

Taking One's Place: Elite Student Status Systems in China and the U.S.

Abstract

Elites are a group who occupy top status in status systems. Studies show that elites strategize to stay and produce in top status, but few examine how elites respond to threats of downward mobility. Professor Yi-Lin Chiang examines how elites maintain top status despite entering new institutions in different countries. Drawing on seven years of ethnography and interviews with socioeconomic elite students from Beijing, she finds that elite students change the status system when they perceive themselves as losing ground. Across high schools, Beijing students subscribed to a status system in which test scores determined status. After graduation, those who entered top American universities remained academically top-performing, and established an identical status system in the U.S. However, others who went to top universities in China found themselves outcompeted. They then constructed a new status system that rewarded "having fun," allowing themselves to stay in top status. These findings show that elite ability to change the status system is key to maintaining privilege. Implications beyond the Chinese context are discussed.