Importance of Transformation from Expansion-oriented to Equity-oriented: How Unequal in Social Capital Fuels Higher Education Opportunity Inequality in China

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Introduction

Since the implementation of higher education expansion in 1999, the enrollment rate of higher education in China has experienced a rapid increase (Ministry of Education of China, 2024). As shown in Figure 1, compared with 1990, the enrollment rate in 2000 and 2020 increased by 3.67 and 16 times respectively. Although this reflects the effective expansion-oriented development and the success in enabling more citizens to receive higher education, its fairness remains to be considered. Existing research shows that China's higher education still has serious opportunity inequality due to multiple reasons of policies and social stratification (Li, 2008; Wu *et al.*, 2020; Yang *et al.*, 2014). By analyzing the data of China Family Panel Studies (CFPS) 2020, this study aims to examine how the social capital fuels the higher education opportunity inequality based on Bourdieu's (1986) cultural reproduction theory and Coleman's (1988) social capital theory. This study finds that after two decades of China's higher education expansion, cultural capital and social capital, includes father's education level and occupation, still significantly affects children's opportunity of enrollment in higher education. Fathers with superior social capital may also reduce their children's chances of entering higher education due to the lack of cultural capital. In addition, personality, as an important kind of social capital, also affects the higher education opportunity a lot. Based on the data, this paper provides the reasons that lead higher education opportunity inequality and potential policy strategies.

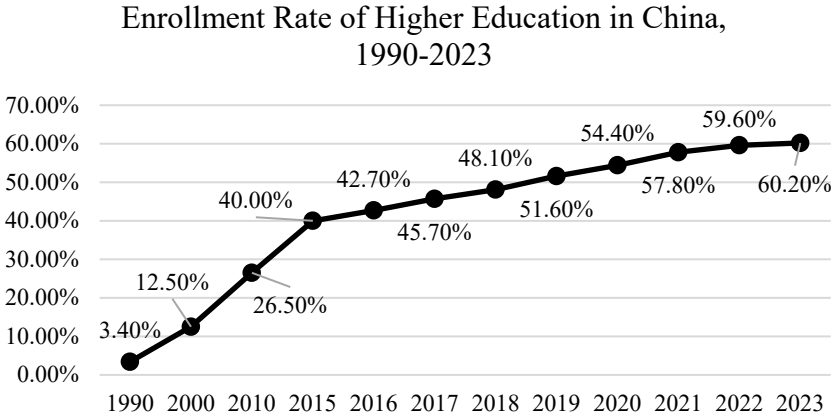

Figure 1. The Enrollment Rate of Higher Education in China from 1990 to 2023

Source: Ministry of Education of China (2024)

Theorical Background

According to Bourdieu's (1986) social reproduction theory, the acquisition of different types and amounts of cultural capital depends largely on intergenerational transmission within the family. High-quality cultural capital cannot be achieved overnight. Since only a very small number of upper-class groups can obtain this cultural capital, a considerable portion of the opportunities to access high-quality cultural capital are only available in families with favorable backgrounds. Therefore, culture capital is perpetuated through the education system, so that the outcomes of education are also closely related to the family background.

Coleman's report has found that there is a strong association between the student's family background and academic performance, and even school facilities and resources are not that important in comparison to family background (Coleman *et al.*, 1966). Coleman (1988) further suggested that there are three forms of capital that contribute to such an influence of family background: physical capital, human capital and social capital. Physical capital refers to the material resources that families can provide their children for education, can be measured by family income. Human capital refers to potential family environments that help children studying, which can be measured by parents' education level. Social capital refers to the capital formed by the social environment in which a person lives, which can supplement and enhance physical capital and human capital.

Raftery and Hout (1993) raised the model of maximally maintained inequality (MMI), which states that unless the demand for higher-quality educational resources by upper-class families with superior culture capital is saturated, educational inequality will not be reduced. Effectively maintained inequality (EMI) model was further developed and considered the difference of education quality (Lucas, 2001): even if there are enough quota for education, the advantaged social groups will ensure their advantaged position by improving the quality of their own education.

China is in post-expansion era of higher education. In this study, social capital refers to 1) cultural capital, includes father's education level, and 2) other forms of social capital that are related to social resources and personal factors due to family background. And according to the above theories, families with greater social capital will expand their advantages through various ways, thus leading to inequality in higher education enrollment. Therefore, further examination and discussion within Chinese context is essential.

Higher Education Opportunity Inequality in Chinese Context & Research Hypotheses

First, China's rapid development led to an issue of social stratification, and the situation is also similar to what Coleman's (1966) found in the 1960s' America. According to Wu (2019), there is a further increase in the influence of the father's socioeconomic status on his children's education. In theory, parents with higher human capital will educate their children in more advanced ways and invest more resources to get their children into better universities. Therefore, the first hypothesis can be raised:

Hypothesis 1: Father's education level, as a culture capital, have a strong association with children's opportunity to attend higher education in China.

Second, China's experience supports the MMI model. According to Trow (1973), when the gross enrollment rate of higher education reaches 50%, a country has achieved universal higher education. China only achieved this target in 2019 with the figure of 51.6%, which means for quite a long time after the higher education expansion, China's higher education quotas were still insufficient (Ministry of Education of China, 2024). This has resulted in the smaller number of high-quality educational resources are occupied by those with superior social capital.

Those with higher job status usually have a superior social status as well as greater social capital, and can more greatly access social resources, thus result in inequality (Lin *et al.*, 1981; Lin, 1990). Besides, the form of personality is highly related to the family background, and can be regarded as social capital (Tulin *et al.*, 2018). In this study, we choose to measure personality through adventure personality. Thus, the second hypothesis can be proposed:

Hypothesis 2.1: Father's occupation, as a social capital, will positively influence children's opportunity to attend higher education in China.
Hypothesis 2.2: Adventure personality, as a social capital, will also positively influence children's opportunity to attend higher education in China.

Descriptive Data

China Family Panel Studies (CFPS) is a nationwide longitudinal social survey, which have recorded the data of educational outcomes, economic relationships, and family dynamics. CFPS 2020 data was chosen for data analysis as it was the first survey after the universalization of China's higher education expansion. According to the variables include "father's education level at age 14", "father's occupation at age 14", "adventure personality at age 14" , and "respondent's education level", the valid observation number is 4,454. The educational levels in the original data, including vocational college, bachelor, master, and doctorate, were combined into "vocational college and above" to indicate receipt of higher education. The original data also provides a ranking of fathers' occupation through ISEI scale, which scale is generally effective in measuring occupational prestige, and is also used in this study to measure father's occupation level (Ganzeboom *et al.*, 1992).

Observations		N	Percent
		4,454	100%
Age	Below 18	480	10.78%
	18-39	2,715	60.96%
	40 and above	1,259	28.27%
Respondent's education level	Illiterate/semi-literate/uneducated	274	6.15%
	Primary School	2,028	45.53%
	Junior High	1,295	29.07%
	Senior High/Vocational High	458	10.28%
	Vocational College and above	399	8.96%
Father's education level	Illiterate/semi-literate/uneducated	927	20.81%
	Primary School	1,222	27.44%
	Junior High	1,451	32.58%
	Senior High/Vocational High	653	14.66%
	Vocational College and above	201	4.51%
Father's occupation (ISEI)	Below 40	3,666	82.31%
	41-66	537	12.06%
	67 and above	251	5.64%

Table 1: The Distribution of Observations

As shown in table 1, respondents aged between 18 and 39 accounted for 60.96%. Since the higher education expansion was implemented in 1999, and the usual age for taking *gaokao* is 18-year-old, that is, the first batch of citizen who benefit from the expansion was 39-year-old in 2020. Considering individual differences in the age of taking *gaokao*, most respondents have experienced the expansion of higher education. As of 2020, there are only 8.96% respondents who have received higher education, which indicated although China has a significant number of new college students each year, there is still a considerable population with a low level of education. It is also observed that the educational levels of the respondents were generally higher than those of their fathers. In addition, according to Li's (2017) division of Chinese social classes and the ISEI score of respondents' father's occupation at age 14, most of respondents (82.31%) belongs to lower-class, and middle-class and upper-class account for only 17.7% of the total, which represent to China's serious social stratification.

Statistical Analysis & Discussion

Table 2 demonstrates the ordinal logistic regression results for opportunity to attend higher level education in China. Model 1 is the baseline model without interactions. The coefficients for all father's education levels are significantly positive, which supports hypothesis 1 on father's education level has a positive impact on children's access to higher education. When a father has an education level of high school or vocational high school, his children's opportunities of receiving higher education are nearly 9 times ($e^{2.211} \approx 9.12$) higher than those of children of illiterate/semi-illiterate fathers. As a kind of human capital, father's education will bring cumulative advantages for children through the behaviors including shaping of learning habits and acquainting wider information. More advanced educational methods will lead to a greater likelihood that children will enter higher education.

Hypothesis 2.1 is supported in all models, which verifies Lin's (1990) argument on social resources and social capital. Those children in families where fathers have higher job status, as a kind of superior social capital, will enable them to access more resources and have more opportunities to enter higher education. In addition, interactions of model 2 show that when the father's education level is low, the increase in job status actually weakens children's higher education opportunities, which re-verify hypothesis 1 on father's education level. Fathers withlower education level may not allow their children to enter higher education even if they have sufficient resources due to their own limitations, that is, the lack of cultural capital.

Adventure personality shows a strong positive association with the opportunity of higher education in all models expect model 3. The result represents that adventure personality, as a kind of social capital, may play its role by promoting academic exploration and the courage to innovate trial and error. However, this is not regulated by father's education level, that is, cultural capital. Personality can overcome the limitations of cultural capital to a greater extent.

	Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Father's education level (ref. = illiterate/semi-literate/uneducated)	Primary School	1.388***	2.209***	0.970
		(0.102)	(0.298)	(0.596)
	Junior High	1.909***	2.712***	2.204***
		(0.100)	(0.277)	(0.550)
	Senior High/Vocational High	2.205***	3.021***	2.403***
		(0.120)	(0.314)	(0.631)
	Vocational college or above	2.211***	2.809***	0.860
		(0.173)	(0.479)	(0.913)
Father's education level (ref. = illiterate/semi-literate/uneducated) × father's occupation (ISEI)	Primary School ×father's occupation (ISEI)		−0.030**	
			(0.010)	
	Junior High × father's occupation (ISEI)		−0.029**	
			(0.009)	
	Senior High/Vocational High × father's occupation (ISEI)		−0.029**	
			(0.010)	
	Vocational college or above × father's occupation (ISEI)		−0.024*	
			(0.011)	
Father's education level (ref. = illiterate/semi-literate/uneducated) × adventure personality	Primary School × adventure personality			0.136
				(0.193)
	Junior High × adventure personality			−0.100
				(0.178)
	Senior High/Vocational High × adventure personality			−0.063
				(0.204)
	Vocational college or above × adventure personality			0.437
				(0.297)
Father's occupation (ISEI)		0.016***	0.043***	0.016***
		(0.002)	(0.008)	(0.002)

Adventure personality	0.167**	0.168**	0.154
	(0.059)	(0.059)	(0.151)

Notes: Robust standard error shown in parentheses. $^{+}p<0.1$, $*p<0.05$, $**p<0.01$, $***p<0.001$.

Table 2: Ordinal Logistic Regression Results for Opportunity to Attend Higher Level Education in China

Potential Policy Strategies

According to the statistical results, children in families with poorer culture capital and social capital will be at a disadvantage in terms of opportunities to receive higher education. China's higher education policy in the post-expansion era urgently needs to shift with equality-oriented idea. Policies should focus on families with low educational backgrounds and families with more children.

Special education subsidy program for low-educated families could be considered for implementation. Government can provide those families with educational allowance or tuition waiver to encourage parents' let their children keep in track in education. Financial aid is proved to be effective to motivate those students' participation in higher education (Boatman & Long, 2016). Thus, public high schools and universities can set up scholarships or protect quotas for these families' children.

Further policies can focus on strengthening targeted publicity on the importance of entering higher education for low-education families since families with superior social capital but low education background may also not prefer their children to enroll in higher education due to limited vision as well as lack of cultural capital.

In addition, during the compulsory education stage, schools should organize more experiential learning that can inspire students' adventurous and leadership. It is believed that such activities can enhance students' innovative spirit, broaden their horizons, and enhance their inner confidence in entering higher education.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study explored how inequality in social capital results the higher education opportunity inequality in the post-expansion era in China, and concretely focus on father's education, occupation, personality, and family size. The research found that fathers' education level, as culture capital, still has an important and positive impact on children's higher educational attainment. Fathers' occupation, as social capital as well as key to access social resources, also significantly influence children's opportunity to attend higher education. An important discovery in this study is, consider a father with a lower education level, even if he has a better occupation and superior social capital, he may not allow his children to attend higher education due to the lack of cultural capital. Personality, as another kind of cultural capital, also positively affects the opportunity to enter higher education on a personal level.

The study also proposed two potential policy strategies including special education subsidy program and targeted publicity for low-educated families and strengthen the cultivation of personality includes adventurous and leadership in compulsory education, which can promote the willingness to enter higher education. It is expected that this study provides advance insights for higher education opportunity inequality in China, and contributes to the transformation of China's higher education development from expansion-oriented to equality-

oriented.

(1996 words)
Note: word count excludes all figures and tables.

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