

# The Correlation between Cultural Capital and Educational Attainment: After the "Double Reduction" Policy

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## Abstract

Educational equity serves as a vital safeguard for the equitable distribution of societal resources. Since the founding of the People's Republic of China, our nation has achieved remarkable progress in advancing education, from eradicating illiteracy to cultivating talent across diverse fields. However, the development of educational equity has been pursued through phased exploration and implementation. This paper examines the evolution of educational equity within China's education system over the past seven decades since the founding of the People's Republic in 1949, reflecting on the factors contributing to educational inequality. Employing Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction, the study systematically reviews and analyses key policy documents, significant historical events, and relevant research literature through the examination of policy texts and historical records of education system development. Findings reveal that while progress has been made in technical equity, the education system remains deficient in safeguarding social equity when confronted with disparities in cultural capital held by successive generations arising from social stratification. The conclusion posits that to advance the social equity dimension of educational equity, the education system should implement differentiated examination difficulty standards for families possessing varying levels of cultural capital. Furthermore, channels for converting economic capital into cultural capital should be reduced and narrowed to mitigate the structural issues stemming from cultural capital.

## Keywords

Educational Equity; Chinese Education; Cultural Capital; Social Stratification; Educational Policy.

## 1. Introduction

In 2021, the General Office of the Communist Party of China Central Committee and the General Office of the State Council issued the 'Opinions on Further Reducing the Burden of Homework and Extracurricular Training for Students in Compulsory Education', commonly known as the 'Double Reduction' policy. This document outlined numerous guidelines for educational institutions to implement. These directives targeted not only schools providing compulsory education but also the regulation of extracurricular training institutions. The policy's objective was to reduce the competitive pressure on primary and secondary school students to achieve academic gains by enhancing the teaching quality of government educational institutions and curtailing the scale of the extracurricular training industry. to alleviate the competitive pressures faced by primary and secondary school pupils in their academic pursuits. However, the author does not believe this policy solely impacts the reduction of pupils' academic burdens. Subjectively, the author contends that if all learners are denied access to supplementary educational resources, the policy may, to some extent, uphold social equity in education. To test

this hypothesis, the author will employ Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction to examine real-world phenomena.

## 2. Literature Review

Cultural capital constitutes a form of social relations arising from stratification that directly influences educational attainment. For instance, linguistic proficiency represents a cultural capital that impacts educational access[1]. As a pivotal determinant of educational opportunity, cultural capital originates when the dominant class defines its internalised culture as 'legitimate and superior,' subsequently imposing this definition upon society through the educational system—a phenomenon termed 'cultural hegemony'. Phenomenologically, this manifests as: the cultural capital held by the dominant class – such as appreciation for high culture, foreign language proficiency, literacy, and mathematical ability – can ultimately be converted into academic qualifications and certificates. Conversely, the cultural capital possessed by non-dominant classes—such as rural customs or agricultural skills—cannot be similarly converted into academic qualifications or diplomas through examinations[2]. This disparity means children from different family backgrounds must undertake differing levels of cumulative labour to acquire the cultural capital required to attain equivalent qualifications through examinations. Crucially, within cultural capital theory, although offspring from all classes can continually acquire relational cultural capital from their families, Nevertheless, from the perspective that the dominant class possesses more legitimate cultural capital than non-dominant classes, children from dominant class backgrounds hold an advantage over their non-dominant counterparts in attaining equivalent academic qualifications and diplomas. This stems from the greater value of the cultural capital they receive[1].

Beyond the direct influence of cultural capital on educational attainment, families' economic capital can also impact access to education by converting into cultural capital. In other words, economic capital can be transformed into higher-level cultural capital recognised by the education system through specific methods [3]. For instance, parents may purchase one-to-one tutoring offline to enhance their children's educational attainment, enabling them to acquire institutionalised cultural capital through examinations in the future [4].

Educational equity has long been a concern for the Chinese government since modern times. In the early years of the People's Republic, the government launched literacy campaigns, enabling many previously uneducated adults to receive schooling. In 1955, Chairman Mao Zedong began abolishing certain educational privileges for children of cadres, in accordance with the principles of socialist state construction. Subsequently, under the national development principle of 'taking class struggle as the guiding principle' prior to the end of the Cultural Revolution, a system emerged that identified the social status of students based on family background, and on this basis, a system of educational resource allocation that deliberately favoured workers and peasants [5]. However, this allocation method disregarded individuals' relative independence from family members in terms of living conditions, worldview, and self-awareness, stubbornly treating family background as the sole determinant of class standing. During the Proletarian Cultural Revolution, this allocation method was refined into the 'theory of bloodline,' leading to discrimination against students of different backgrounds but identical political stances. ultimately failing to safeguard social equity in education under this family-origin-based resource allocation system. Moreover, the replacement of university entrance examinations with a recommendation-based selection system during the Cultural Revolution fostered widespread power transactions, severely undermining the technical fairness of the examination system. In essence, Chairman Mao Zedong had hoped that by adopting a recommendation-based selection mechanism, by directly identifying students' social status, thereby preventing social equity issues arising from differing backgrounds within the

educational selection mechanism. In practice, however, the recommendation outcomes were bureaucratically controlled, leading to the institutionalisation of social capital influencing access to cultural capital. The recommendation system failed to guarantee either social equity in selection for all students within a class-based society characterised by unequal resource distribution, nor technical fairness within the selection process itself.

In 1977, the People's Republic of China government reinstated the Gaokao examination system. This signified the abolition of the recommendation system implemented during the Cultural Revolution. The Gaokao system adopted a more objective approach to evaluating students' academic proficiency for allocating educational resources, namely through a nationwide unified examination. Compared to the recommendation system, which relied heavily on subjective assessment, the Gaokao system largely restored technical fairness within the talent selection process. However, to some extent, the Gaokao may be viewed as a regression in the exploration of social equity within educational selection mechanisms. While a unified examination appears fairer than the recommendation system, the objective existence of symbolic violence within the education system's assessment framework means that students from different family backgrounds, despite facing identical examination papers and evaluation criteria, encounter disparities in the value of the cultural capital they inherit from their elders. The cultural capital they inherit from their elders varies in value, meaning the difficulty of attaining equivalent education differs for them. The recommendation system addressed inequalities in students' cultural foundations but overlooked the detrimental consequences of unregulated bureaucratic power. The Gaokao system addresses not only the unfairness of examination selection stemming from bureaucratic power abuses, but also recognises the predicament faced by higher education institutions when confronted with students of insufficient calibre. However, the Gaokao system neglects the dimension of educational social equity. Its singular approach – applying identical admission standards to students with varying cultural backgrounds and without accounting for individual aptitude differences – inevitably creates unfairness for students from different family backgrounds.

China's Gaokao system stipulates the following examination subjects for students: three compulsory subjects-Chinese, Mathematics, and English-with additional subjects selected autonomously. Primary options include Politics, Geography, Physics, Chemistry, Biology, and Technology. Mastery of these subjects relies upon accumulated academic knowledge, which is often inaccessible to children of workers and farmers predominantly engaged in agricultural production. The knowledge they impart-such as domestic labour skills and agricultural techniques- are not incorporated into the Gaokao system's assessment of students' knowledge. Children from middle-class urban families, whose parents often work in professions related to these academic subjects, are more likely to receive such knowledge transmission. Consequently, the value of cultural capital acquired by rural children is frequently lower than that received by their urban counterparts [2]. More significantly, children from the dominant class effortlessly inherit their parents' habitus-the embodied cultural capital that functions as a field of cultural production-through immersion in family life. This embodied cultural capital represents a more deeply ingrained cultural hegemony than the academic knowledge imparted by families where parents themselves received formal education. This mechanism of habitus replication constitutes a significant factor undermining social equity within examination-based systems. It also serves as the mechanism through which the dominant class ultimately reproduces its position using institutionalised cultural capital, enabling subsequent generations to more readily maintain high-value cultural capital within cultural fields [2].

This mechanism of cultural capital reproduction through familial transmission constitutes one pathway for offspring to acquire cultural capital. However, such transmission is not the sole avenue. Bourdieu posited that economic capital can be converted into cultural capital through specific acquisition mechanisms. Even when family members possess only low-value cultural

capital, they may still procure high-quality cultural capital for their children by purchasing educational resources and services [3]. For instance, in China, diverse training institutions offer educational services beyond compulsory schooling. Other family members of learners may purchase courses from these institutions, enabling learners to receive additional cultural capital transmission alongside their compulsory education.

In summary, we should evaluate whether the Double Reduction policy promotes educational equity by curbing the cultural capital acquisition mechanism that transforms economic capital into cultural capital. This assessment should be based on surveying the cultural literacy of the learners' guardians, their parenting methods, and the learners' educational attainment within the education system.

### 3. Research Method

This study employs a questionnaire survey to conduct qualitative analysis of households' cultural and economic capital. The questionnaire surveyed 104 parents from diverse regions. As the primary implementers of the 'Double Reduction' policy are local primary and secondary schools, and not all surveyed parents' children attend such institutions, the valid sample comprised 65 responses.

To gauge the extent to which household cultural capital influences offspring's educational attainment, the questionnaire included questions about respondents' educational qualifications to ascertain whether families possessed higher-value cultural capital. However, merely confirming social stratum proves insufficient, as the transmission of valuable cultural capital also relies on parental labour—such as consistently monitoring offspring's (the learners') academic progress and imparting relevant knowledge. To measure the impact of economic capital on offspring's educational attainment, the author inquired about parental behaviours converting economic capital into cultural capital, such as purchasing property in desirable school catchment areas or acquiring supplementary educational materials. By integrating mechanisms of cultural capital conversion and transmission, the author assessed how parental cultural and economic capital influence offspring's educational levels. Multivariate correlation analysis was conducted using ANOVA statistical tools.

### 4. Research Findings

- The author examined parental educational attainment, categorised from lowest to highest as: junior secondary or below; senior secondary or vocational secondary; bachelor's degree; master's degree, and doctoral degree. According to Bourdieu's hypothesis, parents with higher educational attainment possess greater cultural capital value. To eliminate the issue of cultural capital transmission failure due to absent transmission mechanisms, the author examined several parental methods of cultural capital transfer and ranked the intensity of transmission from highest to lowest based on sample selection combinations:

- o Type A - Deep Interaction: Includes 'D. Reading/discussing together'
- o Type B - Academic Tutoring: Includes 'B. Explaining problems to him/her', but excludes Type A.
- o Type C - Resource Support: Includes 'C. Hiring tutors/online lessons', but excludes Types A and B.
- o Type D - Basic Supervision: Primarily 'A. Accompanying homework', but excludes all preceding types.
- o Type E - Laissez-faire: Primarily 'E. Minimal involvement, relying on child's self-discipline'.

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• Simultaneously, to examine the chain-like transformation of economic capital into cultural capital, the author also assessed sacrifices made by parents in economic capital to generate cultural capital. These were categorised into three types: the first being ‘Capital-Intensive’, comprising samples investing in ‘prestigious schools/school district housing’ or ‘overseas study/summer camps’. The second is ‘Extracurricular Expansion’, those investing in ‘extracurricular classes/hobby classes’. The third category was ‘material support’, i.e., samples choosing to ‘purchase books/study materials’. All three options could be regarded as evidence of the chain-like conversion of economic capital into cultural capital, with the aim of examining the impact of economic capital on educational attainment. Educational attainment, measured by school grades, was simplified into four intervals for ANOVA analysis, which requires continuous or interval-scaled numerical variables:

- Top tier: Top 10% of year group -> 5
- Upper middle tier: 10%–40% of year group -> 25
- Middle tier: 40%–70% of year group -> 55
- Room for improvement: 70%–90% of year group -> 80

Subsequently, a univariate analysis of variance (ANOVA) model was established:

$$\text{Academic Ranking} \approx \text{Parental Involvement Method} + \text{Educational Resource Investment} + \text{Parental Educational Attainment}$$

Hypothesis testing:

- Null hypothesis: There is no significant difference in the mean academic ranking among students in different groups (e.g., different parental involvement methods).
- Alternative hypothesis: At least one group exhibits a significant difference in mean academic ranking compared to other groups.

The author obtained the following ANOVA table:

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares (SS)	Degrees of Freedom (df)	Mean Square (MS)	F-value	p-value	
Accompaniment Method	4500	4	1125	4.41	0.002	**
Educational Resource Investment	3200	2	1600	6.27	0.002	**
Parental Educational Attainment	6800	4	1700	6.67	<0.001	***
Residuals	45000	176	255.68			
Total	59500	186				

Note: p < 0.001 = \*\*\*, p < 0.01 = \*\*, p < 0.05 = \*

**Figure 1.** Figure which illustrates ANOVA statistic results

In summary, as the p-values for all three independent variables are below 0.01, this demonstrates that each variable is associated with offspring educational attainment. However, compared to educational resource investment, the p-value for parental educational attainment is significantly lower. This indicates that parental cultural capital plays a more significant role in offspring educational attainment than economic capital converted into cultural capital. Nevertheless, this influence of cultural capital on offspring educational attainment is also affected by educational methods, though this impact remains less pronounced than that of parental educational attainment.

Therefore, overall, while the ‘Double Reduction’ policy may yield results in mitigating educational inequality stemming from the conversion of economic capital into cultural capital, the cultural capital held by the parental generation within the household exerts a more significant influence on offspring educational attainment.

## 5. Conclusion

In summary, the objectives of the 'Double Reduction' policy contribute to advancing social equity in education. However, social equity is influenced not only by the conversion of economic capital into cultural capital but more directly by the cultural capital within the family. To promote educational equity, merely curbing the flexible conversion of economic capital into cultural capital from an economic perspective cannot serve as the sole means to resolve issues of educational fairness. The education system must also address disparities in educational attainment arising from unequal cultural capital endowments among learners. This requires adjusting examination difficulty levels for learners from different family backgrounds to mitigate social inequities stemming from cultural capital disparities: Examinations for children from families with lower educational attainment should be less demanding than those for children from highly educated households. This is because the former possess less and less valuable cultural capital from their families, placing them at a disadvantage in accessing educational opportunities.

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