

Social Reproduction and Out-Of-School Tutoring Institutions in China: A Critical Exploration of the Issue

Rui Xue¹

¹ Faculty of Social Science and Public Policy, King's College London, London, United Kingdom
Correspondence: Rui Xue, Faculty of Social Science and Public Policy, King's College London, London, United Kingdom.

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Abstract

This paper takes a look at China's "double reduction policy" of recent years, which restricts the out-of-school tutoring services, and analyses the characteristics of China's working and middle classes in terms of educating the next generation and accessing education, as well as the differences between these groups in terms of external factors, including economic and cultural capital, and internal factors, mainly habits. In this way, it is possible to investigate whether the "double reduction policy" introduced by the Chinese government to safeguard the rights of students and parents to an equitable education can really safeguard the development of an equitable education in China's complex social environment, or whether the forced banning of out-of-school tutoring services has a more negative impact on the disadvantaged classes. In addition, based on the analysis of the characteristics of the different classes, some suggestions are given to guarantee equity in education and the rights of different classes.

Keywords: social reproduction, class, double reduction policy

1. Introduction

With the rise of China's reform and opening up, decentralisation and marketisation (not necessarily privatisation) have been two of the most prominent features of China's systematic education reforms over the last thirty years (Zhao & Qiu, 2012). At the same time, the emerging market economy has created great educational anxiety for parents, in the contemporary competition-based education system, many Chinese parents and students believe that competitive success is the only route to a decent life. Therefore, private tutoring and

supervising agencies are slowly gaining a foothold in the Chinese education market, as the findings suggest over 78 percent of students admitted that they had more than three hours of tutoring and prep classes after school each week (Wang, 2020). However, the risks and challenges associated with the prevalence of private tutoring in education cannot be ignored. Apart from adding to the financial burden of low-income families, it may also lead to a number of social problems such as social inequality and unhealthy competition. More than this, such shadowy educational

phenomena have drawn great attention of educators, policy-makers and researchers (Bray 1999; Bray, 2009).

The Chinese government and educators have seen the negative effects of the proliferation of private tutoring in China, including the financial pressure that training institutions put on parents and the disadvantage that children are placed in the education market because parents do not have the financial means to purchase educational opportunities. As a result, in July 2021, the Chinese government issued the *Opinions on Further Reducing the Burden of Homework and Off-Campus Training for Students at the Compulsory Education Level*, the most important of which is to ‘insist on strict governance and comprehensive regulation of off-campus training practices.’ (MOE, 2021) By banning training institutions, they hope to ease the financial burden on parents and thus further ensure social equity. The policy has been in place for almost a year now, but the results of its implementation have fallen far short of the expectations of educationalists and the Chinese government, and to some extent it has even made the gap in educational equity between classes more pronounced and even exacerbated the problem of class entrenchment in China. This paper is based on the Bourdieu social reproduction theory, using economic and cultural capital as external factors and habits as internal factors, and analyses the characteristics of the Chinese middle and working classes to further explain the reasons for the unsatisfactory or even failed implementation of the “double reduction policy”.

2. China's Division of Class

Before we begin our analysis, it is important to clarify the definition of class in China. Chinese academics began discussing the middle class in the mid-1980s, and the topic still receives a great deal of attention today. But what is clear is that the question of whether China has a middle class or not is still open (Zhou & Chen, 2010). The Chinese middle class has become an indispensable economic and social force in contemporary China, and such class position gives them an advantage in acquiring other social, economic, cultural and political capital (Lu, 2004). The 2001 Chinese Academy of Social Science's (CASS) report recognised middle class in contemporary Chinese society with six defining characteristics (Lu, 2002): (1) the type of work; (2) rights and duties at the workplace; (3)

income; (4) skills; (5) lifestyle and consumption (6) lifestyle and consumption habits; and (7) moral and civic consciousness. It is not difficult to see the importance of economic and cultural capital in this model of division.

Bourdieu (1990) defines class as a group of individuals with a common nature and the same external conditions of life. He proposes three aspects to determine individuals' class status: socioeconomic status, class habitus, and cultural and social capitals (Bourdieu & Passeron 1990). The first and third of these factors can be summarised as the external conditions of life of the individual in social space, the form of capital in Bourdieu's theory; while the second factor, habitus, allows for the analysis of internalised personal characteristics, the part of individual dispositions. In this article, we will analyse why the “double reduction policy” in China has not only failed to protect the rights and interests of the disadvantaged classes, but may even have led to the consolidation of classes, based on Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction and a critical consideration of his theory.

3. External Factors—Socioeconomic Status, Cultural and Social Capitals

Bourdieu (1984) defines capital as ‘the set of actually usable resources and powers’ (p. 114), including economic capital, cultural capital, social capital, and symbolic capital. And economic and cultural capital are always considered to be the most important forms of capital in the formation of classes. Bourdieu (1984) primarily uses the shares of these two types of capital to determine the position of the individual in social space. This section analyses the advantages and disadvantages of different classes under the ‘double reduction policy’ through two external factors: economic and cultural capital.

The first is economic capital, which undoubtedly plays a decisive role in the division of classes. It determines the spending power and level of different families in the field of education. The Chinese government's “double reduction policy”, announcing the use of coercive measures to abolish all commercial subject tutoring institutions, is a fair protection of the rights of children from poor backgrounds who may not be able to attend out-of-school training institutions because their parents do not have sufficient economic capital. The abolition of all operating subject tutors would not only reduce

the financial burden on parents in terms of education expenses, but would also ensure that all children have equal access to educational resources and opportunities as far as possible. In fact, however, some well-off families still pay high prices for private tutors to come to their homes to provide learning support for their children, and owing to its 'hidden' nature, home tutoring cannot be properly monitored and controlled (Kwok, 2010). And to accomplish this monitoring and checking would require a great deal of manpower and investment.

Another issue that we have to think about at the same time is the advantages and reasons for the existence of these tutoring institutions themselves. Because there are so many tutoring institutions in the Chinese education market, and prices fluctuate so much, not all working class families have difficulty paying for this educational expense. And many working class parents who are not only busy with work and lack the time to tutor their children; on the other hand they may also lack the relevant educational qualifications to tutor their children. So sending children to tutorial classes when necessary is the best option. Conversely, once these for-profit subject tutoring institutions are completely banned, it will be far more expensive to hire private teachers than tutoring institutions. This would lead to a further reduction in access to education and tutoring for the working class, which would not only defeat the purpose of the "double reduction policy", but would also potentially entrench the position of the elite and increase the gap between the rich and the poor and inequality.

Furthermore, if the impact of the 'double reduction policy' is viewed in a longer term perspective, it is clear that the impact on working class children can be lifelong. Bian (2002) points out that education and schooling are regarded as an important means to achieve social mobility in China. One study (Fong, 2004) even suggests that for urban working-class families, their children's academic success is often the family's only hope for economic security. Their aim is to use these educational opportunities and resources so that their next generation does not fall behind others and even expect their children to make the class leap. However, with the wholesale rejection of all subject tutoring institutions in the market, many students who expect to improve their academic performance are deprived of these educational

opportunities, and the teachers in their classes do not have enough time and energy to allocate to them. As a result, they are likely to fail in their entrance exams and are eventually forced to go to vocational schools. This again follows the same path as their parents and means that they may remain in the working class for the rest of their lives. The difference is that middle-class families have more economic capital, which also gives their children more possibilities for choice. Research shows that many well-off parents say they may choose to send their children to international programmes to prepare them for university overseas if their children fail in the entrance exams (Wang, 2020).

Although economic foundations deeply influence the behaviour of different classes, few scholars have defined the middle class in terms of income and economic ability alone (Cheng Li, 2010; Chunling Li, 2010). Class formation and reproduction has both an economic and a cultural dimension; one cannot exist without the other (Crompton, 2008). Cultural capital can be seen as a cultural resource possessed by an individual or a household. Hong and Zhao (2015) express the view that individuals or groups who possess cultural capital can use it to gain access to better social resources and social status. Bourdieu (1986) points out that cultural capital has three forms: the embodied state, the objectified state, and the institutionalized state. Many empirical studies have been conducted based on this concept, but the operational definition of cultural capital remains controversial. Most scholars use the term 'embodied cultural capital' (Byun et al., 2012) as a measure of cultural capital, which primarily refers to the involvement of children or their parents in high-profile cultural activities. However, some scholars consider this definition too narrow, arguing that cultural capital should include habits and literary environment, family educational resources, extracurricular activities, and other indicators (Jæger, 2011). I prefer the latter definition because if we use these external activities, i.e., the frequency of participation in high-profile cultural activities such as museum visits and concerts, as an indicator of cultural capital, many details of family education will be overlooked. At the same time, since the "double reduction policy" is mainly concerned with educational resources and educational equity, my view is that it is more appropriate to discuss the issue of cultural capital here with family

educational resources as the core.

With the implementation of the “double reduction policy”, all for-profit subject tutoring institutions were banned and students lost their most direct access to out-of-school tutoring. However, the middle class can use their cultural capital, including their contacts and social resources, to help their children gain more advantages. Mu et al., (2019) claims that there is a strong link between social position and the range of strategies that parents deploy to promote their children’s academic success. Although the ‘double reduction policy’ has outlawed out-of-school tutoring, there is a much wider range of strategies and approaches available to middle-class parents than to working-class parents. For example, middle-class parents have more contacts than working-class parents, and they have more financial means to help themselves to these networking resources. Even if out-of-school tutoring agencies have been banned, they can still use their contacts to get in touch with teachers who are able and willing to tutor their children privately. Working class parents, on the other hand, do not have the time to socialise due to their own busy schedules and their class status means that they are surrounded by people of their own class who do not have the ability or capital to find private tutors for their children. This means that even with the double reduction policy, middle class students still have more access to education than working class students, owing to their parents’ connections and social resources.

In summary, the educational success of children is in fact a test of the economic and social capacity of parents (Mu et al, 2019). The original intention of the “double reduction policy” was to reduce the educational anxiety and pressure of the working class, but it ignored the economic and cultural capital disadvantages that the working class has always had compared to the middle class. The result is that the middle class can use their economic and cultural capital to help their children to have more educational resources, while the working class children are forced to lose some of their educational opportunities, which will only lead to a greater class difference and further class entrenchment.

4. Internal Factors —Class Habitus

Habitus is central to Bourdieu’s distinctive sociological approach and ‘it is key to his

originality and contribution to social science’ (Grenfell, 2014, p. 48). For Bourdieu, class is not only about what they have and what their income is. Rather, it is the individual’s or group’s perception of their place in the social space and their daily practices that determine their class (Wang,2020). Bourdieu described habitus as dispositions, or ways of being and doing (Bourdieu, 1990). At the same time Bourdieu argues that class processes are recorded in the daily decisions and actions of individuals.

The habitus, as the word implies, is that which one has acquired, but which has become durably incorporated in the body in the form of permanent dispositions. So the term constantly reminds us that it refers to something historical, linked to individual history, and that it belongs to a genetic mode of thought, as opposed to existentialist modes of thought. (Bourdieu 1993a: 86, emphasis added)

‘Simply put, habitus focuses on our ways of acting, feeling, thinking and being.’ (Grenfell, 2014, p. 51). It explains how we make choices and why we act in one way rather than another. This section attempts to build on Bourdieu’s theory of habitus, by explaining the different ways of thinking and principles of the middle and working classes, to explore the reasons why a ‘double reduction policy’ is so difficult to guarantee equity in education.

The first is the different mindsets of the middle and working classes regarding the education of the next generation. There are significant differences in the educational philosophies of the middle and working classes, and these differences are entrenched by the economic base and may even be passed on from generation to generation. Bourdieu’s theory does provide a valid framework for the study of Chinese education, but as Lamont (1992) criticises, Bourdieu’s theorization of habitus focuses exclusively on the influences of material conditions but neglects the impact of broader structural features and cultural resources. Thus, given the complexity and novelty of China’s social and economic conditions, we cannot only focus on consensus class material conditions, but one should also take into account China’s unique political system and cultural history.

For many middle-class parents in China, academic success is a way of maintaining the wealth and social status that older generations (even going back multiple generations) have worked so hard to achieve, and a way of

maintaining their class status. This is not simply a matter of rational belief or social ideology, but a multi-generational one, embodied in Han Chinese cultural practices (Mu et al, 2019). At the same time, in the life experience of the middle class, they are also acutely aware of the power and role of education, as they benefit from the advantages they have gained in life through education. As a result, they also attach greater importance to the education of the next generation. With the implementation of the “double reduction policy”, middle class parents will not give up the idea and opportunity to improve their children’s education and access to more educational resources just because of the disappearance of out-of-school classes. Not only will they use their economic and cultural capital to secure private tutoring opportunities for their children, they may even spend more of their own time on their children’s learning and upbringing. In contrast, working class parents may not think this way. In their minds, it is not necessarily a bad thing for a child to graduate and go straight to vocational school. This is because they believe that vocational schools help children to learn more useful skills and even help them to go straight into the workplace after graduation. And it is the expectation of working-class parents that their children earn money early on to support their families. Mu et al. (2019) argues that for middle-class families it is about economic survival, but also about the production, reproduction and intergenerational sustainability of a unique social status.

It can be argued that the middle class has a longer-term perspective, that they can see the long-term impact of education and are willing to invest in the education of the next generation. The working class, on the other hand, expects their children to earn money sooner, which is a pragmatic way of looking at it, because although they enter society earlier than their peers, they find it difficult to cross the gap from the working class to the middle class. Although the ‘double cut’ policy is not class-specific, it puts greater unfair pressure on the working class and their children precisely because it denies all out-of-school providers without distinction.

Another important aim of the “double reduction policy” was to reduce the anxiety of Chinese parents in the competition for education, which has become a habitual state of many Chinese parents. But in fact, in many cases, this measure has largely exacerbated the anxiety of

working-class families. Although we mentioned above that most working class parents do not see further education as the only task and pathway for their children, we should also take into account that in contemporary times working class parents do not see further education as the only pathway for their children. However, we should also be aware of the shift and awakening of working class thinking in contemporary China. Research shows that an increasing number of working class parents are expressing their anxiety, and a major source of their anxiety is the fear that their children will go to vocational high schools and take up blue-collar, low-paying jobs and thus struggle to make ends meet like they do (Mu et al, 2019). Therefore, they are willing to work hard to earn money just to get better educational conditions and opportunities for their children, so sending their children to training institutions is in a way one of the ways to relieve parents’ anxiety. And with the banning of all for-profit subject tutoring institutions in the market, working class families have lost the opportunity to attend out-of-school tutoring on the one hand, while on the other hand they have to bear the pressure of knowing that middle class families can afford private training, which creates a double dose of mental anxiety and pressure on them. Worse still, this anxiety is often combined with a sense of helplessness, as they lack all kinds of social, economic and cultural capital, which can generate ‘fatalistic senses’ (Wexler & Willis, 1981, 70).

Another important ‘habitus’ factor comes from the child. For Bourdieu, traditional moral teachings and family values are part of a primary socialization whereby families shape individual habitus from infancy (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Class-shaping habits have a powerful influence on the educational practices of students. Unlike working-class students, middle-class children usually have only their own futures to consider when making educational choices and decisions. This is because their parents’ overall economic capital sets the conditions for an alteration of longstanding and durable intergenerational practices (Mirchuk & Zelena, 2021). Middle-class parents can proudly tell their children that they have the freedom to pursue a good life because of their own educational and professional success. Working class children, on the other hand, have many customary concerns and

worries when making educational choices, stemming from their family and class origins, and are forced to think more about the interests and future of their parents and family. Therefore, in addition to not being in a position to ask for private tutoring after the implementation of the “double reduction policy”, these students may not be in a position to think about better educational resources and opportunities for themselves because of the habitus of their class. They may even think that entering a vocational school is a good option, meaning that they can work early to subsidise the family and ease the burden on the family. As a result, students from the working class accepted all the changes brought about by the “double reduction policy” as they were told and accepted their academic results and the development of their destiny.

In essence, the ‘habitus’ brought about by class have influenced the way different classes think, leading them to make different educational choices and practices. Thus, despite its good intentions, the “double reduction policy” ignores the fact that the anxiety of Chinese parents stems from the social and economic structures that have always been in place, as well as the beliefs and mindsets of different classes in the field of education. Ultimately, it only adds to the anxiety of the working class, which has further negative consequences.

5. Improvement Measures

As we have stressed many times above, the “double reduction policy” is well-intentioned, but for the reasons analysed above, its implementation may not be as satisfactory as it should be. Indeed, the Chinese government is aware of this series of problems. Recently, the General Office of the Ministry of Education issued a notice on “Looking Back” at the management of subject-based out-of-school training at the compulsory education level, deploying a comprehensive survey across the country to systematically identify and rectify problems. More importantly, however, the Chinese government must recognise the root causes of this series of problems. The anxieties and pressures of Chinese parents and students stem on the one hand from the social and economic structures, including the huge income gap and the lack of effective social security; and on the other hand from the cultural practices and beliefs in education that we have described above, which have led to the emergence of different habitual practices for different classes.

Therefore, rather than singularly dismissing all for-profit subject tutors in the market, it is better to focus directly on and support the interests and needs of working class parents and students. In the context of the ‘double reduction policy’, the government could develop special tutoring programmes for working class students, while at the same time targeting and regulating the hiring of private tutors by the middle class, which would effectively reduce the human and financial resources required for regulation.

On the other hand, the anxiety of these working class parents about the future of their children is based on a sense of helplessness to improve their lives. Their concern for survival underlines the impact of the existing social and economic spheres on individual educational beliefs and practices, and in particular the lack of effective social security and public health systems capable of providing families of lower social status with protection from market mechanisms. Therefore, if the Chinese government wants to improve this problem, it ultimately needs to start with the social and livelihood systems as well as the economic structure. While this will take a long time and relentless effort, a shift in thinking about education reform from this perspective may bring about more positive and effective changes to the education market.

6. Conclusion

This essay focuses on Bourdieu’s theory of social reproduction and discusses the reasons why China’s current “double reduction policy” for tutoring institutions in the market has been ineffective and has even exacerbated class entrenchment. On the one hand, there are external factors, both economic and cultural capital. Middle-class families not only have strong economic power, but also appropriate cultural capital, including contacts and social resources. Therefore, even if for-profit subject tutoring institutions are banned from the market, middle-class families have the capital and ability to seek more and better educational resources and opportunities for their children. Children from the working class are thus deprived of their original educational opportunities and are eventually forced to enter vocational schools because of the economic and cultural capital disadvantages of their own class. On the other hand, there are internal factors that are dominated by habitus. There are major differences in thinking about the upbringing of children between the middle class and the

working class, with the middle class willing to spend more money and time on their children's education, while the working class want their children to be able to work and earn money as early as possible. Although the working class has undergone a certain degree of change and awakening in contemporary China, they are also concerned that their children will struggle to make ends meet in the same way as they do. However, their anxiety has been deepened rather than alleviated by the "double reduction policy" that has banned all tutoring institutions from the market. Another point to note is that children of different classes have different habitus. While middle-class children have more support from their families and are more concerned about their personal development when making educational decisions, working-class children tend to have more concerns and worries about their educational choices due to the burden on their families. To sum up, from the three perspectives of economic capital, cultural capital and habits, the current 'double reduction policy' in China has not only failed to alleviate parents' anxiety and ensure social equity, but has to a certain extent increased the inequality between different classes and deepened class entrenchment.

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