

Dissolution of Subjectivity Behind College Students' "Landing Fever" and Paths to Reconstruction

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Abstract

This paper examines the phenomenon of "landing fever" among Chinese university graduates—a growing preference for public-sector employment—as a symptomatic expression of eroded student subjectivity. Anchored in Bourdieu's theory of practice, the study identifies three interconnected mechanisms driving this trend: the suppression of agency by institutional field rules, herd conformity shaped by habitus, and the invisible disciplinary force of intergenerational and algorithm-driven social expectations. Rather than viewing the issue as an individual career dilemma, the paper positions it as a structural challenge within the education–employment nexus. To address this, the study proposes a multidimensional intervention framework aimed at restoring subjectivity, including dismantling symbolic violence, reshaping the temporal logic of habitus, disrupting inherited risk aversion, and strengthening institutional safeguards. These pathways offer both theoretical clarity and actionable strategies for rebalancing career imagination and labor-market dynamics in contemporary China.

Keywords: Bourdieu's Theory, Landing Fever, Erosion of Subjectivity, Employment Guidance for University Students

Introduction

In the context of global competition for comprehensive national strength, nations increasingly recognize that economic vitality and social stability hinge on the quality and adaptability of their human capital. A well-educated and innovative workforce is essential to maintaining a country's competitive edge, particularly in an era marked by rapid technological change and shifting labor demands (OECD, 2021). Consequently, the employment of university graduates has become a focal concern not only for individual development but also for national socioeconomic progress.

However, in recent years, Chinese university students have exhibited a growing preference for public-sector employment, a phenomenon popularly known as "landing fever". The term refers to the trend of treating civil-service positions or jobs in state-owned enterprises as the ultimate career goal, symbolizing security and status. This preference is not merely a rational response to economic uncertainty; it reveals a deeper erosion of student

subjectivity in career decision-making. Instead of exercising personal agency and diverse career exploration, many graduates conform to a dominant societal narrative that equates success with stability and government affiliation (Chen et al., 2023).

This paper draws on Pierre Bourdieu's theory of practice—specifically the interconnected concepts of field, habitus, and capital—to analyze the sociological underpinnings of the landing fever phenomenon. It seeks to uncover the structural contradictions and psychological dilemmas contributing to this collective behavior, while highlighting the urgent need to restore subjectivity among university students. By advocating for autonomous career values, institutional reform, and cross-sector collaboration, this study aims to offer a multidimensional strategy to overcome the current impasse and promote a healthier, more diversified employment landscape in China (Bourdieu, 1990; Yu et al., 2024).

Literature Review

The “Landing Fever” Phenomenon: Structural Contradictions and Collective Anxiety

The emergence of “landing fever”—a term describing the widespread preference among Chinese university graduates for public-sector employment—serves as a lens through which to examine the complex interplay of structural, educational, and socio-psychological forces in China's evolving labor market. This phenomenon is not merely a reflection of individual choice but a collective behavioral response to systemic contradictions between higher education output and labor market demands (Cui et al., 2022). As China's gross enrollment in tertiary education has more than doubled over the past decade, universities have continued to produce a surplus of graduates in traditional disciplines, while fast-growing industries like the digital economy remain understaffed (Ministry of Education of China, 2023). This disjuncture has been exacerbated by the cultural glorification of job stability, the institutionalization of civil-service pathways, and familial pressures that idealize state employment as a low-risk career route (Wang & Wang, 2024). These overlapping dynamics have generated a climate of collective anxiety and risk aversion, contributing to the narrowing of career imagination among young people and reinforcing what Bourdieu (1990) would describe as the reproduction of social norms through field-determined habitus.

(1) The Rupture between Educational Supply and Market Demand: Logic of Structural Contradiction Formation

China's higher education system has experienced rapid expansion, with the gross enrollment ratio increasing from 30% in 2012 to 60.2% in 2023 (Ministry of Education of China, 2023). While this growth signifies the nation's commitment to becoming an educational powerhouse, it has also intensified structural tensions between educational output and labor market absorption. Amid the rise of the digital economy and the Fourth Industrial Revolution, new occupational structures are emerging at a pace that far outstrips the adaptive capacity of university curricula and program offerings (Shen & Hannum, 2023). As a result, an increasingly visible mismatch has emerged between the competencies of university graduates and the skillsets demanded by contemporary industries.

This disjunction has been officially acknowledged at the national level. During the 14th collective study session of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee, it was emphasized that China's labor market now faces a persistent paradox: the coexistence of “difficulty in finding jobs” and “difficulty in recruiting employees” (CPC Central Committee,

2023). On the supply side, traditional disciplines—particularly within the humanities and social sciences—continue to produce graduates in large numbers, saturating segments of the market where growth has stagnated. On the demand side, sectors such as intelligent manufacturing, big data, and artificial intelligence are experiencing acute shortages of qualified personnel due to the slow responsiveness of university specialization pathways and outdated curricular frameworks (Shen & Zhou, 2024).

This persistent misalignment reveals a deeper structural contradiction: the temporal mismatch between the long-cycle nature of higher education and the short-cycle volatility of labor market needs (Di Meglio et al., 2022). As universities struggle to update content and align training with real-world applications, the cycle of “hot enrollment seasons followed by cold graduation seasons” continues to repeat, undermining both graduate employment outcomes and national economic efficiency.

(2) From “Exam Grinders” to the “Civil-Service Cohort”: Mechanisms Driving the Spread of Collective Anxiety

The tension between an individual’s habitus and the changing structure of the employment field is central to understanding the anxiety that characterizes the current generation of Chinese university graduates. According to Bourdieu (1990), habitus represents deeply ingrained dispositions shaped by historical and cultural contexts. However, these dispositions may lag behind rapidly shifting socioeconomic environments. In China, this temporal misalignment manifests as widespread survival anxiety, particularly as young people navigate the conflicting pressures of market volatility, cultural norms, and institutional expectations.

One key driver of this anxiety is the overwhelming social endorsement of public-sector employment. Civil-service positions are seen not only as stable but also as symbolic of upward mobility and social respectability (Wang & Wang, 2024). As a result, many graduates adopt public examination preparation as their default career path, creating a culture of exam dependency that borders on behavioral addiction. This collective orientation gives rise to what some scholars describe as the emergence of a “civil-service cohort,” marked by test-centric lifestyles, rote memorization routines, and diminishing engagement with real-world labor market dynamics (Wu et al., 2024).

Family expectations further exacerbate this pattern. Rooted in intergenerational risk aversion, many parents pressure their children to prioritize job stability over professional passion or entrepreneurial ambition. This pressure reinforces path dependence, in which early choices constrain future options, ultimately reducing the career flexibility of young adults (Liu, 2023). The sunk-cost fallacy is particularly evident: students who have already invested time and money into exam preparation often feel unable to pivot toward alternative paths, even in the face of repeated failure. This confluence of societal validation, familial insistence, and individual inertia has led to the proliferation of “full-time children”—graduates who delay labor market entry indefinitely in pursuit of elusive public-sector success (Tang, 2024).

(3) Intensifying Competition and the Opportunity-Cost Trap: Real-World Dilemmas on the Public-Sector Track

The competition for government and public-sector positions in China has intensified dramatically in recent years. Civil service examinations and recruitment drives for state-owned enterprises now attract record-breaking numbers of applicants, with the applicant-to-post ratio for many flagship roles far exceeding previous benchmarks (Liu, 2023). This phenomenon reflects a widening imbalance between the oversupply of graduates—particularly from traditional humanities and social science disciplines—and the limited number of high-quality, stable vacancies in the public sector. Simultaneously, entry thresholds have become increasingly demanding, often requiring advanced degrees, outstanding academic records, and even political credentials. This growing selectivity reinforces a Matthew effect in graduate employment, where privileged candidates gain disproportionate access to scarce elite positions (Rigney, 2010).

This paradox—where job seekers struggle to find work while employers struggle to find suitable candidates—points to a deeper misallocation of human capital. Many graduates gravitate toward the public sector not out of genuine interest, but due to the lack of appealing private-sector alternatives. Meanwhile, high-demand fields such as artificial intelligence, digital services, and intelligent manufacturing remain critically understaffed. The gap between university education and practical labor-market needs—particularly in terms of technical and digital skills—has not been sufficiently addressed. Although universities have attempted to introduce new majors, many programs continue to emphasize theoretical knowledge over applied skills, resulting in what scholars have termed "credential inflation" without corresponding increases in employability (Shen & Hannum, 2023).

Moreover, the decision to focus solely on civil service preparation often incurs substantial opportunity costs. Graduates who repeatedly delay entry into the workforce to pursue examination success risk losing momentum during the most formative years of their careers. Prolonged periods of inactivity lead to the deterioration of both professional skills and psychological readiness for the workplace. With limited work experience and outdated knowledge, these "full-time examinees" gradually lose their competitive edge in the broader labor market (Brown et al., 2004; Hopkins et al., 2011). As a result, many find themselves trapped in a vicious cycle: the longer they pursue a singular goal, the narrower their future options become, and the harder it is to pivot away from a saturated track they are no longer prepared to compete in.

The Core of "Landing Fever": A Concentrated Manifestation of Subjectivity Dissolution

Pierre Bourdieu's theory of practice offers a powerful interpretive framework for analyzing the sociological underpinnings of the "landing fever" phenomenon. Central to this theory are the concepts of field, habitus, and capital, which collectively explain how individuals navigate structured social spaces. According to Bourdieu (1990), each field—be it education, employment, or politics—is governed by its own internal logic and rules of engagement. Individuals occupy positions within these fields based on the volume and composition of the capital they possess, including economic, cultural, and social capital. Habitus, meanwhile, refers to the internalized dispositions that guide an individual's perceptions, judgments, and practices. When educational and employment fields become tightly coupled, the dominant norms of one field may impose symbolic constraints on the other, producing what Bourdieu

would term the dissolution of subjectivity—where personal agency is gradually replaced by compliance with institutional logic (Grenfell, 2014).

Erosion of Subjectivity under Field Rules: From “I Want to Learn” to “Forced Competition”

Within the context of “landing fever,” the interaction between field, habitus, and capital becomes highly visible. The educational field, influenced heavily by broader socioeconomic values, has gradually normalized a specific career trajectory that favors civil service and public-sector employment. These positions are perceived as offering long-term stability, social status, and financial security, and thus represent the most desirable outcomes for many students and their families (Li, 2017). To attain these outcomes, students are incentivized to accumulate cultural capital in the form of academic qualifications, competition accolades, and institutional affiliations, as well as social capital through familial networks and insider knowledge (Cheng, 2021; Davies, 2024).

However, this intense alignment with the field’s expectations produces a form of symbolic violence that displaces individual aspirations with institutionally sanctioned goals (Bourdieu, 1990). Instead of cultivating curiosity, creativity, or diverse occupational interests, students internalize a narrow definition of success centered on securing a government job. Algorithmically curated content on social media further reinforces this by overrepresenting public-sector success stories and underplaying alternative pathways. As a result, students become ensnared in a cycle of test preparation and standardized competition—trading personal growth for perceived security. This pattern reduces their capacity for reflective thinking and self-directed decision-making, ultimately eroding their subjectivity and reinforcing institutional reproduction (Zhang & Koshmanova, 2020).

Blind Conformity Rooted in Habitus: From Individual Choice to Collective Unconscious

The widespread preference for public-sector employment among Chinese youth reflects not only structural constraints but also deeply embedded dispositions—habitus—formed through cultural socialization and institutional reinforcement. According to Bourdieu (1990), habitus encompasses the internalized norms and expectations that guide individuals’ actions within specific social fields. In the case of graduate employment, this habitus tends to align with risk-averse, stability-seeking behaviors cultivated over time through education, family values, and social narratives (Grenfell, 2014).

Findings from the 2023 Youth Career Planning Survey reveal that while the majority of young respondents acknowledge the importance of career planning, only 18.35% feel adequately prepared, and more than 40% admit lacking the discipline to implement their plans (Youth Career Planning Survey, 2023). Despite this, over 75% prioritize “job security,” commonly equated with civil-service posts, state-owned enterprises, or other long-term positions within the public system. The normalization of these preferences, often encapsulated in the term *luodi* (落地, “landing”), signifies a collective shift from active decision-making to path-dependent conformity. As one interviewee noted, “Choosing the system comes from caution and inertia; I have only a sketchy vision for my life.”

This tendency is further intensified by digital ecosystems. Algorithms on social media platforms and recruitment apps amplify content related to civil service preparation, creating what Pariser (2011) termed a “filter bubble.” Students are inundated with stories of public-

sector success and exam preparation routines, while alternative career narratives remain underrepresented. This phenomenon locks individuals into a narrow feedback loop, where their behavior and preferences are continuously shaped and reinforced by algorithmic recommendation systems (Fang & Brown, 2024). As a result, career planning becomes less about self-exploration and more about conforming to dominant norms, leading to what Bourdieu (1990) would describe as inert practice—a mechanical reproduction of structured expectations devoid of critical agency or innovation.

Invisible Oppression of Social Expectations: From Autonomous Choice to Emotional Discipline

The dissolution of subjectivity in graduate employment decisions is not solely the result of institutional constraints or habitus-driven inertia; it is also shaped by powerful affective forces emerging from both familial expectations and algorithmic conditioning. These two elements form a dual disciplinary structure that gradually erodes young people's autonomy in career choice. Within many Chinese households, the narrative of "public-sector stability" is deeply entrenched, with state employment perceived as a pathway not only to economic security but also to enhanced social capital—particularly in relation to marriage prospects, filial piety, and intergenerational reputation (Chappell, 2016; Luo & Zhan, 2012). This worldview promotes a culture of risk aversion, where deviation from state-affiliated jobs is subtly, and sometimes overtly, discouraged by parents and elders (Leung et al., 2011; Zhu et al., 2023).

This familial discourse is further reinforced by algorithmic systems that amplify societal anxieties through a curated flow of information. Social media platforms and job-search engines frequently promote narratives of instability in private-sector careers—such as the so-called "35-year-old tech worker crisis" or frequent layoffs in start-ups—while disproportionately highlighting the perceived security and benefits of civil service roles (Fang & Brown, 2024). These digital feedback loops produce what Pariser (2011) calls an "information cocoon," where structurally biased content distorts risk perception and narrows the informational landscape available to students. Over time, such algorithmically constructed realities legitimize public-sector employment as the only viable or 'safe' option, feeding into a culture of conformity and emotional discipline.

Trapped between familial pressure and algorithmic persuasion, many students begin to internalize these external influences as personal judgment, mistaking social discipline for individual choice. As one survey respondent reflected, "It is not that I actively chose the civil-service track; the environment made me feel there was no alternative." This sentiment illustrates how symbolic violence operates through the field—masking structural coercion as voluntary compliance (Bourdieu, 1990). At its core, this process transforms autonomous agency into emotional discipline, suppressing the pursuit of diverse aspirations and reinforcing a systemic cycle of occupational conformity.

Reclaiming Subjectivity: A Multidimensional Collaborative Practice Framework

The dissolution of subjectivity in university graduates' career decision-making is not merely the result of personal indecision, but a reflection of deeper structural, cultural, and technological forces. As Bourdieu (1990) argues, individual agency is shaped—and often constrained—by the logic of the fields in which people operate, particularly when symbolic violence is normalized through institutional routines and discourses. In the context of graduate employment, conformity to dominant narratives of public-sector stability is

reinforced through educational structures, family expectations, and digital recommendation systems (Fang & Brown, 2024; Leung et al., 2011). Reclaiming subjectivity, therefore, necessitates a collaborative, cross-sector approach that addresses the root causes of compliance and encourages critical self-reflection, cognitive autonomy, and diverse occupational imagination. The strategies proposed in this section draw on Bourdieu's theory of practice and aim to empower students through educational reform, social dialogue, and structural innovation at multiple levels.

Building a Cognitive Breakthrough System within the Educational Field

The current educational landscape in China has implicitly institutionalized a “public-sector first” ideology through curriculum design, assessment mechanisms, and institutional discourse. This orientation acts as a form of symbolic violence, as conceptualized by Bourdieu (1990), by subtly narrowing students' career imagination and normalizing state employment as the most legitimate path to professional success. Wang (2024) asserted that to counter this entrenched narrative, educational institutions must initiate a process of cognitive reconstruction that prioritizes critical thinking and structural literacy. Students need not only technical competencies but also the analytical capacity to interrogate the ideologies embedded in their career environments (Zhao, 2009).

One way to catalyze this shift is through the introduction of a compulsory Sociology of Occupations course within general education. Informed by Bourdieu's field theory, such a module would help students critically examine how various forms of capital—economic, cultural, and social—are valued differently across sectors. Case studies comparing civil-service career trajectories with those in the private tech industry or emerging start-ups could highlight how notions of “stability” and “prestige” are socially constructed and often serve to reproduce existing power structures (Maton, 2008). Additionally, integrating algorithm literacy into the curriculum can equip students to detect bias in digital recommendation systems, thereby fostering awareness of how content algorithms influence perceptions of job desirability (Pariser, 2011).

These cognitive reforms should be supported by practice-oriented initiatives. A cross-field career shadowing program would provide firsthand exposure to diverse work environments, helping students visualize pathways beyond the public sector. Kounelaki (2013) suggested that on-campus entrepreneurship incubators could offer low-risk platforms to test ideas under expert mentorship, encouraging students to exercise creativity and autonomy. Technology can further support this framework: career graph platforms could present students with data-driven insights on job markets, while blockchain-based capability certificates could securely track their co-curricular achievements, offering a flexible and personalized approach to career development (Mantry et al., 2022). Together, these interventions aim to dismantle institutional conformity and restore student subjectivity in career decision-making.

Reshaping a Family–Society Collaborative Support Network

Family beliefs and societal narratives play a pivotal role in shaping students' career decisions, often reinforcing risk-averse mindsets passed down across generations. In many Chinese households, the public sector is still equated with lifelong job security and upward social mobility, which narrows students' perceived options and weakens their subjectivity in career

planning (Liu, 2023). To challenge this intergenerational transmission of occupational conservatism, universities should take the lead by organizing Family Career Development Workshops—platforms where parents, sociologists, and career advisors engage in data-driven dialogue. These workshops can help parents reassess long-held assumptions by analyzing shifting labor market trends, such as the reform of state-owned enterprises and the volatility of both public and private sectors (Liu, 2023).

Beyond the family, the broader social climate also needs restructuring. Media outlets, which currently contribute to youth anxiety through exaggerated narratives such as the “35-year-old tech worker crisis,” should instead highlight diverse success stories across emerging sectors (Fang & Brown, 2024). Balanced reporting on entrepreneurial ventures, start-up resilience, and private-sector innovation can help reframe public understanding of what constitutes a successful and fulfilling career. Governmental support is equally vital. Authorities can introduce policy guidelines that incentivize companies to offer structured, high-quality internships and practical training programs, thereby making exploratory career experiences more accessible to students across socioeconomic backgrounds (Cillotto, 2019; Dan, 2022).

To sustain long-term transformation, institutional guarantees must be reinforced through comprehensive policy frameworks that span the entire education-to-employment pipeline. A university–enterprise work-placement subsidy scheme could significantly reduce financial barriers for students seeking internships in market-oriented roles, thus empowering them to explore alternative trajectories without economic strain. Additionally, Okolie et al. (2020) claimed that localized career development systems that integrate counseling, mentorship, and experiential learning can provide consistent support throughout students’ transitions into the workforce. Such initiatives are crucial in restoring career agency, dismantling inherited occupational biases, and cultivating a more open and dynamic employment ecosystem (Baruch, 2015).

Institutional Innovation Within Universities

Redesigning university systems through institutional innovation is crucial for cultivating graduate subjectivity in career decision-making. By deepening industry–education integration and embedding flexible management models, universities can transition from static, knowledge-centered teaching to dynamic, experience-based training. One promising approach is the implementation of a “collaborative industry–academia–research curriculum,” where students can convert hands-on enterprise projects into academic credits and include them in competency evaluations (Lucietto et al., 2021). This strategy blurs the boundary between classroom learning and industry engagement, enhancing the relevance of higher education. Furthermore, establishing an entrepreneurship risk-compensation fund would help create a failure-tolerant ecosystem by reducing the perceived opportunity cost of career exploration (Yin & Wu, 2023). Coupled with a dual-mentor system—where academic advisers guide theoretical development and industry mentors provide real-world insight—students gain a multidimensional understanding of both career prospects and disciplinary application.

Public authorities play a pivotal role in institutional innovation by expanding policy support and public services. A “dynamic accreditation system for new occupations” should link administrative bodies with professional associations to update competency standards

and provide targeted training subsidies based on evolving industry needs (Li, 2011). Additionally, big-data-powered employment platforms can integrate labor-supply trends and sector-specific demands to generate tailored talent analytics. Such intelligent systems support evidence-based curriculum reform and empower students to make informed, personalized career decisions. Policies like a career-transition fund—sourced from social security contributions and development grants—can be leveraged to incentivize participation in grassroots industries and fast-emerging sectors, helping to address both graduate underemployment and regional labor gaps (Yu et al., 2024).

Harnessing corporate and social capital is equally critical. The proposed “Ten-Thousand Enterprises, Thousand Campuses Collaboration Plan” can set national standards for internship bases to ensure equitable access to well-paid, high-quality placements. Through this model, vocational institutions can shift toward group-based management, wherein industry leaders help define technical skill requirements and align academic programs with real-world demands (Zhao & Ko, 2024). At the community level, youth-career hubs established at service centers can consolidate career coaching, mental health support, and entrepreneurship training, forming a supportive infrastructure for holistic student development. Together, these innovations build a closed-loop system—encompassing policy, practice, and support—that sustains student agency and restores career subjectivity.

Conclusion

The erosion of subjectivity beneath the widespread “landing fever” is not simply a personal career challenge—it is a systemic issue that reflects deeper structural tensions in educational design, labor-market alignment, and intergenerational mobility. Viewed through Bourdieu’s framework of field, habitus, and capital, this phenomenon underscores how symbolic violence and the unequal distribution of cultural capital limit young people’s autonomy in career decision-making. Reconstructing subjectivity, therefore, entails more than resisting conformity; it involves a fundamental reconfiguration of how individuals navigate and negotiate institutional logics and social expectations.

This transformation demands a coordinated response across multiple levels. At the individual level, students must be equipped with critical thinking skills and media literacy to resist algorithm-driven narratives and redefine success beyond the confines of public-sector employment. Educational institutions have a responsibility to broaden curricular frameworks, integrate experiential learning, and validate diverse competencies. Families, often driven by risk-averse logics, must update their perceptions of job stability in light of a dynamic and evolving labor market. At the societal level, inclusive policy design, supportive media discourse, and equitable opportunity structures are crucial to nurturing a climate where diverse career paths are legitimized and supported.

The implications are far-reaching. When young people are empowered to make autonomous, well-informed career choices that reflect both personal aspirations and societal needs, they diversify the talent pool and revitalize innovation across sectors. A more open and mobile talent ecosystem emerges—one that fosters dynamic interplay between education and employment, aligns individual fulfillment with national progress, and ensures that social development is fueled not by compliance, but by creativity, diversity, and agency.

In reclaiming subjectivity, the next generation does not merely secure employment—they help shape a more equitable and adaptive future.

This study contributes to existing scholarship by extending Bourdieu's theory of practice—particularly the concepts of field, habitus, and capital—into the domain of contemporary graduate employment behavior in China. By interpreting “landing fever” as a form of symbolic violence that erodes subjectivity, the research deepens theoretical understanding of how institutional logics are internalized and reproduced through cultural and algorithmic mechanisms. It innovatively integrates sociological theory with emerging challenges such as algorithmic conditioning and intergenerational risk transmission, offering a nuanced framework for analyzing constrained agency within late-modern labor markets. Contextually, the study is situated at a critical juncture in China's socio-economic development, where structural shifts in the education–employment nexus are reshaping youth aspirations and mobility patterns. The proposed multidimensional intervention framework—spanning cognitive, institutional, familial, and policy domains—offers practical strategies not only for China's higher education and labor system, but also for other societies grappling with similar tensions between education, employment, and evolving definitions of success. As such, this research informs both academic discourse and policymaking by reconceptualizing career guidance as a socio-cultural project of subjectivity reconstruction.

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