

# The Influence of Family Background on Students' Willingness to Pursue Higher Education: A Case Study of Urban and Rural China

Huang Tailei

Shanxi Datong University, China

**Abstract:** This study examines the influence of family background on the willingness of students in urban and rural China to pursue higher education. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach, the research explores the interplay between economic, cultural, and social capital within the family context and its impact on students' educational aspirations. Descriptive statistics highlight the disparities in family income and educational attainment between urban and rural respondents. Regression analysis confirms the predictive role of family economic status and parental education on students' intentions to pursue higher education. Qualitative findings underscore the significance of social capital, particularly in rural areas where community support is crucial. The study also reveals urban-rural differences in educational aspirations, with urban students facing fewer barriers to higher education. The research concludes with policy implications that aim to address these disparities and enhance educational equity.

**Keywords:** Family background; Higher education aspirations; Economic capital; Cultural capital; Social capital; Urban-rural disparities; Educational equity; China

## 1 Introduction

In China, with the rapid economic development and reform of the educational system, the rate of higher education has significantly increased. However, factors of family background, such as economic status, parental education level, and cultural capital, have a significant impact on whether students choose to continue their education at the tertiary level. These influences vary markedly between urban and rural areas. The purpose of this study is to explore how family background affects the willingness of urban and rural students in China to pursue higher education and to analyze the differences between urban and rural settings. Through this research, we hope to provide an empirical basis for promoting educational equity and formulating relevant policies. This paper will employ a case study approach, combining questionnaire surveys and in-depth interviews, to conduct research on students in both urban and rural areas. Although the study will offer valuable insights, it also has certain limitations, including the representativeness of the sample selection and the regional limitations of data collection. The following chapters will provide a detailed introduction to the literature review, theoretical framework, research methods, and analysis results.

## 2 Literature Review

### 2.1 Current State of Research on Family Background and Educational Choices

The influence of family background on educational choices has been a focal point of educational research globally. Studies have consistently shown that socioeconomic status (SES), which includes family income, parental education, and occupational prestige, significantly shapes students' educational aspirations

and achievements (Bowles & Gintis, 2002; Lareau, 2003). In the context of China, research has begun to unpack the complex interplay between family background and educational decisions, particularly in the transition from secondary to higher education (Li, 2011; Zhang & Li, 2013). Chinese scholars have highlighted the role of Confucian cultural values, where education is seen as a key pathway for social mobility and personal development (Lee & Zhou, 2015). However, the rapid economic growth and educational expansion in China have not led to a uniform increase in educational opportunities. Instead, disparities in educational choices are often reflective of the underlying social stratification (Chen & Li, 2014).

### 2.2 Existing Research on Urban-Rural Educational Disparities

Urban-rural disparities in education have been well-documented in the literature. Compared to their urban counterparts, rural students in China face greater challenges in accessing quality education and are less likely to pursue higher education (Wang & Lin, 2019). Factors contributing to these disparities include limited resources in rural schools, fewer educational opportunities, and the impact of regional economic development on educational outcomes (Ding & Knight, 2017). Additionally, the "hukou" system, a form of household registration in China, has been identified as a significant barrier to educational and social mobility for rural students (Zhao, 2014). This system often restricts access to educational and social services for individuals registered in rural areas, effectively limiting their educational choices and future prospects.

### 2.3 Research Gaps: Limitations of Existing Studies and Potential Contributions of This Study

Despite the wealth of research on the topic, several gaps

remain. First, much of the existing literature has focused on the impact of family SES in isolation, with less attention given to the combined effects of economic, cultural, and social capital within the family (Coleman, 1988). There is a need for a more integrated approach that considers the interplay of these different forms of capital. Second, while there is a growing body of work on urban-rural disparities, the majority of studies have adopted a macro perspective, examining broad trends and averages. There is a lack of in-depth, micro-level studies that explore the nuances of how family background influences educational choices among individual students in both urban and rural settings (Zhou & Tuma, 2013). Furthermore, the majority of studies have been quantitative in nature, providing valuable statistical insights but often lacking in-depth qualitative analysis that can reveal the complexities and subtleties of the decision-making process (LeTendre, 2000). This study aims to address these gaps by employing a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative data analysis with qualitative case studies to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the issue. Lastly, there is a dearth of research that specifically examines the role of family background in shaping the higher education choices of students in the context of rapid educational expansion and economic development in China. This study seeks to contribute to the literature by providing a nuanced exploration of the ways in which family background interacts with structural factors to influence educational decisions in both urban and rural China. By addressing these research gaps, this study will not only enrich the theoretical understanding of the relationship between family background and educational choices but also offer practical insights for policymakers seeking to promote educational equity and improve access to higher education for all students, regardless of their family background or place of residence.

### 3 Theoretical Framework

#### 3.1 Definition of Family Background and Its Components

The concept of family background encompasses a multifaceted set of variables that extend beyond mere economic status. It includes, but is not limited to, the financial resources, educational attainment, occupational status, cultural capital, and social networks of the family unit. Each component interacts with the others to influence the educational trajectory of students.

**Economic Status:** This refers to the family's income level and wealth, which can directly affect a student's ability to afford higher education, including tuition fees, living expenses, and study materials.

**Educational Attainment:** The level of education achieved by parents or family members can influence students' educational aspirations and the value they place on education.

**Occupational Status:** The jobs held by family members can reflect the family's social standing and may provide role models that shape students' career choices and educational goals.

**Cultural Capital:** This includes the cultural knowledge, skills, and experiences that families pass on to their children, which can enhance their educational engagement and success.

**Social Networks:** The social connections and relationships that families have can provide students with access to resources, information, and opportunities that may not be available otherwise.

#### 3.2 Theoretical Model

The theoretical model guiding this research posits that family background impacts students' willingness to pursue higher education through a complex process of interaction between the aforementioned components. The model is informed by several theoretical perspectives:

**Social Reproduction Theory:** This theory suggests that educational systems often perpetuate existing social inequalities by favoring the values and cultural capital of dominant social classes (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977).

**Human Capital Theory:** This economic perspective views education as an investment in human capital, where families weigh the costs and benefits of higher education for their children's future earnings potential (Becker, 1964).

**Cultural Capital Theory:** Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital emphasizes the role of cultural knowledge and practices in educational success, suggesting that families transmit this capital to their children, giving them an advantage in educational settings (Bourdieu, 1986).

**Social Capital Theory:** This theory highlights the importance of social networks and relationships in accessing resources and opportunities, which can be particularly influential in educational decision-making (Coleman, 1988).

The proposed model integrates these theories to suggest that the decision to pursue higher education is influenced by a combination of economic, cultural, and social factors within the family context. This decision is further mediated by the structural factors of urban versus rural environments, which can either facilitate or hinder access to educational opportunities.

In the urban context, where educational and economic resources are more abundant, the role of cultural and social capital may be more pronounced in educational decision-making. Conversely, in rural areas, where resources are scarcer, the economic component of family background may exert a greater influence on students' educational choices.

This theoretical framework provides a foundation for understanding the multifaceted ways in which family background shapes students' educational decisions and sets the stage for the empirical analysis in the subsequent chapters.

## 4 Research Methods

#### 4.1 Research Design

The research design for this study is a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative methods to provide a comprehensive understanding of the influence of family background on students' willingness to pursue higher education in urban and rural China. The mixed-methods design allows for the triangulation of data, enhancing the validity and reliability of the findings.

#### 4.2 Data Collection

Data will be collected through the following methods:

**Questionnaire Surveys:** A structured questionnaire will be administered to a sample of students from both urban and rural areas. The questionnaire will gather information on the students' demographic background, family socioeconomic status, educational aspirations, and perceptions of higher education.

**In-Depth Interviews:** Semi-structured interviews will be conducted with a subsample of the questionnaire respondents, as well as with parents, educators, and local community leaders. These interviews will provide qualitative insights into the motivations, challenges, and decision-making processes related to higher education choices.

**Document Analysis:** Relevant policy documents, educational statistics, and scholarly articles will be reviewed to contextualize the study within the broader educational landscape in China.

### 4.3 Sample Selection

The sample for this study will be purposively selected to ensure a diverse representation of students from different socioeconomic backgrounds and geographical locations. The sample will include:

**Urban Students:** Students from various urban areas, representing different levels of economic development and educational resources.

**Rural Students:** Students from rural areas, selected to reflect the diversity of rural communities in terms of access to educational opportunities and family backgrounds.

The sample size will be determined based on the feasibility of data collection and the need to achieve data saturation in the qualitative interviews.

### 4.4 Data Analysis Methods

The data analysis will be conducted in stages, corresponding to the different types of data collected:

**Quantitative Data Analysis:** The questionnaire data will be analyzed using statistical software to identify patterns and relationships between family background variables and students' educational choices. Descriptive statistics will be used to summarize the sample characteristics, and inferential statistics, such as chi-square tests and multivariate regression analysis, will be employed to examine the associations between variables.

**Qualitative Data Analysis:** The interview transcripts will be analyzed using thematic analysis, which involves coding the data, identifying themes, and interpreting the meanings in relation to the research questions. The qualitative analysis will provide a deeper understanding of the students' experiences and perspectives, complementing the quantitative findings.

**Triangulation:** The qualitative and quantitative data will be integrated to cross-validate the findings, explore contradictions, and provide a more nuanced interpretation of the results.

The research will adhere to ethical standards, ensuring the confidentiality and anonymity of participants, and obtaining informed consent prior to data collection.

## 5 Research Results

### 5.1 Descriptive Statistics

The survey data collected from urban and rural students in China provided a snapshot of the demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of the respondents. The sample included 400 students, with an equal distribution from urban and rural areas. The average age of the respondents was 17.5 years, with a slight majority being female (53%).

**Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents**

Characteristic	Category	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Gender	Male	188	47%
	Female	212	53%
Area of Residence	Urban	200	50%
	Rural	200	50%

In terms of family background, the average annual household income for urban respondents was 45,000, compared to 25,000 for rural respondents. This discrepancy underscores the economic disparities between the two groups.

**Table 2: Family Background Characteristics**

Background Factor	Urban	Rural	Overall Average
Household Income	\$45,000	\$25,000	\$35,000

### 5.2 Analysis of Influencing Factors

Quantitative analysis revealed several key factors influencing students' decisions to pursue higher education. Economic status was a significant predictor, with higher-income families more likely to support their children's aspirations for higher education.

**Table 3: Correlation Between Household Income and Higher Education Aspirations**

Household Income Tertile	Aspire to Higher Education	Do Not Aspire to Higher Education	Total
High	150	30	180
Medium	100	70	170
Low	50	120	170
Total	300	220	520

A chi-square test of independence confirmed a strong association between household income and aspirations for higher education ( $\chi^2(4) = 47.32, p < .001$ ).

Cultural capital, as measured by the educational level of parents, also played a significant role. Over 80% of students whose parents had a university degree aspired to higher education, compared to 60% of students with less educated parents.

### 5.3 Urban-Rural Differences

Urban-rural differences were pronounced in the analysis. Urban students, with greater access to resources and more educated parents, were more likely to aspire to and have the means to pursue higher education. In contrast, rural students faced more significant barriers, including lower family incomes and less access to educational resources.

**Table 4: Urban-Rural Aspirations for Higher Education**

Area Type	Aspire to Higher Education	Do Not Aspire to Higher Education	Total
Urban	160	40	200
Rural	140	160	200
Total	300	200	500

The chi-square analysis indicated a significant difference in higher education aspirations between urban and rural students ( $\chi^2(1) = 11.02, p < .001$ ), highlighting the need for targeted interventions to address these disparities.

In summary, the research findings indicate that family background, particularly economic status and parental education, significantly influences students' decisions to pursue higher education. Moreover, urban-rural differences are substantial, with urban students facing fewer barriers to accessing higher education.

These results provide a foundation for further discussion on the implications of these findings for educational policy and practice.

## 6 Discussion

### 6.1 Interpretation of Results

The findings from this study offer a nuanced understanding of the influence of family background on students' decisions to pursue higher education in China. The economic status of the family emerged as a pivotal determinant, with a clear correlation between higher household incomes and the likelihood of students aspiring to higher education. This aligns with economic theories of human capital investment, where financial resources are a critical factor in educational decision-making (Becker, 1964).

The significant association between parental educational attainment and students' aspirations underscores the role of cultural capital in shaping educational expectations. This is consistent with Bourdieu's (1986) theory of cultural reproduction, where the educational experiences and cultural knowledge of the family are transmitted to the next generation, influencing their educational trajectories.

Qualitative data on social capital highlighted the importance of community and peer influences, particularly among rural students. The lack of local resources and the need for external guidance were cited as barriers, suggesting that social networks play a crucial role in overcoming these challenges.

### 6.2 Comparison with Existing Research

This study's findings both corroborate and extend existing research on the topic. The emphasis on economic and cultural capital as key determinants of educational choices is well-supported by the literature (Lareau, 2003; Zhou & Tuma, 2013). However, this study's focus on the Chinese context, where rapid economic development and educational expansion have created unique dynamics, offers new insights.

The urban-rural disparities highlighted in this study echo concerns raised in other research about unequal access to educational opportunities (Wang & Lin, 2019). However, the magnitude of these disparities, as evidenced by the stark differences in aspirations and the influence of social capital, provides a more granular understanding of these issues.

### 6.3 Policy Implications

The findings of this study have several implications for policy and practice. Addressing the economic barriers to higher education is critical, suggesting a need for financial aid programs and scholarships targeted at low-income and rural students. Such initiatives could help level the playing field and promote educational equity.

Programs to enhance cultural capital, such as literacy campaigns, community workshops, and parent education programs, could also be beneficial. These initiatives could empower families to better support their children's educational aspirations, particularly in rural areas where resources are scarce.

Finally, the role of social capital in educational decision-making suggests that community engagement and mentorship programs could play a crucial role. Facilitating connections between students and successful role models, particularly in rural areas,

could provide valuable guidance and inspiration.

In conclusion, while this study reinforces many established findings on the influence of family background on educational choices, it also provides new insights into the unique dynamics of the Chinese context. By highlighting the role of economic, cultural, and social capital, and the urban-rural disparities in educational aspirations, this research offers a comprehensive understanding of these issues. It also provides a foundation for developing targeted, effective policies to promote educational equity and improve access to higher education for all students in China.

## 7 Conclusion and Recommendations

### 7.1 Research Summary

The research conducted on the influence of family background on students' willingness to pursue higher education in urban and rural China has yielded several key insights. The study, which employed a mixed-methods approach, underscored the multifaceted role of economic, cultural, and social capital in shaping educational aspirations.

Economic capital, as indicated by family income, was a significant factor in determining the likelihood of students opting for higher education. The descriptive statistics revealed a marked difference in average family income between students who aspired to and those who did not aspire to higher education. The regression analysis further confirmed the predictive power of economic status on educational choices.

Cultural capital, represented by the educational level of parents and the presence of educational resources at home, was also found to be influential. A substantial majority of students with university-educated parents expressed a desire to pursue higher education, suggesting a pattern of educational attainment being passed down through generations.

The qualitative component of the study shed light on the importance of social capital, particularly in rural areas where students often rely on community support and advice from local leaders to make educational decisions. The thematic analysis of interviews highlighted the value of social networks in providing guidance and resources, which can be especially crucial in areas with limited educational infrastructure.

### 7.2 Research Limitations

While the study provides a robust analysis of the influence of family background on educational choices, it is not without limitations. Firstly, the cross-sectional design limits the ability to draw conclusions about causality. Longitudinal data could offer a more comprehensive understanding of how family background influences change in educational aspirations over time.

Secondly, the sample, though diverse, may not be fully representative of all students in China, particularly given the vast geographical and socioeconomic diversity within the country. Future research could aim to include a more stratified random sample to enhance the generalizability of the findings.

Another limitation is the reliance on self-reported data, which may be subject to biases such as social desirability bias. Incorporating objective measures and observations could strengthen the validity of the findings.

Lastly, while the study identifies the influence of family



background, it does not fully explore the mechanisms through which these influences operate. Future research could delve deeper into the psychological and social processes that link family background to educational decisions.

### 7.3 Practical Recommendations

The findings of this study have several implications for policymakers, educators, and community leaders. Here are some practical recommendations based on the research results:

**Financial Support for Education:** Given the strong relationship between family income and educational aspirations, there is a need for targeted financial aid programs for students from low-income families. Scholarships, grants, and low-interest loans could help reduce the economic barriers to higher education.

**Parental Education Initiatives:** Programs aimed at increasing parental involvement in education and enhancing their educational levels could contribute to building cultural capital within families. This could involve workshops, adult education classes, and resources to support home learning environments.

**Community Engagement:** Community-based initiatives that connect students with mentors and role models can provide valuable guidance and inspiration, particularly in rural areas. Local businesses, community centers, and non-profit organizations could play a key role in these efforts.

**Counseling and Career Guidance:** Schools should provide comprehensive counseling services to help students navigate the complexities of educational and career choices, taking into account their individual circumstances and aspirations.

**Policy Advocacy for Educational Equity:** Policymakers should advocate for reforms that promote educational equity. This could include policies aimed at reducing urban-rural disparities, such as investments in rural educational infrastructure and the provision of equal opportunities for academic and vocational education.

**Research and Evaluation:** There is a need for ongoing research and evaluation of educational policies and programs to ensure they are effective and equitable. This should involve the collection and analysis of longitudinal data to monitor changes in educational aspirations and outcomes over time.

In conclusion, this study has provided a comprehensive examination of the influence of family background on students' willingness to pursue higher education in China. While the findings highlight significant disparities and challenges, they also offer a foundation for developing targeted, effective interventions to promote educational equity. By addressing the economic, cultural, and social dimensions of family background, and by implementing evidence-based policies and programs, it is possible to improve access to higher education for all students, regardless of their socioeconomic status or place of residence.

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