

Book Review

Higher Education Choice in China: Social Class, Gender, Parental Involvement and Educational Inequality

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Introduction

I will present “Higher Education Choice in China”, a book written by Xiaoming Sheng and first published in 2014. This is the last volume of the interdisciplinary book series focusing on education in Asia. The previous volume of the series are (1) General Education and the Development of Global Citizenship in Hong Kong and (2) Taiwan and Mainland China: Not merely icing on the cake. This series aimed to inform readers of the most up-to-date research and contribute to the development of scholarship on Asian education. This book is a must read for postgraduate students and researchers in the field of sociology, sociology of education, and scholars who are focused on Chinese and Asian studies.

Xiaoming Sheng has a PhD from the University of Cambridge, UK, in Sociology of Education. Before her PhD studies, Sheng worked as a Research Fellow in the Sociology Department at Beijing University in China. Sheng is considered a highly prolific researcher and author. Sheng has published three books in the span of six years; two are published by Routledge Publishing and one by Springer Science and Business Media. Currently, Sheng is conducting research on higher education choice, parental involvement, home education, gender, and social and cultural relations with education in the context of China.

This book sprung from Sheng’s doctoral dissertation research on higher education choice in China in relation to social class, gender, and educational inequality. Based on Bourdieu’s theory, the research explored social differences in terms of social class in the process of higher education choice among both students and parents. It also explored the different ways in which parents from different social groupings are involved in the process of their children’s higher education choices. Additionally, it investigates how gender influences the ways in which mothers and fathers, and male and female students are involved in making such choices. Drawing on quantitative and qualitative analysis, the author discussed the thematic findings in five chapters. The first chapter presented the background, literature review, and research method as well as theoretical and conceptual framework. The second chapter discussed social class differences in terms of parents’ expectations of their children’s higher education. The third chapter discussed how gender is an influence in the level of parental involvement in children’s educational attainment and higher education choice in relation with social class, and how gender plays a role in student’s educational attainment in association with social class. The fourth chapter discussed the ways in which parents from different social groupings are involved in children’s higher education choice. The fifth chapter discussed how the different volumes of cultural, social and economic capital that various social groups possess influences their abilities to promote their children’s cultural capital and manage their children’s educational success. It also focused on four social factions within middle class and how these groups use their different levels of cultural, social and economic capital to help their children compete for university admission. The sixth chapter discussed habitus, particularly how familial and institutional habitus affects the decision-making process of students and parents. The last chapter summarized the findings, discussed the overall findings and provided suggestions for future research and recommendations for policy makers.

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This research has filled several research gaps in the literature. First, although a growing body of researches has been focusing on social stratification and higher education, little research has examined the roles of parents in the process of students' higher education choice. Secondly, not much research has investigated parental involvement separately in gender perspectives. For example, the ways in which a father and mother may be involved in their children's schooling and decision making. Additionally, a large number of researches conducted in China had relied solely on small-scale quantitative analysis using the sample of college students and do not include the parental figures in their study. Further, few studies have applied multiple methods. Sheng, in this study, included parents and utilized a large scale quantitative investigation with qualitative semi-structured interviews of both parents, of both sex, and secondary school students from different social classes.

Review

In the first chapter, Sheng provided a holistic view of the Chinese education system and social stratification in Mao period and post-Mao period. She mentioned that China as a transitional society has been experiencing radical changes in economy and social structure which has led to inequality of educational opportunities. The author highlighted four educational inequalities in China's education system; (1) inequality of access to higher education, (2) inequality in the ability of people from different social class backgrounds to realize their potential, (3) unequal capacity of different individuals with similar abilities to realize their expectations and ambitions, and (4) inequality of economic, cultural, social and environmental conditions of individuals from different family backgrounds. Consequently, the inequality in education has received the interest of researchers. During recent decades, Chinese researchers have focused on the relationship between social class and education, social mobility and higher education and social stratification and higher education choice. Sheng elaborated on the research approaches, sampling and data collection techniques and procedure. Using a mixed methods approach, she investigated the variation in students' educational attainment in terms of family background and explores educational inequality in relation to social stratification. Following these, she discussed several theories and the rationale that she chose Bourdieu's theory as conceptual framework in her study and then explained the conceptual terms in the theory in details. After that she introduced the structure of the book.

In the second chapter, the author discussed social class differences in educational expectations of parents and students regarding higher education based on quantitative and qualitative findings. Using quantitative analysis, the author examined if there are inter-class differences in terms of the students' and parents' expectations regarding higher education. Using qualitative analysis, the author explored what these differences are and what they reveal about urban China. The author applied binary logistic regression analysis. The dependent variable is students' educational expectations in terms of the highest level of academic degree that they are expected to acquire. The independent variables are (1) parental cultural capital in terms of father's education and mother's education, (2) family cultural capital in terms of the amount of non-reference books that a family possessed and the number of educational facilities, (3) the frequency with which students participate in cultural activities, (4) economic capital in terms of father's occupation and mother's occupation, (5) student's self-evaluation of family income, (6) degree of parental involvement in education, and (7) student's academic results. The results showed that seven variables were statistically significant. These variables are: father's occupation; students' self-evaluation of their family income level; father's years of education; mother's years of education; the degree of parental involvement; the level of students' cultural activities; and the number of non-reference books that the family possessed. The qualitative data strongly supported the quantitative findings. Parents' educational and economic background have a positive impact on children's high educational expectations and choice of subjects and universities. Interestingly, several middle class parents in Sheng's study were concerned about campus culture in selecting a university. On the other hand, working class parents have higher expectations for their children's higher education. However, their inferior economic and social capital prevented them from supporting their children's education to the fullest possible extent.

In the third chapter, the author described gender variations in parental involvement in terms of working class and middle class parents. The author discussed the roles of mothers and fathers in their children schooling and university choice separately. Sheng's interviews with all parents in the study consistently concluded that parental involvement in children's schooling is influenced by gender. Because fathers are too busy with their business and job-related social activities, mothers have more intimate relations with their children and participate in parents meetings, provide direct and effective guidance in school work, and are aware of and help to solve academic problems. Most of the middle class mothers in the study invest time, money, and energy (both mental

and emotional) in their children's schooling. The successful educational background of middle class mothers play an essential roles in their children's higher educational expectation and appropriate attitudes towards learning. On the other hand, working class mothers in the study are not confident to involve in their children's academic matter and uncertain how to help their children for university entry because of their low social, cultural and economic capitals. The majority of working class fathers in the study had less direct involvement in their children's daily schooling although they have strong expectations for their children higher education. They come home very late (on average, around midnight) from work when their kids are already asleep. Even when they have time, their poor educational background prevent them helping their children school work. Likewise, the middle class fathers also have little time to be directly involved with their children's daily schooling. But unlike working class fathers, they regularly discuss with their wives about children's education, supervising progress through their wives. They made important decisions about their children secondary school and higher education choices. Their higher educational background prepares them to be able to guide their children to have a better education. This chapter also revealed that transmission of culture capital is gendered in the Chinese society. Furthermore, it highlighted that Chinese mothers of today equally emphasize both of their sons' and daughters' education unlike the situation of 20 or 30 years ago.

In the fourth chapter, the author discussed the impact of cultural capital on educational performance and higher education choice, the ways middle class mothers make family cultural capital works for their children and effective parental involvement in terms of social class. Sheng's discussion on these topics draws on both quantitative and qualitative data. First she described the results of ordinal logistic regression of students' self-estimation of their academic results. The results showed that family income level, mother's education, the level of family cultural activities and students' educational expectations were highly associated with student academic performance. It was interesting that the effects of level of family cultural activities and students' educational expectations were not positively significant when mother's education variable is controlled. Second, she discussed the findings of qualitative analysis. The qualitative data revealed that cultural capital is accumulated and transferred not only through access to rich cultural resources but also through effective parental involvement. Sheng found four strategies employed by highly educated middle class mothers in her study in order to enhance their children education: developing reading habits, developing study habits, setting study goals for children, and providing appropriate and positive assessment. Then Sheng discussed the parental involvement of working class mothers. In contrast with middle class mother, working class mothers in the study were not able to train their children to have reading habits, good study habits and study goals. They encouraged their children to rely on school teachers for academic problems and university choice.

In the fifth chapter, Sheng discussed the volume of capital possessed by different social group, the four social factions within middle class, and the ways these social groups employ their capitals to support their children's educational attainment and higher education choice. The middle class parents in the study can be categorized into four types based on their possessions of different volumes of capital, social and economic capitals. The first category (Type I) includes middle-class parents who are intellectuals, such as professors, associate professors, lecturers, and schoolteachers. These parents generally have higher cultural capital and social capital in the sphere of education than economic capital compared to other middle-class families. They preferred to be directly involved in their children's university applications to improve their academic attainment by using their privileged cultural capital. Their superior social networks in higher education helped them arrange their children's admission to a top university. Type II category comprised parents who were party and government officials. They had high social capital and moderate cultural and economic capital. These parents relied on their high volume of social capital together with cultural and economic capital in the involvement of their children's higher education choices. Type III category consisted of parents who worked in IT, international firms, businesses, and consulting. Although they had a higher income and possessed average-to-high cultural capital, their social capital may have been less powerful and effective than that of Party and government officials and intelligentsia. Their busy schedules and business trips prohibited them from being involved in their children's education. In order to compensate for their lack of social capital and help their children compete for university places, they prefer to invest heavily in sending their children to study at elite schools which had high social and educational status. The fourth category is made up of parents who were private business owners and independent businessmen. They have a high volume of economic capital but the possession of their volume of social and cultural capital was complex. Like Type III parents, they preferred to invest large sums of money in sending their children to a national key-point school or a private school with a favorable institutional habitus for entry to top universities. These parents were also eager to send their children to a selective university abroad. Finally, Sheng's described how working class parents' possessions of low volume of capitals negatively affect their

children educational attainment. Based on her findings, Sheng claimed that the three capitals played a vital role in the process of higher education choice.

In the sixth chapter, Sheng discussed the habitus, namely family habitus and institutional habitus and the influences of habitus in decision making process of higher education in terms of social class. She argued that different class habitus affected how parents made decisions leading to different responses to the choices of subjects and universities. Middle class parents' familial habitus, in terms of a complex of dispositions, attitudes and relationships to the field of higher education contributes significantly to the transmission of parents' cultural capital to children. The habitus, embodied in their daily activities within the family such as everyday language and behavior relating to academic work shaped their children positive attitudes toward study which had eventually contributed to their academic progress. The interview results showed that working-class applicants only benefited from institutional habitus rather than their familial habitus. Middle-class students, on the other hand, were able to benefit greatly from a range of positive interacting influences arising from both familial habitus and institutional habitus.

In the last chapter, the author summarized the findings, discussed the application of Bourdieu's theory in a Chinese context, made suggestions for future research, and recommended changes to educational policy and practices. The author suggested future researchers obtain the actual scores of students in entrance examinations to assess their academic performance, examine the ways parents transfer their familial cultural capital by using quantitative approaches, and conduct more large scale quantitative and qualitative research on the topic using a different sample from various higher education institutions in China. The author also recommended that Chinese policymakers must acknowledge the educational inequality in relation to social classes in urban China. Additionally, the author demanded that the government and universities offer many scholarship opportunities for students from low income families and encouraged the banks and financial organizations to cooperate with the government to build up low-interest student loans. Finally, the key-point schools are advised to review their admission procedures to recruit a large number of students from low-income backgrounds.

Conclusion

This book provided an in-depth analysis of how educational inequalities are associated with social class differences in terms of parental involvement. It also elucidated an overview on how parental involvement is gendered in terms of social stratification. The book painted a clear picture of the Chinese competitive arena in the sphere of education between social classes and within the social class to mobilize their social status through educational qualification. It provided strong evidence that familial cultural capital and habitus, social capital, and economic capital are very influential factors in educational attainment and higher education choice. Moreover, it showed that these capitals contributed to the ways parents can effectively and directly involve themselves in their children's schooling, which results in life-long success in education. This book added invaluable knowledge to the literature by drawing on large scale analysis and including interview data of both parents and children in the context of China. The author presented every chapter in an organized way. The findings are thoroughly discussed, compared with previous findings, and supported by Bourdieu's theoretical concepts. I particularly recommend this book for academics in the field of sociology, educational sociology, and researchers who focus on higher education, parental involvement, and social classes, as well as policymakers who strive to provide educational opportunities for all students.

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