

*How Far Could Poor Rural Students Access Elite Universities in China?
—A Discussion Based on the Cultural Reproduction Theory*

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Abstract

The educational system seems to provide a level playing field and class leapfrogging pathway for lower-class students, because the evaluation criteria could be usually centered on academic performance. However, Bourdieu argued that lower-class children could have little access to cultural capital, so they tend to be at a competitive disadvantage including academic performance, and the social structure could be reproduced through the process of cultural reproduction. However, the cultural reproduction theory might not fully explain why there could still be some ‘exceptions’, the poor rural children who could enter elite schools in China. Recent studies explained the controversial situation through the perspective of the individual, family and government in China. Students from poor rural areas could take the initiative to approach cultural capital through various means, including schools and social media. Besides, families should value their children's education and activate the ‘bottom cultural capital’. In addition, the educational policy which aims to interrupt the influence of the family on education could affect the transmission of the upper class’s advantage between generations in China. Therefore, cultural reproduction theory could be partially applicable in China, but it could be more relevant if the elements of individual, family and government had been considered based on the Chinese context. Although poor rural students still face difficulties in entering elite universities, there could be chances for them to realize it by individual initiative, family support and policy protection.

Keywords: Higher Education, Lower-Class Students, Elite University, Cultural Reproduction Theory

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Introduction

As an important connecting bridge between study and the workplace, higher education could be expected to play the role of promoting social mobility by providing the chance of success to any competent and motivated student (Haveman & Smeeding, 2006). Besides, going to the elite university is often seen as an important step towards a class leap, because people with an elite university credential could be usually advantaged in competing for jobs and obtaining higher starting salaries (Cheng & Kang, 2016; Chiang, 2018). However, there could be more difficulties for lower-class students to gain enrollment chances of elite universities because of the lack of cultural capital (Sullivan, 2001). In this essay, cultural capital could be defined as the knowledge and skills that are useful in educational competition (Lareau & Weininger, 2003). The lower class could refer to people who come from rural areas, whose parents have not received higher education and are predominantly manual workers, as well as the household income is below the local average income level (Cheng & Kang, 2016).

The educational system seems to provide a level playing field and class leapfrogging pathway for lower-class students, because the evaluation criteria could be usually centered on academic performance (Jenkins, 2014). However, Bourdieu (2018) argued that lower-class children could have little access to cultural capital, so they tend to be at a competitive disadvantage including academic performance. The social structure could be reproduced through the process of cultural reproduction (Bourdieu, 2018). Thus, it could be difficult to change social inequality between classes through education (Bourdieu, 1998).

In China, admission to Chinese universities could be determined by students' examination results in the annual "National College Entrance Examination" (Gaokao) (Chiang, 2018, p.506). A student who gets higher scores in Gaokao would be more likely to get into elite universities. Considering the colleges' academic reputation and job market recognition in China, the elite college refers to the 985 colleges in this essay, the list of which was refreshed by the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China with 39 universities (Department of Degree Management and Postgraduate Education, Ministry of Education, 2006). The resources of them could be limited and hotly contested. Only about 1.9% of candidates could be admitted to 985 universities according to the data of 2020 in China (Ye, 2021). Thus, entering elite college could be usually regarded as a form of attaining high educational achievement and getting quality educational resources (Cheng & Kang, 2016).

It could be more difficult for poor rural students to get through Gaokao because of the limited teaching conditions, negative attitude to education and the lack of support from family in China (Yu & Han, 2018). Huang (2018) implied that most rural candidates could end up in ordinary universities of a lower level. Therefore, there could be very few poor families who can cultivate elite university students in China (Cheng & Kang, 2016; Yu & Han, 2018). This situation leads to an argument of the "uselessness of learning" (Cheng & Kang, 2016; Huang, 2018; Xie, Hong, Kuang, & Postiglione, 2018), which implies a tendency that hard study may not lead to the equal outcome for lower-class students. The debate over whether poor rural students in China can succeed in entering elite colleges could reflect many people's hopelessness in changing their lives through learning.

From a macro perspective, students from well-off families are more likely to go to a prestigious university, while lower-class students typically face the opposite situation in China (Cheng & Kang, 2016). However, if we explore this phenomenon in depth, it is not entirely inaccessible for lower-class students to enter elite colleges. Although it has been reported that the proportion of lower-class students that enrolled in university has shown a declining trend in China (Huang, 2018), there could be an increasing trend in the number of students from lower-class attending university in China (Xie et al., 2018). Therefore, it could be obvious that some other elements neglected by Bourdieu could decrease the effect of the family's social status on the accessibility of educational resources. It could be contradictory when applying Bourdieu's cultural reproduction theory directly to the Chinese context to some extent.

The concept of cultural capital has become one of the most widely used in the research on equity of access to higher education (DiMaggio & Mohr, 1985; Jenkins, 2014; Yu & Han, 2018). It could partly explain differences in "educational attainment" between classes (Sullivan, 2001, p.2). However, Bourdieu's analysis could not take account of the individual initiative of the lower-class and different ways in which cultural capital functions in different cultural contexts (Cheng & Kang, 2016; DiMaggio & Mohr, 1985; Mortimer, 1985). Therefore, this research will discuss the approaches of lower-class students' access to elite universities in China through the lens of cultural reproduction theory and focus on the role of cultural capital.

Literature Review

Cultural Reproduction Theory and Cultural Capital

Since the term 'capital' was presented by Bourdieu, research in the fields of social science has expressed strong concerns about it (Lareau & Weininger, 2003; Prieur & Savage, 2013). Bourdieu (2002) pointed out capital could be formed through accumulation and converted into profit, as well as being embedded in some objective form with a tendency of persistence. Cultural capital was coined to represent inheritors' advantages of children whose family is on the high social status (Prieur & Savage, 2013), including the familiarity and good "taste" of "highbrow culture such as fine arts and classical music" (Lareau and Weininger, 2003, p.568). It is usually present with forms of "the embodied state" (stable physically and mental character), "the objectified state" (cultural goods such as books, article work, musical instruments and so on) and "the institutionalized state", which could be presented by educational qualifications (Bourdieu, 2002, p.282). Besides, cultural capital could be passed from generation to generation through "inheritance", which suggests that the cultural capital has a cumulative and inaccessible character (Zhu, 2005).

However, the debate on the question of whether cultural capital could be fixed or floating has never ceased (Prieur & Savage, 2013). Bourdieu (1998) suggested that cultural capital is not a static concept and would be affected by the field. One of the limitations with this explanation is that it is less practical when conducting research because the measurement of cultural capital requires specific indicators (Prieur & Savage, 2013). For example, Katsillis and Rubinson measured cultural capital with "attendance at theater and lectures, visits to museums and galleries" in 1990; while Eitle and Eitle used "trips to museums, art, music, dance classes" as a measurement in 2002 (Lareau and Weininger, 2003, pp.571-573). Besides, it was argued that operationalizing measurements should emphasize the consumption of mass rather than high culture categories" in the United States (Holt, 1997, p.109). Therefore,

although most research about cultural capital share a similar concept of an “elite status culture” with DiMaggio (1982), the specific elements to which cultural capital refers could vary in different research contexts.

Bourdieu suggested that cultural capital plays an important role in cultural reproduction because the children whose families own more of it could be at an advantage in the educational competition (Sullivan, 2001). Thus, cultural capital could be usually used to explain the inequality of academic success between children from different social classes because of the significant correlation between cultural capital and grades (Priour and Savage, 2013; DiMaggio and Mohr, 1985).

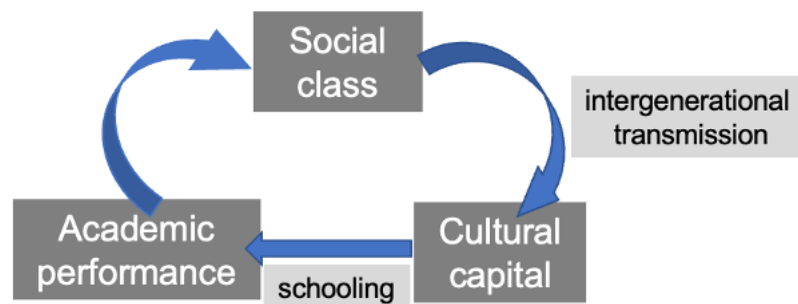


Figure 1: The framework of the cultural reproduction theory

According to the cultural reproduction theory, Bourdieu (2018) implied social power relationships could be reconstructed between classes through the educational system. Milne and Aurini (2015) agreed that the inequality could be generated by resources that are transmitted from parents. Firstly, upper-class parents could have more cultural capital to pass on to the next generation (B. Zhu, 2020). Their children could have approaches to the ‘elite culture’ from childhood. Besides, the upper-class parents would pay more attention to the children’s education and would like to invest for their academic improvement (Chiang, 2018; Xie et al., 2018). According to Jenkins (2014), the family with different SES (social-economic-status) would take different approaches to educate children from attitude and action. In addition, compared to lower-class parents who have to worry about financial resources, parents in the upper class have more time and willingness to transmit cultural capital by talking and acting (Blaskó, 2005). Thus, the “social position” of the family may affect children’s “academic success”, which would lead to the reproduction of status in the social system (Bourdieu, 2018, p.257). In addition, it has been proved that the father’s background could influence a child’s education result (Fan, 2014). Sullivan (2001) also emphasized the significant impact of social class on educational attainment. Therefore, the laws of the educational market transform the social hierarchies into academic hierarchies based on capacity (Bourdieu, 2018).

In addition, cultural reproduction theory questions the neutrality of knowledge and regards schools as the mediators of the transmission of inequality (Jenkins, 2014). Students from the dominant class would be more familiar with the culture which could be assessed in school (Anzaldúa, 1990). In school, teachers could reward students who own the cultural capital and criticize those who do not have it by “pedagogic actions” (Tzanakis, 2011, p.76) More attention and communication could be given to students who have participated in elite culture because teachers could regard them as gifted students (DiMaggio, 1982). Then the cultural capital of the dominant class would be admitted as the standard of talent. Jenkins (2014)

argued that compulsory education could make schooling seem disinterested, but the pedagogical authority could still be held by schools with favoritism towards the upper classes. The existing position in the social structure could limit the "subjective expectations of the objective probabilities" (Jenkins, 2014, p.112). Then, through the lens of cultural reproduction, education could not change the existing situation of the solidification of social structures.

Critical Views of Cultural Reproduction Theory

However, the cultural mobility theory suggested that the influence of the home environment could only partially affect the child's academic performance (B. Zhu, 2020). The acquisition of cultural capital is a long-term process, so it could be also vital to realize the role of schools. Zhu (2020) emphasized that children from non-elite families could not only have access to cultural capital at school, but might benefit from it more than children from elite families. DiMaggio (1982), a major contributor to the theory of cultural mobility theory, is probably the best-known critic of the cultural reproduction theory. Although he agreed that cultural capital could have a positive effect on the acquisition of educational attainment (DiMaggio & Mohr, 1985), he argued that schools and peer groups could help lower-class students access to cultural capital (DiMaggio, 1982). Besides, students could have the ability to choose their position in the "cultural landscape" from expanded social networks and social contexts without restriction in modern society (Emmison, 2003; B. Zhu, 2020). It means individuals could gain cultural capital with the initiative through different approaches such as the internet. Besides, Connell argued that Bourdieu's theory ignored the subjective initiative during the whole process (Mortimer, 1985). Vassenden and Jonvik (2019) have already drawn attention to the paradox in the differences of the tastes and culture between pre-school children from different classes. This research's result suggested that the children from the lower class could automatically experience the culture they are exposed to rather than feeling the subordination, and the educated children did not show contempt for another group as well (Vassenden & Jonvik, 2019). It is suggested that individuals could have the ability to acquire cultural capital if they have access to it.

The school could be regarded as an important place for lower-class students to learn cultural capital to increase the possibility of class leap (B. Zhu, 2020). Some measures of the schools could bridge the capacity gap arising from different capital among families effectively. In a case study that focused on the students' participation in Progressive Discipline, Milne and Aurini (2015) noted that this chance could not only make students from lower SES (social-economic-status) familiar with the value and habits of higher class, but also practice their ability of communication and consolation. The school plays a compensatory role in the individual improvement in the process of accumulating cultural capital (Emmison, 2003; Xie et al., 2018). As a platform to teach knowledge and skills, the school could still be a trustworthy organization to acquire the necessary competencies for social adaptation (Yu & Han, 2018).

In addition, the government could have the capacity to further advance educational equity and reduce the impact of family cultural capital by providing the access to schools (Yu & Han, 2018). It could be possible for schools (especially the "state selective school") to promote the class leap within the management by the government (Jenkins, 2014, p.115). For example, countries with compulsory education laws could provide chances and places for children of all classes to receive knowledge and skills, such as the UK and China ("Compulsory

Education | Department of Education’, 2015; ‘Compulsory Education Law of the People’s Republic of China (Presidential Decree No. 52)’, 2006). Based on these laws, students could learn academic and practical knowledge in schools in adolescence. Jenkins (2014) suggested that new cultural capital could be created rather than reproduced during the process. Then the dominant position of existing cultural capital might be challenged by the new, which could help lower-class students compete with others more equitably.

Besides, recent studies suggested that parents from the dominant class could usually own the cultural capital which could shape children's educational experience, but owning may not mean activating successfully (Chiang, 2018). It could mean that not all parents know how to pass on cultural capital and make it work in their children's academic performance. The transmission of intergenerational advantage is complex and family dominance might not translate into academic and social achievement for children directly (Xie et al., 2018). Thus, the effectiveness of the intergenerational transmission of cultural capital still needs to be further explored.

Therefore, the family background cannot be the only factor that influences students’ educational attainment (DiMaggio, 1982; Sullivan, 2001). Whether lower-class students could access elite universities should also consider the elements of individual, family, and government (DiMaggio, 1982; Jenkins, 2014; Mortimer, 1985).

Research Method

Research Framework

Based on previous research and the context of this study, the research framework is shown in the diagram below. Cultural capital can be regarded as an important factor that can affect class transition through higher education. In the context of China, the elements of personal adaptability, the traditional concept of education in the family, and the national policy will be analyzed as other factors that will influence the academic performance and class transition.

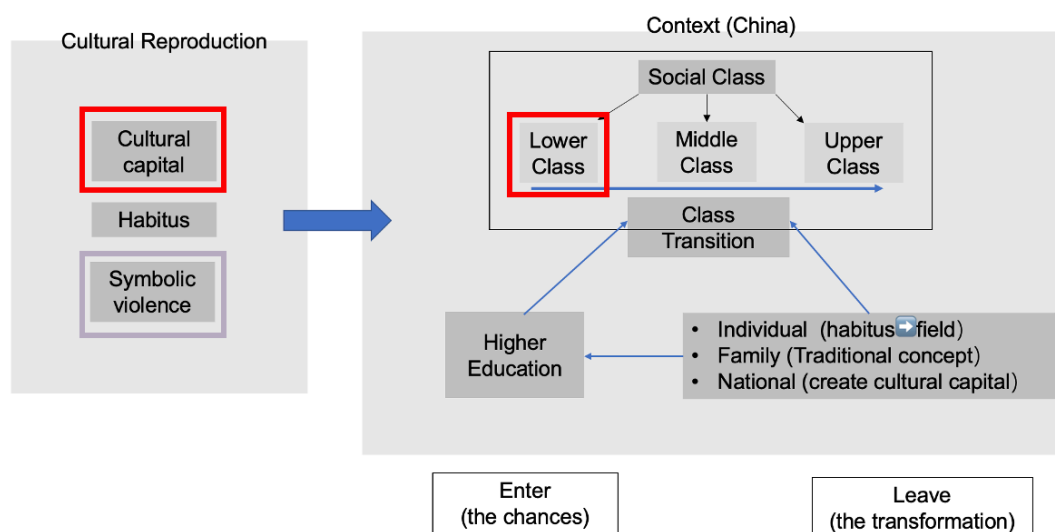


Figure 2: Research framework of this study

Research Design

In this research, the semi-structured interview method has been used to collect the data from 3 interviewees. All the interviews were conducted online and lasted for around one hour. Here is the information of the 3 interviewees. They were chosen by convenience sampling considering the cost and time limitations of the study.

Interviewee	Age	Gender	Hometown	Education Background
A	23	Female	City	Elite University
B	26	Male	Village	Technical College
C	28	Female	Village	Elite University

Table 1: The information of the interviewees

Considering that the participants' mother language is Mandarin, interviews were conducted in Mandarin in order to enable the subjects to express themselves more comfortably and more adequately. After the interview, the recordings of the interview have been transcribed to facilitate subsequent analysis. After the initial collation of the interview script, NVivo 12 has been used to assist with the coding.

Findings and Discussion

Little Cultural Capital Transmitted from Family for Poor Rural Students

Since the *Reform and Opening Up* of the 1970s, China's economy has developed rapidly, and industrial development has led to rapid economic growth in the cities (Liang et al., 2012). However, the rural areas, which rely mainly on agriculture for their development, could be at a disadvantage, so the difference in resources between urban and rural areas could be more pronounced than ever, especially in educational areas (X. Li, 2021). Although the admission list of elite universities would be determined by the grades of the entrance examinations in China (Chiang, 2018), rural students could still be at a significant disadvantage in the educational competition system (Xie et al., 2018). On the one hand, poor rural students could have less access to cultural capital from family (Fan, 2014). It has been proved that children could be more likely to attend higher education if the father is highly educated and has a white-collar occupation in China (Liao, 2018). However, most parents from Chinese poor rural areas could have not received higher education before, so it could be difficult for their children to get academic help from them (Liao, 2018). Besides, they might have not experienced diverse cultural activities themselves such as listening to concerts and going to the library, due to the limitations of the village infrastructure (Xie et al., 2018). The huge financial pressure could make them spend most of their time and energy on making money (Cheng & Kang, 2018), so elegant cultural activities would be regarded as a luxury for them. In addition, poor rural parents emphasize children's obedience to instructions because they tend to believe that the family should firstly provide a safe environment in which children can grow up naturally (Xie et al., 2018). Therefore, there could be little cultural capital to be transmitted from family for poor rural students due to the lack of parents' attention and rationalization of their academic studies and cultural activities in China.

The Unfamiliar Inspires Students' Curiosity to Explore New Knowledge and Experience

It is the truth that the knowledge taught in school could be closer to urban life, so it could be more difficult for rural students to understand and master because they could be more distant from it (Zhang, Xiong, & Liu, 2016). For example, the selection of modern texts in Chinese compulsory primary Chinese textbooks focuses more on cities, with many descriptions of urban human landscapes, such as street trees, Suzhou gardens and the National Palace Museum. Most rural students could just learn the text through textbook illustrations, whereas urban students could get "in touch" with these through trips and summer camps (Zhang et al., 2016). Just as Bourdieu (1984) argued, the upper-class students' familiarity with the dominant culture could allow them to have a greater affinity and adaptability to the knowledge which could be regarded as the evaluation criteria of the society.

However, one participant from the rural area said that although she was not familiar with the content of the books, her curiosity was stimulated to explore or see them by hard-working. In addition, there are more possibilities for students to be exposed to different cultural circumstances, which could help them to gain some cultural capital nowadays in China (B. Zhu, 2020). For example, one interviewee reported that she could listen to the classes of famous universities and enjoy the opera on the internet in the age of informatization, which could be hard to realize in the past. It means that individuals from rural areas could also get approaches to cultural capital easier than before with the development of technology. Thus, cultural capital could not have obvious class segregation and exclusivity, so the rural students might make up for the lack of family cultural capital through significant others or other means in China (Yu & Han, 2018).

The Quality of Diligence in 'Bottom Cultural Capital' Is the Motivation to Work Hard

The lower-class has a unique and meaningful cultural heritage, which can be transmitted from the family. Some scholars have conducted related research to argue that the unique cultural capital possessed by students from poor rural areas could be a vital factor in their success in China (Cheng & Kang, 2016; Yu & Han, 2018). The 'bottom cultural capital', such as conscientiousness, diligence, filial piety and moralistic thinking, can compensate for rural students' lack of the cultural capital of the upper class (Cheng & Kang, 2016; W. Zhu, 2006). These qualities could be the motivation for rural children to work hard. For example, rural students could be more caring and less of a nuisance to their parents, due to the pressure of family finances (Cheng & Kang, 2018). Therefore, they would easily perceive their responsibilities and thus focus their energy on their studies, which could be an important element for high educational attainment.

Regulation by Schools and the Government Can Diminish the Impact of Cultural Capital

Due to the Chinese tradition of respecting and trusting teachers, the reliance on them could reduce the influence of the family to some extent (Cheng & Kang, 2016; Chiang, 2018). Cheng and Kang (2016) emphasized the role of teachers in achieving academic success, who could help lower-class students bridge some cultural capital gap. A qualitative study of students from elite families in Beijing showed that even the elite parents would default to

teachers as key helpers in getting their children into university and often become actively involved when their children are at risk of entering elite universities (Chiang, 2018).

From the perspective of the government, many education-related policies take into account the interests of lower-class students (Liang et al., 2012). For example, *Compulsory Education Law* requires that “all school-age children and adolescents with the nationality of the People's Republic of China, regardless of gender, ethnicity, race, family property status, religious beliefs, etc., enjoy the right to receive compulsory education on an equal footing and fulfill the obligation to receive compulsory education in accordance with the law” (‘Compulsory Education Law of the People’s Republic of China (Presidential Decree No. 52)’, 2006). It could provide children from the lower classes with access to cultural capital through school and reduce the influence of family background. Besides, the Chinese Higher Education Revitalisation Programme for central and western regions and the poor rural areas tends to provide privileges to lower-class students to promote educational equity (Xie et al., 2018). Thus, poor rural students could have more chances to enter elite universities under the protection of the policy.

Conclusion

Bourdieu suggested that the cultural capital possessed by the upper classes would help them to maintain their dominant status based on the cultural reproduction theory (Jenkins, 2014). He emphasized the role of cultural capital from the family in a child's academic success. DiMaggio (1982) argued that cultural capital could also be acquired from schools and others, which could weaken the influence of family background. However, these theories might not fully explain why there could still be some ‘exceptions’, the poor rural children who could enter elite schools in China.

Recent studies explained the controversial situation through the perspective of the individual, family and government in China (Cheng & Kang, 2016; Xie et al., 2018; Yu & Han, 2018; W. Zhu, 2005). Students from poor rural areas could take the initiative to approach cultural capital through various means, including schools and social media (Xie et al., 2018; B. Zhu, 2020). Besides, families should value their children's education and activate the ‘bottom cultural capital’ (Cheng and Kang, 2016). In addition, the educational policy which aims to interrupt the influence of the family on education could affect the transmission of the upper class’s advantage between generations in China (Y. Li, 2006).

In conclusion, cultural reproduction theory could be partially applicable in China, but it could more relevant if the elements of individual, family and government had been considered based on the Chinese context. Although poor rural students still face difficulties in entering elite universities, there could be chances for them to realize it by individual initiative, family support, and policy protection.

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