

Bourdieu's Social Reproduction Theory: A Reflection of Educational Inequalities for Children from Migrant Families in China

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1. Introduction

Since 1978, there has been an increasing scale of cross-regional migration in China (Gu et al., 2020). Not only millions of peasants seek work in cities, but also many migrants who leave their home cities and work in big cities. Although these migrant labours contribute much to cities' economic development, their rights or opportunities are still not equal to urban residents born in cities. One aspect is the education opportunities the migrant children received.

Formal education is a structured education model through which students are expected to receive different stages of learning and ultimately attain a degree (Grajcevcic and Shala, 2016). Equal educational opportunities aim to provide children with sufficient resources as far as possible to enable them to overcome difficulties in learning and help less advantaged children reach the level equal to those who do not have such disadvantages (Nash, 2004). However, the status quo in China that rural-to-urban migrant children have significant differences in receiving education compared to urban-born children force me to consider that the education system is not ideally equal but rather the epitome of social stratification. Education as a part of the social system cannot function independently but is always closely connected with other components, such as economic capital or other resources, in the "matrix of the social situation" (Barros, 1968:312).

In terms of Bourdieu's social reproduction theory which indicates that inequalities in the educational system are reproduced by enhancing the values of the dominated groups, this essay will critically evaluate the role of education in dealing with inequalities in Chinese society. I will demonstrate how opportunities for receiving an education are unequal, especially for rural-to-urban migrant children. After explaining Bourdieu's theory, I will provide a background to introduce the current situation of migrant children's education in China. Then I will critically analyse how capital accumulation and symbolic violence influence migrant children and how migrant families suffer disadvantages in both where they originate from and where they migrate.

2. Bourdieu's Social Reproduction Theory

According to Bourdieu (1986:241), the essence of capital is "accumulated labor (in its materialized form or its 'incorporated,' embodied form) which, when appropriated on a private, i.e., exclusive, basis by agents or groups of agents, enables them to appropriate social energy in the form of

reified or living labor". In terms of measuring this essence, Bourdieu pointed out that the measurements of most universal equivalents are nothing but labour time. Social energy is conserved in constant conversions if one considers the accumulated labour time exist as a form of capital and the required labour time allowing the transformation among capitals (Bourdieu, 1986).

He sought to widen the concept of capital beyond its economic definition and the simple convertibility into money, thus including the other two capitals other than economic capital, namely social and cultural capital (Gilleard, 2020). Economic capital is generally seen as monetary incomes and various financial property (Anheier et al., 1995). Bourdieu argues that, as the most tangible capital in a narrow sense, economic capital has the objective existence within the society and becomes the basic point of reference for the rest two capitals (Desan, 2013). Social capital is conceptualised as "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (Bourdieu, 1986:248). Social capital emphasises the power relations and the network function within the society, that the social relations which could advance individuals' interests (Siisiäinen, 2003). The social relations an individual embeds and the quantity and quality of these social networks significantly influence one's ability to gain more resources and power (Carpiano, 2006). The existences of cultural capital are in diverse forms. They include not only the long-standing behaviours and habits obtained, but also the accumulated valued cultural objects, namely the educational qualification, experience and paintings (Anheier et al., 1995). The accumulation of cultural capital enables some people to be advantaged, deriving from their lifestyles, cultural tastes, cultural knowledge and participation, and attitudes in cultural and moral affairs (Bourdieu, 1984).

Cultural and social capital can be transformed into economic capital to gain financial advantages, and economic capital in turn can exchange for the other intangible capital (Collyer, 2015). The exchange of capital distinguishes high classes from low classes within the society. Individuals with high incomes are always from the dominant class and are more likely to consume many cultural products. While those people with lower incomes are always from the working class, and they devote less to cultural goods, instead they invest more in necessities (Bourdieu, 1984).

The accumulation, exchange and reproduction of capital tend to present inequalities in society. People who initially have more resources and capital achieve the accumulation through

effectively exchanging material or immaterial capital, while it is hard for those people with less capital to generate more capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). The disadvantaged groups gradually become marginalised and the subjects of symbolic violence within the society. Bourdieu (cited in Jenkins, 1992:104) defined symbolic violence as “the imposition of systems of symbolism and meaning (i.e. culture) upon groups or classes in such a way that they are experienced as legitimate”. This legitimacy concealed power relations, forcing the disadvantaged group of people to believe in the superiority of the dominant class, leading to their systematic reproduction and class solidification (Jenkins, 1992).

The educational field is the core part of Bourdieu’s social reproduction theory. Bourdieu (1974) pointed out that schools give individuals educational resources or expectations fitted for their positions in the social hierarchy, helping to extend the legitimacy of inequalities. Education seems to provide few opportunities for social mobility under the solidification of social hierarchy (Azaola, 2012). Under the control of dominant groups with more capitals, schools always pay more attention to children who are from the dominant groups and ignore the demands of children from non-dominant class (Bourdieu, 1977). It is within such a hierarchy that, through education, children from the dominant class possibly gain higher social class status, while children from less advantaged or disadvantaged classes still are left in lower social class and are affected by symbolic violence (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). As Reay (1998) indicated, many middle-class parents invest financial capital or take advantage of the useful social network, which excludes working class or lower class parents, to ensure their children’s educational advantage in the competition.

There is no doubt about the great contribution of Bourdieu’s theory to sociology (Jenkins, 1992). The social reproductive process operates through the inculcation of hierarchical social class, revealing a perspective to explain educational inequalities within the society (Macris, 2011). However, social reproduction theory has been challenged by many scholars. It has been widely criticised for excessive emphasis on the influence of the external social structure on educational systems, ignoring individuals’ subjective initiative and creativity and believing the fate since it appears hardly to change inequalities (Giroux, 1983). It is also disputable that Bourdieu believes that individuals’ cultural practices are determined by their social origin, namely their father’s occupation and social status. Nowadays, many factors could influence one’s cultural practices, such as educational opportunities, wider labour markets and personal efforts (Azaola, 2012). Additionally, standing the opposite of Bourdieu, DiMaggio (1982) considered the importance of schools in facilitating social mobility. He argued that, with the development of the global markets and increased educational opportunities, social networks are not bounded by a small group of people with higher status in contemporary society. Individuals can acquire and extend their cultural capital from wider social contexts. Schools are the essential environment where lower-class children can gain more cultural capital through learning, thus they may acquire upward chances and achieve dreams.

3. Background

Before 1978, cross-regional migration was strictly controlled in China and people were bounded in their resident registration places under the hukou system, a unique household registration system in China (Liu & Xu, 2017). After the economic reform and opening-up policy was released in 1978, the Chinese government recognised that the strict hukou system not permit people working in more developed cities to gain better employment opportunities, loosening the migration restrictions (Chan & Zhang, 1999). Though the restrictions have been relaxed, the hukou system still influences migrant families’ rights in receiving social benefits and services in developed urban areas (Sun & Fan, 2011). Likewise, it also affects migrant children’s opportunities to receive equal educational resources and the rights to enter quality public schools as urban-born children (Xiong, 2015). Under the Chinese hukou system, although rural residents can move to urban areas, they cannot have local hukou unless they satisfy the qualifications, therefore they cannot have equal opportunities to access urban welfare, like educational services, which are only provided for urban residents who have registered hukou (Chen & Feng, 2013).

In terms of megacities in China, like Beijing and Shanghai, only people who can satisfy the strict conditions, such as being highly educated or investing money in the city, have opportunities to have local hukou in these big cities (Hou, 2017). However, most migrants who move from rural to urban are poorer and less educated. Hence, it is difficult for them to gain local hukou in these big cities.

There are a large number of rural children go with their migrant parents to big cities. According to China Development Brief (2018), 18.9745 million taken-along children have enrolled in compulsory education, a 17.6% increase over the past five years. However, migrant labours are regarded as temporary residents in cities. They need to submit a range of complicated documents, namely legal evidence of employment and residence, to let their children access public schools (Goodburn, 2009). However, a majority of migrant workers lack clear and specific guidance for document submission and updated information for annual policy changes (Feng, 2014). Additionally, these complicated processes always take a long time and may not be successful ultimately, leading to delayed education for migrant children (Guo and Liang, 2017). Children need to wait until their applications have been approved. When they successfully enrol in public schools, their parents need to pay additional fees to cover books, meals and uniforms in school (Li, 2020).

For these reasons, many migrant workers send their children to private migrant schools (Wang & Holland, 2011). While these privately-run schools are unlike elite private schools, the teaching facilities and quality are poor. As these schools need to operate at lower fees than public schools and be profitable, they have to lower the quality level of teaching resources (Dong, 2010).

4. Disadvantages from Where Rural-to-urban Migrant Children Came

Although reconstructing the rural economy is the priority mission of the Chinese Communist Party, the large gap between rural and urban development remains a problem (Chen et al., 2017). Due to the scarcity of jobs in rural areas, most rural residents still live on agriculture before some of them move to big cities. However, the uncertainty of farming, which relies on soil quality, climate condition and farming capability, cannot guarantee the income of every rural family (Li & Tonts, 2014). In addition, rural residents can trace their families' history based on the farmland for several generations which means that rural households may farm for generations (Zou et al., 2018). For migrant families, accumulating sufficient economic capital is extremely difficult. Regarding social capital, according to Ye & Zhang's study (2019), the family network accounts for the largest proportion of rural residents' in China. Most of them mainly contact with their family members, but have few connections with other social members. The neighbourhood is also considered important social relationship of rural households (Xiong & Payne, 2017). The neighbourhood relationship will influence the adjacent land management issues, even the use of organic fertilizer (Matous, 2015). It can be seen that, before these rural residents migrated to cities, their social networks were restricted and simple. The restrictions of the Chinese hukou system for settling in cities and obtaining city hukou influence labour mobility, resulting in natural and simple social networks in villages (Vendryes, 2011). When rural residents attempt to seek work in cities, these social networks, to some extent, help these migrants to find non-agriculture jobs in cities (Wang et al., 2015). For instance, migrants within a social network share job recruitment information or seek advice from experienced migrants (Dong et al., 2014). These types of social networks as the social capital will directly influence migrants' salaries.

In terms of cultural capital, firstly, before children migrate to cities with their parents, most of them will receive preschool or primary education in rural areas. However, the gap between rural and urban areas in terms of receiving education and accessing educational resources in the Chinese educational system is large (Wang et al., 2011). One of the challenges is that rural schools lack professional teachers. Although the Chinese government released policies to motivate graduate teachers to serve in rural schools for 2-3 years and improve the qualifications of teachers in rural China (Wu and Qin, 2014). These attempts have not had much success. Given the bad natural environment in rural, lower salaries and few opportunities for teachers' career development, many graduates rarely choose to teach in rural areas (Wang and Gao, 2013). Although some graduate teachers choose to serve in rural schools, they will leave immediately after serving for three years, leading to a high turnover of teachers (Wang et al., 2017). These rural schools, in most cases, lack sufficient and high-quality books, sports equipment and other teaching resources, such as computers and projectors, which are common in urban schools. In Zhao's research (2011), only a few basic subjects are provided for students in rural schools. It is hard for them to access better educational resources to accumulate and extend their cultural capital before they migrate to cities.

Secondly, Bourdieu (1984) presented that cultural capital is a key part of family legacy, which was more essential than

tangible economic capital. As Crossick (2000:71) observed, "the main concern in petit-bourgeois families was not the passage of the business to the next generation but a broader family continuity and the passing on of social position". Nevertheless, for rural-to-urban migrant families with lower education levels, cultural accumulation may be rare among generations. To reduce parents' financial and living pressure, many rural children have helped their parents or grandparents to do housework and agriculture work from early childhood (Li et al., 2004). Some of them even drop out of school before entering high school, going to seek un-skilled jobs like their parents (Chung & Mason, 2012). It seems like a circulation in which rural children hardly have opportunities to go upward in society, as rural families lack capital accumulation and extension. Although people from lower working classes and rural areas are not well-educated or rich, they still strongly pay attention to children's education. Most of them believed that 'knowledge can change one's fate' and 'no matter how poor, people cannot have poor education', which are both proverbs in China. Migrant parents seek to work in urban areas to earn more money, attempting to improve their children's living standards and increase their opportunities to receive better education (Pan, 2018). However, sometimes it is hard for their children to change their destiny and go upward in society through education, and most of them eventually stay at the same social status and do the same unskilled and low-paid jobs as their parents.

In Bourdieu's theory (1986), the crucial factor influencing one's education is the capital owned. The educational attainment of students largely depend on the amount and composition proportion of three different capitals (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). The education level and occupation of parents can transform into income, meanwhile these will reflect on cultural capital. For instance, parents with high-level education and income are more likely to let their children access dominant cultures, such as going to museums, galleries and concerts. They will invest more time and money in children's education and hobby cultivation (Caro et al., 2014). However, for rural-to-urban migrant families, achieving the accumulation and transformation of different capital is extremely difficult. Before they move to cities, most of them live on farming or are typically employed in low-skilled sectors with low salaries, their financial capacities are limited (Zhu, 2016). Under these situations, migrant parents have to spend more money on improving children's living standards and securing elementary education for children, rather than on children's richer spiritual education such as going to concerts or cultivating children playing the piano.

On the other hand, there are also some outstanding rural students enter top universities and achieve going upward through their hard-working. Therefore, Bourdieu's completely dismissive attitude toward the role of education in promoting social mobility needs to be doubted. Although there may be few family support, like a large amount of money invested or strong social networks, individuals' efforts cannot be ignored. As Llorent (2012) argued, today's societies are required to facilitate social development based on individual efforts. Provocative education based on individual inner initiative and individual diligence is essential. However, the polarized screening mechanism, which distinguishes

‘good’ or ‘bad’ students, in rural schools, should be criticized. Pan (2018) showed that, in some rural schools in China, students would be divided into ‘good’ and ‘bad’ students according to their exam scores. ‘Good’ students can receive more attention from teachers, while ‘bad’ students are destined to fail to attend high school admission exams, leading to ensure higher high school admission rate. Under this screening mechanism, for those rural students without a large amount of capital accumulation, only students who gain high grades have the opportunities to access higher education and possibly cross divides of hierarchical social class, while those students with lower grades lose the qualification.

5. Disadvantages in the City Which Rural-to-urban Migrants Move to

Although the rural-to-urban migrants and their children are disadvantaged from their background, with lifting serious restrictions on migration and the demanding cheap labour in cities, rural-to-urban migrants have burgeoned (Knight & Gunatilaka, 2010). Though migrant parents expect their children to receive better education and have more opportunities to go upward in society after migrating to big cities, they are still disadvantaged compared to those urban families. Rural-to-urban migrant families already lack all three capitals, and once they arrive, their prospect for achieving upward social mobility is further threatened. For rural-to-urban migrants in China, according to Bian (2002:104), social mobility means “status attainment, career mobility, and social networks in occupational process”. When adapted to Bourdieu’s, achieving social mobility can be considered as the accumulation of three capitals and the better transformation among different capitals. Migrant parents expect their children to receive better education and obtain skilled job opportunities in cities, resulting in inheritance in capitals and upward social mobility among generations. However, there are still barriers.

Firstly, although migrant parents work in cities, their disposable incomes are still low. Since most migrant workers are poorly educated, they have limited job options. As Golley & Meng (2011) argue, a majority of unskilled migrant workers are only able to find jobs in labour-intensive manufacturing sectors. With low incomes, they not only need to face the high living costs in cities, but also the tuition fees and extra costs of their children. Additionally, migrants also need to send money to family members living in their hometowns (Dang et al., 2019). Therefore, it is still challenging for migrant families to accumulate sufficient economic capital after migrating to cities. Secondly, although the social network of migrants will expand after they move to cities, most new relationships within their networks are still associated with other settled migrants. Liu et al. (2019) indicate that migrants are more likely to seek communities that are full of fellow townspeople to enjoy the familiarity and sense of belonging. Meanwhile, these networks could promote the information circulation about housing, jobs and other essential services. Nevertheless, most of these relationships cannot further help migrants and their children to go upward in society. Wu et al. (2019) pointed out that the rural residents and settled migrants as a form of social capital can be considered potential resources, but the actual value of these social networks largely depends on several conditions

which need further study.

Furthermore, there is evidence showing that preschools and primary schools, where the largest gap between rural and urban areas exist (Yue et al., 2018). When rural children who complete merely a part of preschool or primary education migrate to cities with parents and enrol in another urban school, it may be difficult for those rural students to keep up with the teaching progress and adapt to the entirely new learning environment. These situations may lead to low academic performance and attainment of children. In Ma et al.’s research (2018), they find out that rural-to-urban migrant children, especially those from private migrant schools, perform much worse than urban-born peers. Attending different schools is a main cause of the academic performance gap since most urban children attend quality public schools, while most migrant children can only access low-quality public schools or private migrant ones (Lu & Zhou, 2013). On the other hand, migrant children receive cultural bias from urban residents (Yiu and Yun, 2017). In Mu and Hu’s study (2016), urban peers tried to distinguish themselves from rural-to-urban children in many aspects, such as accents, hygiene habits, hobbies and also the way of talking and behaving. Due to rare economic capital accumulation, most rural students cannot wear beautiful dresses and never go to galleries or concerts, becoming loners in urban schools. These rural children even are perceived by urban children and parents, who have more capital accumulation, as “dirty”, “out of control” and “ignorant” (Goodburn, 2009:498). It appears that the cultures and values of rural-to-urban migrant children, as the disadvantaged groups, are not recognised by urban-born children and parents who belong to the dominant groups in the society. Rural-to-urban migrant children are gradually forced to become the subjects of symbolic violence imposed by advantaged social class, namely urban children and parents.

Due to many rural cultural practices being suppressed and refused, many rural-to-urban migrant children get bullied. According to Li et al. (2010), some migrant children whose families have the financial capabilities to afford fees of public schools are unwilling to go to public schools, since they may be discriminated against due to their temporary residents’ status, accents and their clothes. They are always worried that students in urban public schools ‘look down upon’ themselves, leading to the feeling of low esteem (Li et al., 2010:82). In the new environment, continuously being rejected or mocked by urban peers in the long term, rural-to-urban migrant children will be more sensitive and more reluctant to express themselves and actively communicate with others, resulting in mental health problems (Chen et al., 2009).

Facing changed living and learning environment and discrimination from urban peers, rural-to-urban migrant children cannot wholeheartedly devote to adapting and learning new things in schools, resulting in lower academic performances, namely the low scores received in examinations. However, in China’s competitive social environment, it seems that received examination grades can be regarded as an important factor to define ‘good’ students and as a determining factor for going upward in society (Howlett, 2021). Because of the lower educational attainment and social status, rural-to-urban migrant children possibly

receive little attention from school teachers. Over time, migrant children may gradually believe that they are not as good as urban children. As Bourdieu (1974:42) indicated, the educational system persuaded disadvantaged social class groups to believe “that they owe their social fate ... to their individual nature and their lack of gifts”. The existing urban-biased educational system in which the culture and value of dominant urban groups are enhanced, to a large extent, marginalised the social position of migrant children by persuading them firmly believe in their lower abilities and lower social status.

Arguably, rural-to-urban migration can be considered a double-edged sword for rural-born children. On the one hand, the urban environments have not only high-quality educational resources and a set of welfare systems, like hospitals, but also give migrant children opportunities to access broader ideas and social networks to broaden horizons (Xu and Xie, 2015). These potential resources in cities can positively influence the further development of migrant children, helping them extend their cultural practices rather than staying in impoverished rural areas. However, attempting to integrate into an entirely new environment is challenging. Migrant children even suffer discrimination from urban peers, which will harm their well-being. Under this situation, extending cultural capital accumulation becomes harder.

6. Conclusion

Leaning on Bourdieu’s social reproduction theory, this essay critically explores the educational inequality received by rural-to-urban migrant children. Before moving to cities, most rural-to-urban families are inefficient in accumulating and transforming the three different capitals. They do not have enough financial capabilities or strong social networks to extend cultural capital among generations. However, after migrating to cities, they are still disadvantaged in expanding capital accumulation due to the low income of unskilled jobs and restricted social networks. Due to their social status and specific rural cultural practices, migrant children are not welcomed by urban peers. The existing hukou registration systems in China also enhance the educational inequalities between urban-origin families and rural-to-urban migrant families. It seems extremely difficult for migrant families and their children to achieve capital accumulation and cross divided hierarchical social classes through education.

However, it is undeniable that education seems to be a relatively fair operating system for some rural children. They can access higher education and find jobs in big cities, changing their social position by gaining higher grades in examinations. It is a strong rebuttal to Bourdieu’s attitude that children’s fate is closely connected to their parents’ income, education level or social network. It is needed to acknowledge that completing changing the educational inequalities in China is idealistic, but individuals’ subjectivity initiative cannot be ignored. The Chinese government not only need to invest more money in improving the quality of educational resources in areas and securing the social welfare systems for migrant families, but also attempt to help migrant children’s learning and pay attention to their adaptation ability and well-being at the root levels.

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