

## Cultural Capital and Collaborative Cultivation: a Study on Investment in Education by Urban Families in China

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**Abstract:** Urban families in China are continuously increasing their investment in their children's education, leading to the rapid expansion of the shadow education market and making parental anxiety a significant social phenomenon. This paper, using Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital and Laroux's theory of collaborative upbringing as its core framework, systematically examines the scale and motivations of shadow education, the generation mechanism of parental anxiety, and the reproduction of class differences and educational inequality. The study finds that the intergenerational transmission of cultural capital exhibits complex effects in market-driven education; the collaborative upbringing model of middle-class families reflects both rational strategies and faces the dilemma of methodological deficiencies; educational anxiety is structural and contagious, with group interaction further amplifying competitive pressure; and the expansion of shadow education forms a symbiotic relationship with the existing education system, making it difficult to completely eliminate. Finally, this paper points out that future research should focus on the specific dilemmas of cultural capital transmission among middle-class families and the operational logic of horizontal collaborative networks among parents.

**Keywords:** Cultural Capital; Collaborative Education; Shadow Education; Educational Inequality

### 1. Introduction

In China, the phenomenon of extracurricular training consumption has long been prevalent. Studies have found that before the implementation of the "double reduction" policy, the proportion of students in compulsory education participating in tutoring was the

highest[1]. In recent years, the shadow education market has continued to expand, and its operating income reached 925.1 billion yuan in 2019. Although its market size has declined due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, it has not shrunk substantially overall, but has instead accelerated the transformation to online education[2]. At the same time, a new phenomenon has gradually emerged: some middle-class families are investing more and more in non-academic shadow education due to various considerations[3].

The increase in parents' investment in their children's education is a global phenomenon driven by two factors: first, the increase in income inequality, and second, the strengthening of the relationship between education and income (i.e., the increase in the return on education). This makes parents believe that their children's education is crucial to their future socioeconomic status, and insufficient investment in education will lead to a relative decline in status[4]. In the Chinese context, market-oriented transformation has led to increasingly fierce competition in education, and family anxiety has continued to rise, further driving cultural capital investment characterized by after-school training[5].

Faced with this reality, the academic community has accumulated a wealth of research. This article uses Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital and Laroux's theory of collaborative upbringing as its core framework to systematically review relevant literature on shadow education, parental anxiety, and class differences, aiming to present the research progress, core debates, and future directions in this field.

### 2. Theoretical Basis: Cultural Capital and Collaborative Cultivation

#### 2.1 Bourdieu's Theory of Cultural Capital

Bourdieu believes that actors with more social resources are in an advantageous position in the

field[6]. Cultural capital is a resource that can be used for investment, including embodied forms (such as upbringing and taste), objectified forms (such as cultural items) and institutionalized forms (such as academic qualifications). In the field of education, cultural capital can be transformed into academic advantages for children. The research of Zhao Xiaomin and Wang Yijie points out that China's market-oriented transformation has led to increasingly fierce competition in education and rising family anxiety, which further drives cultural capital investment characterized by after-school training[7]. However, cultural capital is not "all useful" - its effect varies depending on the specific context of education marketization.

have found that primary and secondary school students with higher family cultural capital are more inclined to participate in non-academic extracurricular training, which is reflected not only in the type of participation but also in the duration of participation. Even families with different cultural capital have extracurricular education consumption behavior. Families with richer cultural capital can also indirectly affect the learning and growth of their children through the creation of a good learning environment and cultural atmosphere [8].

Although middle-class parents possess abundant cultural capital, in today's complex and competitive social environment, they often lack clear methods and strategies to effectively pass on their cultural capital to their children[9]. This dilemma reveals the applicability of cultural capital theory in contemporary China: capital ownership is not equivalent to capital transfer.

## **2.2 Laru's Collaborative Training Theory**

In her book "Unequal Childhoods", Lalou systematically explained the class differences in family education. She summarized the family education of the middle class as a rational model of "cooperative education": to gain the academic competitive advantage of children by rationally planning and choosing high-quality tutoring services. Compared with the "natural growth" logic of working class families - which emphasizes the natural growth of children and gives less play to the function of family education - children under cooperative education gradually develop a sense of superiority unique to middle class families, while children of working class and poor families show a sense of

unease[10].

In educational sociology research, class differentiation is an important perspective for analyzing family parenting styles, but how the education market shapes family parenting styles is often overlooked. Middle-class parents generally attach great importance to their children's education, tend to actively participate in their children's education process and seek more decision-making power and control, and their parenting style has structural and autonomous characteristics[11]. However, collaborative education is not without cost. The research of Sun Ting and Xu Jiajun found that in the scenario of after-school tutoring classes for children entering primary school, although middle-class families try to pass on cultural capital by enrolling in classes, they often fall into the process of "learning to be parents" and lack a systematic methodology[12].

## **3. Shadow Education and Parental Anxiety**

### **3.1 Definition and Expansion of Shadow Education**

"Shadow education", also known as "private tutoring" or "extracurricular tutoring", is a supplementary form of education that occurs outside the formal education system, paid for by private individuals, and aimed at improving students' academic performance[13]. Bei Lei's classic definition emphasizes the "imitative" and "dependent" nature of shadow education on formal education. In China, shadow education has experienced rapid expansion. Some scholars have pointed out that although the "double reduction" policy has strictly restricted subject-based training, the overall scale of shadow education has not been substantially reduced, but rather has accelerated its transformation to an online model[14].

During the compulsory education stage, the marketization of education continues to develop, posing a serious challenge to the role of public education expenditure in the equalization of education[15]. As an important way of investing in human capital, parents make shadow education investments, hoping to benefit from the education investment .

### **3.2 The Generation Mechanism of Parental Educational Anxiety**

Chen Huazai and Xiao Wei define "educational anxiety" as "a complex emotional state of

tension, unease, worry, and annoyance caused by the uncertainty of the educational process and educational results"[16]. This concept emphasizes uncertainty as the core source of anxiety. Han Haitang pointed out that the development of policies is related to parents' worries, educational anxiety and even dilemmas. She started from the background of social transformation such as the family planning policy and reform and opening up, and pointed out that the family planning policy reduced the number of children in the family, and the economic capital, cultural capital and political capital that the family could invest in the education of their children were relatively concentrated, but it also made parents place all their expectations on their only child, thus amplifying the anxiety.

Liu Baozhong's research found that, driven by the psychology of "not letting children lose at the starting line", parents' decision-making behavior is deeply influenced by their peers, which in turn triggers significant group anxiety[17]. This anxiety is contagious: when seeing other parents enrolling in classes, taking courses together, and buying school district housing, individual parents will feel a sense of urgency that "if they don't do this, they will fall behind". Shen Hongcheng analyzed this phenomenon under the wave of "parentalism", pointing out that Chinese parents' parenting behavior has a strong performance orientation, no longer focusing only on their children's daily life, but mainly on their academic performance[18]. Tang Xiaojing also pointed out that compared with the subtle daily interactions in the past, the current parenting behavior of parents is more proactive and strategic[19].

People find it difficult to directly perceive macroeconomic income inequality and changes in educational returns, but rather perceive them through the perception of changes in the community. In addition to the micro-family level, some studies have also noted the external context of individual and group interactions in which shadow educational decisions occur [20]. This suggests that anxiety is not only an individual psychological state, but also a collective phenomenon embedded in social interactions.

#### **4. Class Differences and Educational Inequality**

##### **4.1 The Hierarchical Logic of Collaborative Cultivation**

Lareau's collaborative parenting theory reveals a fundamental difference in parenting styles between middle-class and working-class families. Middle-class families tend to cultivate their children's cognitive abilities, communication skills, and self-confidence through rational planning, intensive communication, and systematic extracurricular activities. This parenting style is not arbitrary but has a clear goal: to give children an advantage in academic competition while simultaneously acquiring the unique behavior and language of the middle class. In contrast, working-class and impoverished families tend to follow a "natural growth" logic—they give their children more free time, interfere less with their extracurricular activities, and their communication style is often more direct and commanding, with less emphasis on designing a "growth roadmap" for their children. Lareau's research shows that the direct consequence of this difference is that children raised under collaborative parenting gradually develop a sense of entitlement, becoming more at ease when interacting with teachers, doctors, and strangers; while children raised naturally often appear awkward, withdrawn, and even hesitant to make reasonable requests in unfamiliar situations.

Applying this theoretical framework to contemporary China reveals that while the parenting behaviors of middle-class families generally align with the characteristics of collaborative education, some new changes are also emerging. First, collaborative education in Chinese middle-class families is more focused on academic performance. Shen Hongcheng's concept of "performance-oriented education" is particularly prominent here—parents' energy is highly concentrated on their children's grades, rankings, and pathways to higher education. While the cultivation of interests and comprehensive abilities is mentioned, it often serves the core goal of academic achievement. Second, Chinese middle-class parents are more involved and deeply engaged. They not only handle pick-up and drop-off, check homework, and communicate with teachers, but also actively search for various tutoring information, join parent groups, exchange information with other parents, and even personally participate in their children's extracurricular learning processes, such as auditing classes, compiling incorrect

answers, and developing review plans. This high-intensity involvement reflects the extreme importance middle-class families place on education, but it also means that parents' own time and emotions are being consumed significantly.

However, collaborative education doesn't always guarantee the successful intergenerational transfer of cultural capital. Many middle-class parents face an awkward dilemma: they themselves have achieved high social status through education and are willing to invest significant resources in their children, but often feel helpless in practical implementation. For example, how do they determine which of the various tutoring classes on the market is truly effective? When their child's grades fluctuate, should they increase pressure or loosen it? If other parents are pushing their children too hard, will their children fall behind if they don't follow suit? There are no ready-made answers to these questions. Many middle-class parents are essentially "crossing the river by feeling the stones" at crucial junctures like the transition from kindergarten to primary school and from primary to middle school—they spend money on classes while simultaneously gathering information and observing how others are doing in various parent groups, trying to discover an effective "educational methodology." This in itself illustrates an important fact: the transfer of cultural capital is not an automated process; it cannot be accomplished naturally simply by having money and education. It requires strategy, trial and error, social support, and even a bit of luck.

#### **4.2 Shadow Education and the Reproduction of Inequality**

The expansion of shadow education is closely linked to educational inequality, a point on which existing research has reached a relatively consistent conclusion. Simply put, children from families who can invest more resources in shadow education are more likely to have an advantage in academic competition. This conclusion sounds simple, but its social implications are quite profound.

First, shadow education amplifies the impact of family background on educational outcomes. Ideally, the public education system should act as an "equalizer"—ensuring children from different family backgrounds receive roughly equal educational opportunities in school.

However, the existence of shadow education allows families to bypass the public system and provide extra support for their children. Families with better financial means can hire renowned tutors for one-on-one lessons, enroll in various expensive training courses, and purchase the latest teaching materials and learning equipment; while families with average financial means, even if they wish to participate in tutoring, are often limited by their budgets and can only choose cheaper and less effective tutoring methods. This gap is not a one-time event but accumulates as children progress through the grades.

Secondly, shadow education and the formal education system have formed a deeply intertwined symbiotic relationship. The current college entrance examination system primarily uses scores as the selection criterion, and these scores largely depend on how much knowledge and problem-solving skills students have mastered beyond the textbook scope. Public schools, due to curriculum constraints and time limitations, often don't delve into these "out-of-syllabus" contents, leaving a huge space for shadow education to thrive. Tutoring institutions essentially fill the "shortcomings" of public education—teaching what schools don't teach or don't teach thoroughly. As long as the competitive logic of the college entrance examination remains unchanged, parents' demand for tutoring will not disappear. As some scholars have stated, completely eliminating clandestine extracurricular tutoring is almost impossible; a symbiotic relationship can only be sought, maintaining a relatively dynamic balance in the absence of fundamental changes to the existing system. This means that shadow education is not a "superfluous growth" that can be eliminated through policy bans, but rather a structural component deeply embedded in the current education system.

Secondly, while the marketization of education and the continuous expansion of education at all levels have provided more educational opportunities for children from all families to some extent—for example, more people can attend high school and university—this increase in opportunities does not equate to an improvement in fairness. Middle-class families, leveraging their economic and cultural capital, are able to seize new educational opportunities more quickly and astutely, and use these opportunities to further widen the gap with lower-income

families. A typical example is that when online education emerged, middle-class families could immediately purchase high-quality online courses, equip themselves with good electronic devices, and even hire online tutors for their children; while low-income families might struggle to even guarantee a stable internet connection and suitable devices. Without a corresponding fair mechanism, increased opportunities could instead become a lever for the privileged class to further consolidate their position.

Finally, we should also note that this unequal reproduction driven by shadow education often forms a self-reinforcing cycle. Children from middle-class families, having access to additional educational resources, perform better in exams and enter better schools; better schools mean better academic prospects and future income; and these children, when they become parents, will invest in their own children in the same way. Children from lower-class families find it difficult to break this cycle. This is not merely a matter of individual effort, but a structural dilemma. Understanding this is of significant practical importance for reflecting on the fairness of education policies and re-examining the role of shadow education.

## 5. Conclusion and Discussion

### 5.1 Main Research Findings

Through a systematic review of existing literature, this paper draws the following main findings:

First, the intergenerational transmission of cultural capital exhibits complex effects in the contemporary Chinese education market. On the one hand, the higher a family's cultural capital, the greater the likelihood and duration of their children's participation in extracurricular training. On the other hand, while middle-class parents possess abundant cultural capital, they often lack specific methods for effectively passing it on to their children. This suggests that cultural capital theory needs to supplement this with the intermediate variable of "transmission strategies."

Second, Larue's collaborative parenting theory has been widely validated in middle-class Chinese families, but it also exhibits new characteristics. Chinese parents' collaborative parenting is more performance-oriented and driven by collective anxiety, as well as by local

discourses such as "not letting children lose at the starting line." Compared to the middle-class American families described by Larue, Chinese parents' involvement is more intensive and strategic, but also accompanied by higher emotional expenditure.

Third, shadow education and the formal education system have formed a deeply symbiotic relationship. Given that the existing college entrance examination system cannot be fundamentally changed, completely eliminating extracurricular tutoring is virtually impossible; a dynamic balance can only be sought. This means that education policy design needs to acknowledge the structural existence of shadow education, rather than simply prohibiting it.

### 5.2 Theoretical Contributions and Limitations

This study, using cultural capital theory and collaborative education theory as its core framework, reveals the rational logic and emotional costs of middle-class families' educational investment. However, existing literature still has the following shortcomings: First, it does not pay enough attention to parents' horizontal collaborative networks (such as WeChat groups and class-sharing groups), with most studies still focusing on the intra-family or family-school relationship; second, the analysis of anxiety reproduction mechanisms is relatively fragmented, lacking a systematic explanation of "how group interaction amplifies anxiety"; and third, the concept of "shadow capital"-informal educational collaborative resources among parents-has not yet been theorized.

### 5.3 Future Research Directions

Based on the above analysis, this paper proposes two future research directions: First, to conduct ethnographic research on parental collaboration networks, entering field sites such as waiting areas of training institutions and WeChat groups for parents, to reveal the micro-mechanisms of information exchange, resource sharing, and emotional interaction among parents; second, to construct an integrated framework of "collaboration-anxiety-inequality," combining Bourdieu's field theory, Laroux's collaborative training theory, and the sociology of emotion to analyze how parental collaboration can simultaneously amplify anxiety and reproduce class advantage. Furthermore, the new forms of shadow education following the "double reduction" policy (such as underground training

and online transformation) also deserve continued monitoring.

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