

# EDUCATION FEVER IN CHINA: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CULTURAL CAPITAL FOR IDEAS OF CLASS AND STATUS

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In September 2018, the story of an elite elementary school in Suzhou went viral on WeChat and Weibo in a matter of days. The campus had been divided in two areas by a fence: on one side were 800 rural migrant students and on the other 400 students from local wealthy families who own expensive apartments near the school. The complaints that caused the story to go viral originated from the rich parents who did not want their children sharing exclusive educational resources with rural migrant students with no local hukou (户口). The rural students in question are all between 8 and 12 years old and were previously enrolled in a local “migrant school”. After that school closed, all of its 800 students were transferred to the nearest school that was able to receive such a high number of students: the exclusive experimental elementary school of Qixi. At the end of August, the rich parents who had spent nearly 28,000 RMB/sqm (about 3,500 EUR/sqm) to purchase an apartment in that neighborhood

started to feel threatened because they perceived their children’s academic success to be now in danger due to the presence of unqualified students. The parents also complained that the situation was unfair: after all they had invested to grant their children an exclusive education, they did not want to share their privileges with the migrants.

One of the core issues behind the heated debate on education exclusiveness rights is the fact that, in most cities in China, schooling and housing are very closely connected. This connection is due to two policies: the “neighborhood-school policy”, which assigns students to a list of predetermined neighborhood schools, and the one commonly referred to as the “tenant discrimination policy”, a regulation that favors homeowners as opposed to renters by placing them higher in school enrollment rankings. Hence, it is not uncommon for

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Rural students are attending their English class in a local elementary school in Xingfu village (幸福村), Zhejiang province.



Chinese middle-class families to purchase a home in a neighborhood known for a good school in order to gain access to high-quality education.

An inevitable consequence is a *de facto* capitalization of school quality, meaning that the presence of a so-called “Key School” indirectly increases a neighborhood’s housing prices, thereby causing phenomena of residential segregation, being that only middle- and upper-class families are able to afford housing in Key School-neighborhoods and, therefore, to afford Key School-education. This situation, specific to the Chinese context, coupled with the enrollment of 800 rural migrant students, has generated rage and profound dissatisfaction among wealthy parents whose children are attending the elite school in Suzhou, parents who feel that the exclusiveness and status they have gained by moving into an elite neighborhood is being threatened by unqualified migrants.

Schools in China can indirectly affect a neighborhood’s and a community’s symbolic capital, thereby increasing a family’s perception of status and social class by associating them to high-end neighborhoods. Furthermore, high-quality schools can also affect status and social class through the supply of cultural capital, which can be obtained and enhanced by receiving education in the best schools.

Middle-class families are able to afford expensive housing in high-end neighborhoods and represent the social class that shares the strongest inclination towards human capital investment. Such a predisposition explains why wealthier families are willing to pay for high-quality education and for all that is required in order to achieve it.

Cultural capital, as well as being the primary source of *suzhi* (素质), or personal quality, can also be converted into economic, symbolic and social capital. Middle-class families in China are therefore willing to spend a small fortune on their children’s education: in China, this “education fever” is a widespread phenomenon and reflects one of the renowned characteristics of Chinese middle class, that is pragmatism. Middle-class members generally believe that spending money on their children’s education potentially has a higher return on investment than any luxury good: today, the idea of comparing luxury goods to show off social status seems to be outdated and Chinese parents prefer comparing their children’s education level instead.

What emerges is that education is paramount for middle-class families. However, education is only one aspect of cultural capital, which consists of a

wider set of social assets (education, intellect, style of speech and dress, etc.), promotes social mobility in a stratified society, and confers social status and power.

The possession of cultural capital is also important because it affects how middle-class members can distinguish themselves from the working class and poorer migrant workers. Cultural capital, in fact, generates not only *suzhi*, but also *wenming* (文明), civilization, and being a high-quality and civilized individual are considered two key elements for securing middle-class belonging in China.

In its propaganda, the Chinese government often uses these two concepts in an attempt to promote ideas of social distinction, also when it comes to residential planning. For example, gated communities and residential enclaves are used with the purpose of social clustering and engineering: the *wenming xiaoqu* (文明小区), award, earned by the “most civilized” residential communities, serves the purpose of exemplary neighborhood setting. Being “civilized” is therefore the element that sets apart the middle class in juxtaposition to the lower

classes, which are instead archetypically considered rude in their manners. *Suzhi* and *wenming* are both extremely important: a high economic capital alone does not make an individual a member of the middle class. In fact, while reaching a “middle-class” status

is seen as an ideal goal, terms such as “new rich” have increasingly been used as derogatory terms to indicate individuals who have accumulated wealth but are still low-quality and largely uncivilized.

An academic degree and a good job can allow middle-class individuals to increase all of their four types of capital (economic, cultural, symbolic and social), but what really sets them apart from the lower classes is the acquisition of cultural capital, from which the other three types derive. The significance of acquiring cultural capital is cause for the pursuit of exclusiveness by securing the best education opportunities, a goal that requires investment and sacrifice and for which Chinese parents are willing to fight.



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