



The Harvard Speech Incident: An Analysis from the Perspective of Park's Marginal Man Theory

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Abstract. Amidst the sweeping tide of globalization, the crossing of geographical and cultural boundaries by individuals and groups has become increasingly commonplace. Robert E. Park's "Marginal Man" theory, introduced in 1928, conceptualizes the marginal individual as a "cultural hybrid" who "lives in two worlds, in both of which he is a stranger." Such individuals are neither able to sever ties completely with their past nor gain full acceptance into the new society. This liminal state engenders distinctive personality traits—psychological distress, maladjustment, and heightened self-consciousness—rendering them, in Park's view, "the crucible of cultural fusion" and "the most ideal resource for observing the process of human civilization."

Utilizing Park's Marginal Man theory as its central analytical framework, this study examines the case of a Chinese female undergraduate's speech at Harvard University. It dissects the complex cultural conflicts, identity dilemmas, and inherent agency experienced by the speaker as a marginal individual. Furthermore, the paper explores potential pathways for bridging cultural divides between China and the West and fostering mutualistic coexistence, viewed through an intercultural lens.

Keywords: Marginal Man Theory; Sino-Western Cultural Differences; Harvard Chinese Female Student Speech Incident; Intercultural Communication

1 Introduction

The conceptual foundations of Robert Park's Marginal Man theory are traceable to Georg Simmel's seminal formulation of *The Stranger* (Simmel, G., 1908), which theorized liminal social actors existing in a dialectical state of spatial proximity and cultural distance. Simmel's strangers paradoxically reinforced group boundaries through "we-they" dichotomies while gaining epistemic privilege via detachment—a duality Park later transposed onto early 20th-century American urban contexts. Confronting mass European immigration in Chicago, Park reconceptualized these figures as **Marginal Men** in *Human Migration and the Marginal Man* (Park, R. E., 1928), framing them as

cultural hybrids forged through industrialization-era collisions. His core thesis centered on their *dual identity crisis*: suspended between ancestral heritage and host society assimilation, they manifested distinct psychological symptomatology—chronic spiritual unrest, heightened self-consciousness, and creative maladjustment. Paradoxically, Park argued this liminality functioned as a sociological "crucible of cultural fusion," generating cosmopolitan perspectives essential to modernity while enabling critical cultural critique.

The theory underwent significant evolution through Everett Stonequist's psychological expansion in *The Marginal Man* (Stonequist, E.V., 1937), which formalized marginality as a three-phase life cycle (contact-crisis-adjustment) emphasizing personality crises. By mid-century, structural revisions emerged: Golovensky (Golovensky, D. I., 1952) shifted focus to institutional barriers, while Milton Goldberg contested Park's pathological framing by documenting adaptive resilience. The critical turn culminated in postcolonial reworkings, most notably Homi Bhabha's reconceptualization of hybridity as a subversive "third space" challenging cultural hegemony (Bhabha, H. K., 1994), and Gloria Anzaldúa's articulation of borderland resistance (Anzaldúa, 1987). Contemporary intersectional scholars (e.g., Anthias & Yuval-Davis, 1992) further complexified the model by integrating co-constitutive marginalizing forces of race, gender, and class.

Persistent critiques target the theory's historical specificity—its Euro-American immigration origins obscuring colonial power dynamics—and agency neglect in early pathological depictions. Kerckhoff and McCormick's (Kerckhoff, A. C., & McCormick, T. C., 1955) empirical studies debunked maladjustment as universal, revealing strategic acculturation practices. Yet the framework's enduring vitality lies in illuminating diasporic identities in globalization, cultural brokerage in transnational spaces, and hybrid subjectivity in digital borderlands. As Bell Hooks (1990) observed, the theoretical evolution ultimately reframes marginality from a site of alienation to an epistemological vantage point, sustaining its analytical relevance for contemporary liminal social spaces.

2 Case Study: Deconstructing Jiang Yurong's Intersecting Marginalities

On May 29, 2025, during Harvard University's commencement ceremony, Jiang Yurong, a young woman from Qingdao adorned in a traditional Chinese *yun jian* (ceremonial cape), stood at the center of global attention. As the first female Chinese student in Harvard's history selected as the graduate orator, she delivered an address themed "Safeguarding Humanity." Her speech recounted a cross-cultural quandary spanning China, Tanzania, and Mongolia—illustrated when Indian and Thai classmates confronted a washing machine covered in Chinese characters. Google Translate rendered one function as "ghost spin mode," prompting her realization of the imperative for human empathy transcending cultural barriers.

What might have been celebrated as a model of intercultural understanding rapidly devolved within the public discourse into a nationwide scrutiny of educational equity,

cultural allegiance, and identity authenticity. This shift intensified following revelations concerning her father, Jiang Zhiming's, employment background at the China Biodiversity Conservation and Green Development Foundation (CBCGDF, or "Green Foundation"). The organization's prior promotion of a "Secretary-General's recommended admission" (later retracted) propelled Jiang Yurong into a storm of nepotism allegations.

2.1 Cultural Marginality: The Discursive Predicament of the Podium

Jiang Yurong's oration exemplified a strategic cultural balancing act: her traditional Chinese *yun jian* signified cultural roots, while fluent English demonstrated international competence; the washing machine anecdote conveyed cultural inclusivity, whereas her critique of the Trump administration's "recruitment ban" asserted political critique⁷¹⁰. This calculated positioning—intended to leverage her "East-West hybridity" as marginal advantage—instead precipitated a dual hermeneutic dilemma: Western audiences interpreted her as an ambassador of multiculturalism, while segments of Chinese netizens condemned her rhetoric as "appeasing Western political correctness," contending that statements like "I am not truly affluent while any woman on Earth lacks access to menstrual products" disregarded China's material realities.

Such reactions substantiate sociologist Robert E. Park's assertion that border-crossing endeavors by cultural marginals are frequently misread through an essentialist lens as cultural betrayal. As one trenchant online commentary noted: "The jarring dissonance between her narratives of trauma (e.g., school bullying) and her privileged credentials renders this 'trauma performance' a spectacle curated for Western consumption of imagined Chinese human rights violations."

2.2 Marginality by Class: The Disjuncture Between the "Disadvantaged-Background" Narrative and Elite Trajectory

Jiang Yurong's self-narrative emphasized the hardships of class mobility: her parents' divorce, transient life with her mother, enrollment at Qingdao No. 65 Middle School (described as "under-resourced"), and experiences of bullying—including forced stripping by classmates. After gaining admission to a prestigious high school via the entrance exam, she pursued studies in the UK through scholarships. She purportedly funded her Harvard tuition entirely through savings from four years of employment at Credit Suisse post-undergraduation, deliberately delaying enrollment by two years.

This "rags-to-riches" narrative, however, faced swift deconstruction:

- **Educational Trajectory:** After middle school, she attended Cardiff Sixth Form College (annual fees: ~¥660,000), transferred to Duke University via the University of Warwick (annual cost: ~¥500,000), and ultimately entered Harvard Kennedy School.
- **Family Background:** Her father, Jiang Zhiming, served as Executive Director of the China Biodiversity Conservation and Green Development Foundation (CBCGDF). The organization publicly claimed Jiang Yurong's Harvard admission

resulted from a "recommendation by Secretary-General Zhou Jinfeng" (later retracted), fueling allegations of **intergenerational transmission of privilege**.

- **Economic Contradiction:** Netizens estimated her total overseas education costs at approximately ¥5 million, starkly contradicting her assertion of "self-funding through work."

This narrative disjuncture exposes the structural predicament facing contemporary educational migrants: Even with exceptional individual merit (evidenced by a 3.96 GPA and graduation *magna cum laude* from Duke¹⁰), success remains inextricably marked by familial capital. The median family income of Harvard students (\$168,800—triple the US median) starkly corroborates the **stratified access to educational resources** reinforcing class barriers.

2.3 Institutional Marginality: Performative Activism under Utilitarian Exploitation of DEI Policies

Harvard's contentious Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) policies formed a critical backdrop for interpreting Jiang Yurong's admission. While designed to redress disadvantages faced by marginalized groups, these policies have been strategically co-opted by segments of the transnational middle class:

Policy Intent vs. Reality:

Original Intent: With merely 4.5% of Harvard students originating from families in the bottom 20% of income earners, DEI initiatives aimed to mitigate class-based disparities.

Instrumentalization: Economically privileged Chinese families adeptly navigate this framework, curating their children as "diversity proxies" through standardized repertoires—African volunteerism, environmental advocacy, and minority rights activism.

Jiang Yurong's Positionality:

Her internship at the China Biodiversity Conservation and Green Development Foundation (CBCGDF), closely linked to her father's executive role, invited scrutiny as potential institutional arbitrage. Her graduation speech emphasizing a "global village" ethos further aligned with—and seemingly validated—Harvard's institutional defense of its DEI commitments.

This performative multiculturalism lays bare the veneer of inclusivity within elite education. When Jiang cited her cohort's composition (77 students from 32 countries) as symbolic of diversity¹⁰, critics incisively noted that such cosmopolitan branding obscures intra-class homogeneity. Specifically, 20% of Harvard's international cohort (approximately 1,358 students) hail from China—predominantly representing the nation's economic elite. This stands in fundamental contrast to the material disadvantage embodied by peers from contexts like Tanzania, revealing DEI's failure to address structural inequity beyond superficial representation.

3 Public Discourse: Sociopsychological Projection of Marginalized Anxiety

3.1 Equity Challenges and Class-Based Resentment

The public's core contention with Jiang Yurong centers on **shattered illusions of educational equity**. When the CBCGDF retracted its endorsement article and her father's institutional affiliation was scrubbed from official platforms, these actions were interpreted as a **concealment reflex endemic to privileged classes**. As noted by Hu Xijin: *"The public's primary outrage stems from systemic inequities in resource distribution—opportunities remain scarcely visible or accessible to grassroots populations."* This resentment originates in profound anxiety over **class immobility**: while disadvantaged students remain trapped in the gaokao competition vortex, elites leverage international education pathways for **intergenerational class reproduction**.

A more fundamental contradiction lies in the **collapse of the mobility narrative**. Jiang's self-comparison to Linghu Chong—a Jin Yong martial arts protagonist who "maintained composure when denounced by the entire jianghu"—attempted to deflect criticism through heroic pathos. Yet the public perceived a stark dissonance: an individual narrating victimhood (middle school bullying) while utilizing familial capital to execute a **class-transcending trajectory** from a Qingdao public school to Harvard's podium. This **narrative rupture** stripped marginalized struggle stories of their **moral legitimacy**, reducing them to mere footnotes in a **gilded pathway of elite accession**.

3.2 Interrogating Loyalty within Nationalist Discourses

The cultural authenticity questioning triggered by Jiang Yurong's speech reflects a broader contraction of identity politics amidst receding globalization. When she stated, "If a young boy dies in a war he neither started nor understood, a part of me dies with him," segments of the online discourse accused her of "dissolving national allegiance through universalist rhetoric." This reaction epitomizes the traditional suspicion non-Western societies harbor toward boundary-crossing individuals—cultural traversers are frequently construed as potential defectors from national loyalty.

Notably, Jiang's sartorial strategy—adopting the Chinese *yun jian*—intended as an assertion of cultural confidence, was deconstructed as an act of "self-orientalizing performance." Critics trenchantly observed: "Beyond dragons, kung fu, and the color red, our cultural richness is reduced to symbolic collage." This reveals the double bind of performativity confronting marginalized subjects: The very reinforcement of ethnic symbols to authenticate cultural legitimacy traps them in circuits of self-orientalization.

4 Educational Reflection: Marginality Production within Elite Reproduction Systems

4.1 Harvard's Paradox: Diversity Rhetoric vs. Intergenerational Privilege Reproduction

Harvard's DEI commitments reveal a structural contradiction:

Superficial Progress: International student enrollment reached a record 6,800 (from 102 countries) in the 2023-2024 academic year.

Persistent Stratification: Over half of students originate from the top 10% of U.S. household incomes, while the share from the top 0.1% equals that from the bottom 20%.

Asian-American Conundrum: Though Asian students comprise 80% of Ph.D. cohorts in STEM fields (e.g., biochemistry), they face admissions restrictions under DEI frameworks due to the "high-score penalty" paradox.

This institutional dissonance instrumentalizes marginal subjects. Figures like Jiang Yurong gain entry precisely because they supply quantifiable diversity metrics—international student ratios, nationality counts—without disrupting entrenched resource hierarchies. The \$15 million donation by Pan Shiyi to fund disadvantaged Chinese students epitomizes philanthrocapitalism: an individualized redress for systemic inequities that ultimately legitimizes institutional inertia.

4.2 International Education Industrialization and the Marginality Assembly Line

The expansion of Chinese students in the U.S. – from 60,000 in 2003 to 300,000 in 2015 – has catalyzed a sophisticated credential-curation industry. Jiang Yurong's trajectory (UK private school → University of Warwick → Duke University → Harvard Master's) exemplifies an institutionalized mobility pathway characterized by:

Economic Filtering: Annual costs exceeding ¥300,000 for British private schools and ¥500,000 for Ivy League graduate programs.

Cultural Capital Conversion: Strategic credentials (e.g., CBCGDF internship, Mongolian Prime Minister's Office experience) functioning as positional assets.

Temporal Engineering: Four-year post-baccalaureate employment circumventing direct-entry competition while accumulating professional capital.

This assembly line produces what might be termed curated marginal subjects – individuals embodying the tragic duality foreseen by Robert Park's marginal man theory: They achieve socioeconomic mobility yet experience cultural deracination; master linguistic fluency in English while suffering linguistic displacement in their native context; develop global perspectives only to be condemned as "aerially suspended elites" by their compatriots.

5 Conclusion: Marginality as Method

The Jiang Yurong incident constitutes a symptomatic manifestation of the marginal condition in the globalized era. Her simultaneous positioning in the commencement spotlight and public vilification epitomizes the existential fissure inherent to transnational educational migrants: simultaneously class transgressors and privilege monopolizers, cultural ambassadors and perceived identity traitors. The performative diversity under Harvard's DEI regime and the Green Foundation's retracted post jointly expose the institutional hypocrisy embedded within elite reproduction systems.

Robert E. Park's marginal man theory here demonstrates enduring explanatory power and prescience. Marginality has evolved from an immigrant-specific predicament to a universal condition of late-modern existence. When Chinese international students face censure for being "insufficiently Chinese" yet suspicion of privilege for being "overly accomplished," we must reconceptualize marginality's emancipatory potential: The liminal position engenders critical bifocality and comparative consciousness—essential wellsprings for innovative cognition.

The resolution lies not in retreating to identity silos but in forging an ethics of authentic cross-boundary dialogue:

Elite institutions must transcend exoticizing tokenism to establish substantive cross-class engagement;

Public discourse should move beyond "gilded" stigmatization to recognize structural constraints on individual agency;

Educational migrants ought to courageously embrace their marginality, transforming cultural fissures into generative dialectical tension.

Jiang's appeal for "the courage to hold onto one another amidst global uncertainty" crystallizes the marginal subject's most vital capacity. As increasing numbers of youth navigate cultural fault lines, Park's theory reminds us: Civilizational advancement often originates with those who, from the edges, discern connective possibilities.

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