

Research on the Current Situation of Education for Rural Students in China

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Abstract: In recent years, the phenomenon of "township test-taker" has aroused widespread concern in China. After the college entrance examination, these elite college students from rural areas or counties found themselves at a disadvantage in the competition with their peers in cities. Former researches reveal the differences between rural and urban students during and after graduation, including the first job salary, job stability and continuing education rate. With the help of Bourdieu's "capital" theory, this paper analyzes how economic capital, social capital and cultural capital affect students' educational experience and future employment. Rural students are at a disadvantage in the transmission of economic, social and cultural capital, which leads to their inequality in university life and job market. Especially in China city, the phenomenon of "raising chickens" further aggravates the accumulation difference of cultural capital, and economic capital can be directly transformed into social capital, providing more opportunities for urban students. In a word, the gap between urban and rural students in elite universities in China is deeply rooted in the unequal transfer of capital, and systematic intervention measures are needed to alleviate the obstacles faced by rural students.

Keywords: Township Candidates; Economic Capital; Social Capital; Cultural Capital; Bourdieu Theory

1. Introduction

In recent years, the term "township test-taker" has gained significant attention in Chinese media (Qinke LI & zhuzhi Xia., 2023), originating from the "985 Waste Import Plan Group" on Douban. This term reflects the experiences of elite university students from rural or county areas who, after passing the

highly competitive college entrance exam, find themselves at a disadvantage when compared to their urban peers. These students often share their feelings of shock and inadequacy when faced with the socio-cultural advantages of their city-dwelling classmates, such as family background, social skills, and even everyday habits, leading them to self-deprecatingly refer to themselves as mere "test-takers."

Guangzhou University Education College Professor Xie Ailei has identified these phenomena. Since 2013, he has conducted a longitudinal study tracking nearly 2,000 students from four 985 universities through questionnaires and interviews during their university years and after graduation. His research reveals significant disparities in the outcomes of graduates from different backgrounds. According to Xie's data, graduates from the same 985 universities show clear differences based on whether they come from rural or urban areas, with rural students generally earning lower first-job salaries, working in less desirable locations, and experiencing less job stability and lower rates of further education (AileiXie, 2010).

Among urban students who secured employment, 25% worked in municipalities, compared to only 9% of rural students. More rural students ended up working in villages, towns, or counties, with 17% of them doing so, compared to only 7% of urban students. Furthermore, starting salaries for urban students were 20% higher than for their rural counterparts, a critical factor for long-term income potential. Rural students also experienced lower job stability, with many having changed jobs multiple times within just a few years after graduation (AileiXie, YanbiHong, Huan Kuang, & Jerry Bai, 2014).

2. Methodology: Understanding Bourdieu's Concept of "Capital"

Bourdieu's theory posits that capital refers to the resources and advantages individuals

possess, which have value within specific social contexts (Ramsey, 2024). He categorizes capital into three main types:

2.1 Economic Capital

This refers to financial assets, such as income, property, and wealth (Tran, 2015).

2.2 Social Capital

This encompasses the networks of relationships and connections that individuals can draw upon for support and opportunities (Tran, 2015).

2.3 Cultural Capital

This includes knowledge, skills, education, and other cultural assets that enable individuals to succeed in society (Tran, 2015).

Bourdieu's basic ideology suggests that higher education institutions are far from being culturally neutral spaces. Instead, they are dominated by the cultural norms and rules of the middle and upper classes. For students from disadvantaged backgrounds, entering an elite university means adapting to a completely foreign, and ostensibly superior, cultural environment. This creates institutional inequality where these students bear greater psychological and emotional burdens in their attempt to assimilate—an experience Bourdieu describes as "schools as spaces of capitalization" (Edwards, 2024).

3. The Concept of "Habitus"

"Habitus" is another key concept in Bourdieu's theory. It refers to the deeply ingrained habits, skills, and dispositions that individuals acquire through their life experiences, particularly during childhood. Habitus shapes how individuals perceive the world and react to it, often unconsciously guiding their behavior in social contexts. Importantly, habitus is shaped by the type and amount of capital one possesses, creating a feedback loop where those with more capital are better equipped to accumulate even more (Tran, 2015).

4. The Interconnected Nature of Capital and Its Transmission

Capital is not static; it is constitutive and can be transformed from one form to another (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014). The intergenerational transmission of capital is a key mechanism through which inequalities are reproduced. Parents' economic, social, and

cultural capital heavily influence their children's educational trajectories and outcomes. For example, parents with high economic capital can afford to send their children to prestigious schools and provide them with enrichment activities that enhance their cultural capital. Social capital, often transmitted through family networks, can open doors to internships, jobs, and other opportunities that are inaccessible to those without such connections. Cultural capital, which is often unconsciously passed on through everyday interactions, equips children with the knowledge and skills to navigate social institutions effectively.

5. The Transmission of Capital from Parents to Students and How It Results in Educational Inequality

5.1 Economic Capital Transmission

Parents' economic capital significantly impacts a student's educational experience. For rural students, the burden of rent, tuition fees, and daily commute expenses can be overwhelming. These students may need to work part-time jobs to support themselves, which leaves them with less time to focus on their studies and personal development. In contrast, urban students, who often have financial support from their parents, do not face these challenges. They can dedicate more time to improving themselves, taking on internships, or engaging in extracurricular activities that enhance their future employability. Additionally, affluent families can provide a safety net for their children, allowing them to take risks and explore various career options without the fear of financial ruin (Swartz, Kim, Uno, Mortimer, & O'Brien, 2011).

5.2 Social Capital Transmission

Urban students are often more aware of the competitive nature of the job market and are proactive in accumulating social and cultural capital. They build networks within their chosen industries and gain industry-specific knowledge, which adds value to their degrees (Weiyi Wang & Xingde Chen, 2014). Rural students, on the other hand, may follow the standard academic trajectory outlined by their schools but lack awareness of the hidden job market or the need to accumulate relevant capital. As a result, when companies recruit on

campus, these students may find themselves at a disadvantage, lacking the connections or industry knowledge that urban students possess.

5.3 Cultural Capital Transmission

Cultural capital is perhaps the most insidious form of capital because it is often invisible yet deeply influential. Urban students, especially those from well-off families, are more likely to be familiar with the implicit cultural norms and expectations within elite universities. They understand the importance of strategically choosing courses, networking with professors, and participating in extracurricular activities that will boost their resumes. In contrast, rural students may focus solely on academics, unaware of these unspoken rules. For example, in her book *After the College Entrance Exams: The Mystery of College Student Differentiation*, Zheng Yajun discusses a practice at a Shanghai 985 university where a guidebook, "Introduction to Course Selection," circulates among students. This guide records the grading criteria and assignment requirements of various elective courses. Students like Zhebin, who grew up in Shanghai with business-minded parents, use this guide to maximize their grades with minimal effort, showing a clear understanding of how to navigate the university system to their advantage (By YajunZheng, & QingnianXiong. April, 2023).

6. Economic Capital Transferred to Cultural Capital in a Chinese Context

"Chicken Parenting" in Urban China: Urban parents, particularly in cities like Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou, are known for their intensive investment in their children's education, often referred to as "chicken parenting" (Chang, 2021). This includes enrolling their children in extracurricular activities such as piano lessons, calligraphy, and foreign language classes, as well as taking them to museums, science exhibitions, and historical sites.

6.1 Cultural Capital and University Success

Students from wealthier backgrounds who had accumulated cultural capital through early exposure to cultural activities felt more confident and connected in elite universities. These students were more likely to engage actively in university life, participate in academic discussions, and take on leadership

roles, while rural students often struggled to adapt due to a lack of similar experiences (Xie, 2015).

6.2 Impact on Educational Outcomes

The disparity in cultural capital also impacts educational outcomes. Urban students with rich cultural capital are more likely to excel in China's Gaokao (college entrance examination) and gain admission to top-tier universities. In contrast, rural students, who may not have had the same level of cultural enrichment, often face challenges in competing on an equal footing, despite having similar academic potential. By 2010, urban children still had twice the chance of attending top universities compared to rural children. Although the gap in higher education between urban and rural areas has narrowed, rural students were more likely to attend vocational colleges compared to urban students (WeiyiWang, & XingdeChen, 2014). Another study using data from the China General Social Survey (CGSS) 2015 found that the urban-rural education gap in China has decreased, but mainly in terms of quantity; the gap in access to high-quality undergraduate education has not narrowed (wei Wu, 2019). From the 2007 to 2017 cohorts, the proportion of urban students at top undergraduate institutions increased from 50.59% to 54.77%, further widening the gap with rural students (zituan Liu&min Tan, 2020).

7. Economic Capital to Social Capital in a Chinese Context

Economic capital in China can also be directly converted into social capital, particularly in urban areas where wealthier families have the means to facilitate their children's social networking opportunities. These networks play a crucial role in academic success and future career opportunities, as connections often lead to internships, job placements, and other advantageous positions. Data from the Chinese Ministry of Education indicates that only 10% of rural students participate in extracurricular activities compared to 40% of urban students, highlighting the disparity in social capital accumulation. (Xinhua, 2023)

8. Conclusion

In conclusion, the disparities between urban and rural students in China's elite universities are deeply rooted in the unequal transmission

of economic, social, and cultural capital. These inequalities manifest in various aspects of university life, including employment outcomes, job stability, and starting salaries. Bourdieu's theoretical framework on capital and habitus offers a comprehensive understanding of how these disparities are perpetuated across generations. Addressing these issues necessitates systemic interventions that acknowledge and mitigate the barriers faced by rural students, ensuring that educational institutions serve as genuine equalizers of opportunity rather than as reinforcers of existing inequalities.

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