



A longitudinal mixed methods study of parents' socioeconomic status and children's educational attainment in Dalian City, China



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ABSTRACT

This article examines why most of a cohort that attended eighth or ninth grade in 1999 at a middle school in Dalian City, Liaoning Province, China believed by 2012–2013 that children of poorer parents did better academically than children of wealthier parents. Based on survey data collected from 503 members of this cohort in 1999 and 2012–13, we found that business owners were the wealthiest among respondents' parents, that children of business owner mothers were less likely to get into a prestigious college prep high school and attain a bachelor's degree than children of white-collar mothers, and that children of blue-collar fathers were more likely than children of white-collar fathers to get into a prestigious high school and obtain a bachelor's degree. Based on follow-up interviews with 48 of these respondents, we found that business owning parents had less time than other parents to tutor their children, and that children of "poorer" parents were more motivated than children of "wealthier" parents (most of whom were business owners) to gain upward mobility through academic achievement.

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1. Introduction

China's market economy has created an emerging middle class, a strong, widespread desire for upward mobility, and increasing inequalities between those who are wealthier and those who are poorer. These factors have made China's educational system an extremely competitive arena in which all parents, regardless of socioeconomic status, hope their children can succeed (Fong, 2004). In Chinese cities, definitions and structures of socioeconomic status (SES) increasingly resemble those found in more developed countries (Guo, 2012; Li, 2010). However, despite the large volume of literature on social stratification and income inequality in China (Hannum and Adams, 2007; Hannum et al., 2011, 2009, 2013; Hannum, 2003, 2005; Watson, 1984), no previous studies have explored how urban Chinese parents' SES reproduces itself in China by influencing children's long-term educational attainment outcomes. Our study is the first to address this issue.

Understanding the relationship between parents' SES and urban Chinese children's educational attainment is important for understanding reasons and potential remedies for growing socioeconomic inequalities in China and worldwide. Rapid economic growth has created many opportunities in the urban Chinese labour market, but also increased inequalities (Davis and Wang, 2009). In the past few decades, Chinese society experienced significant social upheavals that disrupted existing class divisions, and redistributed wealth and socioeconomic opportunities (Bian, 2002; Davis and Wang, 2009; Osburg, 2013). Privatization provided new opportunities to "get rich fast," and the growing service and light industry sectors provided new opportunities for youth in the job market, while the restructuring of the state sector resulted in widespread layoffs, especially among middle-aged urban women (Appleton et al., 2014; Hanser, 2001; Hoffman, 2010; Ngai, 2005).

In this article, we explore how and why urban Chinese parents' SES affected their children's educational attainment. We draw on a survey of eighth and ninth graders at a middle school in Dalian City, Liaoning Province, China in 1999 and resurveys of the same cohort in 2012–13 and 2014, focusing on the 503 who indicated their educational attainment on the 2012–13 survey (hereafter called "respondents") as well as 48 interviewees representative of the 406 of them who were living in Dalian in 2012–2013 and had spent

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no more than a month outside of China. This paper will shed light on the beliefs held by our respondents regarding the relationship between their middle school classmates' academic achievement and parental SES, and how their beliefs compare with the actual associations between respondents' parents' characteristics (education, occupations, and income) in 1999 and respondents' educational attainment (of college prep high school degrees and bachelor's degrees) by 2012–2013. The mechanisms by which parents' occupation might explain children's achievement are explained through the narratives provided by our interviewees, who emphasize children's motivation and parents' involvement as key factors affecting children's academic achievement.

2. Family socioeconomic status and achievement

Since the development of [Hollingshead's \(1975\)](#) Four Factor Index of SES and [Duncan's \(1961\)](#) Socioeconomic Index, parents' education, occupation, and income have long been used as core indicators of family socioeconomic status (SES) by researchers in the United States and the United Kingdom ([Duncan et al., 1972](#); [Mueller and Parcel, 1981](#)). Studies of the United States and the United Kingdom found that SES tended to reproduce itself in the same families over generations, and that parents' SES strongly predicted children's educational attainment ([Bornstein and Bradley, 2003](#); [Brooks-Gunn and Duncan, 1997](#); [Coleman, 1988](#); [MacLeod, 2004](#); [McLoyd, 1998](#); [Willis, 1977](#)). [Coleman's \(1966\)](#) widely cited report showed that SES was more predictive of children's educational attainment than school-level factors in the United States.

Relationships between parents' SES and children's educational attainment have not been studied as much in China, because the kind of longitudinal, mixed methods research needed to study such relationships were discouraged in China between 1949 and 1976 and did not start to flourish until the late 1990s, and because rapidly changing definitions and structures of SES in China have made it difficult to study its transmission across generations prior to the 1990s. After the 1949 revolution, the Maoist government drastically transformed China's socioeconomic structure by collectivizing and redistributing wealth, using non-meritocratic political criteria to assign most urban residents jobs that differed little in income, making education through middle school mandatory and mostly free, offering few incentives for high school education, discouraging tertiary education, and privileging families that had lower pre-revolutionary socioeconomic statuses over those that had higher pre-revolutionary socioeconomic statuses ([Spence, 1990](#)). [Guo \(2012\)](#) argued that, though class labels (i.e. proletariat, peasant, workers) derived from Marxist-Leninist theories were used throughout the Maoist era (1949–1976), many still attempted to turn China into a truly classless society during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). "Social strata" or "socioeconomic status" (*shehui jieceng*), defined in terms of education, occupation, and income, increasingly replaced the term "class" in China after the Maoist era ended in 1976 ([Anagnost, 2008](#); [Li, 2010](#)). Starting in the 1980s, Chinese definitions of "class" downplayed discourses of class struggle ([Guo, 2012](#)). Because the generation born in China in the 1980s was the first to grow up with post-Mao socioeconomic structures, most previous studies have focused on describing the emergence of those structures rather than on how socioeconomic status was transmitted from one generation to the next (an issue that could not be fully addressed until the generation born in the 1980s completed their educational trajectories). So far, the only major study to address these issues in China focused on a rural area of Gansu Province that had socioeconomic structures very different from those found in Chinese cities and in most Western societies, which tend to be highly urbanized ([Hannum and Adams, 2007](#); [Hannum et al., 2011](#);

[Hannum, 2003, 2005](#); [Zhang et al., 2007](#)). Ours is the first study to examine relationships between urban Chinese parents' SES and their children's educational attainment.

Previous US studies have elucidated two mechanisms by which parents' education, occupation, and income contribute to how well a student does academically: (1) direct provision of resources at home and (2) indirect provision of the social capital necessary for long-term school success. The first is about household possessions and the availability of educational materials and resources, which were strongly associated with children's cognitive development, especially among younger children ([Dubow and Ippolito, 1994](#); [Hoff, 2003](#); [Hollenbeck, 1978](#)). This measure was frequently used in studies of family SES and achievement ([White, 1982](#); [Sirin, 2005](#)), and was found to mediate the relationships between parental education and combined parental income and children's academic achievement ([Davis-Kean, 2005](#)).

The second mechanism is the transmission of cultural capital, which has been widely documented in studies of class-based differences in Western societies. These studies attributed the reproduction of inequalities across generations to major differences between how upper-class parents and lower-class parents socialized their children ([Bourdieu, 1977](#); [Kusserow 2004](#); [Lareau, 2003](#); [Ogbu, 1987](#); [Coleman, 1988](#)). These studies showed how parents' involvement and socialization of their children further reified class distinctions by advantaging upper-middle class children who engaged in intellectually and cognitively stimulating activities and a culture that fostered their academic achievement at home while working class parents were less likely to provide adequate resources for their children at home or meet teachers' expectations of close parental involvement.

A parent's income and wealth are most closely associated with the potential for parental investment in children's education by making social and economic resources available to their children, while a parent's occupation is more closely associated with the parent's prestige, social and economic status, and cultural capital, and a parent's educational attainment is more closely associated with parenting beliefs, practices, and academic socialization at home ([Hauser and Warren, 1997](#)). [Duncan and Brooks-Gunn \(1997\)](#) found that the impact of combined parental income on child achievement was smaller for older children, suggesting that factors such as motivation or ability might become increasingly important in shaping later outcomes.

Desires for upward mobility are particularly important for motivating children of ethnic minorities to pursue academic achievement. [Pieke \(1991\)](#) explained how successful minorities often take the society they left as point of reference, which increases their satisfaction and motivation. [Louie \(2001\)](#) explained how immigrant optimism created a generation of Chinese American immigrants "compelled to excel" who still adopted differential strategies depending on their SES. [Ogbu \(1987\)](#) distinguished between "involuntary minorities" such as African Americans and Native Americans and "voluntary minorities" who came to the United States for a better life, and explained how voluntary minorities' strong belief in the likelihood of attaining upward mobility through education made them conform to upper-middle class behaviours conducive to strong school performance while involuntary migrants were more likely to reject those behaviours because the discrimination their families experienced over many generations caused them to doubt that education would provide better opportunities. A study of Chinese American business owner parents found that these parents positively influenced their children's academic achievement through autonomy-encouraging practices and high aspirations for their children's education ([Sanichirico, 1991](#)).

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