

How does cultural Capital work in Chinese society.

Abstract

In this research, we firstly attempt to define “cultural capital” in China, compare to the one that Bourdieu once suggested, if cultural capital still remain the same after all these years; and if it remains the same in an eastern country. By conducting 4 in-depth interviews with 4 pair of parents from different social classes, we also want to know how cultural capital works; how is it transmitted from generation to another, is it still confined to a certain cohort of people; and finally how does it help children to gain high social status and high economic capital. By using ethnographic data, we hope that the answers to all these questions can be roughly answered and give us a picture of cultural capital in China.

Literature review

Research on Cultural Capital in China is very rare, the only one found is the book called *Cultural Capital and Status Attainment: An Empirical Study Based on Data from Shanghai*. Based on fairly quantitative data, it argues that the more cultural capital one has, the more likely one is to enter a higher stratum. In addition, it reveals that parental accumulation of cultural capital is proportionately linked to their children’s length of education. Also, a family’s education, cultural ambience and cultural investment have a sustained and stable impact on status attainment. Moreover, this book also points out that cultural capital provides an effective way for the lower strata of society to achieve upward social mobility.

Bourdieu’s book *The Forms of Capital* which is published in 1986 is basically the most influential work in this area. His concept of cultural capital refers to the collection of symbolic elements such as skills, tastes, posture, clothing, mannerisms, material belongings, credentials, etc. that one acquires through being part of a particular social class. But Bourdieu also points out that cultural capital is a major source of social inequality. Certain forms of cultural capital

are valued over others, and can help or hinder one's social mobility just as much as income or wealth.

According to Bourdieu, cultural capital comes in three forms—embodied, objectified, and institutionalized. One's accent or dialect is an example of embodied cultural capital, while a luxury car or a record collection is an example of objectified cultural capital. In its institutionalized form, cultural capital refers to credentials and qualifications such as degrees or titles.

Habitus is one of Bourdieu's most influential yet ambiguous concepts. Bourdieu explains it by using sports metaphors, such as a "feel for the game." Just like a skilled baseball player "just knows" when to swing a fastball without consciously thinking about it. *Habitus* also extends to our "taste" for cultural objects such as art, food, and clothing. In one of his major works, *Distinction*, Bourdieu links French citizens' tastes in art to their social class positions, forcefully arguing that aesthetic sensibilities are shaped by the culturally ingrained *habitus*. Upper-class individuals, for example, have a taste for fine art because they have been exposed to and trained to appreciate it since a very early age, while working-class individuals have generally not had access to "high art" and thus haven't cultivated the *habitus* appropriate to the fine art "game."

The thing about the *habitus*, Bourdieu noted, was that it was so ingrained that people often mistook the feel for the game as natural instead of culturally developed. This often leads to justifying social inequality, because it is (mistakenly) believed that some people are naturally disposed to the finer things in life while others are not.

For example, in a study of English pupils in their final year of compulsory schooling, Sullivan (2001) examines students on a broad range of possible components of cultural capital, her data led her to suggest that the linguistic ability of students vary significantly and it is reflected on students' reading scores. This is mainly due to different levels of 'intellectual resources' which refers to cultural knowledge and lexical resources that the student's family provides during his/her upbringing.

Another qualitative research conducted by Patricia McDonough(1997) on how parental cultural capital can influences their children's college choice process. The research revealed that students who are first-generation begin to think about attend university much later than students whose parents went to universities. Besides that, parents' first-hand knowledge about college admission has been found to be very helpful to their children.

In addition, base on Annette Lareau(1988)'s in-depth qualitative study about 2 African-American families, it showed how middle-class parents constantly sought to improve their children's institutional outcomes, and the social skills they instilled in their children subconsciously, and also a taken-for-granted belief that they are entitled to use the skills.

Operationalization of key terms

Cultural capital

- institutionalized, widely shared, high status cultural signal (attitudes, preferences, formal knowledge, behaviours, goods and credentials) used for social and cultural exclusion
- cultural capital is that it allows culture to be used as a resource that provides access to scarce rewards, it is subject to monopolization, and, under certain conditions, may be transmitted from one generation to the next.

● Habitus

- It refers to the physical embodiment of cultural capital
- such as the deeply ingrained habits, skills, and dispositions that we possess due to our life experiences
- the 'feeling' of doing something without thinking consciously
- the 'feeling' for a certain type of situation, when in the right situation, habitus allows us to successfully navigate social environment.

● Elite

- with very high economic capital, high social capital, and highbrow cultural capital
- have extensive social contacts
- have properties with very high value

- are educated at top universities
- typical occupations: chief executive officer, marketing and sales directors, barrister, judges, dentists.
- **New affluent worker**
 - economically secure, without being well off
 - do not have extensive social contacts
 - have high scores of emerging culture, such as watching sports, going to gigs, using social media, etc.
 - do not attend highbrow culture, such as classical music and theatre.
 - people in this group are likely to come a working class background
 - typical occupations: electricians, postal worker, retail cashiers, plumbers, retail assistants.
- **CBD**: central business district

Methodology

In this research, we have chosen 4 pair of parents from 4 different social classes which are established middle class, traditional working class, elite and new affluent workers, so the sample should cover a wide range of social classes, and may show a great contrast in findings. However, we have only sample one pair of parents from each of these 4 social classes, so variations within these social classes were not detected, which means the results are still highly unrepresentative for each social class, in terms of age, occupation, income, cultural background and etc. Therefore, generalization of each social class should not be made.

The first two of the samples are taken in Zhejiang and the latter 2 are in Guangzhou, despite the fact that these 2 places are reasonably far from each other and it should have greater representativeness than doing the research alone in Shenzhen, the results, however, are still not representative enough for the whole China.

Each interview has lasted on average 2.5 hours, and chosen to be carried out in private, quiet environment, without the presence of their children. The interviews are all semi-structured, and conducted

following a interview schedule. Interviewers are allowed to provide further explanation of the questions whenever it is needed, however, this also takes away the objectivity because the researchers' values are involved, the ways that they ask and explain the questions may subconsciously give some implications which can influence the respondents' answer. Also, when asking the same questions to different interviewees, different articulation may be applied, which means generalization should not be applied to the whole population.

In addition, validity could be challenged, because lack of understanding of the questions and lack of understanding of the respondents's answer can create confusion for both sides, which may ultimately hinder the researchers from getting the right 'reason' of respondents' behaviour.

Moreover, a face-to-face interview also means it lacks anonymity. Respondent may 'help' the researcher by providing answers design to please, or, provide answers which 'make themselves look good' to protect their prestige, this is particularly true for people from privileged background.

Validity should be high since in-depth interviews allow the interviewers to establish verstehen, to get a true picture of interviewees' ideas and know the reason behind their behaviour. However, before the research, there are no relationships between the interviewees, so it's highly possible that the respondents may have lied to protect their privacy. Reliability is low, for researchers didn't ask standardized questions in the same order, so the results may not be consistent and suitable for comparison.

Interview Findings

The Huang Family (Guangzhou)

Both Mr.Huang and Mrs.Huang are at their 40s, and together they run a company which is currently doing very well. They live in an expansive apartment in the CBD in Guangzhou, which worth approximately 5 million pounds. Both of them come from affluent families with strong academic backgrounds, they are well educated,

one has a MBA and the other has a Doctor degree. They have a strong belief that education is paramount important for a child's upbringing, so they sent their fourteen-year-old daughter, Emily, to the top private school in Guangzhou.

Despite Emily's school is a boarding school, Mr. and Mrs Huang insist Emily to live with them so that they can supervise their daughter's study closely, and communicate with her daily. They don't fully trust the school since they believe there are certain things which school can't teach and won't teach. They want their daughter to stand out in the crowd, not only academically but also socially, and they are very proud of their daughter indeed.

Mrs.H: " Emily is the principal clarinetist in the orchestra, and besides that, she also plays golf, tennis, and she's a very good swimmer as well! We have sent her to many summer camps abroad, so that she can visit lots of museums and hopefully help her learn to appreciate those famous painting like her father and i do; to let her make new friends; practice English, and most importantly, to broaden her horizon. We don't really care about the expense since we can cover it anyway. Well, um... you know, ultimately, i think because it's necessary for her to be able to play a musical instrument, to be well-travelled, to be sociable, because you know, that's what every child does! Even my cleaner's boy can play violin!"

Interviewer: " Why do you think it is necessary for her to do all these additional, extra-curriculum activities? Any particular reasons?"

Mrs.H: "Well, me myself, as an employer, i know what the bosses are looking for when they are recruiting workers, i know exactly what kind of characteristics, qualifications and experience are preferred by the business, so i think it's perfectly normal for me, for any parents to do it, you know, to make sure that your children fits the expectation of the society, have a comfortable life and avoid as many failures as possible."

Mr. H: " And i have taken her to play golf since she was a little girl, you know, to see how it works."

Interviewer: " What do you mean by 'how it works', could you please explain it in more details?"

Mr.H: "Well, for businessman like me, we do our businesses at the golf court, because....and i think it's important to let her meet my partners, to build a relationship with them, with their children; and see how we chat, how we strike a deal, etc. Well, in the end, i just want her to pick up a style, a thing, you know, that make her stand out in the crowd, and somehow connect to people like Me and her mother naturally. "

Interviewer: " Do you think any of Emily's special talents and characteristics, like the ability to play clarinet, excellent manners, and the experience of going abroad help her in her school life? I mean like getting any awards or something."

Mrs.H: “Yes, of course! Emily has won many medals over these years. Last year, she went on a small tour with the school orchestra, they have raise lots of money to help disabled children, and when she got back to school, she was awarded! With extra 500RMB! I’m so proud of her. Also, hm, her teacher gives loads of compliment on her good behaviour at schools when i went to parent meeting at her school, you know, for being a model student.”

Interviewer: “What about her scores at school? Besides her hard work, are there any other reasons that can explain her outstanding scores at some subjects ?”

Mr.H: “ Well, i think there are. You see, because my father is a university professor, so i grew up reading loads of books and novels, my dad taught me how to appreciate the classical Chinese music, and yes, in our family, it’s a habit for us to talk about literatures, history, politics and etc over dinner. So i do believe that these conventions in our family contribute to Emily’s high score in Chinese, History and Music.”

From the above conversation, we can see that the to Mr. and Mrs. Huang, they themselves are instilled with a belief that “education is paramount important for a person’s upbringing”, partly due to their family backgrounds, partly due to their own business experience. They routinely train Emily so she can successfully fit in the upper-class world. Their methods of training includes purposefully involving her in many upper-class events, such as going to golf court with Mr.Huang and having dinner with Mr.Huang’s trading partners’ children.

As it is showed, Mr. Huang intentionally and directly trains his daughter to develop her own nascent social skills since very young age, and directly shows her how to pursue interests and negotiate with people in the positions of authority. In the interview, Mr.Huang openly pointed out that the aim of taking Emily to golf court is to let her pick up a ‘style’ which may actually refers to *Habitus*. This method of train her daughter corroborate Bourdieu’s theory of Habitus, which argues that because the cultural capital is deeply ingrained in children with upper-class background, so people often believe that some people are naturally disposed to these finer things in life, but in fact, they are ‘trained’ culturally to inherit this capital.

In addition, by letting Emily befriended with descendent of other upper-class families which could potentially underpin assortive

marriage, can be a way of transmitting their cultural capital, and strengthening social contacts.

Moreover, from Mrs.Huang's response, it reveals that from 'her own experience' she knows exactly how to get her daughter a high social status, and with the wish to do so, she purposefully expose Emily to many special curricula, which she considered is valued by upper-class in Chinese society. It should be notice that, without some costly activities such as constantly sending Emily to summer camp abroad could not been done without enough financial capital. So, in this case, the access to some cultural capital is still confined to the elite, which once again supports Bourdieu's theory of *Habitus*, which states that early and constant exposure to highbrow culture help cultivate *Habitus*. However, what came as a surprise is the fact that Mrs.Huang is also very competitive, her awareness of other social classes' investment in their children attempts to assure that Emily is always better than other children.

All these actions show how an elite family in China plan and strategize to transmit their cultural capital to their children, how they routinely train their children to 'inherit' their *Habitus*.

At the last part of this interview, Mr.Huang confirms the fact that cultural capital has helped Emily's study at school, and improved her technical skills such as reading and writing. In addition, we can see that Mrs.Huang's plan worked once again, her daughter's outstanding talents and good behaviour at school has successfully caught the teacher's attention and led to economic reward. All these benefits generated by cultural capital were proved to have the potential of lead one to economical reward, and by doing that, inequality between different social classes is therefore created and reinforced, which supports Bourdieu(1986)'s study.

It should be noticed that the concept of 'cultural capital' in this case has not been changed since Bourdieu suggested in 1986, which stills refers to the collection of symbolic elements such as skills, tastes, posture, clothing, mannerisms, material belongings, credentials, etc. that one acquires through being part of a particular

social class. In addition, from what Mrs.Huang has observed, high culture is no longer confined to a certain group of people, access to knowledge of classical music and arts fairly attainable, however, its existence still acts as one of those mechanisms which strengthens social exclusion and leads to the reproduction of economic inequality.

The Chan Family (Guangzhou)

Sixteen-year-old Cassie and her younger brother live with their parents, Mr.Chan and Mrs.Chan and their grandparents in a three-bedroom apartment near the city centre, the district they currently live in has been derelict for many years, lots of the amenities are worn out, but the services are still sufficiently provided and the place is highly accessible. Mr. Chan is an electrician who is the team leader at a factory which manufactures air conditioners. Mrs.Chan is a shop assistant who has worked in an large department store for 2 decades. Both Mr.Chan is very busy with their own work, he leaves at 7 a.m.and comes back at 9 p.m. As for Mrs.Chan, she leaves much later so she can stay and takes care of the children and do some housework before the store opens.Cassie attended the local high school like many of her peers did at the age of fifteen. She is a hard-working students who keeps a good record and loves to participate in school events. Besides school, Cassie has also signed up for the gift & talent class which is specially provided for students who scores highly at mathematics.

Mr.Chan: “I am very proud of Cassie, my girl, who shall have a good job in the future, a job which will be much better than her mother’s and mine. We don’t want her to live a life that i did, every night, her mother and i come home knackered, and the money we earn every month is just enough to cover all the spendings.”

Mrs.Chan: “ It has always been a shame that we couldn’t help with her school work, even though i really want to. She said i’m too stupid to help her with her homework, yeah, she really said that, and i know i can’t do anything about it since i dropped out of school early to earn money.”

Interviewer: “Besides the talented class at school, does Cassie have any other hobby? Like any musical instrument, piano, violin or others?”

Mrs.Chan: “ No, she doesn’t, but i do remember she once said she wanted to play piano when she was five, but we couldn’t afford to buy one because i just gave birth to her brother and her grandparents moved in to help with the childcare.”

Interviewer: “ If you don’t need to consider the cost of hiring a tutor and buying a piano for Cassie, would you encourage her to develop her own interests, and why?”

Mrs.Chan: “Well, definitely, i would encourage her to have her own interest, if that can keep her entertained and gives her good mood., but my condition would be, she must be as diligent as she is right now, nothing should distract her from getting good grades and getting in a reputed university, and I believe she’s well aware of that.”

Researcher: “Do you think having some knowledge of arts, classical music and sports would be beneficial to her future career? You know, help her to get a better job and etc.”

Mrs.Chan: “ I don’t really think so. Because, you see, i think the reason why those rich kids are so keen of traveling, arts and classical music is because they don’t have to worry about their life anymore. They know their parents have loads of money, and i think those people don’t really care about their children’s grades anyway, because if i am them, i would spare my children from those boring homework and let them live a life they want to live, you know, relaxing, enjoyable, stress-free. But, sadly, for a girl like Cassie, the only way for her to get a good job and earn more money than i do is t to study hard and get into a good university, that’s the only way out, i believe.”

The above conversation shows a great contrast to the Huang Family, especially their attitude of extra-curriculum activities. From their own life experiences, Mr.Huang and Mrs.Huang is very well aware of the importance of education, and they deeply believe that education is only thing that can end their suffering. For them, cultural capital does not exist, any activities involve arts and music are futile and it has always been ‘just an entertainment for the rich kids’. This huge difference in attitude can actually be one of the outcomes of successful social and cultural exclusion created by the upper-class in the society. So,from this perspective, it may supports Paul Willis’(1981) study of ‘why working-class children get working-class job’, since people like Mr.Chan and Mrs.Chan are not aware of the existence of cultural at all. Moreover, in the Chan family, parents rarely intervene Cassie’ school life, the way that the Chans handle Cassie’s study is very passive, in contrast, in the Huang family, routinely supervise, they have shown how the upper-class in Chinese society constantly monitor and intervene their children’s life to transmit their cultural capital.

Evaluation

This methodology also demands certain skills in the researcher, which we may not have, such asking the right question, think

quickly around the topic and establish good rapport. Because we don't have a complete mastery of these skills, certain difficulties are created.

One of the major difficulties is to establish rapport with the interviewees. Because there are no existed relationships between the interviewer and the interviewees before the interview, which makes it hard for the interviewer lead the interview straight into the topic. In the first hour of these two interviews, the answers provided by the interviewees are basically futile for this research. For improvement, it would be better if we choose interviewees that we are already acquainted with, so the research could be less time-consuming and the validity can be improved, or, we can spend some time chatting informally with the interviewees to establish a rapport, so answers can be more open and honest.

In addition, because these two interviews are carried out in Guangzhou, language barrier may have created some difficulties in understanding, some key content which they interviewer expressed in cantonese may have been lost in translation.

To improve the representativeness of this research, we could conduct more interview with more people in one social class, and carry it our in more than 2 places. Moreover, a pilot interview could be ran beforehand to figure out what's the best way of explaining some key words, to see whether these questions make sense to the respondents.