

The Value of Higher Education: The Voices from Middle-class Parents in China's Yunnan Province

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Abstract: This study delves into the perceptions of middle-class parents in Yunnan province, China, regarding the significance of higher education. It further seeks to identify the determinants of these attitudes and to comprehend their implications for children's educational trajectories. Positioned within the broader discourse on the role of higher education for middle-class families in contemporary China, this research employs a qualitative approach, selecting four representative middle-class families as its subjects. Utilizing semi-structured interviews with both parents and children, the study reveals a pronounced emphasis on higher education among these parents. While various factors influence parental expectations, there is a consistent pattern of deep parental involvement in their children's educational journey. Additionally, the study highlights how parental expectations affect children's views on higher education. The findings contribute to understanding the evolving role of higher education in Chinese society, particularly among the middle class, and its implications for educational planning and social mobility.

Keywords: higher education, middle-class parents, parental attitudes

1. Introduction

This study analyzes how China's socio-economic changes shape parental expectations for their children's education—a crucial factor in learning and development [1]. It explores the heightened role of education in social mobility, reflecting on the post-1977 educational reforms and the emergence of a middle class with distinct educational aspirations amid a competitive academic environment [2]. The expansion of the middle class has triggered shifts in higher education through government interventions, cultural shifts, and resource model transformations [3], sparking debates on educational quality in the context of global standards [4]. The paper investigates middle-class parents' educational expectations in China, examining how these are shaped by socio-economic trends and their impact on children's educational outcomes. The research questions focus on parents' perceptions of higher education, the influences on their educational beliefs, and the connection between these beliefs and middle-class children's educational experiences.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Emergence of Middle-class Families in China

The emergence of China's middle class has been a subject of academic intrigue, particularly as it diverges from Western conceptualizations of social strata. Economic reforms of the 1980s, a result of China's open-door policies, have been seminal in shaping its social fabric, leading to the rise of the middle class. It is stated that this socioeconomic class's expansion is partly due to educational advancements and occupational shifts noted in the period from 1990-2005 [5]. However, debates around the definition of 'middle class' are ongoing, with some scholars advocating for a definition encompassing economic, consumption, and occupational factors [6], while others emphasize the importance of occupation and resource possession, predicting a significant rise in the middle class population [7].

2.2. The Purpose of Higher Education

The function of higher education has evolved over the past few decades, transitioning from a public service entity to a cornerstone of economic development, a change propelled by globalization [8]. This has led to an increased focus on higher education as a pathway to economic prosperity, although it also plays a role in non-economic societal contributions [9]. Chinese higher education, traditionally aimed at moral cultivation, has pivoted towards fostering global competitiveness [10], as evidenced by initiatives like the “Double First-Class University Plan”. However, Chinese students often prioritize practical outcomes, aligning with the country's economic aspirations [11].

2.3. The Relationship Between Parental Expectations and Student's Achievement

Parental expectations are significantly influential in shaping children's educational success, with research drawing on Bourdieu's cultural reproductive theory to understand the role of inherited capital—social, economic, and cultural—in educational attainment. Shared educational expectations between parents and children correlate with higher achievement [12]. It has been identified the mechanisms through which parental expectations operate, impacting the resources provided, shaping aspirations, and reflecting parental responses to children's behaviors [13]. However, this influence is nuanced; it is argued that parental expectations serve as social capital and are beneficial [14], while it is also suggested these expectations might not be as decisive in university enrollment [15]. Furthermore, high parental expectations can sometimes lead to educational anxiety, adversely affecting children's psychological well-being and academic performance [16].

3. Method and Research Design

The study utilized non-probability sampling to interview 8 parents and 4 children from 4 families, using semi-structured interviews conducted via video calls. The interviews, recorded and transcribed for accuracy, focused on understanding personal values. A thorough analysis of these transcripts helped identify key themes and patterns, forming the basis of the study's findings.

Table 1: Background information of the participants recruited for this research

Demographical Index		Family 1	Family 2	Family 3	Family 4
Child's	Age	17	25	25	27
	Birth order	only	only	only	only
	Gender	Male	Female	Male	Female
	Educational level	Senior high school	Master degree	Master degree	Master degree
	Status	Senior high school student: second year	Postgraduate student	Secondary school teacher	Financial analyst
	Discipline	N/A	Plant production	Chinese literacy	Financial accounting
Father's	Age	51-60	51-60	51-60	51-60
	Birth place	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban
	Educational level	Bachelor's degree	Vocational school	Vocational school	Master's degree
	Occupation	Health administrator	Meteorologist	Clerical worker	Professor
	Yearly income (RMB)	60,000-120,000	60,000-120,000	60,000-120,000	Over 120,000
Mother's	Age	41-50	51-60	41-50	51-60
	Birthplace	Rural	Rural	Urban	Urban
	Educational level	Bachelor's degree	Bachelor's degree	Bachelor's degree	Master's degree
	Occupation	Government official	Doctor	Doctor	Company manager
	Yearly income (RMB)	60,000-120,000	Over 120,000	60,000-120,000	60,000-120,000

4. Findings

4.1. Parental Expectations of Higher Education

The study reveals that higher education is regarded by middle-class parents as a crucial determinant of their children's future success. They view it as a stepping stone to economic stability and upward mobility. Parents like the father from Family 1 see professional skills gained through higher education as essential for securing competitive jobs. Concurrently, parents also aspire for their children to attend globally recognized universities, as the mother from Family 4 did, believing that a degree from a prestigious institution will significantly enhance employment prospects abroad. Beyond economic gains, some parents also attribute intrinsic value to higher education, emphasizing its role in shaping wisdom and personal growth, indicative of the belief that education transcends material wealth and is integral to one's moral and intellectual development.

4.2. Factors Shaping Parental Educational Attitudes

4.2.1. Family Economics Status

Family 1 and Family 2 illustrate how economic conditions shape educational expectations. The parents from Family 2, with a relatively strong financial position, consider international studies a viable option for their child, reflecting a trend where economic capability broadens educational horizons. Conversely, the mother from Family 1, while recognizing improved financial conditions, still prefers domestic education for her son due to the high costs of overseas tuition, highlighting economic pragmatism.

4.2.2. Parental Previous Experiences and Parental Educational Level

In Family 3, the mother's own attainment of a bachelor's degree sets a clear expectation for her son, establishing her educational level as the minimal benchmark for him. Family 1's father recounts his interrupted educational journey due to financial constraints, expressing a desire for his son to experience the higher education he could not, indicating how past experiences inform present

expectations.

4.2.3. One-Child Policy and Its Implications

The mother from Family 1 speaks to the intensified focus and investment in her only son's education, a consequence of the one-child policy, emphasizing the heightened hopes placed on a single offspring. In contrast, the father from Family 2 does not perceive the policy to have altered his educational aspirations, suggesting that the policy's impact is not uniform.

4.2.4. Children's Educational Achievements and Predispositions

In the case of Family 1, the parents' aspirations were initially high, hoping for their child to attend one of China's top universities. However, as their child progressed through school and faced academic challenges, expectations were adjusted to aim for institutions that more closely matched the child's academic performance and interests. This realignment reflects a pragmatic approach to educational planning, one that is responsive to the child's abilities and achievements.

4.2.5. The Intense Competition of the Job Market

Parents are acutely aware of the competitive nature of the job market and its implications for their children's futures. For instance, the father from Family 4 highlights the advantage that graduates from prestigious universities have in securing employment. This perception steers parents to encourage their children towards higher education as a means to gain a competitive edge. Such attitudes are also evident in families who, while valuing the intrinsic benefits of education, acknowledge the harsh realities of job scarcity and the need for their children to be well-prepared for the workforce.

4.3. Implications of Parental Perspectives on Children's Views of Higher Education

The children's views on higher education reflect a complex interplay of acceptance, resistance, and personal aspiration, influenced by their parents' perspectives. In Family 1 and Family 4, where parents have economically driven goals, the children recognize these aspirations but also express a desire for broader learning experiences. The children from Family 2 and Family 3, whose parents emphasize personal accomplishment, perceive higher education as a means for self-improvement and talent development. They value the role of education in achieving personal fulfillment, which may or may not align with the institutional prestige valued by their parents. The involvement of parents in their children's educational paths is a common thread across all families but evolves with time. Initially, many parents, such as those in Family 4, employ an authoritative approach, closely guiding educational decisions. However, as children like those in Family 2 grow older and more independent, parents transition to a supportive role that respects their children's autonomy.

5. Discussion

The role of higher education in contemporary China has evolved substantially, positioning it as both a catalyst for economic progression and a platform for personal growth, mirroring global shifts towards knowledge-based economies [17]. This duality resonates with the current literature, which has begun to highlight the complex contributions of higher education to society, beyond mere economic outcomes [9]. At the heart of this discussion is the multifaceted value attributed to higher education, seen by parents not only as a vital channel for economic prosperity but also as a platform for personal and intellectual growth. It is a reflection of the broader shift in Chinese society where education is increasingly seen as a cornerstone for future success, both in terms of career advancement and personal development. Rooting this sentiment in history, China's massive expansion in higher

education has dramatically altered societal perspectives. From the reinstatement of the National College Entrance Examination (NCEE) in 1978, there's been an inclusive shift in higher education access. It has led to the transformation from "elite" to "mass" higher education, affirming the democratization of education as a driving force behind strong parental convictions of its value, as seen in the inclusive policies post-NCEE reinstatement [18]. Furthermore, the growing dissatisfaction with the development of higher education in China, in the face of intensified competition within the world-class university movement [4], is reflected in the concerns of parents who balance high aspirations with critiques of the educational system's current trajectory.

In examining the factors that shape parental attitudes toward their children's education, findings in this study reveal a complex interplay between socio-economic status and personal experience. Economic circumstances greatly influence parental aspirations, with wealthier parents aiming for international education, while those with less wealth tend to set sights on domestic institutions. In addition, a parent's own educational attainment often serves as a minimum benchmark for their children's education, fostering a desire for academic success that may surpass their own achievements, which aligns with recent findings on the stratification of educational opportunities [19]. The influence of China's one-child policy also highlighted in this study, provide new insights into the ongoing debate about the changing dynamics of family structure and expectations in China [16]. The adaptability of parental hopes in response to their children's academic performance and the competitive job market underscores the critical nature of higher education as a means for children to secure a foothold in an increasingly competitive workforce. By delineating these influences, the study not only corroborates but also expands upon [6] observations about the emerging middle class in China and its implications for educational planning and social mobility. All these factors create a dynamic framework within which parents shape their educational expectations, reflecting a narrative that is both personal and influenced by wider societal norms.

In addition, the perceptions of children in Yunnan's middle-class families reflect a complex interplay of acceptance and resistance to parental expectations. While children are influenced by their parents' deep investment in their educational trajectories, they also foster unique personal aspirations that may not always align neatly with parental visions. This divergence is particularly pronounced when children articulate their desire for self-actualization through education, which sometimes contrasts with their parents' more pragmatic goals of economic stability and social status. The children's narratives, rich with ambition, reveal an emerging individuality that negotiates within the traditional familial structures and societal norms that are deeply rooted in the Chinese context. For instance, children often need to deal with the pressures of fulfilling parental aspirations that carry the weight of cultural expectations, while also seeking for their own educational and professional paths. The study's depiction of this divergence, especially in the context of children's desires for self-actualization through education, adds a rich layer to the understanding of educational motivations among Chinese youth. Furthermore, the parental approach, which ranges from the highly authoritative to the progressively child-centered, is also indicative of a transition. Families initially exhibit a form of authoritative involvement, where parents closely monitor and direct educational choices. However, as children progress through their educational journey, parents tend to adopt a more supportive role, respecting their children's individuality and independent decision-making capabilities. This transition from authoritative to child-centered parental approaches, documented in the study, resonating with current research on the progressive liberalization of child-rearing practices [20]. In this sense, while parents serve as the primary architects of their children's early educational experiences, the children themselves gradually become co-architects, negotiating and redefining the value of higher education in the context of their personal goals and the realities of an increasingly competitive global landscape.

6. Conclusion

This research provides insights into the perceptions of 8 middle-class parents in Yunnan, China regarding higher education. It has unpacked the dual expectations parents hold: the anticipation of economic stability and the aspiration for their children's cognitive development. The findings suggest that these beliefs are not static but are dynamically shaped by an interplay of familial aspirations and the evolving socio-economic changes of Chinese society. Parental involvement, although well-intentioned, can sometimes create a tension between the expectations of parents and the experiences of their children. While the study adds depth to our understanding of the role of higher education in Chinese middle-class families, it has limitations in focusing solely on middle-class respondents. To build on these findings, future research could broaden the inquiry to include a more diverse range of socio-economic backgrounds and consider the implications of China's educational policies and global market forces on the aspirations and realities of families.

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