Unraveling the Layers of Inequality Among Chinese International High School Students

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Abstract. China's education system encompasses both regular and international high schools, catering to students seeking a global education experience. However, the association of international education with high costs raises concerns about educational inequality. This essay delves into the problem of educational inequality within Chinese international secondary high schools, employing an interdisciplinary socio-political perspective that considers both economic and cultural factors. Drawing upon Michael Sandel's educational theory and Pierre Bourdieu's examination of cultural capital and habitus, this research identifies two primary factors contributing to educational inequality. Firstly, regional wealth disparities and economic differences among individuals can result in unequal access to international education opportunities. Secondly, differences in the possession and utilization of cultural capital among students attending Chinese international schools further exacerbate these inequalities. Despite these challenges, the analysis highlights the potential for resolution. Collaboration between governments, schools, and individuals is essential to build a more equitable international education landscape. Policymakers may focus on providing financial support and scholarships to economically disadvantaged students, ensuring that no student is denied access based on financial constraints. Moreover, schools can implement inclusive admission practices and bridge programs to support students from diverse backgrounds. Emphasizing cultural competence within the curriculum can also help minimize cultural capital disparities and promote a more inclusive learning environment. Ultimately, by acknowledging and addressing the underlying factors that contribute to educational inequality, Chinese international high schools can become catalysts for positive change and provide a level playing field for students aspiring to gain a global education experience.

Keywords: Inequality, China, International High School Students.

1. Introduction

China's education system consists of a wide array of educational institutions, ranging from traditional high schools to international schools. Regular high schools offer a standard national curriculum and are required to take Gaokao, the Chinese National College Entrance Examination, to pursue further education [1].

On the other hand, international schools provide international curricula such as the International Baccalaureate (IB), Advanced Placement (AP) programs, and British IGCSE and A-Levels, catering to students' demand for global education. In most cases, the expenditure on international education is drastically high, and the amount of money and resources highly determines the educational outcomes for students attending international schools. In addition, most students who attend international high schools will waive their rights to attend the Gaokao. The renunciation of the Chinese College Entrance Examination indicates their undergrad preference is mostly abroad, in which the tuition and living expenses may also be high. The large involvement of economic, social, and cultural capital in international education has consistently drawn criticism of inequality.

Currently, there is a significant body of literature dedicated to examining the inequality within international education. However, most of these studies primarily focus on the international education systems in North America and Europe, where international education is more prevalent compared to China. These studies often highlight the unfair treatment or discrimination faced by Chinese students or the Chinese diaspora in Western countries. However, there is a lack of research exploring how Chinese individuals in China respond to international education. Moreover, existing studies on

educational inequality in China predominantly center around the disparities arising from regional and urban-rural differences in regular high schools. The research gap addressed by this essay lies in the researcher's integration of international education within the Chinese context, along with the incorporation of classical social theories (e.g. meritocracy, fields, etc.) as the analytical framework.

In general, based on the existing literature and data, this essay investigates the educational inequalities faced by international students in China and proposes innovative methods to promote educational equality. The research aims to analyze the problem from an interdisciplinary socio-educational perspective, which has Michael Sandel's educational theory and Pierre Bourdieu's examination of cultural capital and habitus as the analytical basis. Also, this essay will also include the perspective of different roles (students, schools, parents, governments) on educational streamlining. By gaining a comprehensive understanding of educational inequality among Chinese international schools, valuable recommendations will be provided on how to execute equal distribution of resources and how to improve the educational experiences in general.

2. The Influence of Economic Capitals on Education

In this section, how unequal wealth causes educational inequality will be discussed. The author attempts to divide the wealth distribution into two different scopes: macro, which is how the regional wealth inequality influences educational outcomes, and micro, which focuses on how the wealth level of individuals and parents affects children's educational outcomes.

From a macro perspective, regional inequality largely directs to educational inequality. The wealthy, and largely developed cities, often share international educational resources of the best quality. In China, the wealth distribution follows a coast/inland dualism. Coastal Chinese provinces, which includes Beijing, Shanghai, Guangdong corresponds to a higher level of development and openness [2]. This regional wealth pattern is also reflected in education distribution: The educational resources are generally better in the eastern coastal region.

The best educational resources are predominantly concentrated in two cities, Beijing and Shanghai, which is the capital city and major global entrepreneurial hub of China [3]. The "Hurun Education Top International Schools in China 2022" survey, which involved one-on-one questionnaires with 353 international education experts and employed a peer evaluation method, asked the experts to nominate up to five international schools they considered most reputable in East China, North China, South China, and the western regions. The survey results clearly demonstrate the dominant position of Beijing and Shanghai in international education. Among the top 10 international schools, three are from Shanghai, and two are from Beijing, accounting for half of the ranking. This trend continues when expanding the scope to the top 60 schools, with 15 from Shanghai and 17 from Beijing. Thus, schools in Beijing and Shanghai make up more than 50 percent of the top international schools in China [4]. Another prestigious ranking, the Forbes China's International School Annual Selection, also shows regional educational inequality. Beijing has the highest number of schools among the top 10, with six schools selected. Among the top 50 schools, Shanghai has the most representation, with a total of 13 schools, followed by Beijing with 11 schools [5].

Besides the leading cities of Beijing and Shanghai, which are known for their prominent international education offerings, other cities with exceptional international education resources have also demonstrated impressive economic growth. According to the "HKPEP Top 100 Global International Schools in Education Competitiveness 2023" report published by Hong Kong Professional Education Press, mainland China boasts a total of 17 schools on the list, with Beijing hosting three schools and Shanghai astonishingly hosting nine schools [6]. The remaining five spots are distributed among Nanjing, Guangzhou, Xi'an, Wuhan, and Shenzhen, which respectively serve as the capital cities of Jiangsu, Guangdong, Shaanxi, Hubei, and one of China's three major national financial centers [7]. Out of the seven cities mentioned, four cities rank among the top ten nationwide in terms of per capita GDP, surpassing an impressive figure of 179,000 yuan. Furthermore, six cities secured positions within the top ten in terms of total GDP, exceeding a remarkable value of 1,600

billion yuan [8]. When compared to the relatively limited and less comprehensive international education resources available in other cities, these economically thriving cities undoubtedly offer a wide range of high-quality educational opportunities on the international stage.

3. A Challenge of Family Investment

Due to the different educational preferences within the Chinese international high school system, the majority of Chinese students enrolled in international high schools voluntarily give up their quotas for the national college entrance examination (Gaokao) and choose to pursue higher education abroad [1]. It is worth noticing that the funding for studying at foreign universities is predominantly provided by the students' families but not helped by the government. According to data from the Ministry of Education, in 2007, self-financed students accounted for 90% of all student migrants (129,000 out of 144,000), while government-sponsored students represented 6%, and employer-dispatched students comprised 4% [9]. Since the expenses of studying abroad are borne by parents, the economic inequality among parents can affect their children's access to educational resources, consequently leading to disparities in educational outcomes.

An apt example of this would be the additional fees associated with out-of-school tutoring, extracurricular activities, competitions, and standardized tests. Taking the application process for undergraduate programs in the United States as an example, the TOEFL iBT® exams, which are required by most English-speaking universities, cost more than 2000 Chinese yuan ($290) to take [10]. An SAT test takes xxx to register and cannot be taken in mainland China. Mainland Chinese test-takers usually spend around ¥6000 (~$850) to ¥10000 (~$1420) for tickets, accommodations, and transportation to take tests in Hong Kong, Macao, and some over-sea countries. The expenditure can reach more than ¥3,0000 during the epidemic. While many international universities have adopted a test-optional policy for SAT/ACT scores during the application process, it is uncertain whether choosing not to submit these scores will reduce one's chances of being accepted. In fact, Colleges still favor applicants who hold high test scores over those who have none. According to New York Post, During the 2020-2021 application period, it was shown that nearly 90% of students accepted into Georgetown University's Class of 2025 provided test scores. At Vanderbilt University, 56.3% of applicants chose to submit test scores, and 61.1% of those admitted had applied with test scores [11].

Furthermore, to achieve relatively high scores, most students take multiple English proficiency and SAT tests, which can accumulate costs of over ten thousand yuan depending on different people.

Renowned political philosopher Michael Sandel has brought to light a disturbing reality of educational inequality in his influential work, "The Tyranny of Merit." Sandel exposes the covert strategies that some students employ during the college application process, known as the "side door." This clandestine pathway involves illicit practices such as falsifying test scores, athletic achievements, or even resorting to bribes, all facilitated by intermediaries. Sandel's meticulous investigation reveals the exorbitant costs associated with these "side door" maneuvers. For instance, securing an ideal college entrance exam score may require a staggering sum of $75,000, while bribing a Yale soccer coach could set one back $400,000. Meanwhile, manipulating SAT scores can come at a price tag of $15,000. These figures starkly underscore the troubling reality that money can significantly influence admission outcomes, perpetuating educational disparities [12].

The author contends that this phenomenon is not limited to the American education system but extends to international schools worldwide, including those in China. The desire for prestigious educational opportunities, coupled with the prevalent use of economic capital, makes the pursuit of the "side door" an unfortunate reality across borders.

The "side door" scam deprived qualified kids of the place they deserved, though another more ironic injustice was seen in college admission---- "The back door" a tunnel of getting into a dream university where no illegality was involved, but the money should be ready. A common example of this is the donation to the university. Knowing many American colleges accord kids of generous donors and famous alums, Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner had been accepted into Harvard despite

a modest academic achievement after his father donated $2.5 million to the university. In a similar vein, Trump himself openly disclosed contributing $1.5 million to the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania when his son and daughter enrolled there [12]. It is worth noting that such substantial donations, as exemplified by Kushner and Trump, are not common among the majority of American students seeking the "back door" route, and the same holds true in China. However, according to Michael Sandel's explanation, "going through the back door" is not limited to monetary donations. In reality, any action that legally increases one's chances of admission through economic capital can be considered a form of "going through the side door." Therefore, examples of "back door" approaches include repeatedly taking the ACT/SAT and TOEFL/IELTS exams to achieve higher scores or participating in paid summer programs and research investigations that enhance one's CV and provide an edge in the admissions process. These practices demonstrate how economic capital can influence one's admission prospects and underscore the role it plays in shaping educational outcomes.

To recapitulate, the more severe economic inequality is, the more possible the gap in education is. The relationship is pretty straightforward ---Money can be exchanged for educational opportunities and access. This transformation between economic and educational capital would not be so significant and conspicuous if the evaluation system is based on merits, which is "the means you get into [a good college] on your own". Though our educational success and failure today are not only focusing on this fair and equal "front door" but also highly dependent on the opportunity invested by money. This is not a good indication, since the global economic inequality has been widening these years. Though no ready data has been retrieved from Chinese officials, the widening economic inequality is a research topic well investigated in the United States. One research by Heather Boushey has shown that the top 1% have seen a nearly 300% increase in wealth since 1989, and only the top 10% have seen above-average income growth [13]. It is like the second gilded age-- A rise in income inequality leads to a rise in wealth inequality. More wealth means more return (fixed rates of return), which brings more income, giving a chance to create even more wealth to spend on their kids' education, transforming the economic capital into cultural and symbolic capital, laying out a foundation for their future generation to increase income and wealth. This is the loop for the wealthy; the loop for the poor is on the drastic contrary.

4. Analyzing Educational Inequality through a Cultural Perspective

The previous section discussed the significance of economic capital in relation to achieving success in education. However, it is important to note that having only money does not guarantee success. Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu conducted a study in 1960s France, revealing that the disparity between upper-class and working-class individuals was not solely based on wealth or income differences but also on their preferences and cultural capital [14].

Bourdieu introduced the concept of the "cultural field" to explain the dynamics of capital. He observed distinct tastes among different social classes and described them as different "habitus." Bourdieu argued that habitus, shaped from early years, influenced decision-making and reflected a person's social status, creating a distinction and distance between higher and lower-class groups [14]. Taste, according to Bourdieu, is cultivated through a person's cultural trajectory, primarily influenced by family and education. This leads individuals to seek a social status aligned with their well-educated background, behaving in an elegant manner and setting themselves apart from others.

In terms of education, higher-class families and schools provide a different kind of education to the next generation compared to lower-class families. For instance, individuals educated at prestigious schools acquire tastes that reflect the values of the institution. It can be concluded that taste is not solely determined by personal development or efforts to improve one's taste but rather influenced by cultural background, particularly family and education [15].

Research data from the New Oriental Study Abroad White Paper (2022) supports this notion. The proportion of highly educated parents among prospective international students is increasing year by

year. Parents with bachelor's degrees make up 40% of the total, while those with master's degrees or above reach a historical high of 15%. Moreover, 13.4% of the parents have overseas education backgrounds, indicating a higher emphasis on investing in their children's education and support for studying abroad among families with relatively higher education levels [16].

From a practical perspective, parents' cultural capital can influence their children's outcomes in international education and their probability of gaining admission to prestigious universities. College admissions often consider students' activities during high school, such as research projects or participation in artistic endeavors. Parents with cultural capital can provide the necessary knowledge or access to social networks that connect their children with professionals in these fields, enhancing their chances of success. Additionally, specific cultural capital is essential for participating in aesthetic and entertainment activities like music and art.

Bourdieu categorized cultural capital into three forms: embodied state, objectified state, and institutionalized state. The institutionalized state refers to recognized certificates or licenses that significantly contribute to the transformation of economic capital and educational outcomes [15]. For example, holding a degree from a renowned overseas university can increase job prospects and salary potential. Moreover, institutional cultural capital can influence the educational outcomes of family members, even without economic capital as an intermediary. College applications often inquire about family members who have attended the same institution, indicating a higher chance of admission for applicants with such connections.

In conclusion, the analysis of educational inequality through a cultural perspective reveals the recursive relationship between cultural and economic capital. Bourdieu's work emphasizes that cultural capital and economic capital are transformational [15]. Wealthy individuals can offer their children opportunities to study abroad or attend exclusive schools, thereby accumulating cultural capital. The qualifications and experiences gained through education can lead to high-wage occupations and further accumulation of economic capital. Thus, the loop between cultural and economic capital influences the educational outcomes of individuals and perpetuates educational inequality.

5. Suggestions and Solutions

From a government perspective, addressing regional disparities and ensuring an equitable distribution of educational resources across different areas is of paramount importance. While regulating the tuition fees of all international schools and tutoring classes may not be feasible, the public sector can consider establishing guidelines that define both upper tuition fees.

International high schools should prioritize the allocation of their funds toward improving educational resources. It is crucial for them to offer a wider range of elective courses and enhance the quality of English instruction. This would reduce the need for students to spend excessive amounts of money seeking external academic support.

To mitigate the impact of inequality, universities, especially in America, can implement affirmative policies that take income into account [12]. Many universities have already begun adopting affirmative action in their admissions process as a means to address persistent unfairness. For instance, Vanderbilt University, as stated on its official website, is committed to equal opportunity and affirmative action with the aim of addressing inequities [16].

Bourdieu's theory emphasizes the significant role of the family in an individual's acquisition of cultural capital. Parents play a crucial role in addressing the negative effects of educational inequality. Firstly, parents should recognize that college admissions are not solely determined by financial resources and should avoid excessive spending on superficial activities. Instead, students can engage in community-based initiatives that bring about meaningful social change without requiring significant financial investment. Secondly, parents should understand the essential role of home education in guiding their children's development. To sum up, by understanding that college

admissions are not solely determined by financial resources and by emphasizing the importance of home education, parents can empower their children to overcome barriers and succeed academically.

6. Conclusion

There exists educational inequality among international high school students, primarily driven by economic and cultural capital. Economic capital influences education through regional wealth disparities and individual financial resources, resulting in unequal educational opportunities and resources for students from different regions and families. Cultural capital, on the other hand, shapes students' tastes and aspirations based on their family backgrounds and educational preferences, further exacerbating social divisions within education. Resolving these inequalities requires collective efforts from the government, schools, and parents to promote fairness in education by reducing regional disparities, implementing fair tuition policies, and ensuring equal opportunities. Additionally, parents should prioritize cultivating their children's intrinsic qualities, encouraging their participation in community activities, and guiding the development of their cultural capital to provide equal opportunities for all students.

There are two main contributions to this essay. Firstly, this paper unveils the phenomenon of educational inequality among Chinese students in international schools through the analytical framework of sociology. The sociological perspective enables us to better understand the roots and mechanisms behind these inequalities. By revealing the impact of different regions and family backgrounds on students' educational opportunities and resource allocation, we come to recognize the role of economic and cultural capital in educational inequality. Secondly, this paper fills the research gap in the study of educational inequality in Chinese international schools. While research on domestic educational inequality has been relatively extensive, studies focusing on inequality within international schools are limited. The author's analysis and proposed solutions provide new insights and directions for research in this field.

Nonetheless, this study still leaves several inherent limitations for future researchers to research on. Firstly, from a methodological standpoint, this article relies solely on secondary research, lacking the inclusion of original experimental designs or surveys. Secondly, the analysis in this article is significantly influenced by the author's educational background. The inspiration for this study stems from the author's observations of international education in Jinan, Shandong, potentially introducing a limited perspective that may overlook alternative viewpoints. As a result, this article primarily offers a sociological lens for understanding the phenomenon of educational inequality in Chinese international education. Moving forward, it is crucial to explore broader research directions encompassing the imbalance in Chinese international education through comprehensive surveys and statistical investigations. Such endeavors will provide a more comprehensive understanding of the complex factors contributing to educational inequality.

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