

From family capital to social mobility: educational choices and challenges of second-tier city students studying abroad

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Abstract. This study examines the role of family capital in shaping overseas educational mobility within the context of second-tier cities. Using Y High School in Hefei as a case study, it compares the strategies adopted and challenges faced by families of different income levels in supporting their children's overseas education, and offers relevant recommendations. This research, based on Bourdieu's theory of capital, employs a qualitative approach through in-depth interviews. The results show that high-income families leverage their comprehensive advantages in economy, culture, and social capital to connect with global education resources; while middle- and low-income families prefer a path with manageable costs and higher expected returns, which could cause loss of opportunities for students and even result in psychological pressure. Meanwhile, failing to reach the expectation of studying abroad, such as gaining advantages in the job market and social recognition, indicates that the conversion and flow of capital are not necessarily upward. This study proposes to establish a public information platform for international education, improve the national and local scholarship systems for studying abroad, integrate public school curricula with international programs and other suggestions. It encourages families and students themselves to make decisions about studying abroad with a positive mindset and calls for enterprises and society to enhance recognition towards overseas study, thereby promoting education equality and capital flow.

Keywords: family capital, educational mobility, capital conversion, studying abroad, equality of opportunities, second-tier city.

1. Introduction

In recent years, the world has witnessed the advancement of globalization and the intensifying competition in international higher education. More and more families in China regard studying abroad as a major means for capital conversion and social status enhancement. According to The Development of Chinese Students Studying Abroad in 2023-2024 pointed, as one of the largest countries that sends international students, China's number of international students continues to grow steadily [1]. As Marginson emphasized, for middle-class families, investing in their children's higher education has often become a quasi-compulsory choice, as it concerns not only academic achievement but also serves as an important means of maintaining and enhancing social status [2]. This phenomenon is also prominent in second-tier cities. For example, middle-class families in Hefei, the provincial capital of Anhui Province, see studying abroad as a "dual-track" engine that not only allows students to escape the intense competition of the domestic college entrance exam but also achieves intergenerational status advancement through international education.

Current research mostly focuses on elite families in first-tier cities such as Beijing and Shanghai. Yang Suhong and Fan Ai'ai pointed out that these cities own a considerable number of schools characterized by internationalized teaching, and the number of students going abroad each year at various educational levels is substantial [3]. In existing research, scholars usually target elite high schools or use macro-level data to reveal how high-income families achieve studying abroad through long-term investment and capital management. However, research focuses on the pathways and strategies of children's international education of families in second-tier cities such as Hefei is limited. Hefei is a city that has experienced rapid economic growth and the rise of emerging affluent and middle-class groups. It lacks the educational resources and information advantages of first-tier cities while also being in an increasingly competitive educational environment. Against this backdrop, children from high-income families have easier access to resources to enter the world's top schools, receiving the deemed educational investment. In contrast, students from middle- and low-income families frequently experience anxiety and indecision as a result of economic pressures and information gaps. According to Zeng Shaorui, high-income families are defined as those mainly relying on wage income and comprising non-manual workers with some technical or managerial authority, while middle- and low-income families include

semi-skilled and semi-manual workers, unskilled manual laborers, and their supervisors and colleagues [4]. Therefore, this study aims to address the regional bias present in previous research and reveal the perceptions and pursuit of international education of families outside first-tier cities.

It conducts an in-depth examination using a public school in Hefei as the case. As one of the top high schools in Anhui Province, School Y has both an international division and regular classes, allowing it to reflect the educational choices and pathways of families with different income levels regarding studying abroad. Through in-depth interviews with nine families of different income levels, this study discusses how family capital impacts the overseas educational mobility and decisions about studying abroad. It seeks to address the following questions: the difference among families of varying income levels in mobilizing economic, cultural, and social capital to support their children's applications to universities abroad; the role of education ecology (such as the culture of Gaokao, namely national college entrance exam, and the development of international divisions) of Hefei; the significance of studying abroad for students' long-term development and social mobility. This study aims to reveal the role of family capital within the local educational context and resulting differences in pathway choices. Instead of merely filling the empirical gap of second-tier cities in China, it hopes to provide a reference for policy formation in improving the equity of international education opportunities and facilitating the better integration of returnee students into the domestic economy.

2. Literature review

The capital theory of Pierre Bourdieu, a French sociologist, provides the core framework for understanding the educational inequality among families of different income levels. Bourdieu put forward that families possess and transmit three types of capital, including economic capital (money and material resources), cultural capital (educational background, academic knowledge, values, and tastes), and social capital (social connections and networks). Capitals are constantly converted and accumulated during the process of intergenerational transmission, influencing children's educational opportunities and shaping their developmental pathways [5]. According to Bourdieu, schools typically legitimize the cultural capital of privileged classes as talent or ability, making the education system appear neutral on the surface, while in reality reproducing social inequality [5]. This theory has been widely applied in the research field of international education. For example, Lareau's research in 2018 revealed that middle-class parents in the US continuously intervene in and plan their children's learning and interests through concerted cultivation, while working-class families are more likely to adopt the method of natural growth. The difference ultimately leads to the widening gap in educational opportunities available to children [6].

Recent research in China provides empirical evidence to support this theory and to analyze the dynamics of capital within the context of studying abroad. Based on analysis of national data for the period 2005–2017, Gao Wenjuan and Jiang Cheng found that children from high-income families are more than twice as likely to study abroad as those from low-income families. Although China Scholarship Council (CSC) and other policy programs provide opportunities for some low-income families to access public universities in Germany and Japan, elite high-income families still dominate access to resources of top universities in the UK, the US, and similar countries. The results indicate that, despite the compensatory role of policies, significant class-based distinctions persist, largely because privileged families view studying abroad as a key strategy for preserving their social position [7].

Other research analyzes the impact of family capital in first-tier cities on overseas study choices and pathways using qualitative analysis, while also proving that solid economic capital within a family provides the essential material basis for pursuing international education. Wang Xiyang, Guo Zixuan, and Huang Yaping focused on a private international school in Beijing and conducted interview-based research on the international education investments and study-abroad preparation strategies of middle-class parents in Beijing. While discovering the complexity within the middle class, the research results show that students preparing to study abroad become aware of the structural risks of their family's capital in the course of participating in the educational competition among the global middle class, generating self-development-related anxiety [8]. The condition could be more prominent and complex in China's second-tier cities. A few key high schools provide AP or A-Level programs in their international divisions, which becomes a "fast track" to studying abroad for high-income families, while most ordinary students struggle along the Gaokao path, facing a severe lack of resources and experience for study-abroad applications. This institutionalized differentiation not only demonstrates variations in family capital but also reinforces educational inequalities within schools.

In summary, existing research has provided a solid theoretical and experiential foundation for understanding the relationship between family capital and study-abroad pathways. However, a significant research gap still remains. The first is that most research focus on first-tier cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, lacking in-depth analysis of second-tier cities like Hefei; the second is that although quantitative studies reveal the overall trend, they neglect individuals' strategic choices and psychological experiences in specific contexts. Therefore, this study employs the method of qualitative interviews and focuses on overseas education experiences of children from families with different income levels at Hefei No. 1 High School, attempting to reveal the role of family capital in choosing study-abroad pathways and the challenges it presents.

3. Methodology

This study follows an interview-centered qualitative research design. Taking School Y in Hefei as the case, it discusses the differences in choices and strategies among families of varying income levels during the study-abroad application process through in-depth interviews. Moreover, it focuses on students' long-term development and psychological changes. This study is guided by Bourdieu's theory of capital and habitus, understanding educational decision-making as a process that is both constrained by economic income levels and shaped by the agency of families. Purposive sampling is applied, and a total of nine participants were publicly recruited, coming from high-, middle-, and low-income families, with three participants from each group. To ensure the diversity and representativeness of the sample selection, the interviewees comprised students from both the international division and regular classes, which can reflect the disparities under different education pathways. All interviewees have completed their undergraduate studies, which helps to track and analyze the choice pathways of families across different income levels and the long-term outcomes of overseas education, while also illustrating the process of conversion between economic and cultural capital. The detailed information of interviewees is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Interviewee information

Pseudonym	Gender	Family SES	High School Track	Undergraduate School(Country)
Cathy	F	High-income	International	Harvard University(USA)
Ethan	M	High-income	International	Duck University(USA)
Leo	M	High-income	International	University of Chicago(USA)
James	M	Middle-income	International	University of Illinois at Chicago(USA)
Jasmine	F	Middle-income	International	Indiana University at Bloomington(USA)
Zoe	F	Middle-income	General	James Cook University-Singapore(Singapore)
Rachel	F	Low-income	General	Saint Petersburg State University(Russia)
Peter	M	Low-income	General	Osaka University(Japan)
Jane	F	Low-income	General	Seoul National University(Korea)

Each interviewee takes part in a single semi-structured in-depth interview. In semi-structured interviewing, the researcher has a list of questions or fairly specific topics to be covered, often referred to as an interview guide, but the interviewee has a great deal of leeway in how to reply [9]. Each interview lasts approximately 60 to 90 minutes and is conducted mainly in Mandarin. All interviews are audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The study uses the Atlas. TI software for coding, and the analysis follows grounded theory. According to Birks and Mill, grounded theory coding begins with initial coding, which is open and exploratory. The codes are then compared and grouped into categories through constant comparison. These categories become the basis for developing higher-level themes and ultimately a grounded theory [10]. This cross-case comparison focuses on the role of family capital in accessing study-abroad resources and shaping educational pathways, while also examining students' psychological experiences and shifts in perceptions during overseas education. The research adheres to ethical standards by using pseudonyms to protect interviewees' identities throughout the study and obtaining informed consent from all interviewees.

The question section of the semi-structured interviews includes the following contents: idea development and motivations for studying abroad; families' attitudes and perceptions towards receiving overseas education; capital investment from parents in overseas education, including mobilized financial support and culture capital investment; students' and parents' evaluations of the outcomes of studying abroad, including employment opportunities, identity recognition, and changes in social status after returning home. These questions can help to accurately identify the attitudes and choices of families at different income levels toward studying abroad within the second-tier city context. Moreover, it provides a clear understanding of the role of family capital in studying abroad and its operation mechanism. The question design in the final section demonstrates the long-term flow of family capital, along with changes in social identity and mindset among study-abroad students across different family income levels.

4. Research findings and results

Through a comparative analysis of interviews with nine cases, this study identifies three interrelated thematic findings concerning family capital and study-abroad experiences of students at Y High School in Hefei. These findings include: the differentiated study-abroad pathways chosen by families of different income levels; the role of family capital in educational equity and student psychological outcomes; and the circulation of capital and its influence on the social status and perceptions of study-abroad students in the context of international education.

4.1. Differentiated study-abroad pathways and choices among families of different income levels

High-income families usually begin planning for study abroad before their children enter high school or in the early years of high school, viewing overseas education as a long-term investment. The idea of studying abroad usually originates from parents' own study-abroad experiences or their recognition and knowledge of foreign universities. This accumulation of cultural and social capital presents students with an advantage, such as enrolling in international-division courses, hiring study-abroad consultants, or participating in overseas summer schools or research programs. High-income families are able to convert economic, cultural, and social capital into one another to ensure the competitiveness of their children. Cathy, from an affluent family and enrolled in the international division, said, "My parents chose the international division not for its curriculum, but for its environment, which offers a strong English-language atmosphere, a direct pathway to overseas universities, and early opportunities to build social networks."

For middle-income families, the development of study-abroad motivations and the choice of pathways often show complexity. Some students in regular classes only consider studying abroad temporarily when their Gaokao results are unsatisfactory or when their peers choose to go abroad. Some international division students, motivated by their parents' high expectations and the experiences of relatives and friends, choose to plan for studying abroad early. However, they undoubtedly are confronted with greater financial pressures and limited resources. These families rely heavily on education agents or their social networks for information and have limited financial resources. Therefore, their strategies and choices exhibit clear characteristics of "anxious trade-offs." For low-income families, the development of study-abroad motivations is based either on clear interests or on policy plans, featuring high dependence on scholarships and policy funding. Peter, who studies in Japan, said it was his love for anime that motivated him to arrive here. Some students from these families choose to pursue study abroad at the graduate level, while others give up private universities in the US in favor of low-tuition institutions in Asia.

The research results show that choices of study-abroad pathways are under significant influence and constraints by family capital, despite that each individual exhibit unique motivations for studying abroad. Notably, economic capital can be converted into cultural and social capital, and vice versa, providing guidance and support for choosing study-abroad pathways. Children from high-income families are benefited from early strategic mobilization of capital, while students from middle- and low-income families exhibit reactive and improvisational characteristics, leading to the differences in studying abroad ultimately.

4.2. Equality of opportunity in the context of studying abroad

Within Y High School, the international division and the regular classes have developed two distinctly different educational ecosystems, which are fundamentally shaped by family capital. Students in the international division receive instruction in English and guidance for applying to overseas universities, while students in the regular classes focus on the Gaokao and must rely on overseas education agents or social networks to access study-abroad information. This institutionalized tracking amplifies the differentiation of study-abroad pathways and affects the equality of opportunities.

Students from middle- and low-income households, even if admitted to the international division with the aid of scholarships or family sacrifices, often encounter marginalization in an elite environment. Rachel indicated that "For financial reasons, I had to give up the summer overseas study tour organized by the international division. I subsequently experienced a sense of alienation from my classmates due to missing out on this experience for quite some time." Undoubtedly, this stratification of family capital imposes social comparison and psychological pressure on some students. Jasmine said, "I actually received offers from more than five schools, but when choosing a school, I inevitably had to consider tuition and scholarships. In the end, my choice was not the highest-ranked school, but it was the one offering the most scholarship support." These experiences highlight that even when families of different income levels choose the same study-abroad pathways, the competitive environment is far from equitable. Families with strong capital resources can still provide certain advantages for their children's education, while children from middle- and low-income families face relatively higher psychosocial costs.

4.3. Capital mobility and social recognition in the context of studying abroad

Studying abroad brings students significant personal growth, including improved English proficiency, increased self-confidence, and the broadening of a global perspective. A number of interviewees noted that overseas education helped cultivate their independence and a global mindset. As Ethan said, "Away from the intense pressures of the Chinese education system, I came to redefine 'success,' which is not only measured by test results or class standing, but also by creativity, the ability to think independently, and an international outlook." These findings indicate that studying abroad enables students and their families to accumulate international cultural capital, including multilingual abilities, adaptability to diverse cultures, and an international network. Under certain conditions, these can be converted into economic capital, representing a successful investment of family capital in overseas education.

However, the reality differs from expectations. A number of interviewees face challenges and social biases when re-entering the domestic job market in China after graduation. Some mentioned that during the job application process, employers had never heard of their schools or programs, leading to doubts about the value of their overseas degrees. In some cases, certain positions showed a strong preference for graduates from well-known domestic universities. Graduates from top-ranked universities are able to gain greater recognition and opportunities, while graduates from less well-known overseas institutions are often undervalued in the domestic job market. Even with high levels of professional expertise, some study-abroad students noted that their employment prospects were disappointing and did not meet expectations. Moreover, study-abroad students find it difficult to rebuild professional networks in China. This represents a challenge particularly pronounced for those from middle- and low-income families. Consequently, the returns on international education are constrained by the domestic economic and social structure, and the flow of capital is not always smooth.

From the perspective of individual development, studying abroad often promotes personal growth and transformation, which can also facilitate the conversion and circulation of family economic and cultural capital. However, many students find that the feedback from the domestic job market upon returning does not meet their expectations, as they remain constrained by domestic cognitive structures, differences in family capital, and institutional controls. While overseas education can broaden personal horizons and promote individual development, its symbolic and material value ultimately depends on China's social and economic context. In short, while international education may provide new pathways for achievement, it does not inherently disrupt the established hierarchy of capital that shapes social life locally.

5. Discussion

This study, based on interviews with study-abroad students from families of different income levels at Y High School in Hefei, reveals educational mobility shaped by the interplay of family capital and the local environment. Families with different income levels follow distinct paths in overseas education: high-income families tend to plan early and invest heavily, while middle- and low-income families exhibit more improvisational and reactive strategies. These characteristics also affect opportunities and choices in the context of studying abroad, while capital continues to influence future career development. The findings align with Bourdieu's theory: students from high-income families can convert abundant capital resources into advantages at various stages, while middle- and low-income families tend to invest more cautiously in overseas education or maintain alternative plans, with their choices and outcomes also shaped by the domestic socioeconomic environment.

Y High School, as a microcosm of the local educational field, reflects the circulation and influence of family capital at various stages of overseas education, and provides a regional perspective on the phenomenon of studying abroad in China. The social awareness and economic conditions of a second-tier city differ from those of first-tier cities. For example, the number of international schools or programs offered, the public's familiarity with and recognition of study-abroad information, and other factors all make the findings particularly significant.

Based on this, the study attempts to propose the following recommendations to promote positive conversion of capital, facilitate the flow of overseas education resources, and balance disparities in opportunities and resources. First, the government should establish a unified and publicly accessible study-abroad information platform, providing more equitable information support for families of different income levels and expanding their access to reliable information. At the same time, improving national and local scholarship systems can enhance equality of opportunity, offering more students from middle- and low-income families the chance to study abroad and promote social mobility through international education. Schools should also offer international curriculum modules or cross-cultural competency courses in regular classes. This would allow all students to gain exposure to and understand pathways to studying abroad, helping to prevent impulsive choices made without careful consideration. Moreover, incorporating the positive aspects of international education can better support students' holistic development in a globalized context. Second, parents and students should adjust their expectations and choices appropriately based on the findings of this study. While studying abroad undoubtedly enhances students' global perspectives and personal skills, future employment conditions may not be ideal. High investment does not necessarily guarantee high returns on capital. Therefore, students and families, particularly those from middle- and low-income backgrounds, should exercise greater caution when making study-abroad decisions. Study-abroad decisions should be based on personal interests and preferences, while also considering potential future opportunities in the labor market, so as to avoid choices that may impose financial burdens on families or psychological pressure on students. Finally, society and employers should enhance the recognition of overseas education. For example, employers can collaborate with educational authorities to promote the establishment of more transparent and convenient degree verification and career support systems. Increased social recognition can strengthen the human capital of study-abroad students and enable the capital conversion of the advantages of international education.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, through interviews with students from diverse income-level families at Y High School in Hefei, this study reveals the intricate interactions among family capital, overseas education choices, opportunity equality, and social recognition, enriching the theoretical and empirical research of capital conversion and international educational mobility. The study shows that, in the context of globalization, overseas education serves as a new channel for social mobility, but it is also shaped by family capital. High-income families enjoy advantages in terms of time, money, and access to information, enabling them to convert economic capital into cultural and social capital. Middle- and low-income families compare options carefully and make cautious choices regarding study-abroad pathways. Family capital not only influences educational starting points but is also continually amplified and solidified throughout the educational process. This can lead to inequalities in opportunities and even create social and psychological pressures for students. As an investment of family capital, studying abroad does not necessarily produce the expected outcomes, nor does it guarantee a smooth conversion between economic and cultural capital. This study shows that family capital is a crucial factor influencing study-abroad choices, while overseas education can also play a role in capital conversion and the enhancement of social status. Promoting the flow of capital and maximizing equity in international educational opportunities are concerns for governments, society, and individuals alike, and are key to realizing the transformative potential of international education.

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