



# The Impact of Family Capital on Chinese Students' Access to Higher Education

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**Abstract.** In China, besides the government and schools, the family has attached increasing importance to the children's education. It is the existence of family capital that plays a vital role in affecting students' higher education to a certain extent. Through the research on family economic capital, family cultural capital, and family power capital respectively, this paper finds that the groups with disadvantaged family capital show an obvious imbalance in the quantity and quality of higher education. Family economic capital has a significant positive correlation with the quality and quantity of students' higher education, and it also has a positive effect on their acquisition of high-quality resources in the process of higher education and the selectivity of post-graduation development. Family cultural capital also positively impacts students' access to higher education. The influence of family power capital on students' access to higher education does not show a significant correlation, but it still positively affects children's access to higher education.

**Keywords:** Family capital · Higher education · Power capital

## 1 Introduction

AS the education policies become more and more equal, the impact of schools and society on students' access to higher education is gradually decreasing. In addition to the gaps in students' own abilities, there are still some differences in students' access to higher education. Therefore, family capital has become a vital factor in the emergence of differences in students' access to higher education that have to be found.

In academia, according to Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction and the social conflict theory, many scholars have done relative research on the impact of family capital on students' higher education acquisition. Through the data analysis, Zhong and Shen concluded that the distribution of high-quality higher education opportunities is still skewed toward the children of the superior social class, and the social stratification expands the unfairness of the starting point of higher education [1]. The capital accumulation of students' families can directly affect whether they can enter high-quality colleges and universities to obtain good higher education or not. Xie and Wang conducted research on college students in different regions for families of different social classes, as well as the differences in children's higher education opportunities from the

perspective of subjects and majors [2, 3]. Cai and Wu also conducted a questionnaire survey on 1,611 college students in Xinjiang and concluded that differences in family background and social status and parental education have a certain impact on children's access to high-quality higher education, while in higher vocational colleges and universities, the impact smaller [4]. Family economic capital, family cultural capital, and family social capital all affect the proportion and quality of students' access to higher education from various aspects. In China, due to the different educational systems, there are some regional specificities, and the situation in each region is somewhat different. However, the majority of these studies are conducted from a certain perspective, differentiate from classes, or target at specific groups of students, such as students in rural areas. In this field of research, there is a lack of a systematic review of the impact of family capital on students' access to higher education in China from a macro perspective, which can give a general impact and focus on most Chinese students who have faced such an education gap. As a result, a broader and more comprehensive study of the impact of family capital on students' access to higher education is needed. Based on the above background, this paper will comprehensively analyze how family capital affects Chinese students' access to higher education from three perspectives: family economic capital, family cultural capital, and family power capital.

## **2 The Impact of Family Economic Capital on Higher Education**

Family economic capital is one of the most important factors that affect the students' higher education. And the economic capital of the family is mainly composed of the family income of the parents and the fixed assets. It has an impact on a child's stage of access to higher education, quality resources acquisition, and career options after graduation.

### **2.1 The Impact of Family Economic Capital on College Admission Opportunities**

Family economic capital shows a positive influence on the quality level of students' access to higher education opportunities. First, students from better-off families are more likely to be admitted to a high-quality university in China. According to the analysis of data from the study of Qin, Guo and Liu, the proportion of top scholar from families with poor financial status has been decreasing year by year in the last decade, and most of the rest come from families with good financial status [5]. It can be seen that, in addition to one's own efforts, the economic investment of the family of origin is also a very important factor in obtaining a good higher education. Secondly, there are also implications in terms of the diversity of opportunities for college admission choices. As for the students from well-off families, they can have more choices. In the choice of majors, they can choose majors according to their own advantages and interests, without considering the financial burden of their families as well as tuition fees. In addition, for colleges and universities, these students can also choose to study abroad, study in the places such as Hong Kong and Macau, or choose Sino-foreign cooperative schools with higher domestic fees to meet their academic needs. Thirdly, providing that they are not able to enter the university via their academic performance, these students also have the

capital to study in special ways, such as entering some private universities by means of capital investment, or go to a language school in advance to prepare for further study abroad.

On the contrary, as for students with the poor family economic condition, it is the only way to successfully enter the universities in China, which rely on their final grades. But they may still have many restrictions in their choice of majors. According to the conclusion of the survey conducted by Zhong and Lu, the distribution of students in different disciplines and majors is more and more stratified. The students of the better family economic background choose the popular and art majors more; while the children of the poor family economic capital choose the unpopular profession [6]. Due to family economic reasons, those students are generally more inclined to choose majors with lower tuition fees. For example, majors such as art and finance, which are expensive and require a certain parent's professional background, may rarely be chosen. And they are more likely to attach the importance to the major that will help them to find a job easily in the future, such as agriculture, nursing and teacher training.

## **2.2 The Impact of Family Economic Capital on Quality Educational Resources Acquisition**

The differences in family economic capital also have a certain impact on the differences in students' acquisition to quality resources in colleges and universities. Generally speaking, students with good family economic capital can more easily obtain high-quality resources. The access to resources is wider and the quality of resources is higher. The most important influence of the resources that students obtain in colleges and universities is the academic resources. In general, students with better family economic conditions can obtain more advanced and sufficient academic resources. Parents with more economic capital are willing to pay higher economic investment for their children's education, and provide them with some resource help according to their own occupational level. Therefore, these students can generally have a high-quality life in college, a more comfortable learning environment, and various advanced learning equipment to adapt to the current information-based learning methods. If they want, they also do not hesitate to pay to acquire high-level knowledge resources to expand their professional knowledge, as well as to obtain opportunities for higher-level academic research. There are also more opportunities offered to them to cultivate interest and improve themselves, to meet their spiritual needs.

Conversely, students with poor family economic conditions will mainly solve their basic living needs, and will adopt a more economical way in other expenditures. In comparison, they will obtain relatively few high-quality resources. However, the impact of this family economic capital is gradually diminishing. In recent years, with the improvement of scholarships, grants and loan systems by the government, society and schools, more financial aid has been provided to students from economically disadvantaged families, which enables many students with excellent academic performance to obtain more financial aid and thus have the opportunity to obtain more high-quality resources in all aspects [7]. Therefore, as the government pays more and more attention to educational

equity and the aid system become more and more perfect, the impact of family economic capital on students' access to high-quality resources in higher education will also become less and less.

### **2.3 The Impact of Family Economic Capital on the Career Choice of Graduating Students**

Today, higher education in China has gradually entered the stage of popularization. The number of college graduates is increasing and even showing explosive growth. As a result, the pressure of employment competition is also increasing. In addition to the school and graduates themselves, family factors have also become a very important factor, including family economic capital, which affects graduates' cognition and choice of future development and employment to a large extent. According to the research of Gao and Liu, there is a certain difference in the cognition of employment difficulties for college students with different family stocks of economic capital [8]. Also, through the investigation and data analysis on the "graduation plan" of 118 subjects, it is argued that the family economic capital represented by family economic status mainly affects the judgment of college students on the current employment situation. Students with better family economic capital will have more choices in employment and development, and among the wide range of choices, the choice of further study will account for a larger proportion [9]. In terms of the choice of employment, these students will also consider various factors. The difficulty of the job, opportunities for advancement, own interests and strengths, the pressure of work and many different aspects will all be taken into consideration. Students with good family economic capital do not need to worry about survival issues, so they have the ability and conditions to try. And because they already have a certain economic foundation, they will have higher spiritual and material pursuits, and will value higher treatment and broader development space. Therefore, most of them may choose decent jobs that seem to be more difficult, challenging and wider room for improvement. Even there are also some students who have family economic support choose to start their own business.

However, students with poor family economic capital mostly choose to work directly, and most of them choose relatively stable occupations. Through the analysis of the survey data of college students from 20 colleges and universities in Jiangsu Province, it is found that college graduates from low-income families will feel more employment pressure than college graduates from high-income families [8]. They need to earn money to meet their own life and also help their families to share certain economic pressures as soon as possible, so they enter the society at the moment they graduated in order to find suitable and stable jobs. Moreover, Yang claims that family economic capital is significantly negatively correlated with economical households [10]. It can be seen that students with less family economic capital have higher economic demand for work. Therefore, when they choose a job, most of them will take salary and stability as the first condition, and then consider other factors such as work intensity, work difficulty, further improvement and so on.

### 3 The Impact of Family Cultural Capital on Higher Education

Family cultural capital is also an essential factor affecting students' access to higher education. Unlike family economic capital, which is fixed, it is a capital that can be created and changed. Family cultural capital mainly includes three aspects: parents' education level, family professional capital, and family cultural environment. Among them, the parenting style, the handling of parental relationships, and the learning environment of students are three main parts of the family cultural environment.

#### 3.1 The Impact of Educational Level of Parents on Students' Access to Higher Education

Parents' education level is positively correlated with children's access to higher education. If parents have better education, higher education level, their children have a higher rate of entering higher education and a greater advantage in access to key universities and choice of advantageous majors. Based on data analysis of children's higher education and parents' education in Liu's Logit Probabilistic model, it is concluded that the education levels of fathers and mothers have a positive and significant correlation with the probability of their children's obtaining higher education, and a trend of increasing this effect over time is captured [11]. And according to Yang, when parents have a bachelor's degree or above, the rate of their children's access to various types of colleges and universities has increased significantly. There are relatively more opportunities to enter "211 Project" universities, independent colleges, and private undergraduate colleges, and the birth rates are as high as 14.33%, 11.16%, and 8.1%, respectively. However, in comparison, when parents only have primary school education or below, the rate of their children's access to "211 Project" colleges and universities is very low, only 0.24%. Most of them can only get admission opportunities in general public undergraduate colleges and public higher vocational colleges [12].

The reason for this phenomenon is, first of all, the influence of parents on children's learning assistance. Parents with better education are more able to help children complete their learning tasks better, answer their knowledge doubts, expand expertise and reduce the knowledge gaps. In this way, their children can keep up with the pace of school from an early age and lay a good foundation, so that they can learn more smoothly in the future. Moreover, well-educated parents can also pass on some of their educational experiences and excellent learning methods to their children, which can cultivate children's learning thinking and correct study habits, so that make it easier to enter colleges and universities to obtain higher education. The second is the influence of the importance attached to the education of their children. In general, well-educated parents may better understand the importance of education. They obtained the positions and resources they have today through a good education. Therefore, they are able to identify the pressures of contemporary society, take stock of the situation and understand that education is important for their children's future development. All in all, the parents who have a good education were positive both in the demands for their children's access to higher education and their support for obtaining it. In contrast, most parents with low levels of education have little concern for whether their children need a high education whilst ignoring the requirements and assistance for their children's education.

### **3.2 The Impact of Professional Cultural Capital on Students' Access to Higher Education**

In recent years, professional cultural capital has a certain influence on students' access to higher education and some special professional culture has an increasing influence on it. A large number of "artistic families" and "medical families" have emerged, and especially in China are some specialties with ancestral craftsmanship and technology, such as Chinese medicine and Chinese Kongfu. The professional cultural capital can affect students' access to higher education and their choice of higher education to a certain extent. Taking the medical family as an example, a research also confirms this objective fact. The study shows that among the 27,788 people who participated in the statistics, 14% of the physicians had one parent who is a physician, and the other 2.5% of the doctors had both parents as physicians, and this data is increasing year by year. Meanwhile, the number of physicians with collateral relatives who are physicians also increased significantly over time among the participating physicians. A descendant from a medical family is much more likely to become a doctor or to engage in medical research [13]. This is also a trend all over the world.

The impact of professional cultural capital on the future generations' access to higher education is mainly reflected in the four aspects below. The first thing is the strong professional atmosphere of the family. In addition to talent, children are more likely to be interested in things that are close to them. For instance, if parents and even grandparents are engaged in medical careers, their children will be nurtured by medical knowledge from an early age, which will also imperceptibly lay the foundation for the future. And the children will consciously feel and learn the knowledge, so as to leave a deep impression, so they will have a tendency to this profession for higher education, and it will be easier to obtain higher education in this major. Secondly, the parents themselves have certain expertise and will provide professional guidance for their children in learning relative areas, or even help them find more authoritative teachers for teaching, which lay a solid foundation for the access to higher education and future development. Third, parents with such professional cultural capital will have strong expectations for their children to continue to study in this area, hoping that their family major can be inherited, which may push their children to choose certain majors when they have access to high education. For example, some of China's intangible cultural heritage and ancestral craftsmanship, such as the production of velvet flowers, need to pass on. Last, genetics will also play a vital role to some extent. A sports family has the advantage of height and physical fitness so that the children from these families can work on sports more easily, compared with others. Even though many of them need to be cultivated in later life, the genes should not be ignored either.

### **3.3 The Impact of Family Cultural Environment on Students' Access to Higher Education**

The family cultural environment is also a very important factor in a student's access to higher education, especially during the period when Chinese students are preparing for the college entrance examinations. The better the cultural environment of the family, the

more advantageous it is for students to enter higher education and the better the quality of higher education they obtained. There are four aspects included.

Firstly, it is the student's learning environment. The learning environment here mainly contains hardware conditions and software conditions. On the one hand, provided that students have a comfortable learning space, sufficient learning resources and useful learning equipment, they will be handier and smoother in preparing for the college entrance examination. On the other hand, the noise in the learning environment and other things which can disturb or distract the students can also affect their concentration and learning efficiency at all times, thus affecting their achievement in higher education. Therefore, the better the family's learning environment is created, the greater the possibility of students having access to higher education.

The second one is the relationships between parents and between parents and children. Generally speaking, the more harmonious the family, the more communication and close relationship between parents and children, the higher the possibility of children entering higher education. A harmonious family atmosphere can reduce the distraction of students' energy during study and make their minds more peaceful so which can allow them to concentrate more on the learning as well as the preparation for higher education acquisition. Some families experience changes during the critical period for students to have access to higher education, which increases the possibility of psychological problems for students during this period. Therefore, it will affect their performance in the college entrance examination or other important tests so that reduce the possibility of obtaining higher education. Besides, if there is a conflict between parents and children during this period, quarrels, indifference and scolding between parents and children, it will lead to a negative effect on the critical period for students to enter colleges and universities.

Thirdly, parents' educational expectations for their children also influence whether students will choose to continue to obtain higher education. If parents have strong educational expectations for their children, the more likely it is that the children will go on to higher education. Also, the study found that the impact of educational expectations can compensate for the impact of interparental relationships and family economic capital. According to Ouyang, a study of seven students from single-mother families found that offspring with higher personal educational expectations performed better academically and were more likely to obtain higher education. Meanwhile, when single mothers have higher educational expectations for their offspring, the offspring of the family have higher educational levels. Furthermore, the interaction between parent-child educational expectations, in which both parents and children have the same high educational expectations, has a positive impact on the educational attainment of their offspring. That means if both the parents and the child have high educational expectations, the child may be more likely to receive higher education [14].

Finally, it is the parenting style that affects students' access to higher education. Xie et al. found that positive parenting styles (emotional warmth and understanding) were significantly positively related to academic performance, while negative parenting styles (punishment and harshness, excessive interference and overprotection, favoritism, rejection and denial) were significantly negatively related to academic performance [15].

And the impact of this parenting style was also moderated by age, with the positive association between positive parenting style and academic performance increasing with age. Therefore, especially in high school, parents who treat their children in an appropriate and positive style can increase the likelihood that passes the college entrance exams and obtain higher education.

## **4 The Impact of Family Power Capital on Higher Education**

In this paper, family power capital mainly includes family political capital and family social capital. It refers to the social status of parents and the power advantage of their occupation. It can also refer to the convenience of obtaining resources and utilizing certain special powers through social relations. Differences in social status will lead to differences in power capital, thus affecting the results of higher education acquisition for the students to a certain extent.

### **4.1 The Role of Family Power Capital**

Compared with family economic capital and cultural capital, the impact of family power capital on students' access to higher education does not show a significant positive or negative correlation. In previous studies on this issue, the researchers removed some confounding factors and only analyzed parents who held different administrative positions. It can be found that the administrative level of the position held by the parents is indeed positively correlated with the difference in their children's access to higher education [16]. As a result, to a certain extent, the higher the social status of the parents, the higher the education level of the students whose families have more power capital, and the higher the proportion of obtaining higher education.

At the same time, with the continuous advancement of the college entrance examination policy and the emphasis on education equality, the negative influence of the so-called "relationship" of this kind of power capital or social capital on higher education still exists. Inequalities in access to higher education have also persisted. According to the data analysis in Liu Zhimin's research, it is found that family power capital directly affects the advantages of children in obtaining higher education opportunities. When higher education opportunities are generally limited, the children of the advantageous social class will have an advantage in the quantity of higher education. And if higher education is expanded and popularized to a certain extent as well as the educational opportunities are generally increased, the children of the advantageous social class will receive more high-quality higher education resources and has a significant advantage in the quality of higher education [17]. Therefore, although China's college entrance examination policy makes the admission to higher education follow the principle that everyone has a uniform standard based on scores when they choose universities, it seems to be superficial equality.

### **4.2 The Disadvantage of Weak Family Power Capital**

As for low-class families, because of the lack of power capital, they do not have many contacts, and cannot obtain privileges as well as sufficient resources. Students with weak



family power capital have suffered a certain unfair treatment in higher education. First, this effect lies in the stage of access to higher education. Some children from lower-class families may not be able to enter the university that they have been admitted to by their own efforts for higher education. In the early years of China, there was a phenomenon called “replacement of life”. After some students from low-class families succeeded in being admitted to excellent universities, they were impersonated by students with powerful parents and went to university. Finally, their lives were replaced by those students with social power. Although such incidents have been severely cracked down, some still exist quietly in some underdeveloped areas. In a study on the distribution of the occupational types of the college student’s parents and the social relations they used when filling in their voluntary reports, it is found that the social relations used by these rural candidates when filling in their voluntary reports were mainly relatives (46.98%) and teachers (33.40%), only a small number of people can rely on the help of their parents, and most of them only stay in the province for undergraduate studies [18]. It can be seen that these children with less family power capital have very limited access to resources and are at a disadvantage in the competition for higher education.

Moreover, the influence of parental power and social connections will continue even after higher education. The outcomes of students in different classes after higher education are unequal. Providing that the father is a high-ranking person with great power, his children can find a good job more easily, even if their education and ability may not meet the requirements of the job, which reflects the real inequity that extends from higher education. On account of their parents’ power, with the help and instigation of which, the promotion of the sons and daughters will go smoothly. On the other hand, those students whose parents have little power not only need to rely on their own efforts and abilities but also may face the risk of being squeezed out by powerful ones. Generally speaking, fathers’ occupations are administrators, managers, and professional technicians, and their children’s job implementation rate and enrollment rate are higher than the average. While the father’s occupation is a farmer, individual industrial and commercial personnel, commercial service personnel, and retired and unemployed persons, the child’s job implementation rate and enrollment rate are both lower than the average level.

### **4.3 Inequity Caused by Family Power Capital**

This difference in family power capital affects the equality of students’ access to higher education not only temporarily but also triggers a series of transmissible effects. The first is the continuous division of social classes according to social reproduction. Bourdieu’s theory of cultural reproduction sees higher education as a mechanism for the reproduction of social inequality. In his view, the purpose of education was no longer noble. It was not to promote mobility between classes, but to reproduce and reinforce the class hierarchy of capitalist society. And the main purpose of teaching is not to impart knowledge and develop abilities but to develop habits and maintain social structures [19]. Therefore, higher education is an important factor affecting social reproduction and maintaining existing social inequalities. It is precisely because of the inequality of higher education influenced by power that keeps the phenomenon of “the son of a peasant is still a peasant” from being alleviated. The children of professional elites are more likely to become elites

in the future, however, it is more difficult for the people of the working and peasant classes to become elites.

Secondly, due to the influence of power capital, the inequality in higher education has deepened the educational gap and violated the principle of educational equality. As long as power capital exists and plays a certain role, the vision of educational equality will not be realized, no matter how many supported policies are added. If the government does not fundamentally solve the problem that power capital keeps affecting the higher education of students, it is impossible to achieve true educational justice at all, especially in the period of higher education. Higher education is a watershed as well as an accelerator that widens the educational gap. It can give those who receive high-quality higher education advantages in further education and splendid capacity, while those who obtain low-quality higher education or even no higher education stop there.

The third is the phenomenon of increasing intergenerational benefits. The influence of power capital does not only exist in one generation, and even causes a vicious circle, because power is usually extremely expansive. When children obtain a high-quality higher education with the help of their parents' power, until they obtain a good position and reach a certain status, they will have corresponding power capital through which they can help their offspring to obtain good higher education as well. Although the phenomenon of "hereditary" has long been avoided in contemporary society, in the unspoken rules of higher education acquisition, power is hereditary along with "birth", showing an increasing marginal benefit effect, which affects children's higher education acquisition from generation to generation.

## 5 Conclusion

Family capital has a non-negligible impact on students' access to higher education. Different categories of family capital have different effects on students' access to higher education, and also different stages of students' access to higher education. The influence of family economic capital on the quality and quantity of higher education obtained by students has a significant positive correlation. In general, the better the family's economic capital, the higher the probability of its children obtaining higher education, and the better quality of higher education. Moreover, family economic capital also affects the choice in higher education. Students from families with abundant economic capital will have more choices for the acquisition of higher education and development after graduation, and they will think about more aspects as the basis. And in the process of higher education, it is also more advantageous for the students with strong family economic capital to obtain high-quality resources. Family cultural capital also affects children's access to higher education from different aspects. The first is that the educational level of parents plays a positive role in their children's access to high-quality higher education. Secondly, professional culture has a certain influence on their choice of higher education. Students with a certain family professional cultural capital are more tend to choose family-related majors in higher education and future development, thus achieving family inheritance. Third, the impact of the family environment can make up for the impact of the weak family economic capital and the low educational level of the parents on the children. The family environment can be created and changed, and a good family environment can

play a very positive role in children's access to higher education. The influence of family power capital on children's access to higher education showed a non-significant positive correlation. It is through some means that their children's access to higher education can be changed. This paper can provide parents with a reference to help them better understand how family capital can promote children's good higher education. It can also provide the government with an overall macro theoretical basis as a direction to implement some relevant policies and assistance plans and can give background support for further research to improve disparities in higher education in China. Therefore, it is hoped that in the future, there will be research on how to solve this kind of impact on the basis of this paper, and corresponding solutions will be proposed, in order to reduce educational class division and educational differences.

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