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"Can We Not Wear the Uniform?": Inter-School Heterogeneity in the Uniform System of Public High Schools and Its Internalized Discipline on Students—A Field Study of Key High Schools in Hangzhou

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Abstract. School uniforms are a non-autonomous self-performance of students in public high schools under the disciplinary power of the school. Previous studies have mostly focused on students' resistance to uniforms as reflected in symbolic interactionism and subcultural construction. However, these studies have prompted some reflections: Are the uniform systems in today's public high schools as strict as the public imagines? Have they changed with the times? Is there a potential connection between uniform systems and public recognition of schools? Do high school students still commonly modify or resist uniforms? How do they perform self-expression and seek self-identity? Moreover, previous researchers have not studied uniforms from the perspective of those who are disciplined by the uniform system, lacking long-term observation and personal experience. Drawing on my daily observations as a student at a key high school in Hangzhou and on semi-structured interviews with students from multiple schools, this study uses qualitative research methods to horizontally compare institutional heterogeneity in uniform styles, dress regulations, and inspection intensity among key high schools in Hangzhou. It also takes a key high school in Hangzhou as a field to explore the specific ways students there engage in self-performance. The findings are as follows: (1) The uniform policies of key high schools in Hangzhou are closely related to student quality, school culture, and academic performance. (2) With the changing times, most students do not resist the act of "wearing a uniform" itself; instead, they regard it as a natural given, reflecting the reshaping of subjectivity brought by the internalized discipline of the uniform system. (3) The reshaped subjectivity still yearns for self-identity. Students use residual performative spaces—such as earrings, shoes, and accessories—to maintain limited space for self-expression.

Keywords: school uniform system, public high schools, institutional heterogeneity, internalized discipline, residual performative space

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1. Introduction

In recent years, with issues such as employment pressure and student depression receiving widespread public attention, many scholars have studied the excessively strict school management systems that high school students face under the "score-only" dilemma. School uniforms, as the most visible manifestation of school rules and regulations, are not only a hot topic in society but have long been a focus of sociological researchers, becoming an important object of study in school culture research.

Previous research on school uniform culture has mainly focused on students' "resistance" to school disciplinary systems through behaviors such as uniform graffiti. The perspective of these studies is somewhat limited and does not match the current reality of student uniform culture.

However, for different schools, uniform styles and dress regulations still show significant localized characteristics. In addition, beyond wearing uniforms, students still have reserved spaces not regulated by school rules, where they can express their personalities and aesthetic tastes through earrings, shoes, accessories, and so on.

This study adopts insider research and autoethnography. It is based on my long-term daily observations as a student at a key high school in Hangzhou, with semi-structured interviews with students from multiple schools as the main research data. Observations were recorded in the form of field notes. In daily life, I consciously paid attention to scenes related to the uniform system (such as morning uniform inspections, casual chats about uniforms during breaks, and school notices about uniforms) and recorded what I saw and heard in a "thick description" manner. Interviews used snowball sampling, with initial interviewees recommending other eligible students. The interviews focused on uniform-wearing experiences, views on the uniform system, and ways of self-expression. A total of 23 high school students from eight key high schools in Hangzhou were interviewed.

This study focuses on the diverse practices under mainstream uniform culture that have not been fully addressed in the field of school culture research. It explores the social significance behind school regulations on uniforms and students' "attitudes" toward uniforms, outlines the sociological meaning embedded in uniforms, and thus provides a new perspective for school culture research.

2. Research questions

2.1. Domestic research on school culture

As a subculture opposed to school culture, student culture, together with curriculum culture, teacher culture, family culture, and student peer group culture, constitutes a complete school culture [1]. Student culture refers to a subcultural phenomenon constructed by students at a special age stage and in a special social environment when facing the school's mainstream cultural values disciplining their bodies, in order to seek space for their own personality development. It is embodied in students' learning and lifestyles, attitudes toward interpersonal relations, value positions, and moral principles. Student culture can be a supplement to school culture, not necessarily an anti-school culture that conflicts with school culture. Uniform culture, then, is the manifestation of student culture in school uniforms.

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2.2. Domestic research on school uniform culture

2.2.1. Research on school uniform culture from the perspective of resistance

In the field of sociology in China, existing studies on school uniforms mostly focus on phenomena such as uniform graffiti as students' "deviant subculture," emphasizing the explanation of student subculture's "resistance" to mainstream culture.

Zhu [2] analyzed uniform graffiti to propose the motivations and psychological symbolism of middle school students' uniform graffiti behavior. Wang [1] approached the issue from social stratification to explain differences in uniform identification among students from different class families, concluding that students from working-class families have conflicts with mainstream culture. Chang and Wan [3] took a special class of students from "new citizen" families as a field, revealing that as a group marginalized in the school field, they constructed subculture through uniform borrowing and graffiti, using collective resistance to create differences between groups and satisfy the identity needs of group members.

2.2.2. Research on school uniform culture from the perspective of compliance

In recent years, some researchers have proposed new perspectives, shifting the focus from "resistance" to "compromise." Dana Guli Bolati et al. [4], in a survey of a subcultural group in a primary school, found that the fifth-grade subcultural group recognized the value of knowledge and diplomas, acknowledged and maintained school education and management methods, and did not show "resistance" to mainstream school culture. Gao and Wang [5], through a study of student subcultural dress before and after the college entrance examination, proposed that subcultural dress enthusiasts, when facing school rules and regulations, choose to suppress their subcultural identity, showing a "compromising escape" from the school's mainstream culture.

2.3. Limitations and questions

However, when reading these papers, as someone who is also subject to the uniform system, I felt a considerable sense of distance. Taking key high schools in Hangzhou as a field, I found that the relationship between students and the mainstream uniform culture on campus is not a binary opposition of resistance and being resisted, but is rather characterized by diverse practices such as negotiation, interaction, and even compromise. The "uniform graffiti" discussed by researchers mostly exists among marginalized groups in schools and does not capture the mainstream culture of uniform wearing. According to the interview data I collected, "uniform graffiti" is now very rare in key high schools in Hangzhou.

It can be seen that Chinese scholars' research on middle school students' uniforms is still in an exploratory stage. Researchers have always conducted interviews and surveys as outsiders, and their research perspective has certain limitations.

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3. Findings

3.1. Inter-school heterogeneity of the uniform system

3.1.1. Styles and designs

Through my daily observations and photos posted on various schools' official WeChat accounts, I can gain a preliminary understanding of each school's uniform styles. Generally speaking, Hangzhou high school uniforms are divided into three seasonal types: spring/autumn, summer, and winter. The spring/autumn style consists of a sports jacket and sports pants; the summer style consists of a short-sleeved shirt, thin shorts, and thin long pants; the winter style consists of a windbreaker, a fleece jacket as the windbreaker's lining, a down jacket, and fleece-lined long pants. There is not much difference in style among schools; all are based on the above standard. Of course, there are exceptions. School B introduced a sun-protection uniform, which was widely praised by students.

In terms of uniform design, this is where schools differ most, and it is also a common topic of discussion among students. Each school generally chooses one color as the main color of the uniform and designs around it. For example, School A's main color is dark green, School C's is brick red, School D's is sky blue, and School F's is purple. Some schools do not design around a single main color. For example, School B's summer and spring/autumn uniforms use white as the base, with stripes of other colors only on the sleeves; however, its winter windbreaker uses navy blue as the base, with the sleeve stripes unchanged. I also interviewed students from different schools to understand their preferences for each school's uniforms.

"The dark green is really ugly... and the uniform even has the year of enrollment printed on the back, which is even worse..." — Student from School A

"I think our summer uniform is quite nice. After all, the design is relatively simple, at least it's not ugly. But the navy blue winter uniform is really terrible." — Student from School B

"I really can't do anything about the earthy red windbreaker. Does it have to be the same color as the school walls?" — Student from School C

"At first I thought our school uniform was a bit ugly, but after wearing it more, it feels quite pleasing to the eye. After all, sky blue is much better than bright red or green. And the school name in pinyin on the back uses a fancy font, which is quite stylish." — Student from School D

"Purple, what can I say? What an awful color it is." — Student from School F

"I always feel like our uniform is a knockoff of School B's..." — Student from School G

Drawing on the interview data and my personal experience trying on various school uniforms, I can summarize several design features that high school students prefer: 1. Light and bright colors as the main colors; 2. The lettering on the uniform should not be too rigid; printing square Chinese characters or numbers is a major taboo; 3. Unique designs that do not overlap with other schools.

Uniform styles are also a reflection of school rules. Almost all schools add distinctive patterns to uniforms to distinguish students from different grades. For example, School A prints the year of enrollment on the back of the uniform, while School D uses red, blue, and green color schemes on the collar, cuffs, and chest badge to distinguish grades. Some schools even distinguish by gender on top of grade. For example, School B uses six colors for the sleeve stripes. There are also many rumors about this design at School B, such as a rumor that if a senior class's college entrance exam results are unsatisfactory, the school will seal away that class's uniform stripe color.

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3.1.2. Management and regulations

There are also significant differences among schools in regulations on students' wearing uniforms and corresponding management measures.

There are some common regulations among schools, such as wearing the full uniform on important occasions and not wearing uniforms from other grades. Schools do not specify which pieces students must wear by season; as long as students wear uniforms, they can freely mix and match. For example, at School D where I am, most students, for personal reasons, do not wear shorts in summer but choose spring/autumn long pants. There are even more special cases. I observed that in the hot summer, many students even wear the thicker spring/autumn sports pants. So I interviewed one student whose outfit was "out of season."

"The fabric of the summer uniform pants is too poor. It's not breathable, doesn't absorb sweat, and after playing soccer in PE class, it doesn't dry at all. It also has no elasticity, like woven bag material. I'm already a bit overweight, and last time I played soccer, the pants just burst open. I'd rather be hotter than wear summer uniform pants again." — Student G, 175 cm tall, 90 kg

The strictness of uniform management also varies greatly among schools. At School A, only Monday is mandatory for wearing uniforms; on other days, students can wear their own appropriate clothing. All other key high schools except School A require uniforms to be worn daily. However, there are also large differences in the degree of detailed management. Schools B and E, known for their strict school cultures, have strict uniform management. Generally, students must wear uniforms, and homeroom teachers seriously supervise. Except for PE class, when sports clothing is allowed, the outermost layer must be a uniform at all other times, including classes, self-study, and meals. At School D where I am, management is relatively loose, but the specific strictness mainly depends on the homeroom teacher's teaching style. Ninety-five percent or more of students wear the full uniform, but I often see some female students wearing their own trendy clothes, only throwing on a uniform jacket when entering the school gate. Even during the large recess group exercise, a few students wearing their own clothes can be spotted in the lines. At School D, uniforms must be worn unless there are special reasons. But the definition of "special reasons" varies from person to person. Some students have their parents communicate "special reasons" to the homeroom teacher. In addition, wearing one's own clothes when the homeroom teacher is not present is also common. However, after being reminded by the homeroom teacher, they all obediently put the uniform back on.

3.2. "Compliance" and "compromise" rather than "resistance" toward the uniform system

To study the attitudes of students in key high schools in Hangzhou toward the uniform system, I selected School D where I am as the field and took my class as the main research object. Although the sample is small, the field site still has indicative value and can to some extent reflect the overall attitudes of key high school students in Hangzhou from the micro to the macro level.

School D divides classes according to entrance exam scores into four innovation classes and nine parallel classes. There are also some differences in uniform wearing between different classes. In some parallel classes, there are several special talent students. Special talent students have great freedom in dressing. In classes with more special talent students, homeroom teachers find class management more difficult, and uniform wearing rates tend to be lower. Therefore, I selected a class without special talent students (an innovation class) as the research object to exclude interference from factors outside the system.

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In my class, if the homeroom teacher sees a student not wearing a uniform, she will remind them. The reminded student will put the uniform back on at that moment, or explain special reasons to the homeroom teacher and promise to wear it next time. Generally speaking, about one-quarter of the students in the class (all boys) choose to wear their own clothes under the uniform jacket, and many take off the uniform jacket in the classroom during classes when the homeroom teacher is not present. In other innovation classes, some homeroom teachers only give symbolic reminders, and students gradually become "repeat offenders" through repeated "glib talk." If a student becomes a "repeat offender" of not wearing uniforms, the homeroom teacher no longer bothers and does not impose punishment. Overall, if reminded by the homeroom teacher, students will obediently follow instructions and put on the uniform. When the homeroom teacher cannot supervise, students have some freedom, but most students still consciously wear the full uniform. Those who want to wear their own clothes also ensure that at least one piece of uniform is worn on the upper and lower body. I interviewed several classmates who often wear their own clothes.

"Why do you wear your own clothes instead of the uniform?"

"The uniform is too uncomfortable; I can't play ball at all." — Student F (male)

"I'm too lazy to change clothes for PE class." — Student M (male)

"Have you ever thought about not wearing the uniform at all? When the homeroom teacher reminds you, have you thought about refusing to put it on?"

"Can we not wear the uniform? At least one piece has to be worn. How dare I disobey XX (homeroom teacher's name)? I don't want to die." — Student F (male)

"There's no need to not wear the full set. When reminded, just put it on. After XX (homeroom teacher's name) leaves, take it off again. Isn't it just making yourself miserable by provoking her?" — Student M (male)

"Have you ever thought about drawing on your uniform?"

"Huh? Why would I do that? Drawing on the uniform is too... show-off." — Student F (male)

"What kind of funny childish behavior is that? I wouldn't do it." — Student M (male)

Summarizing the field observation notes and interview data, I drew several conclusions about uniform wearing in my class: 1. All girls in the class consciously wear the full uniform; 2. The main reason for wearing one's own clothes is that uniforms are inconvenient for sports; 3. Not wearing uniforms is not because they reject the uniform system. On the contrary, wearing uniforms is a consensus among everyone. But in special situations (sports activities), some students prioritize their own interests and wear their own clothes, and after being reminded by the teacher, they comply; 4. Everyone cannot understand uniform graffiti behavior.

3.3. "Gray area" residual space performance

Although students generally adopt an obedient and compliant attitude toward uniforms, this does not mean that high school students have lost their subjectivity. On the contrary, high school students in their youth still have a strong desire for self-expression. They long to show their uniqueness and to have that uniqueness discovered and recognized by others. However, under the control of school rules, students cannot use the most visually effective means—clothing—for self-performance. Thus, they turn to the "gray areas" unregulated by school rules, using residual spaces for self-performance.

Hair. The visual effect of hair is second only to clothing, and self-performance through hair is very eye-catching. However, school rules explicitly prohibit hair dyeing, so the room for hair manipulation is limited. Only very few "troublemakers" in school dare to use hair for striking self-performance. Girls use the height of their ponytails, hairpins, and hair ties for limited self-

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performance; boys have very limited self-performance through hair, with two main hairstyles: a short buzz cut or a "mushroom head" with more hair on top.

Earrings. Earrings are a self-performance method popular among high school girls and an important proof of social status. However, earrings themselves are not considered proper attire for high school students. It is only because of their small size, concealability, and detachability that earrings can survive in the gray area of school rules. But at School B, strict school culture and management prohibit earrings and hair color alike. In my class, the homeroom teacher strongly opposes earrings, so no one in my class wears them. But in the liberal arts innovation class at School D, the earring-wearing rate among girls is close to 50%. I even observed students with multiple ear piercings and multiple earrings.

Shoes. Shoes are not part of the school uniform in China, and students have considerable freedom in choosing shoes. Based on my observations, the shoes worn by high school students can be roughly divided into three types: 1. Plain sports shoes, worn only for daily commuting; 2. Trendy shoes such as Dunk, Samba, and Replica, to show personal fashion taste; 3. Professional running shoes or basketball shoes, directly meeting sports needs. According to my rough statistics, the distribution of shoes worn by School D students is approximately: type 1, 50%; type 2, 30%; type 3, 20%.

Accessories. With the rise of the trendy toy industry, the variety of accessories and the cultural connotations they express perfectly meet the self-expression needs of high school students. At the same time, because accessories are generally attached to backpacks or pencil cases, they are almost not controlled by school rules or teachers and are very popular among students. Accessories can be classified into four types: 1. Popular IP accessories from well-known trendy toy brands such as Popmart; 2. ACG-related IP accessories, generally from favorite games or anime; 3. Text-based motivational accessories; 4. Korean or Japanese entertainment star IP accessories.

4. Conclusion

The inter-school heterogeneity of uniform systems can be explained by Bourdieu's cultural capital theory. The uniform system is precisely a triple embodiment of the embodied, objectified, and institutionalized forms of cultural capital. Schools with excellent academic performance have the best student sources and high overall student quality, so they can adopt an open and inclusive management attitude, even allowing students to wear uniforms only once a week, enabling students' aesthetic literacy and self-initiative to be exercised. This unequal cultural reproduction, through the intergenerational transmission of cultural capital, facilitates the legitimization of cultural privilege.

As a form of bodily discipline for students, the uniform system in today's society has achieved internalized discipline among students. Students no longer graffiti their uniforms or resist uniforms. Their attitude toward uniforms has shifted from "resistance" to "compromise" and then to "conscious compliance." The uniform system has been "displaced" into individual consciousness, becoming a code of conduct that individuals consciously obey.

Although the internalized discipline of school rules symbolizes the loss of some subjectivity among students, as immature social individuals, high school students still have a strong desire for self-expression. Through a hidden symbiotic relationship with school rules, students use the "gray areas" of school rules for self-performance. The channels and sites of self-performance also bear distinct contemporary characteristics.

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