* is like a million people crossing a single-log bridge, but you find that when you get into college, you are crossing a log bridge on your own”. Sam was passionate about entrepreneurship, but due to delayed movement in building connections in the university, he could not find a coworker on campus. Thus, he participated in NGO activities with the wish of meeting people with similar passion.

An underlying desire for FGS to join NGO education activities was to explore alternative routes for self-fulfilment. Scholars have pointed out that Chinese FGS tend to develop a multifaceted understanding of success in higher education, including not only grades, but also personal fulfilment and happiness (Li et al., 2024). In consistent with Li et al.’s (2024) finding, first-generation participants showed a strong commitment to self-actualisation. Their involvement in NGO education was a way to adhere to their individualised value principles, or in other words, to examine and justify their self-positioning developed in the reflective engagement with college lives.

### ***Non-first-generation students (NFGS): complementation and self-adjustment***

Some NFGS attended NGO activities to gather extra resources. Most participants who spoke about this reason intended to apply for universities abroad after graduation. They took part in NGO programs to add experiences on CVs, make friends with outstanding people and earn quality certificates. However, this is not to say their motivation was purely profit-oriented. Participants carefully analysed the competencies they were unable to develop from college engagement and chose NGO programs which compensate their university experience. International perspective, creativity and leadership were frequently cited as abilities beyond what universities could offer. Plans for switching major during postgraduate was another incentive for attending NGO education.

NFGS also reported more casual reasons for participating in NGO education, such as exploring the unknown, developing new interests, killing the time and having fun. As Kelly explained:

“My subjective idea was to do something that looked interesting...Because this program was on the plateau, it was pretty fascinating for me. I completely saw it as a brand-new experience...It was also a very immersive one-month program. So I just signed up with a mind of testing the water.”

Kelly majored in Law, although she believed her life should be more than professional work, she never thought about “leaving what I already had behind to do something I might have a little interest, but can’t make me determine”. Therefore, attending NGO activities was more of a temporal break from routine than a transformation from the past-self. Non-first-generation participants who critically reflected on university competitions and the restless undergraduate life tended to have motivations similar to Kelly.

## **4.2 Experiences in NGO education**

### **4.2.1 The overall environment in NGO education programs**

Non-formal education is commonly deemed better than formal education in adaptability, participatory environment, bottom-up organisational structure and student-centred pedagogies (Rose, 2009; Romi & Schmida, 2009; Johnson & Majewska, 2022). This research assumed the NGO education programs attended by Chinese undergraduates also bear analogous characteristics. Findings from interviews correspond with this assumption. Students introduced

the NGO programs to have flattened power structures, a friendly and inclusive atmosphere, ample participant freedom and diverse knowledge.

### ***Equalised power relations and flexible space for autonomy***

Participants complained about the unequal power relations they encountered in formal higher education. They discussed university officials having the authority to decide their eligibility for awards, distribute implicit resources based on personal preference and repress certain student movements and initiatives. Student governance in Chinese universities is led by the Chinese Communist Party which implements its ideology through an elaborate system of faculty committees, student counsellors, formal teaching and activities (Liu et al., 2023). Under the national policy of building world-class universities, faculty members place research over teaching (Lai et al., 2014), resulting in unequal student-teacher relationships where students are more of employees than partners (Dai & Matthews, 2023). This top-down environment made interviewees feel a lack of autonomy.

Compared to the university, NGO education programs create a freer, more bottom-up and equalised environment for undergraduates. All participants reported being more autonomous in NGO activities. This was firstly because of NGOs' flat organisational structure and flexible administrative power. As Stella stated: "they are in a 'who's in charge, who make final decisions' kind of way, so even the manager sometimes also need to follow arrangement". The NGO programs also had flexible schedules, allowing participants to choose courses and activities based on personal interest and availability. The learning progress was student-oriented with varied ice-breaking sessions, peer-to-peer discussions and group projects. Moreover, participants emphasised that upward feedback was always encouraged, and it was always much easier to reach to the managers of NGOs than to university leaders.

### ***Affable interpersonal relations and non-competitive atmosphere***

The perpetual competition among students in Chinese universities has been criticised for increasing student anxiety, solidifying class-based self-conceptions (Mulvey & Wright, 2022) and causing negative peer effects (Chen & Hu, 2024). In this research, both NFGS and FGS

reported being more or less stressful in the competitive atmosphere of university. In contrast, they highlighted that the interpersonal relationships in NGOs were milder and more friendly. Generally NGO education programs commit to creating supportive leadership, interactive membership and close friendship. For instance, A compared the different responses from the university and NGO administrations when he tried to ask for advice on his entrepreneurial project:

“When I sent WeChat invitations to the supervisors in the NGO, they quickly proved it, and they never put on airs when I talked to them...I asked them many times and they all answered patiently. But the teacher in my university just said this project wasn’t good enough and dismissed me in a few sentences.”

Participants also mentioned that activities such as self-sharing sessions and interactive games were designed in NGO programs to enhance in-depth communication and cooperation.

### ***Practical and extracurricular knowledge***

The knowledge acquired from NGO education programs were largely different from that in universities. Participants mainly discussed two types of knowledge. Students who attended NGO education in line with their major received experience-based knowledge which echoed with and complemented disciplinary learning. Participants underscored the significance of such knowledge in bridging their understandings between knowledge in the university and at work. For students participated in programs unrelated to their field of study, NGOs provided extracurricular knowledge inspiring and informing new academic interests and career paths. Participants also mentioned that the knowledge learned in NGOs were more various and fragmented than university curriculum, therefore, their acquisition of knowledge was hard to distinguish from personal inspirations. As Evelyn said:

“The knowledge I learned wasn’t systematic, it more like my personal feelings, there are some clear inspirations in ideas in my heart but I can’t single them out or list a framework, but I think they are internalised as my cognitive habits.”

## **4.2.2 Engagement practices in NGO education**

### ***First-generation students (FGS): proactive engagement and broad participation***

Previous studies showed that compared to NFGS, FGS are less involved in extracurricular activities in the university (Madjar & Cohen-Malayev, 2013; Zhang et al., 2016; Zhang et al., 2022; Wang & Pan, 2023). However, results from interviews demonstrated FGS' proactivity in NGO participation.

FGS' activeness was firstly manifested in their elaborate agendas and steadfast orientations to access resources and compensate weakness. Ruth had a habit of writing long-term plans, by the time of the interviews she had updated her scheme of personal development to the third version. According to Ruth, the first version was developed after *Gaokao*, aiming at achieving freedom in higher education. The second version was produced out of dissatisfaction with the university life, so she separated college and social participation apart and systematically planned for attending off-campus activities. The third version was drafted after attending numerous NGO programs. Feeling more empowered, Ruth decided to make a more focused plan with higher future expectations. A devoted all his vocations to different NGO education programs, adopting a very tight schedule. Attending university with a strong will of 'making money to change the fate', he seized every opportunity to join NGO education programs related to entrepreneurship and career development. The stories of Ruth and A could give a glimpse into FGS' proactive seeking of NGO programs and their copious participation. To be noticed is that, different from NFGS who pinpointed NGO programs with a clear conscious of what ability they required, FGS sought for the broadness of participation at the beginning and gradually narrow down their focus.

FGS also proactively participated in NGO programs. Participants described their deep immersion in NGO's teaching sessions and strong motivation to overcome challenges. For example, Ra-Horakhty spoke about an online sharing lecture he attended during hospitalisation: "I took at least three pages of notes, at last I couldn't even recognise the words I wrote". Ruth mentioned that to overcome language barriers, she would simultaneously check for English words on a mobile phone while taking NGO lectures on the computer. Both participants sought for solutions when facing difficulties, demonstrating a high level of involvement in the learning process. Seven participants took leadership in group projects or initiated their own project in NGOs. Such processes were interpreted by FGS as stepping out of the comfort zone, breaking

through timidity and taking challenges. All ten first-generation respondents identified themselves as being relatively central among all the NGO program participants.

In addition to active participation, FGS also proactively sought for extra opportunities and social connections in NGOs. For instance, Evelyn became friends with the initiator of the first NGO she attended by being extremely active:

“I was very active at that time, I wanted to participate in anything, join any event. So the initiator thought I was very active and reliable, so she called me first in every activity. If she heard other activities in Beijing she would also ask me to go.”

Evelyn actively expanded her social network by reaching out to the mentors, guest speakers and organisers of the NGO, and attended a few more NGOs through the recommendation of the NGO leader.

### ***Non-first-generation students (NFGS): selective engagement and enjoying immersion***

Compared to FGS who attended every NGO program with great enthusiasm, NFGS took more diverged approaches during their participation. Mainly three types of attitudes were observed from interviews with non-first-generation respondents: active engagement, passive engagement and immersive engagement.

As aforementioned, NFGS often participate in NGO education with a specific objective, such as improving leadership or gaining experiences different from those in the university. Therefore, they would carefully select NGO activities to attend. As Quehuaqiuse remarked on her decision to participate in one NGO:

“According my judgement at that time, this NGO was mature and did pretty well...So I was affirmed that it was a relatively authoritative and influential organisation, which was worth trying. Secondly, it had a well-established evaluation system. I saw a student posted four to five certificates issued by this organisation on his WeChat profile, so I thought joining this program wouldn't be a waste of time.”

In such NGO programs, NFGS reported being very active, taking the leading role and developing quality relationships. However, it is worth noticing that most non-first-generation respondents emphasised that even useful NGO programs were still considered secondary to their university engagement.

The second type of practice, however, was to be rather alienated from the program. Respondents called such a behaviour as ‘Shui’ (水)<sup>5</sup> unessential activities. NGO programs engaged passively by NFGS were considered not very important. NFGS attended such programs simply out of teachers’ recommendations, a purpose of adding an extracurricular experience to CV or killing the vacation times. Thus, they usually made less efforts, seldom answered questions or participated in group discussions, and sometimes withdrew before the program ended.

The last attitude taken by NFGS was to completely enjoy the immersion in NGO activities, taking it as a way to reflect on their previous lives and reconsider the future. NFGS who adopted this mindset mentioned much more details with emotional rather than profitable values, such as the intimacy between members, informal group gathering beyond the program schedule and interesting, heartwarming stories with NGO personnels. When being asked about their position in the group, NFGS usually defined it as “just fine, maybe a little peripheral”. However, even without being in a central position, participants did not feel marginalised and reported taking great pleasure in NGOs.

#### **4.2.3 The development of self-image**

The participation in NGO-provided education allowed FGS and NFGS to develop complicated images of self in relation to their first-generation and non-first-generation identities, purposes of attending higher education, self-positioning and future imagination.

##### ***First-generation students (FGS): responding to the past and negotiating the present***

FGS were aware of the class disparity between themselves and the non-first-generation counterparts. Therefore, they had a strong will to close this gap. Despite noticing their relative disadvantage, they still positioned themselves positively in the university context, believing that they could gain extra resources from the broader society. The productive engagement in NGO programs convinced them that they were on the way to upward mobility. Among the ten first-generation respondents, eight reported that experiences in NGO programs enhanced their

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<sup>5</sup> Originally means ‘water’ in Chinese, as an internet slang, it means to go with the flow, get a certificate/complete an activity without putting in too much effort.

self-esteem. This was consistent with their proactive practices of applying for multiple programs, making connection with program personnels and taking leading roles in group activities. Participants mentioned various reasons for gaining self-confidence. For instance, Sam believed he was more well-prepared for the job market after taking a summer camp in career planning; J's success in her first initiative as a project leader gave her great inspiration; Ra-Horakhty mentioned that the encouragement from NGO mentors and organisers helped him overcome the self-doubt after unsuccessful university experiences.

FGS' establishment of self-esteem was a result of negotiating their previous self with experiences in NGOs. As Evelyn stated:

“At the beginning I felt quite self-abased because I had no experiences, like I was just a little kid...but this indeed contradicted with my strong agency, it contributed an important part of my self-construction...Later on when I attended more and more activities, I began to be disenchanted, I felt that everyone was the same, the world was just a makeshift theatre troop (世界是个草台班子<sup>6</sup>).”

Tutors, guest speakers and organisers of NGO education programs were usually people with outstanding social titles, such as entrepreneurs, governmental leaders and graduates of prestigious universities. Evelyn found these people sharing similar characteristics for success, which were not unachievable for her. Through continuous attempts to understand and imitate their behaviours, she felt a strong sense of confidence and self-improvement: “when you stay close with those energetic people you feel your self being uplifted”. The progress made in NGOs broadened FGS' minds and enhanced their university performance. Participants highlighted the narrowed gap between themselves and their former advantageous peers.

Although FGS felt a sense of upward mobility through NGO participation, their perceptions of self were not always consistent. Despite with a strong motivation to move up the social ladder, FGS recognised a number of middle-class habitus they struggle to copy or hardly agree with. For example, Lara felt a sense of powerlessness when she inevitably messed up with middle-class behavioural codes. Heye mentioned his aversion to elite socialisation which signifies the stratification of people. As a result, FGS doubted the middle-class identity and

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6 A Chinese internet slang meaning that the fancy side of the world is constructed through the unequal distribution of resources, people of higher social status do not necessarily as talented and competence as they appeared to be.

sought to view themselves as not only different from who they originally were but also vary from their non-first-generation counterparts.

The NGO education experience provided FGS a new way to understand themselves. On the one hand, it offered them opportunities to improve personal abilities. On the other, the flexible, friendly and equalised atmosphere in NGOs brought FGS a feeling of “being healed” (as stated by Lara). The combination of personal enhancement and emotional fulfilment made most FGS value self-worth more than self-achievement. For example, J, who identified herself as an idealist, distinguished herself from elites who she considered as primarily concerning profit, having gorgeous appearance and sophisticated sociability. Although J believed that extensive experiences in NGOs had made her as capable as her non-first-generation peers, she expressed a strong will to maintain her non-elitist uniqueness.

Previous literature found that FGS’ self-perceived identities oscillate between the middle-class aspirations and the working-class roots (Lehmann, 2014). This research further argues that this conflict stemming from class differences could lead to the construction of new self-images distinct from both middle- and working-class identities. In the special context of NGO education, NFGS not only built confidence to head towards a higher social status, but also developed an empathetic attitude towards the vulnerable group and a critical perspective on social stratification. It could therefore be concluded that FGS tended to view themselves as the empowered disadvantaged (rather than the advantaged), who were as competent as NFGS but with humbled personality, austere temperament and unique life pursuit.

### ***Non-first-generation students (NFGS): echoing the past and reflecting on the present***

NFGS’ self-image echoed their family background. Participants identified themselves as “urban middle-class” based on their family condition. Consistent with this, NFGS expressed their wish to maintain familial strength and middle-class status in their own studies and careers. Many of the participants wished to go to a prestigious university abroad or find a decent job with high social reputation. In preparation for such goals, those participants strived to be among the best students at the university and student leaders in social activities. In NGO programs they considered important, NFGS engaged actively and took key positions in groups. The combined

experiences in formal and non-formal education contexts made NFGS confident that they would achieve their aims. Therefore, most NFGS regarded themselves as future elites.

NFGS seldom made reflections on self-image when passively participated in NGO programs they considered unessential. In programs they actively participated and pleasantly immersed, however, participants found themselves becoming more capable and spiritually enriched. In terms of ability enhancement, leadership was mentioned most frequently by NFGS. Unlike FGS who increased self-confidence from leading and organising student projects, NFGS made more in-depth reflection on leading skills and the nature of leadership. For example, in her leading experiences at the university, Quehuaqiuse was worried about being disrespectful to others, however, she pointed out that in NGO programs, “I realised it’s just fine to directly assign tasks to people, they can accept it emotionally. This also got me out of the fear of instructing unfamiliar people”. In addition, Jiayue realised that leadership was more about balancing stakeholders and making resolute decisions than caring about details and one member’s feeling. Apart from leadership, participants also spoke about getting rid of the student mindset, developing in-depth understandings of professions, improving problem-solving abilities and augmenting creativity.

Several participants stressed that they were spiritually enriched through the engagement in NGO education programs. Most of such reflection come from immersive engagement. When NFGS were asked about the impact of NGO programs on themselves, they emphasised that the impact was “imperceptible” and “hard to explain”, but might have a profound or postponed influence to their lives. For example, Kelly felt she was energised from the close friendship and peaceful atmosphere in an NGO program. She stressed that meeting “fun souls” and “kind people” in the program was inspiring, but she had to get back to the pre-settled life track of preparing for studying abroad and pursuing professional careers. However, Kelly thought the experiences in NGO might affect her future decisions:

It sometimes flashes back to me when I try to fight against the kind of life I’m used to. Because indeed I met a lot of people in this (program), their life plans weren’t common in the general sense. You could feel that a lot of people changed their work if they didn’t like it, and they didn’t take this seriously. There are really well-educated people (the organisers) who are doing something brave and unstable... So sometimes I wonder when I will attend another activity like this, although I haven’t

determined but maybe one day I will.

It could be seen from Kelly's story that NFGS reflected on the emotional comfort and intellectual enlightenment in NGO programs to reimagine their future possibilities and possible selves, which indicate an implicit and nuanced alteration of the inner self-awareness.

#### **4.2.4 The re-construction of life projects**

Life project is the future that active subjects fashion for themselves according to their self-knowledge (Marginson, 2023b). Therefore, life project is individualised, different agents have their unique life projects. For example, university students' life project includes various aspects, such as career goals, ability enhancement, academic learning and gathering social capital (Marginson, 2024). Projects also have different time length, some life projects are ends in themselves, while people also develop projects for certain stages of their life (Marginson, 2023a). People make reflections on themselves and the external environment throughout their life time, thus, life project changes over time as people continuously make alteration on their future plans and life-long pursuits (Marginson, 2023a). Due to this dynamic nature, life project is both a product and a condition of self-formation. Interviews presented different trajectories of FGS and NFGS establishing and transforming life projects through their participation in NGO education.

#### ***First-generation students (FGS): clarifying a future path and pursuing personal growth***

Most first-generation participants merely developed vague agentic projects before attending university. As Sam reported: "the only cognition before I went to college was to get that degree, it was just a universal value". With a Bachelor's degree becoming increasingly necessary for entering the job market, getting a degree is more of a social expectation than a personal intention. On the individual level, however, FGS envisaged an ambiguous picture of their college life. The most frequently mentioned personal project was acquiring resources for upward mobility. Some participants also talked about enhancing social skills, learning disciplinary knowledge and seeking freedom and emotional comfort. However, scholars have argued that students with more concern in exam performance and the pecuniary benefit of

education usually do not have a specific plan for the future (Wang & Rao, 2022). Consistent to this, first-generation participants in this research were neither certain of whether their projects could be achieved, nor did they have a clear plan for college engagement and post-graduation arrangement. Thus, they soon found a mismatch between their expectation and the reality in the university and became disappointed to college life.

FGS' activeness in seeking NGO education programs reflected their relentless pursuit of the aforementioned projects. However, the education taken in NGOs inspired FGS to reconstruct their life projects. Firstly, participants reported that they determined a more specific future path. In NGO activities, FGS developed life-long interests that informed their post-graduation goals. For example, Ruth, who attended university for achieving freedom and upward mobility, discussed an NGO activity that fuelled her passion for SDGs:

“At that time after I learnt about sustainable development, I was extremely excited, like discovering a new continent. After that SDGs was deeply rooted in my heart, because they also accorded with my mind.”

The ideas introduced by NGO education made Ruth feel “the world was broadened in a sudden”. Since then, she began to consciously sought out numerous NGO activities related to SDGs. In her active participation, Ruth discovered infinite personal potential and future possibilities. She finally decided to develop a career at the intersection of her major (Chinese Literature) and SDGs, which she emphasised was “different from the paths of others”. Thus, Ruth reconstructed her personal project by recognising her passion and deciding a clearer future goal. Similar tracks of project development were found in the interviews of most first-generation participants.

Specific future goals are likely to be temporary and changeable as students would continuously collect new information and made adjustment on their plans. A more stable life project is the underlying aim of existence, or in other words, the fundamental reason for pursuing specific future plans. Some FGS reported altering this underlying life project from enhancing social status to pure personal growth. As Lara discussed:

I've been thinking about what kind of person I want to be...I feel that my mind has changed, at first I was eager to chase fame and fortune or achieve something higher and farther, but now I think it already very good to have my own spiritual world...I have recently realised that I need to respect other people's fate and my own fate as

well...My life project last year was to recognise and make connection to the world...but this year I think it is more important to understand who I am.

It could be seen that Lara changed her focus from social achievement to personal development, which represents a shift from an externally- to internally-oriented self. Other participants reported a similar shift in the core life project: from eliminating disadvantages and improve social status to becoming a growing person as his own end. This could be explained by FGS' self-image as different from both middle- and working-class. By actively participating in NGO programs, FGS compensated for their disadvantages. Meanwhile, through reflective engagement they reconciled class division and extended themselves from the dichotomy of first- and non-first-generation. Eventually, FGS found their pursuit of personal interests more crucial than upward mobility.

***Non-first-generation students (NFGS): revising future schedules and reflectively staying on track***

In contrast to FGS who entered university with vague personal projects, NFGS had more specific goals for their college lives and career development before taking education in NGOs. In most occasions, NFGS' participation in NGO programs was an attempt to achieve their post-graduation aims.

Similar to the development of self-image, passive engagement usually did not inform NFGS' life project. During active and immersive program engagement, some participants reflected on new knowledge and experiences to further detail and revise their future schedules. Linxi was a sophomore student majoring in Editorial and Publishing Science, however, she wished to pursue a career in Law after graduation. In order to learn professional knowledge, she attended an online course in Law provided by an NGO. Linxi stated that she detailed her goals in this program:

“For sure my aim became clearer after I participated. Because before this program my knowledge in this area was really shallow...I felt that I wanted to do everything...I only had a vague understanding that this could be a social problem. After entering this NGO, I found it was indeed a problem, it was very inspiring to see that the thing I paid attention to really existed. And this course also gave you more professional aspects. So it helped me to further decide what direction I should work towards in the future.”

Linxi witnessed gender violence in her neighbourhood when she was a Child. With a desire to address such social problems, she found lessons about domestic violence law perfectly matching her interest. Moreover, Linxi further considered whether she wanted to help individuals or groups of people: “if one female faces this problem, you bring help to just herself, but what I want to do is to empower a group...if they don’t come to me, I reach out to them to solve their troubles.” Therefore, we could see that NFGS reflectively applied the knowledge learnt in NGOs to fine tune their original passion. In this process the future schedule of NFGS became more specific and comprehensive.

With regard to the life project underlying future plans, no obvious difference was observed from NFGS’ description. Participants reported that they would stick to their original pursuits, such as living a decent life and realising professional or academic passions. However, six participants mentioned their wills to keep reflect on their lives and the external environment. For these NFGS the NGO programs they attended presented different ways of life, some of which were more interest-focused, sympathetic, inclusive and less competitive, and some introduced a different field of profession. Although these differences did not make non-first-generation participants change their life trajectories, they did increase NFGS’ reflexive awareness.

## CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION

### 5.1 Students' self-formation in NGO education

As an ongoing process of self-making, self-formation continues throughout a person's life course (Marginson, 2023a). In his argument about higher education as self-formation, Marginson (2023a; 2023b; 2024) stressed the significance of higher education's concentrated knowledge, social relations, activities and institutional environment in promoting rapid self-formation. It could be seen that the scope of higher education in Marginson's argument is encompassing, as it not only includes what happens in the classroom but also the complicated interactions that take place within and beyond the boundaries of the university. Previous research about university students' self-formation primarily focused on international education experiences (e.g. Ye & Edwards, 2017; Yu, 2021; Lin & Xu, 2023), class engagement (e.g. Matsunaga et al., 2020; Mili & Towers, 2022) and the academic self (e.g. Ashwin et al., 2014; Lee, 2021). This research argues that non-formal education provided by NGOs is also a context where self-formation could be facilitated.

Firstly, both FGS and NFGS attended NGO education programs with active, intrinsic motivations. As aforementioned, FGS participants sought to attain more resources in NGOs in supplement to their lack of advantage in college competitions. This was based on their dynamic and critical self-positioning and their inherent impulse of self-actualisation. While realising their advantages over FGS, NFGS reflected on their future ambitions and recognised the limitations of college. Their participation in NGO activities was therefore a proactive attempt to acquire additional resources or make self-adjustments. From these findings we could see students' internalised personal projects for receiving NGO education, which were generated through the reflective positioning of selves on the continuum of past, present and future (Xu, 2018).

In recognising structural constraints, FGS and NFGS adopted an active approach to seek solutions in NGO programs. This is in line with Tran and Vu's (2018) statement that students could activate their agency in resistance to undesirable situations. Kudo (2023) further argued that it is precisely institutional constraints that serve as affordances for the agency of resistance, as individuals are able to mobilise their previous knowledge to critically reflect on and deal

with unsatisfactory circumstances. Thus, the active response of FGS and NFGS showcased their agentic wills to combat structural challenges. As claimed by Marginson (2023a; 2023b), the will to learn is one of the key elements of self-formation; even though the will could be externally elicited, it must go through an inner mental process that the extrinsic push transforms into internal drives. In this study, FGS and NFGS developed a strong desire to learn in NGOs in order to overcome structural barriers. It could therefore be concluded that students initiated their self-formation by developing intrinsic motivations to participate in NGO programs based on their agentic reflection on structural limitations and enablement, relative self-positions and temporary life projects.

Secondly, the development of intrinsic motivation resulted in FGS and NFGS' active practices in NGO programs. Surface learning practices are employed by people who passively follow external regulation, while active individuals construct their own learning orientations and knowledge systems in deep learning (Richardson, 2005). FGS' and NFGS' proactivity in NGOs, such as their detailed scheme-making, active interactions with NGO personnel and full-hearted immersion in enjoying the program, illustrated their in-depth learning. Although NFGS sometimes adopted a passive attitude when participating in NGO programs they considered unessential, this passivity was a result of balancing the significance of programs with their own needs, which reflects the fact that NFGS exercised their agency to negotiate their practices in different situations (Matsunaga et al., 2020; Lee, 2021). Therefore, students continued the process of self-formation through agentic and reflective participation in NGO education.

Finally, both FGS and NFGS developed new self-images and reconstructed their life projects. Findings have shown that FGS established their self-esteem, reconsidered their identity as a first-generation/disadvantaged student and reconciled their differences with NFGS/elites. Through deep engagement, they discovered their life-long interests and infinite potential, thereby deciding on a specific future path with the ultimate pursuit of personal growth. The NFGS, however, except from continuing to view themselves as middle-class, future leaders and elites, felt more enhanced and enriched through NGO participation. Taking part in NGO programs with an already determined future goal, NFGS revised their schemes after gaining new knowledge and insights in NGOs. Even though most NFGS remained determined to stay

on track, they revisited the possible selves by reflecting on their lives and external environments.

It could be seen that participants consecutively reflected on and negotiated between selves and external environments as they developed their self-images and life projects. The act of imagination requires individuals to envision a broader community and the meanings of taking part in it by “taking some distance from their situation” (Wenger, 2000, p. 228). This is to say, imagination involves the agentic reflection on the external world and the recognition of personal position. Both FGS and NFGS imagined their self-images through such a reflexive process, as it was through reconceptualising their group identities and relationships with others in NGO events that they altered their perceptions of selves. Marginson (2014) proposed that students tend to use the strategies of multiplicity and hybridity to conduct self-formation, which means that the newly-generated self is neither pristine nor authentic. Through the production of multifaceted selves, essentialised social categories would be challenged (Ye & Edwards, 2017). This is consistent with the results of this research as both FGS and NFGS added new aspects to themselves instead of simply adhering to the existing images of first-generation or non-first-generation students. In addition, similar to previous literature which pointed out that the process of self-formation is not linear or straight-forward (Gu et al., 2010; Kudaibergenov, 2023), participants reported iterative processes of negotiating with different factors in forming their self-images and life projects, such as FGS’s vacillation between self-confidence and self-questioning, and NFGS’s confusion between pursuing externally and internally defined success. Therefore, the self-images and life projects of FGS and NFGS demonstrated the rich outcome of their self-formation through NGO participation.

## **5.2 Two modes of self-formation**

### **5.2.1 First-generation students (FGS): rapid transformation**

Both FGS and NFGS reimagined and reconstructed themselves in NGO education. However, the two groups of students displayed different modes of self-formation. This research argues that FGS experienced a more rapid and thorough transformation than NFGS because they had a strong yearning for self-change and made deep alterations in self-perceptions and life projects.

FGS developed firm inside-out motivations for achieving positive self-change in NGO activities. As depicted in the findings chapter, after encountering difficulties and expectation mismatch in college, FGS were anxious about their disadvantaged status and the uncertain future. They were thus determined to seek compensatory resources and self-fulfilment from NGO program participation. In their study about students' identity formation in multicultural classrooms, Mili and Towers (2022) argued that a social dynamic privileging a certain group of students may undermine the agency of disadvantaged ones, discouraging their willingness to change passive behaviours and break through their original selves. However, although FGS withdrew from scenarios where they found themselves underprivileged, such as class discussions and on-campus student activities, this did not mean that they gave up enacting their agency. Instead of changing themselves through college engagement, FGS sought opportunities for self-change beyond the university. This was motivated by their desire to fight against unjust circumstances (Tran & Vu, 2018) and their aspiration and imagination of better future possibilities (Joorst, 2015) that could be brought forth by attending NGO education. This indicates an inherent urge for self-transformation. Moreover, previous literature noted that strongly motivated students deliberately take challenges in uncertain circumstances, criticise themselves and create discrepancies in their life experiences (Lee, 2021; Yu, 2021). Likewise, FGS reported intentionally overcoming fears and stepping out of comfort zones by taking leadership roles in NGO programs and actively broadening their social network in informal interactions. The active challenge-taking behaviours suggest that prior to NGO education, FGS already developed an inner desire to transform themselves through NGO program participation.

With an intense will for self-change, FGS achieved profound transformation through NGO education. Instead of adapting to the dominant culture to transcend their original identity (e.g. Yang, 2014), they created unique self-images as belonging to neither working-class/disadvantaged students nor middle-class/elite students. Existing research described the in-betweenness of first-generation/working-class/rural students in higher education (e.g. Lehmann, 2014; Cheng, 2019; Jack, 2019). The scholars argued that although these students entered college and strived to learn the middle-class ways of life, it was hard for them to cut ties with their original lives and communities. Such a point of view focuses on structural restrictions over

human agency, as it seems to emphasise that even if students wish to transform themselves, they are unable to get rid of their underprivileged roots. However, this research finds that FGS deliberately chose not to become total elites out of their reflective deliberations. Hall (1990) pointed out that people construct their identities through recognising their differences with others. FGS were aware of their differences in personalities, interests and life projects with their non-first-generation peers. However, they reconciled these differences by gaining self-confidence and reconsidering success and the meanings of life in NGO programs. Thus, we could see FGS' active response to the environment in NGOs, colleges and the society (Matsunaga et al., 2020), as well as their challenging of unequal power structures (Ye & Edwards, 2017). Through these processes, FGS rebuilt their self-images and life projects in a thorough manner, as they not only reinvented their self-perceptions but also reimagined their future goals and life pursuits.

### **5.2.2 Non-first-generation students (NFGS): progressive formation**

Compared with FGS, NFGS presented a more progressive process of self-formation. From interviews we could detect that the self-formation of NFGS did not complete with the end of the NGO programs. In other words, NFGS' experiences in NGOs may have a delayed impact on their future self-awareness and long-term self-formation.

NFGS did not attend NGO education with a steadfast self-changing resolve. As aforementioned, the main reasons for NFGS to participate in NGO activities were to obtain extra resources or to explore a different field. These purposes served for the post-graduation goals and life imaginations already decided by NFGS. Thus, for NFGS, attending NGO programs was initially an act to reinforce their original self. Some respondents mentioned their critical reflections on university competitions and the limitations of the success in college, which could infer a wish to develop more personal possibilities. However, this was obviously not as strong as FGS' desire of achieving profound self-change.

NFGS' will of changing themselves was developed primarily through the participation process in NGO programs. Holliday (1999) remarked that *small culture* exists in "small social groupings or activities wherever there is cohesive behaviour" (p. 237) and has "no necessary

subordination to or containment within large cultures” (p. 241). Education programs organised by NGOs have their special small cultures distinct from college lessons and activities. NFGS discussed about the abundance of resources, implicit opportunities, flat power structures, non-competitive atmosphere, intimate friendship and the broad space for autonomy in NGOs. These characteristics led to highly-interactive, sincere, equalised and immersive behaviours. Meanwhile, the variety of extracurricular and practical knowledge in different NGO programs created special cultural environments. As stated by previous studies, transitional events and contradictions between expectations and the reality are able to trigger identity negotiation (Ye & Edwards, 2017; Marginson, 2023a; Kudaibergenov, 2023). People exercise self-reflection in such circumstances, thereby eliciting the self-consciousness of self-change (Xu, 2018). The inconsistency between college and NGO environments made NFGS revisit their self-perceptions and revise their future schemes. Therefore, the motivation of NFGS to conduct self-formation was more externally than internally oriented.

Existing literature describes the self-formation process as a transformation, for example, Lin & Xu (2023) split self-formation into pre-positioning, positioning, performing and transformation. In the case of NFGS, however, the self was gently modified instead of rapidly transformed. Non-first-generation participants claimed that they constantly deliberated on their own projects and the external world while participating in NGO programs. As a result, they felt that there were some nuanced differences in themselves after taking NGO education. Some of them mentioned their enhanced ability and deepened understanding of a certain type of competence; others spoke about their spiritual enrichment through learning a different field or a new way of life. Kempner (1980, as cited in Kempner, 1992, p. 72) pointed out that human beliefs at the top of the belief structure are easier to change, whereas deep-rooted beliefs at the core of the self are difficult to switch. This probably could explain the limited self-change made by NFGS. For example, experiences in NGOs informed some NFGS’ the critical reflection on university assessment revolving around grades, emphasising ordering and objectifying students. Despite recognising the problematic nature of the assessment system, NFGS hardly relinquished their aims of succeeding in such a structure, because these objectives were closely entangled with their broader career goals, professional interests and life aspirations, which had

been in place a long time ago. NFGS' gradual process of self-change showed their maintenance of a coherent sense of self (Ye & Edwards, 2017). Nevertheless, they also reported a tendency to keep reflecting on and exploring their possible selves, which could infer that NFGS might continue to alter their inner beliefs over time.

## CHAPTER 6. CONCLUSION

### 6.1 Summary of the findings

This study compares the experiences of first-generation and non-first-generation university students in NGO-provided education programs through the lens of student self-formation. NGOs are crucial providers of non-formal education. A growing number of NGOs in China have been offering university students education programs encompassing an ample diversity of topics, related or unrelated to higher education disciplines. Through semi-structured interviews, this research explored the different routes of self-formation went through by FGS and NFGS in their consecutive experiences in the university and NGO programs.

FGS entered the university with a strong eagerness for upward mobility but a vague plan to achieve this aspiration. In the face of cultural shock, adaptation difficulties and fierce competition in college, instead of accepting their disadvantaged status, FGS activated their agency and took a dynamic, critical and multi-dimensional approach in self-positioning. They extensively looked for information on NGO learning opportunities and actively participated in NGO programs, deliberately taking challenges and seeking self-change. Combining self-reflection and proactive practices, FGS achieved rapid self-transformation in NGOs. They established self-esteem through critically negotiating their previous selves with their NGO experiences, reconciled their differences with NFGS/elite students, developed concrete future schemes and altered their life projects from moving up on the social stratification spectrum to realising pure personal growth.

NFGS attended college with clear future objectives. Despite recognising their advantages over FGS, they critically weighed up what they could acquire from the university and what they needed for achieving their future ambitions. NFGS thus realised the structural constraints of formal higher education and positioned themselves not only within, but also beyond the university. NFGS presented heterogeneous motivations for attending NGO education and practices within NGO programs. Students participated to improve abilities actively engage in NGO activities; those who attended simply to obtain certificates acted passively in NGOs; and those who wished to experience a different lifestyle or explore a different field immersed in the NGO atmosphere but did not bother to gather social capital. The self-formation of NFGS was

more gradual and progressive than FGS.

This research complements previous literature on NGOs' function in providing higher education by presenting students' perspectives, their micro-interactions and inner negotiations in NGO programs. While previous studies of student agency focused more on disadvantaged, first-generation students (e.g. Kutty, 2014; Ellery & Baxen, 2015; Cheng, 2019; Li et al., 2024), this research shows that both FGS and NFGS exercised their agency in pursuit of extra education outside of college. As Clegg (2011, as cited in Marginson, 2024) argued, agency has the potential to offer a way through structural inequalities. The findings of this study suggest that NGO programs provided participants with a broad space for agency. Through proactively gaining academic and social resources in NGO activities, FGS rebuilt themselves and largely overcame structural disadvantages; this may indicate a promising prospect for NGOs in promoting education equity.

## **6.2 Limitations**

This research has some limitations which could be discussed in future studies. Firstly, this study does not distinguish between different types of NGO education programs. For example, programs focusing on research, teaching and social practice may have different influence on students, leading to different patterns of self-formation. Secondly, the gender ratio of participants is uneven, with more female students than males. The two NGOs where recruitment letters were initially posted do have more female students than males, however, it is unknown that whether generally more female than male students take part in NGO education. Thirdly, NGO provided education belongs to the extracurricular realm of higher education (Marginson, 2024), however, its differences with other extracurricular activities, such as student movements (Marginson, 2024), on-campus student activities and non-formal education provided by companies still need further exploration.

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# Appendix A: Interview Questions

## Round 1.

### I. Family Background and Pre-college Education

1. How would you define your family background? For example:
  - 1) Where are you from?
  - 2) What are your parents' occupations?
  - 3) How would you identify your family's financial situation?
  - 4) How would you identify your family's cultural situation?
2. Can you tell one experience of family education that you think had a great influence on you?
3. Can you briefly tell 1-2 educational experiences from primary school to high school that had a great impact on you?
4. How do you think your family and schooling experiences have influenced your purposes of receiving education and your personal life projects?

### II. University Education

1. What was your purpose of receiving higher education? What were your goals for the future before entering university?
2. Can you briefly describe your life in the university? For example:
  - 1) Classroom study
  - 2) Extracurricular activities (clubs, student union...)
  - 3) How did you get along with the faculty?
  - 4) How did you get along with your classmates?
  - 5) Your participation in activities outside the university (clubs, internships...)
3. Have you ever encountered any difficulties in university, or anything that dissatisfy you? How did you try to solve them?
4. Has your life being an undergraduate brought you any new thoughts and reflections? For example:
  - 1) How has your understanding of yourself changed?
  - 2) How has your perception of others changed?
  - 3) How has your understanding of the environment/society/world changed?

- 4) How has your life projects and future goals changed?
5. Can you tell 1-2 experiences that caused you to reflect on these issues?

### **III. Preliminary Survey on Participation in NGO Educational Programs**

1. How many times have you participated in educational programs or activities provided by NGOs (including research programs, summer schools, summer camps, lectures, etc.)?
2. Can you briefly describe each of these programs? For example:
  - 1) When did you participate?
  - 2) The duration of the program
  - 3) Theme and content of the program
3. Why do you want to participate in the educational programs and activities organised by the NGO?
4. How do you think the programs and activities provided by NGOs are different from formal education in universities (such as classroom education, lectures organised by the university, research groups of university scholars)?

Is there anything else you would like to add on to questions asked today?

Ok, thanks, see you next time!

### **Round 2.**

A student may have participated in more than one NGO-provided education program or activity, based on the total length of the interview and the first round of investigation, I will mainly discuss 2-3 of these programs with the student, specific questions for each program are as follows:

1. Why did you participate in this program? What do you hope to gain from your engagement?
2. How did you get involved in this program? For example:
  - 1) What was your role in the program? What responsibility did you need to take? What tasks did you need to complete?
  - 2) How much time did you allocate to your participation in this program? What does this consist of?

3. How do you get along with the different people in the program? For example:
  - 1) mentor/TA
  - 2) fellow students
  - 3) Guest speakers
  - 4) Staff of the NGO
4. How do you think you can achieve your objectives participating in this program? How did you do it?
5. Did you encounter any difficulties during your participation? How did you try to solve them? Can you explain through 1-2 experiences that impressed you the most?
6. Has there been any shift in the purpose of your engagement in this NGO educational program? If yes, what was the shift? Why?
7. Do you think the purpose of your participation in this program has been achieved? Why?
8. How autonomous do you think you are in your participation in the program? For example:
  - 1) Were you able to choose what you were interested in learning?
  - 2) Were you able to make your requests to the teachers or organisers? Were these requests be responded?
  - 3) Do you feel you have control over your participation in the program?
  - 4) Do you think there is a different level of autonomy in this NGO-provided educational program compared with university education?
9. What was your motivation and will to learn in this program? How does it compare to your motivation in studying in university? Why?
10. What knowledge do you think this program has provided you? How does it compare to the knowledge in university? Is this knowledge important to you? Why?
11. Has this program brought you any new thoughts or reflections? For example:
  - 1) How has your understanding of yourself changed?
  - 2) How has your perception of others changed?
  - 3) How has your understanding of the environment/society/world changed?
  - 4) How has your life projects and future goals changed?
12. Can you tell 1-2 experiences that caused you to make these reflections?

Is there anything else you would like to add on to the questions asked today?

Okay, these valuable answers are very important for my research, thank you very much for your answers!

## 第一轮访谈

### 一、 家庭背景与大学前教育

1. 你如何定义自己的家庭背景？例如：
  - 1) 你来自哪里？
  - 2) 父母的职业？
  - 3) 你对家庭经济状况的评价？
  - 4) 你对家庭文化状况的评价？
2. 可否回忆 1 件你认为对你影响很大的家庭教育经历？
3. 可否回忆 1-2 件小学到初中对你影响很大的教育经历？
4. 你认为家庭、小学到高中的教育对你对于受教育的目的的认识、人生规划有何影响？

### 二、 大学教育

1. 在上大学之前，你认为自己受教育的目的是什么？对未来有何规划？
2. 可否简单介绍一下你在大学的生活？例如：
  - 1) 课堂学习
  - 2) 课外活动（社团；学生会…）
  - 3) 与老师们相处得如何
  - 4) 与同学们相处得如何
  - 5) 大学之外活动的参与（校外社团；实习…）
3. 在大学中你是否遇到过什么困难，或是让你觉得不够满意的地方？你是如何尝试解决的？
4. 大学生活是否带给你过一些新的思考与反思？例如：
  - 1) 让你对自己的认识发生了哪些变化？
  - 2) 让你对他人的认识发生了哪些变化？
  - 3) 让你对环境/社会/世界的认识发生了哪些变化？
  - 4) 让你的未来规划发生了哪些变化？
5. 是否可以回忆 1-2 个引起你这些反思的经历？

### 三、 NGO 教育项目参与初步调查

1. 你参加过几次 NGO 提供的教育活动或项目(包括科研活动、暑期学校、夏令营、讲座等)?
2. 可以分别简单介绍一下这几次活动吗? 例如:
  - 1) 项目的时间
  - 2) 项目持续时长
  - 3) 活动的主题、内容等
3. 你为什么要参加 NGO 举办的教育活动?
4. 你觉得 NGO 举办的活动或教育项目与大学中的正式教育(课堂教育、学校组织的讲座、学校老师的课题组)有何不同?

关于今天问到的问题,你还有什么想补充的吗?

好的,谢谢,下次见!

## 第二轮访谈

一个学生可能参加过多个 NGO 组织的活动项目,根据访谈时间和第一轮调查,我将主要与学生讨论其中的 2-3 个项目,针对每个项目的具体问题如下:

1. 你为什么参与这个项目? 希望收获什么?
2. 你是如何参与这个活动的? 例如:
  - 1) 你在项目中的角色是什么? 承担什么工作? 需要完成哪些任务?
  - 2) 你为这个项目参与付出了多少时间? 这些时间由什么部分组成?
3. 你如何与项目中的不同人员相处? 例如:
  - 1) 导师/TA
  - 2) 同学
  - 3) 讲座嘉宾
  - 4) NGO 工作人员/项目组织者
4. 你认为如何才能通过 NGO 教育活动的参与达到你的参与这些活动项目的目的? 你是怎么做的?

5. 你在参与过程中是否遇到过什么困难？你是如何解决的？可否通过 1-2 个经历说明？
6. 你参与这个 NGO 教育项目的目的有没有发生过转变？如果有，发生了什么转变？为什么？
7. 你认为你参与这个项目的目的是否达到了？为什么？
8. 你认为自己在参与过程中的自主性如何？例如：
  - 1) 你是否可以选择自己感兴趣的学习内容？
  - 2) 你是否可以向老师和组织者提出你的诉求？这些诉求是否会得到回应？
  - 3) 你是否觉得你对活动的参与有掌控权？
  - 4) 你认为与大学教育相比，在 NGO 教育项目中的自主性是否不同？
9. 你认为自己在这个项目中的学习动力和意愿如何？与大学相比，有何不同？为什么？
10. 你认为这个项目为你提供了哪些方面的知识？与大学相比，有何不同？这些知识对你是否重要？为什么？
11. 这个项目的参与是否带给你过一些新的思考与反思？例如：
  - 1) 让你对自己的认识发生了哪些变化？
  - 2) 让你对他人的认识发生了哪些变化？
  - 3) 让你对环境/世界的认识发生了哪些变化？
  - 4) 让你的未来规划发生了哪些变化？
12. 是否可以回忆 1-2 个引起你这些反思的经历？

关于今天问到的问题，你还有什么想补充的吗？

好的，这些宝贵的回答对我的研究非常重要，非常感谢你的回答！

## Appendix B: Participant Demographics

### Non-first-generation university students

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Major</b>
Jiayue	Female	20	International Politics
Quehuaqiuse	Female	19	Art History
Stella	Female	21	English Literature
Rose	Female	23	History
Ismaele	Female	25	Chinese Literature & Law
Jessica	Female	23	Economics
Joanna	Female	23	English
Mary	Female	22	Art and Design Management
Kelly	Female	24	Law
Linxi	Female	21	Editorial and Publishing Science

### First-generation university students

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Major</b>
Charlotte	Other	20	Business English
Evelyn	Female	21	Social Work
Lara	Female	20	Art and Design Management
Ruth	Female	21	Chinese Literature
A	Male	23	Sociology
Ra-Horakhty	Male	26	Antiquities and Museology
Sam	Male	22	Finance
Eric	Male	21	Communication Science
J	Female	22	Law
Heye	Male	21	Law

# Appendix C: Information Sheet for Participants

## Undergraduate's self-formation in NGO-provided education: A comparison between first-generation and non-first-generation students in China

### PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Central University Research Ethics Committee Approval Reference: [EDUC\_C1A\_24\_034]

You are being invited to take part in a research project. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether you wish to take part.

#### 1. Why is this research being conducted?

This research aims to study university students' experiences in informal education programs provided by NGOs (e.g. research projects, summer schools, training camps). Compared with receiving mandatory, formal higher education in the university context, students actively seeking and seizing education opportunities from NGOs. It is thus vital to understand how students, as active agents, navigate their learning in such non-formal contexts, and what role do non-formal education experiences play in transforming students' selves, redefining their life projects and reconstructing their subjectivity.

#### 2. Why have I been invited to take part?

Chinese students who 1) are aged 18-27; 2) are currently an undergraduate in China or holding a Bachelor's degree issued by a Chinese university within 3 years; and 3) have experiences in education programs or activities held by Chinese NGOs (e.g. research projects, summer schools, training camps) are welcomed to take part in this research. The total number of participants is 20, including 10 students in the "first-generation" university student group and 10 in the "non-first-generation" group. If more than 10 students sign up for either of the two groups, a selection of registered students will be carried out to ensure students with different majors, genders, ages and who have experiences in different types of NGO-provided education programs have equal chances to participate in this research. The selection result does not represent any assessment of personal qualities.

#### 3. Do I have to take part?

No. It is up to you to decide whether to take part. You can ask me any questions you want before or throughout. You can withdraw yourself from the research, without giving a reason, and without negative consequences, by advising me of this decision. The deadline by which you can withdraw any information you have contributed to the research is 1<sup>st</sup> August, 2024. If you decide to withdraw any information, it will be deleted from the transcripts of your interviews and will not appear in the dissertation paper and any future publications based on this research.

#### 4. What will happen to me if I take part in the research?

The entire research will last for approximately 6 months, until 8<sup>th</sup> August, 2024.

You will be involved in the research with two rounds of interviews. The first round would be approximately 1 hour and the second round would take 1-1.5 hours. There will be approximately a week between the two rounds of interviews.

The interviews will take place online via Microsoft Teams.

An electronic information sheet will be provided to you, after reading the information sheet, I will send you a PDF written consent form where you can sign the agreement electronically. If it is not convenient for you to sign the consent form on your own, alternatively, I will read a consent script for you before the interview begins, and record your answers in an oral consent form. It is up to you to decide whether to agree with the contents in consent form.

The first round of interview will cover a brief introduction of your family background, your education experiences before undergraduate and in the university, your motivation of participating in NGO-provided education programs and the challenges you met when you first entered the organisation.

The second round of interview will cover your experiences and feelings in education programs provided by NGOs, including, for example, how you interact with tutors, students and organisers, how you manage to overcome the challenges, how you construct your academic or career objectives and how you re-recognise yourself during the programs.

All the questions will be open-ended, without a right answer. You will be asked to answer these questions according to your own experiences and personal feelings.

With your consent, I would like to video/audio record you, so I can have an accurate record of our conversation. If you consent, I will do the recordings through Microsoft Teams, Teams only supports video recording, however, it is up to you to decide whether to turn on your camera during the interviews. If you do not wish me to record our meetings via Teams, I would like to alternatively record the conversation using an audio recording device not connected to the internet.

If you consent to record through Teams, the transcripts of the recordings will be made firstly through Teams' automatic transcription, and then be proofread by myself. If you do not agree to record through Teams, I will personally transcribe the audio recording. If you do not agree to record either through Teams or through an audio recording device, I will take fieldnotes during the conversation.

You can ask to pause or stop the interviews at any time.

##### **5. What are the possible disadvantages and risks in taking part?**

You might experience some discomforts when reflecting on your education experiences at home, schools, universities and NGOs. You have the right to pause or stop the interview anytime if you feel uncomfortable, choose not to share traumatic experiences, and ask me to delete information that discomfort you after the interviews.

The interview might be time-consuming for you. To minimise your loss, I will arrange our interview in a time that is convenient for you. You will also receive payments for your contribution.

You will be given a pseudonym or choose a pseudonym on your own. Your name will be replaced by the pseudonym in transcriptions, fieldnotes and other written background materials of the NGO education programs you attended, so potential readers of the research data and research outcomes will not be able to know who you are. The organisations mentioned, such as your universities and the NGO that provided you education opportunities, will also be given pseudonyms to prevent readers from guessing your identity through these institutions. However, it is unlikely to eliminate all chances

of you being identified since you will give detailed information of your personal experiences in the interviews.

#### **6. Are there any benefits in taking part?**

While there are no immediate benefits for those people participating in the research, it is hoped that this research will lead to more equal and quality education environments built by both universities and NGOs that support the personal development of students from different socioeconomic background.

#### **7. Expenses and payments**

You will receive either 15£ in cash payment or a gift (e.g. books, equipment etc.) worth 15£ for participation, depending on your preference.

#### **8. What information will be collected and why is the collection of this information relevant for achieving the research objectives?**

Interview data will be collected, because in order to approach the research aims, I am interested in understanding your experiences in different education contexts, how these experiences affect each other, and your views of participating in NGO-provided education. The information you provide will help me better understand how university students form themselves through actively engaging in education contexts beyond the university.

If you do not allow video or audio recording, I will take fieldnotes during the interview to record key information in our conversation.

You are also welcome to provide written background materials about the NGO education programs you attended, such as recruitment posters, written program descriptions and program retrospections.

All the data will be stored on the University of Oxford Nexus365 OneDrive for Business file storage service, which is approved by the University for all research data storage.

Identifiable data (including consent forms and contact details) will be stored in an encrypted folder in my personal computer, which needs a password to log in. The data will be deleted once the research is complete, namely after 8<sup>th</sup> August, 2024.

Video and audio recordings of Microsoft Teams conference will be stored in my personal computer protected by a password and will be deleted after transcription.

Transcripts, fieldnotes and background materials will be pseudonymised by replacing personal identifiers with pseudonyms, and will be retained safely in my personal computer, protected by a password to log in, for 3 years after publication or public release of the work of the research.

The researcher and supervisor will have access to the research data.

#### **9. Will the research be published? Could I be identified from any publications or other research outputs?**

The findings from the research will be written up in a dissertation, a copy of my dissertation will be deposited both in print and online in the [Oxford University Research Archive](#) where it will be publicly available to facilitate its use in future research. The research findings may also be further written up in an academic publication or conference presentation.

It is highly unlikely for participants to be identifiable from the research outputs, since pseudonyms will be given to participants and relevant organisations. However, a combination of details could allow an individual to be recognised.

I would like your permission to use direct quotations and translate them into English, but without identifying you in any research outputs.

## 10. Data Protection

The University of Oxford is the data controller with respect to your personal data, and as such will determine how your personal data is used in the research. The University will process your personal data for the purpose of the research outlined above. Research is a task that is performed in the public interest. Further information about your rights with respect to your personal data is available from the University's Information Compliance web site at <https://compliance.admin.ox.ac.uk/individual-rights>.

## 11. Who has reviewed this research?

This research has received ethics approval from a subcommittee of the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee. (Ethics reference: EDUC\_C1A\_24\_034).

## 12. Who do I contact if I have a concern about the research or I wish to complain?

If you have a concern about any aspect of this research, please contact Yunyu Jiang, University of Oxford, email: [yunyu.jiang@education.ox.ac.uk](mailto:yunyu.jiang@education.ox.ac.uk) or Xin Xu, University of Oxford, email: [xin.xu@education.ox.ac.uk](mailto:xin.xu@education.ox.ac.uk), and we will do our best to answer your query. I will acknowledge your concern within 10 working days and give you an indication of how it will be dealt with. If you remain unhappy or wish to make a formal complaint, please contact the Chair of the Research Ethics Committee at the University of Oxford who will seek to resolve the matter as soon as possible:

## 13. Further Information and Contact Details

If you would like to discuss the research with someone beforehand (or if you have questions afterwards), please contact: Yunyu Jiang (University email: [yunyu.jiang@education.ox.ac.uk](mailto:yunyu.jiang@education.ox.ac.uk))

# NGO 教育过程中的大学生自我塑造：中国初代与非初代大学生的比较研究

## 参与者信息表

大学研究伦理中央委员会批准编号： [EDUC\_C1A\_24\_034]

我们邀请您参加一个研究项目。在做出决定之前，您有必要了解这项研究的意义以及研究的内容。请花时间仔细阅读以下信息，并根据自己的意愿与他人讨论。如果有任何不清楚的地方，或者您想了解更多信息，请向我询问。您可以慎重决定您是否愿意参与。

### 1. 为什么要进行这项研究？

本研究旨在了解大学生在 NGO 提供的非正式教育项目（如研究项目、暑期学校、训练营）中的经

历。与在大学环境中接受强制性的正规高等教育相比，NGO 提供的教育机会需要学生的积极寻求。因此，了解学生作为能动的行动者如何在这种非正式环境中进行学习，以及非正式教育经历在改变学生的自我、重新定义他们的人生目标和重建他们的主体性方面发挥了怎样的作用至关重要。

## 2. 为什么邀请我参加？

本研究邀请 1) 年龄在 18-27 岁之间；2) 目前在中国就读本科或在 3 年内获得中国大学颁发的学士学位；3) 曾参与中国 NGO 举办的教育项目或活动（如研究项目、夏令营、培训营等）的中国学生参与本研究。总人数为 20 人，其中“第一代”大学生 10 人，“非第一代”大学生 10 人。如果任何一组的报名人数超过 10 人，我将对报名学生进行筛选，以确保不同专业、性别、年龄以及有不同类型 NGO 教育项目经历的学生有平等的机会参与本研究。筛选结果不代表任何个人素质评估。

## 3. 我必须参加吗？

不，您可以自行决定是否参与。您可以在参与之前或在整个过程中向我提出任何问题。您可以自行退出研究，无需说明理由，也不会产生负面影响，只需将此决定告知我即可。您可以在 2024 年 8 月 1 日这一截止日期前撤回您为研究提供的任何信息。如果您决定撤回任何信息，这些信息将从您的访谈记录中删除，并且不会出现在论文中，也不会出现在今后基于本研究的任何出版物中。

## 4. 如果我参加了这项研究，会发生什么？

整个研究将持续约 6 个月，直至 2024 年 8 月 8 日。

您将参与两轮访谈。第一轮约 1 小时，第二轮约 1-1.5 小时。两轮面试之间大约间隔一周。

访谈将通过微软 Teams 软件在线进行。

我将向您提供一份电子信息表，在阅读完信息表后，我将向您发送一份 PDF 格式的书面同意书，您可以在该同意书上签署电子版协议。如果您不方便自己签署同意书，我也可以在访谈开始前为您宣读同意书，并将您的回答记录在口头同意书中。您可以自行决定是否同意同意书上的内容。

第一轮访谈将简要询问您的家庭背景、本科前和大学期间的教育经历、参与 NGO 教育项目的动机以及初入组织时遇到的挑战。

第二轮访谈将涉及您在 NGO 教育项目中的经历和感受，例如，您如何与导师、学生和组织者互动，您如何克服挑战，您如何构建自己的学术或职业目标，以及您如何重新认识自己。

所有问题都是开放式的，没有正确答案。您需要根据自己的经历和个人感受来回答这些问题。

如果您同意，我希望对您进行视频/音频录制，以便准确记录我们的谈话。如果您同意，我将通过 Teams 进行录制，Teams 仅支持视频录制，但您可以自行决定是否在访谈期间打开摄像头。如果您不希望我通过 Teams 对我们的会谈进行录音，我希望可以使用不连接互联网的录音设备对谈话进行录音。

如果您同意通过 Teams 录音，录音转写文本将首先由 Teams 自动转录，然后由我本人校对。如果您不同意通过 Teams 录音，我将手动转录录音。如果您不同意通过 Teams 或录音设备录音，我将在谈话过程中进行现场记录。

您可以随时要求暂停或停止访谈。

## 5. 参加访谈可能会有哪些不利因素和风险？

在回顾您在家庭、学校、大学和 NGO 的教育经历时，您可能会感到不适。如果您感到不舒服，您有权随时暂停或停止访谈，选择不分享创伤性经历，并要求我在访谈后删除令您不舒服的信息。

访谈可能会耗费您的时间。为了减少您的损失，我将在您方便的时间安排我们的访谈。您还将收到稿酬。

您将被分配一个化名或自行选择一个化名。在录音转写、现场笔记和您参加的 NGO 教育项目的其他书面背景材料中，您的名字将被替换为化名，以确保研究数据和研究成果的潜在读者将无法知道您是谁。相关机构，如您就读的大学和为您提供教育机会的 NGO，也将使用化名，以防止读者

通过这些机构猜测您的身份。不过，由于您会在访谈中详细介绍您的个人经历，因此不可能完全杜绝您的身份被识破的可能。

#### **6. 参加调查有什么好处？**

虽然对参与研究者来说没有直接的好处，但我们希望这项研究能够促使大学和 NGO 建立更加平等和优质的教育环境，支持来自不同社会经济背景的学生的个人发展。

#### **7. 费用和付款**

您可以选择获得 15 英镑的现金或价值 15 英镑的礼品（书籍、工具等）。

#### **8. 哪些信息将被收集，为什么收集这些信息与实现研究目标有关？**

访谈数据将被收集，因为为了实现研究目标，我有兴趣了解您在不同教育环境中的经历，这些经历如何相互影响，以及您对参与 NGO 提供的教育的看法。您提供的信息将有助于我更好地了解大学生如何通过积极参与大学以外的教育环境来塑造自我。

如果您不允许录像或录音，我将在访谈过程中做现场记录，以记录我们谈话中的关键信息。

我也欢迎您提供有关您所参加的 NGO 教育项目的书面背景材料，如招募海报、书面项目介绍和项目回顾。

所有数据都将存储在牛津大学 Nexus365 OneDrive for Business 文件存储服务中，该服务经牛津大学批准用于所有研究数据的存储。

可识别的数据（包括同意书和联系方式）将存储在我个人电脑的一个加密文件夹中，电脑需要密码才能登录。研究完成后，即 2024 年 8 月 8 日之后，数据将被删除。

微软 Teams 会议的视频和音频记录将保存在我的个人电脑中，并有密码保护，转录后将被删除。

转写文本、现场记录和背景材料将用化名代替个人身份信息，并安全地保存在我的个人电脑中，有登录密码保护，在研究成果发表或公开发布后保存 3 年。

研究人员和导师可以查阅研究数据。

#### **9. 研究成果是否会发表？能否从任何出版物或其他研究成果中确认我的身份？**

研究成果将撰写成硕士论文，我的论文副本将以印刷版和网络版的形式存放在牛津大学研究档案馆，供公众查阅，以便在今后的研究中使用。研究成果还可能进一步写入学术出版物或会议报告中。

从研究成果中识别参与者身份的可能性很小，因为参与者和相关组织都将使用化名。不过，综合一些细节可以识别出个人。

我希望您允许我使用直接引语并将其翻译成英文，但不会在任何研究成果中透露您的身份。

#### **10. 数据保护**

牛津大学是您个人数据的数据控制者，因此将决定在研究中如何使用您的个人数据。牛津大学将出于上述研究目的处理您的个人数据。研究是一项符合公共利益的任务。有关您在个人数据方面的权利的更多信息，请访问大学的信息合规网站 <https://compliance.admin.ox.ac.uk/individual-rights>。

#### **11. 谁审查了这项研究？**

本研究已获得牛津大学中央研究伦理委员会下属小组委员会的伦理批准。（伦理批准编号：EDUC\_C1A\_24\_034）。

#### **12. 如果我对研究有疑虑或想投诉，该与谁联系？**

如果您对本研究的任何方面有疑问，请联系牛津大学蒋昀育（电子邮件：[yunyu.jiang@education.ox.ac.uk](mailto:yunyu.jiang@education.ox.ac.uk)）或牛津大学许心（电子邮件：[xin.xu@education.ox.ac.uk](mailto:xin.xu@education.ox.ac.uk)），我们将尽力回答您的问题。我会在 10 个工作日内确认您的问题，并向您说明将如何处理。如果您仍不

满意或希望提出正式投诉，请联系牛津大学研究伦理委员会主席，他将尽快解决此事：

**13. 更多信息和联系方式**

如果您想事先与他人讨论研究（或事后有疑问），请联系：蒋昀育（大学电子邮件：[yunyu.jiang@education.ox.ac.uk](mailto:yunyu.jiang@education.ox.ac.uk)）

## Appendix D: Written Consent Form

### Consent to take part in

### Undergraduate's self-formation in NGO-provided education: A comparison between first-generation and non-first-generation students in China

Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC) approval reference: EDUC\_C1A\_24\_034

Purpose of Study: Understanding how students, as active agents, navigate their learning in non-formal education contexts, and what role do NGO-provided education experience play in transforming students' selves, redefining their life projects and reconstructing their subjectivity

Please initial each box if you agree with the statement

I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above research. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any point until **01/08/2024**, without giving any reason.

I understand who will have access to personal data provided, how the data will be stored and what will happen to the data at the end of the project.

I understand the extent to which I could be identifiable from any publications or presentations.

I consent to being audio recorded.

I consent to being video recorded.

I understand how audio and video recordings will be used in research outputs.

Use of quotations: Please indicate your preference (select *one* option):

a) I do not wish to be quoted. **or**

b) I agree to the use of quotations (including English translation) in research outputs if I am not identifiable. **or**

c) I agree to the use of direct quotations (including English translation), attributed to my name, in research outputs.

I give permission for you to contact me again to clarify information.

I understand how to raise a concern or make a complaint.

I agree to take part.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of participant

dd / mm / yyyy  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of person taking  
consent

dd / mm / yyyy  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

## 同意参加

### NGO 教育过程中的大学生自我塑造：中国初代与非初代大学生的比较研究

大学研究伦理中央委员会批准编号：EDUC\_C1A\_24\_034

研究目的：了解学生作为主动行动者如何在非正式教育环境中进行学习，以及 NGO 提供的教育经验在改变学生自我、重新定义他们的人生目标和重建他们的主体性方面发挥了什么作用。

如果您同意该声明，请在每个方框内打"√"

我确认已阅读并理解上述研究的参与者信息表。我有机会考虑了相关信息，提出了问题，并得到了满意的答复。

我明白我的参与是自愿的，在 2024 年 8 月 1 日之前，我可以随时退出，无需说明任何理由。

我了解谁有权访问我所提供的个人数据、数据的存储方式以及项目结束后数据的去向。

我了解我可以从任何出版物或演讲中被识别的程度。

我同意被录音。

我同意被录像。

我了解录音和录像将如何用于研究成果。

关于引用：请注明您的偏好（选择一个选项）：

1) 我不想被引用。或

2) 如果本人身份无法被识别，本人同意在研究成果中使用引用（包括英文翻译）。或

3) 本人同意在研究成果中使用直接引文（包括英文翻译），并注明本人姓名。

我允许您再次联系我以确认信息。

我知道如何提出问题或投诉。

我同意参加。

\_\_\_\_\_  
被访者姓名

dd / mm / vvvv  
日期

\_\_\_\_\_  
签名

\_\_\_\_\_  
接受同意者姓名

dd / mm / vvvv  
日期

\_\_\_\_\_  
签名

## Appendix E: Oral Consent Form

Hello, my name is Yunyu Jiang. I'm currently doing my Masters' dissertation at the University of Oxford in the department of education.

**Project details and aims:** In my study, I want to investigate university students' self-formation during their participation in education provided by NGOs. I'm interested in understanding how undergraduate students navigate their learning, redefining their life projects and reconstructing their subjectivity in such non-formal contexts. If you choose to be a part of this project, here is what will happen:

- **Interviews:** I will have two rounds of conversation with you, both of which would be online via Microsoft Teams. For more information, please refer to question 4 in the information sheet.
- **Data sharing/ access/ confidentiality:** The answers you give will form the basis of my MSc dissertation. On a practical level, the researcher and my supervisor will have access to the research data.
- **Data storage:** please refer to question 8 in the information sheet.
- **Video/audio recording:** With your permission, I would like to make a video/audio recording of our discussion. Instead of recording you, I can take notes in my notebook. Which would you prefer?
- **Keeping contact details:** I would also like your permission to keep your contact details so that I can re-contact you to clarify information you gave me in your interview.
- **How identifiable you will be:** please refer to question 9 in the information sheet.
- **Risks:** please refer to question 5 in the information sheet.
- **Rights:** please refer to question 3 and 4 in the information sheet.
- **Publication plans:** please refer to question 9 in the information sheet.
- **Complaints/ concerns procedure:** If you have any complaints or concerns, please feel free to contact me. For contact details, please refer to questions 12 and 13 in the information sheet.
- **Ethics review details:** please refer to question 11 in the information sheet.
- **Data Protection statement:** The University of Oxford is responsible overall for ensuring the safe and proper use of any personal information you provide, solely for research purposes. Please refer to question 10 in the information sheet.

Do you have any questions?

Did you read the information sheet and understand how the data will be handled and stored?

Do you understand that your participation is voluntary and that you are free to withdraw at any point until **01/08/2024**, without giving any reason?

Do you understand the extent to which you could be identifiable from any publications or presentations?

Do you give your permission for me to interview you?

Do you give your permission for me to audio/video record you?

Do you give permission for me to re-contact you to clarify information?

Do you give me permission to quote you directly and translate the quotations into English without identifying you?

Do you understand how to raise a concern or make a complaint?

Are you happy to take part?

Ok, thanks, let's start.

你好，我是蒋昀育。我目前正在牛津大学教育系完成硕士学位论文。

项目详情和目的：在我的研究中，我想调查大学生在参与 NGO 提供的教育过程中的自我塑造。我有兴趣了解本科生如何在这种非正规环境中引导自己的学习、重新定义自己的人生目标并重建自己的主体性。如果你选择参与这个项目，将会发生以下事情：

- **访谈：** 我将与您进行两轮谈话，这两轮谈话都将通过微软 Teams 在线进行。如需了解更多信息，请参阅信息表中的问题 4。
- **数据共享/访问/保密：** 您的回答将成为我硕士论文的基础。在实际操作中，研究人员和我的导师将有权访问研究数据。
- **数据存储：** 请参阅信息表中的问题 8。
- **录像/录音：** 如果您同意，我想对我们的讨论进行录像/录音。我也可以在笔记本上做记录，而不是录音。您更喜欢哪种方式？
- **保留联系方式：** 我还希望您允许我保留您的联系方式，以便我再次联系您，确认您在访谈中提供给我的信息。
- **您的身份在多大程度上可以被识别：** 请参阅信息表中的问题 9。
- **风险：** 请参阅信息表中的问题 5。
- **权利：** 请参阅信息表中的问题 3 和 4。
- **论文发表计划：** 请参阅信息表中的问题 9。
- **投诉/疑虑程序：** 如果您有任何投诉或疑虑，请随时与我联系。有关联系方式，请参阅信息表中的问题 12 和 13。
- **伦理审查详情：** 请参阅信息表中的问题 11。
- **数据保护声明：** 牛津大学全面负责确保安全、妥善地使用您提供的任何个人信息，仅用于研究目的。请参阅信息表中的问题 10。

您是否有任何疑问？

您是否阅读了信息表并了解数据将如何处理和存储？

您是否了解您的参与是自愿的，在 2024 年 8 月 1 日之前，您可以随时退出，无需说明任何理由？

您是否了解您在多大程度上可以从任何出版物或演示文稿中被识别出来？

您是否同意我对您进行访谈？

你是否允许我对你进行录音/录像？

您是否允许我再次联系您以澄清信息？

您是否允许我在不透露您身份的情况下直接引用您的话并将其翻译成英文？

您了解如何提出问题或进行投诉吗？

您是否愿意参与？

好的，谢谢，我们开始吧。

## **Appendix F: Recruitment Poster**

### **Undergraduate's self-formation in NGO-provided education: A comparison between first-generation and non-first-generation students in China**

Ethics Approval Reference: EDUC\_C1A\_24\_034

### **VOLUNTEERS NEEDED FOR ONLINE INTERVIEW**

NGOs has become an important provider of informal education opportunities for university students in China. This research aims to examine the micro process of students' engagement in education programs and activities provided by NGOs, attempting to answer how the processes and outcomes of students' self-formation in these programs vary between first-generation and non-first-generation university students.

I am looking for student volunteers, aged 18-27, to take part in the qualitative investigation. I expect to recruit participants who: 1) is currently an undergraduate student in China or holding a Bachelor degree issued by a Chinese university within 3 years; and 2) have experiences in education programs or activities held by Chinese NGOs (e.g. research projects, summer schools, training camps) during undergraduate. You are invited to participate in 2 rounds of online interviews, the first round would be around 1 hour, the second round would take 1-1.5 hours of your time. You would have conversations with me regarding family education, college experiences and experiences in NGO education. A recompense will be made in cash payment or a reward in kind (e.g. books/ equipment), according to your preference.

This research has received ethics approval from a subcommittee of the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee. (Ethics reference: EDUC\_C1A\_24\_034).

If you are interested and would like more information, please contact Yunyu Jiang at the Department of education, 15 Norham Gardens, Oxford on [yunyu.jiang@education.ox.ac.uk](mailto:yunyu.jiang@education.ox.ac.uk) or the WeChat QR code below. There is no obligation to take part.

Thank you!

### **Message sent together with the recruitment poster in WeChat groups of educational NGOs and social media accounts of Chinese universities:**

Hi, I am Yunyu Jiang, a master's student at the university of Oxford. I am currently doing research about undergraduate's learning experiences in NGO-provided education programs (such as research projects, summer schools and training camps) and I am looking for interview volunteers. Please look at the recruitment poster for detailed information. If you decide to participate, you are very welcome to contact me by the WeChat code or the email address

shown in the poster. I believe it would be a great pleasure to have a conversation with you. Looking forward for you to share your story with me!

**NGO 教育过程中的大学生自我塑造：中国初代与非初代大学生的比较研究**  
大学研究伦理中央委员会批准编号：EDUC\_C1A\_24\_034

## 在线访谈志愿者招募

NGO 已成为为中国大学生提供非正规教育机会的重要机构。本研究旨在考察大学生参与非政府组织提供的教育项目和活动的微观过程，试图回答初代和非初代大学生在这些项目中自我塑造的过程和结果有何不同。

我正在寻找 18-27 岁的学生志愿者参与质性调查。我希望招募以下参与者 1) 目前在中国读大学本科，或在三年内在中国大学获得学士学位；2) 在大学期间有参加中国 NGO 举办的教育项目或活动（如研究项目、暑期学校、训练营）的经历。我们将邀请您参加两轮在线访谈，第一轮约 1 小时，第二轮约 1-1.5 小时。您将与我就家庭教育、大学经历和非政府组织教育经历进行交谈。我们将根据您的意愿，以现金或实物（如书籍/设备）作为访谈报酬。

本研究已获得牛津大学中央研究伦理委员会下属小组委员会的伦理批准。（伦理批准编号：EDUC\_C1A\_24\_034）。

如果您有兴趣并希望了解更多信息，请与牛津大学教育系 15 Norham Gardens, Oxford 蒋昀育联系（yunyu.jiang@education.ox.ac.uk），或添加以下微信二维码。您可以自行决定是否参加访谈。

谢谢！

### 在非政府教育组织微信群和中国大学社交媒体账户中与招募海报一起发送的信息：

大家好，我是牛津大学的硕士生蒋昀育。我目前正在做关于大学生在 NGO 提供的教育项目（如研究项目、夏令营和训练营等）中的学习经历的研究，现招募访谈志愿者。详细信息请参阅招募海报。如果您决定参加，非常欢迎您通过海报中显示的微信二维码或电子邮件地址与我联系。相信我们将开展一场非常愉快的对话。期待你与我分享你的故事！

## Appendix G: Questions for Participants Selection

1. Could you tell me your age?
2. Could you tell me your gender?
3. In which university did you do your undergraduate study?
4. What major did you study in undergraduate?
5. Do your parents (including biological, step, foster and adoptive parents) have a bachelor's degree or higher?
6. What type of education programs or activities provided by NGOs did you attended? For example:
  - 1) Research-based or teaching-based?
  - 2) How long did the program take in total?
  - 3) Full-time/part-time?
  - 4) In person/online?

1. 能告诉我您的年龄吗？
2. 您能告诉我您的性别吗？
3. 您在哪所大学读的本科？
4. 您本科学习的是什么专业？
5. 您的父母（包括亲生父母、继父母、养父母和收养父母）是否拥有学士或以上学位？
6. 您参加过哪些类型的 NGO 提供的教育计划或活动？例如：
  - 1) 研究类还是教学类？
  - 2) 项目总共需要多长时间？
  - 3) 全日制/非全日制？
  - 4) 面对面/在线？

## Appendix H: CUREC Approval

**SOCIAL SCIENCES & HUMANITIES  
INTERDIVISIONAL RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE  
DEPARTMENTAL RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE**

Department of Education  
15 Norham Gardens, Oxford OX2 6PY  
[student.curec@education.ox.ac.uk](mailto:student.curec@education.ox.ac.uk); [staff.curec@education.ox.ac.uk](mailto:staff.curec@education.ox.ac.uk)



Yunyu Jiang  
Department of Education, Social Sciences Division  
University of Oxford

14 February 2024

Dear Yunyu Jiang,

### Research ethics approval

**Research title: Undergraduate's self-formation in NGO-provided education: A comparison between first-generation and non-first-generation students in China**

**Research ethics reference: EDUC\_C1A\_24\_034**

The above application has been considered on behalf of the Education Departmental Research Ethics Committee (DREC) in accordance with the University's procedures for ethical approval of all research involving human participants.

I am pleased to confirm that, on the basis of the information provided to the DREC, ethics approval has now been granted for this study.

Please note the following:

**Personal data:** It is the responsibility of the PI to ensure that all personal data collected during the project is managed in accordance with the University's [guidance and legal requirements](#).

**In-person activities:** Any data collection involving in-person interactions with participants must have an up-to-date fieldwork risk assessment in place; further guidance is available from the Safety Office's [website](#).

**Amendments:** Please notify the committee if you intend to make any amendments to the information in your ethics application as submitted at date of this approval, as all changes must receive ethical approval prior to implementation. The amendment form is available on the [SSH IDREC webpage](#).

We welcome feedback on your experience of the ethical review process and suggestions for improvement. Please email any comments to [staff.curec@education.ox.ac.uk](mailto:staff.curec@education.ox.ac.uk) / [student.curec@education.ox.ac.uk](mailto:student.curec@education.ox.ac.uk) or [ethics@socsci.ox.ac.uk](mailto:ethics@socsci.ox.ac.uk).

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'S. Cadwallader'.

Dr Stuart Cadwallader, DREC Member

cc: Dr Xin Xu, [student.CUREC@education.ox.ac.uk](mailto:student.CUREC@education.ox.ac.uk)