

# *How Does Family Cultural Capital Influence Students Academic Performance? A Secondary Analysis of Chinese Educational Studies Based on Bourdieus Capital-Field-Habitus Framework*

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**Abstract.** Based on Bourdieu's 'capital-field-habitus' theoretical framework, this paper conducts a secondary analysis of three empirical studies in the Chinese educational context to illustrate how family cultural capital influences students' academic performance through academic habitus. The results show that there is a stable positive relationship between family cultural capital and academic performance, which is not mainly achieved in a direct way, but through the formation of habitus habits that are consistent with the school assessment rules, which are further manifested in sustained learning behaviours, and finally transformed into academic strengths. In the test score-centred Chinese educational environment, learning habits play a key mediating role in the transformation of cultural capital into academic performance, and the differences in the intensity of the role in different studies are related to differences in educational stages and research designs, and reflect the process by which the educational evaluation mechanism and the structure of learning practices jointly influence the path of capital transformation.

**Keywords:** family cultural capital, habitus, learning behavior, academic performance, Chinese educational context

## **1. Introduction**

In China, the college entrance examination is widely seen as the most legitimate mechanism for 'fair competition' [1]. Admission to elite colleges and universities relies heavily on test scores, and a degree from a prestigious school remains an important selection criterion in the labour market, and can significantly affect an individual's income and career opportunities [2]. Therefore, academic performance is at the centre of the 'education-employment' chain and is closely related to social mobility. Although academic performance is often understood as the result of individual effort, it is not shaped equally. Family cultural inputs in terms of language environments, reading practices and educational expectations significantly affect students' learning abilities, attitudes and classroom participation, and parental educational attainment, as institutionalised cultural capital, is an important source of these strengths [3]. Studies have been conducted to analyse this relationship

from different perspectives. Some studies have emphasised the joint role of family social and cultural capital [4], others have pointed to the mediating role of learning inputs in the influence of family capital on academic outcomes [5], and still others have found a stable positive relationship between cultural capital and academic performance [6]. However, the results of these studies are scattered, and in particular, they lack a systematic explanation of how cultural capital is transformed into learning dispositions and further into academic performance in China's test-based education environment. Based on this issue, this paper adopts Bourdieu's 'capital-field-habitus' theoretical framework [7], and conducts secondary analyses of three representative empirical studies on Chinese students [4-6], which are used to illustrate how the family's cultural capital through learning habitus, and to provide explanations for understanding the reproduction of educational inequality in the context of test-based education.

## 2. Framework

This study takes Bourdieu's "capital - field - habitus" theory as the analytical framework to explain how family cultural capital influences students' academic performance through learning behaviors. From this theoretical perspective, educational achievement is not the direct result of an individual's ability or effort, but rather the outcome of the combined effect of family resources, an individual's inner tendencies, and institutional rules [7]. At the family level, cultural capital is an important resource that influences students' educational performance. Bourdieu pointed out that cultural capital encompasses not only the manifested forms such as language ability, reading habitus and thinking patterns embodied in individuals, but also the institutionalized forms presented in the form of academic qualifications. The educational attainment of parents not only represents their institutionalized cultural capital but also provides different cultural experiences for their children by influencing the family's language environment, learning conditions and educational expectations, thus becoming the starting point of cultural capital accumulation. However, cultural capital does not directly translate into academic achievements but is internalized as "habitus" through a long-term socialization process. Bourdieu understood habit as a relatively stable cognitive approach and behavioral tendency formed by an individual during their growth process, which affects how an individual perceives learning, participates in the classroom, and faces academic evaluation [7]. In educational contexts, this habitus is specifically manifested in learning attitudes, learning engagement, learning strategies, and ways of dealing with exams, that is, a relatively stable "learning habitus". Meanwhile, the education system itself constitutes a social field with specific evaluation criteria. Although schools and examinations seem neutral in form, their evaluation rules often favor students with specific cultural abilities, thereby enabling cultural capital to be selectively recognized and magnified in this field [8]. When students' learning habitus are highly consistent with the evaluation standards of the educational field, family cultural capital is more likely to be transformed into academic performance. If the two are inconsistent, it is more likely to lead to long-term adverse consequences.

## 3. Methodology

This study adopts the method of literature analysis and is a secondary research. Three existing empirical studies were selected for analysis, all of which were set in the context of the Chinese educational context and centred on the relationship between family cultural capital and students' academic performance. The literature was selected based on three main aspects: first, whether the research topic was related to Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital; second, whether the studies

conducted systematic empirical tests on learning habitus and academic outcomes; and third, whether the research methodology was clear and comparable in terms of the research design and the path of analysis. In the specific analysis process, firstly, the conceptual definitions and measurements of family cultural capital, learning behaviour and academic performance in the three studies are sorted out, which are used to illustrate the operational differences of each variable in different studies; then, we focus on analysing the test paths and main findings of mediating the role of learning habitus in the studies, which are used to illustrate how family cultural capital affects the students' academic performance through learning habitus; finally, an overall comparison of the findings of the three studies is made, and the commonalities and limitations of the findings are further discussed in relation to each study's target population, sample characteristics, and research design, providing a methodological basis for the subsequent discussion and conclusions.

## **4. Finding**

### **4.1. Overall relationship between family cultural capital and students' academic performance**

The results of all three empirical studies show a clear and stable positive relationship between family cultural capital and students' academic performance. Although the studies cover different stages of education and specific measures, all of them show that students with higher levels of family cultural capital are usually in a more favourable position in terms of academic performance or educational gains. The fact that this result occurs several times in different samples suggests that the effect of family cultural capital on academic performance is not an isolated case, but rather is highly consistent and universal. In terms of the indicators used in the studies, family cultural capital is generally measured through variables such as parental education, family cultural resources or family educational environment, which, although in different forms in different studies, all show the same direction of relationship with students' academic outcomes. The findings show that when families are able to provide more cultural resources and a better learning environment, students are more likely to perform better in the school assessment system. This relationship is not only reflected in examination results at secondary school level, but also in academic development and educational gains at higher education levels. Taken as a whole, the three studies form a relatively consistent empirical finding in their conclusions that family cultural capital is always an important factor influencing students' academic performance in the Chinese educational context. Regardless of students' educational stage, family cultural capital maintains a stable relationship with academic outcomes, which provides a reliable empirical basis for further analyses of its mechanism of action and theoretical implications.

### **4.2. The mediating role of learning behaviours between family cultural capital and academic performance**

The three empirical studies, on the basis of the same overall conclusion, also point to the same point, that is, the relationship between family cultural capital and academic performance does not depend on the 'direct effect' only, but usually exerts its influence through the process of students' learning behaviours. In other words, family cultural capital influences students' 'how they learn, whether they are willing to learn, and whether they can keep learning', and these learning behaviours then form a stable link with academic outcomes. Although the indicators of learning behaviours used in different studies are not exactly the same, they all focus on the aspects of learning commitment, learning habitus, classroom participation, learning plans and self-management, so they can be regarded as the

specific manifestations of students' learning habitus in the school context. From the common findings of these studies, it is clear that students with higher levels of family cultural capital are more likely to show higher frequency and more stable learning engagement in their daily learning, and are also more likely to form sustained learning habitus, such as more regular study rhythms, more proactive classroom participation, clearer study plans, and stronger self-discipline and self-management skills. These behaviours have a strong relationship with academic performance, so the mediation path of 'family cultural capital - learning behaviours - academic performance' is formed statistically. In other words, family cultural capital does not only appear simultaneously with academic performance, but is more likely to influence students' learning styles first, and then influence learning outcomes through learning styles.

At the same time, the three studies have also demonstrated that the effects of learning behaviours are not short-term, but continuous and cumulative. Learning behaviours usually last throughout a semester, an academic year, or even longer, and continue to affect students' knowledge acquisition, homework completion, and adaptation to examination assessment. Therefore, when the studies found that learning behaviours could explain part of the relationship between family cultural capital and academic performance, this was not only a result on the model, but also indicated that family cultural capital is more likely to be gradually transformed into visible academic differences through the process of long-term learning practices. Taken as a whole, the common finding of the three studies at the mechanism level further strengthens the core logic of this paper, which is that family cultural capital influences students' academic performance through influencing learning behaviours, i.e., the outward manifestation of learning practices.

### **4.3. Differences in the findings of the three studies and additional findings**

Although the three studies were consistent in their core findings, they differed markedly in their emphasis on mediating effects; Jin et al. gave more prominence to the mediating role of learning behaviours, arguing that family cultural capital is mainly translated into academic performance by influencing students' learning habitus and learning inputs; Wang and Huang placed more emphasis on the direct impact of family cultural capital on academic outcomes, while viewing learning behaviours as a complementary pathway; Tan and Fang fell somewhere in between. Wang and Huang place more emphasis on the direct influence of family cultural capital on academic outcomes, while viewing learning behaviours as a complementary pathway. Tan and Fang's findings fall somewhere in between, affirming the importance of learning behaviours, but also retaining the space for family cultural capital to directly influence academic performance. These differences are related to the educational stage of the study participants, the way the variables are measured, and the different model settings, and provide a basis for subsequent theoretical discussions on the mechanisms of family cultural capital.

## **5. Discussion**

### **5.1. Family cultural capital as a starting point for educational inequality**

Combining the findings of the three studies, it is clear that there is a stable and continuous relationship between family cultural capital and students' academic performance. However, this relationship is not one in which the family's cultural capital directly 'determines' performance, but rather one in which the foundation of learning and the educational strengths of the student are developed over time prior to entering school. From the perspective of Bourdieu's theory, cultural

capital is a resource that can be identified and recognised within the education system, and the family is the place where this resource first begins to have an impact. In families with higher cultural capital, parents tend to place more emphasis on language expression, reading habitus and learning planning, and children are exposed to learning styles that are highly aligned with the requirements of the school much earlier in their schooling. This will make it easier for them to meet the school's assessment criteria for classroom participation, homework completion and test response. Family cultural capital is also reflected in parents' ability to understand the rules and key stages of education. Parents with higher cultural capital are more likely to have access to relevant information and make choices about further education and study arrangements that are conducive to academic development, thus placing students at a more favourable starting point in the education system. In contrast, families with lower cultural capital are more likely to be at a disadvantage in terms of information acquisition and learning strategies, even if they also value education. Taken as a whole, these studies collectively suggest that differences in academic performance do not arise solely from individual ability, but are largely rooted in structural inequalities where family cultural capital is consistently identified, recognised and amplified in the education system. This also explains why the three studies reach more consistent conclusions across the different samples.

## 5.2. Habitus formation and mediation

In the analyses presented in this paper, academic habitus is not an abstract concept but an important mediator used to illustrate how family cultural capital influences academic performance through everyday learning practices. According to Bourdieu, habitus is a stable tendency that develops over a long period of socialisation; it is not the specific behaviours per se, but rather the internal structure that produces these behaviours. Family cultural capital slowly influences the way students understand and act on learning through daily educational practices, learning expectations, and value-based guidance, and these intrinsic dispositions are manifested in the school environment as learning behaviours such as commitment to learning, study habitus, classroom participation, and self-management.

Combining the findings of the three studies, it can be found that students with higher levels of family cultural capital are more likely to develop stable and sustained patterns of learning behaviours. For example, they are more likely to maintain a regular learning rhythm, show higher commitment to the learning process, and are more willing to actively participate in classroom activities and learning planning. These behaviours are not one-off choices, but recurring practices over time, and can therefore be seen as external manifestations of learning habitus in school. It is precisely because of the stability of such behaviours that learning behaviours constitute a statistically significant mediating pathway between family cultural capital and academic performance. Again, the mediating role of learning habitus is not only in terms of 'how much effort', but also in terms of how students understand and adapt to the rules of the school. Families with higher cultural capital are often more familiar with the preferred expressions and learning standards of the school's evaluation system, so students are more likely to develop learning styles that are consistent with the school's requirements. Such learning habitus that are consistent with school rules are more likely to be reinforced by positive feedback on homework assessments, classroom interactions, and test performance.

On the contrary, students whose learning habitus are not aligned with school requirements are more likely to have a harder time effectively translating their efforts into achievement, even if they put in the same amount of effort. Therefore, in the explanatory framework of this paper, learning behaviours are not a separate individual variable, but a practical outcome of the internalisation of the

family's cultural capital into learning habitus over a long period of time during the socialisation process. By shaping students' learning habitus, family cultural capital further influences their learning behaviours and academic performance in school, thus creating relatively stable differences in the educational process. The existence of this mediating mechanism also contributes to a clearer understanding of how family background continues to influence academic outcomes through daily learning practices.

### 5.3. The logic of capital transformation in the Chinese educational field

Putting these findings into the Chinese educational context provides a clearer understanding of how cultural capital translates into academic performance. Bourdieu points out that the ability of capital to function depends on the rules of the field in which it resides, and the Chinese education system is centred on testing and quantifiable assessment, which creates a very strong link between students' commitment to learning, the pace of their learning, and their academic performance. In such an educational field, students who already have learning styles that are aligned with the school's assessment criteria are more likely to gain an advantage in long-term competition.

Specifically, in the secondary school context studied by Jin et al., frequent testing, ranking, and screening mechanisms continually reinforce learning styles that conform to the school's rules and translate them into achievement advantages. In the tertiary education stage analysed by Wang and Huang, although there are some changes in assessment methods, family cultural capital can still influence students' educational gains through learning engagement and learning planning, for example. This suggests that changes in educational stage do not eliminate the role of cultural capital, but rather change the specific ways in which it functions in different educational settings. Meanwhile, Tan and Fang found both a direct path of influence of family cultural capital and a path that works through learning behaviours, which also suggests that the transformational paths of cultural capital and the strength of mediating effects are not identical because there are differences in the intensity of competition and evaluation criteria in different educational stages and in different school environments. On the whole, the Chinese educational scene is not a neutral institutional context, but rather provides a clearer set of transformative mechanisms for cultural capital through the examination system and evaluation criteria that give continuous recognition to certain learning styles and learning rhythms. This institutional context shapes the process of stable transformation of cultural capital into academic performance as a whole, and provides an important explanatory framework for understanding the discrepancies between the findings of different studies.

## 6. Conclusion

Based on a secondary analysis of three empirical studies, this paper finds a stable and consistent positive relationship between family cultural capital and students' academic performance, which is usually mediated through learning behaviours. Within the framework of Bourdieu's 'capital-field-habitus' theory, family cultural capital provides students with a learning foundation that is more in line with school evaluation standards, which is continuously identified and amplified in the test-centred Chinese educational environment, and finally transformed into visible academic advantages. seen as an academic advantage. Based on these findings, this paper argues that in educational practice, it is necessary to focus not only on academic outcomes per se, but to place policy and pedagogical interventions more on students' learning styles and learning processes. In terms of the mechanism of action, rather than merely reflecting family differences, schools can, to a certain extent, compensate for deficiencies in family cultural capital and positively influence students'

academic performance through systematic mechanisms of study guidance, reading support and classroom participation. At the same time, sociological studies of education also point to the important role that school environments and teacher practices play in shaping students' habitual habits and beliefs about learning, which is particularly important for students with less cultural capital at home. In the longer term, early and sustained interventions around learning behaviours and competencies can help narrow the attainment gap among students from different family backgrounds. Therefore, there is a clear theoretical rationale and relevance for strengthening the compensatory role of schools through institutionalised learning support, reading resourcing and classroom interaction design at both policy and practice levels.

It should be noted that this paper also has some limitations. First, only three empirical studies were analysed in this study, so the applicability of the conclusions is to some extent limited by the original research sample and research design. Second, as a secondary study, this paper cannot directly test the specific effects of different cultural capital indicators and learning behaviour measures on academic outcomes. Future research can further analyse the dynamic relationship between family cultural capital, learning habits and academic performance by combining primary data and longitudinal research design. Overall, this paper illustrates the mechanism by which family cultural capital affects academic performance through learning behaviours from a comprehensive perspective, providing new empirical evidence and theoretical additions to the understanding of educational inequality in the Chinese educational context.

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