This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Journal

Research Papers in Education on 2 Sep 2020, available online:

https://doi.org/10.1080/02671522.2020.1814849

Gaming the No-Choice System? School choice and persistent educational inequality in China

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Acknowledgements

The authors thank the public dataset - China Family Panel Studies (CFPS), designed by Peking University (PU) research team, supported by PU 985 funds and implemented by the Institute of Social Science Survey (ISSS) PU.

We also would like to thank Professor Meg Maguire and Dr. Anna Mountford-Zimdars for their feedback on early drafts of this manuscript.

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Abstract

The admission policy for public compulsory schools in China is neighbourhood enrolment which entitles children to attend their assigned local school free of charge, and this policy has been rigorously implemented in recent years to prevent school choice. However, driven by disparities in education provision, parents still find ways to make choices in an officially no-choice public educational system. Inspired by a Bourdieusian framework, this study uses the China Family Panel Studies (CFPS) to explore the relationships between family capital, school choice, and the quality of the school pupils attend. We seek to offer a lens to explore the prevalence and patterns of school choice, and its impact on constructing educational stratification. Findings suggest persistent inequality in the no-choice policy context and that children from more privileged families are more likely to study in higher performing schools. (137 words)

Keywords: school choice, educational quality, compulsory education, educational stratification, neighbourhood enrolment

(Word count: 5212)

Introduction

School choice, also described as educational choice or parental choice, has attracted much discussion around the world (Gorard & Fitz, 2006; Oría et al., 2007). For example, the school choice system in the UK is seen as a way of providing market-based accountability that is central to raising standards, and in the US supporters of school choice say it gives parents and students more control and options. However, critics of these systems are concerned about the disparity between schools (Brasington & Hite, 2014) and equality of educational opportunity (West, Barham, & Hind, 2011). In China, the admission approach for public compulsory schools is neighbourhood enrolment, which entitles children to attend their assigned local primary and lower secondary schools free of charge. School choice is not officially permitted, though some parents find ways to navigate the tightly controlled admission system in order to enrol their children in academically higher performing schools or ones with better resources.

In the theory of social reproduction, Bourdieu emphasized the role of education in reproducing social privilege (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). School choice, as a strategy to reproduce educational privilege, may not only have an impact on the individual's educational path, but may also contribute to education stratification (Böhlmark, Holmlund, & Lindahl, 2016). Correspondingly, the effectively maintained inequality (EMI) hypothesis (Lucas, 2001) identifies persistent inequality in terms of quality of education. EMI emphasizes that even with universal access to education, family origin is still an essential factor influencing the quality of education received and individuals from advantaged backgrounds can still enjoy their

privilege by accessing better forms of education (Davies, Maldonado, & Zarifa, 2014; Ichou & Vallet, 2011; Tieben & Wolbers, 2010; Yue, 2015). The current study aims to apply these theoretic perspectives to explore the linkage between family capital and the quality of school that pupils attend and whether school choice is one of the determining factors in any potential stratified pattern.

International experience of school choice programmes and the Chinese system

School choice programmes were introduced in many countries since the 1980s with the intention to boost competitiveness among schools and to improve overall quality, both in western (e.g. the UK, the USA) and eastern (e.g. Japan, India) countries (Belfield & Levin, 2002; Forsey, Davies, & Walford, 2008). In China, the majority (over 90%) of pupils attend public school for nine-year compulsory education (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2016), which is government funded and free of charge. In 2015, there was around 7% and 10% of primary and lower middle school students attending private schools (Schulte, 2017). Additionally, there was a small proportion (the rate estimation varies across different researchers) of dropouts during compulsory educational stage, who might be engaged in child labour force (Bilige & Gan, 2020; Chang, Min, Shi, Kenny, & Loyalka, 2016; Tang, Zhao, & Zhao, 2018).

With the policy of neighbourhood enrolment, each public school is assigned a catchment area, and school-aged children with Hukou (household registration) in the catchment area have the right to enrol in a school. The *Hukou* system is based on place of birth;

it divides citizens into rural and urban residents. It is the primary mechanism through which Chinese people are eligible for government-subsidized social security programs, such as education, health and social assistance. The Hukou system is closely linked to the educational system in all levels, from primary schooling admission to university entrance examination (Vickers & Zeng, 2017). For instance, without a local Hukou, students with migrant parents may be excluded during public primary/secondary school admission. In big cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, migrant children may only be left with the choice to study in privately-run and under-resourced 'migrant schools' (Chen & Feng, 2017; Goodburn, 2009).

Education has long been seen as the key to securing a better future in the Chinese society. As upper secondary school and university admissions are almost solely determined by students' test scores in exam results, including the highly competitive National Higher Education Entrance Examination (*gaokao)* (Hannum, An, & Cherng, 2011). Therefore, many parents, and possibly students, believe that choosing and attending a 'good' or 'better' quality school adds value to students' academic outcomes and long-term future (Burgess, Greaves, Vignoles, & Wilson, 2015). There is, however, great disparity in academic performance and resources in different schools due to uneven development (e.g. key school system[1]). Despite the official ban, the practice of school choice is widespread as many parents strive to send their

[1] The key school system has been in place since the foundation of the People's Republic of China in the 1950s, to accumulate school-leadership experience, and with the intention of spreading the experience to other ordinary schools. The key school system was abolished in 2006, when the revised Education Law was introduced. However, educators and parents would like to call a former key school a 'high-performing school' (Feng, 2007).

children to ‘better’ schools. Therefore, school choice in China refers to how and when ‘parents break through the restrictions of admission to the designated school and send their children to the school of their choice, which is outside their school catchment area’ (Qin, 2008, p.334). The government has simultaneously prohibited school choice while little attention has been paid on its prevalence (Dong & Li, 2019; Liu & Apple, 2016). A number of government interventions, for example stricter enforcement of proximity-based admissions, abolishment of the key school system and computerized lottery system, have been implemented more recently to help tackling the school choice issue and equalizing school qualities. Nevertheless, families with more resources continue to find ways to navigate, or ‘game’ the ‘no choice’ system to obtain a place for their child in a preferred school.

There are many possible indicators of the quality of a school's educational provision, for this paper, the discussion of ‘quality’ of schools is largely focused on academic performance. We treat government designated key schools or beacon schools as high-quality schools, which are often seen as pathways to high performing upper secondary school and top universities. Historically governments invested more resources into these schools, such as facilitating these schools to have better material environments, and better qualified teachers. And although the key school system was officially abolished, they still exist under different names or guises (Yu, 2017).

In open-choice systems, there are critics who mainly worry that families with limited resources and capability are less able to make informed decisions or have constrained freedom

to make their choices (Peterson & Hassel, 1998). For example, in the UK, the school market has also been found to be increasingly orientated towards meeting the perceived demands of middle-class parents (Crozier et al., 2008; Gewirtz, Ball, & Bowe, 1995; Reay, Crozier, & James, 2011). Hence, educational stratification may be caused by parental school choice (Kotok, Frankenberg, Schafft, Mann, & Fuller, 2017). Similarly, research in China (e.g., Wu, 2012, 2013a, 2013b) shows that parents from higher socioeconomic backgrounds are the most active participants of school choice. This phenomenon also exacerbates the uneven development in compulsory education and the inequality of resources amongst different schools (Dong & Li, 2019).

How capital influences school choice participation

Prior studies in China suggest family capital affects school choice (Wu, 2013a, 2013b). Bourdieu describes capital as 'the set of actually usable resources and powers' (1984, p.114). Capital enables people to take up a position, which then interacts with their habitus within the field of social practice. In this paper, we draw on three main types of capital to explore school choice in China: cultural capital, social capital, and economic capital. Cultural capital refers to the collection of symbolic elements such as skills, tastes, credentials, etc. that one generally acquires through being part of a particular position in social space. Social capital refers to social networks and relations, and economic capital denotes financial and economic resources. However, the value of capital is not fixed but is determined by the *field* (distinct arenas in the

social world, the 'game', e.g. education). Bourdieu proposes that social life can be understood as produced through interactions of *habitus*. Habitus is an infinite capacity of engendering products of perceptions, expressions, actions, and thoughts (Bourdieu, 1980). It produces a 'feel for the game' and capital within the context of field. Substantial research has examined the ways in which interactions of capital and habitus can generate academic achievement and the reproduction of privilege. As discussed, a number of studies outside of China have highlighted the ways in which the middle classes are often able to combine economic, cultural and social capital to secure the 'best' school places for their children (e.g. Reay et al., 2011; Vincent & Ball, 2006).

We focus the discussions on capital in this paper for several reasons. Bourdieu (1986) states that all types of capital can be derived from economic capital through varying efforts of transformation. China's social structure has undergone tremendous changes during the recent economic growth, and there are debates on concepts relating to the 'Chinese middle class'. Hong and Zhao (2015) argue that Chinese society has not fully reached class crystallization, and the current Chinese middle class is primarily affluent in income but shows limited class distinctiveness in aspects like attitudes and habitus. Additionally, analysis of survey data could only provide partial information relating to habitus. We acknowledge that the value of capital is not fixed but is determined by the field (Bourdieu, 1984).

Using economic capital was the most common approach by Chinese families to exercise school choice. This includes school choice fee (*Zexiao fei*), which is paid by those who study in a

school of choice, to their selected schools (Xie & Postiglione, 2016). This money, often seen as an 'education donation', is used for enriching the funding pool of the schools. This could also be viewed as schools maintaining some autonomy in a highly controlled system (Maxwell & Aggleton, 2015). In addition, attending extracurricular activities is another form of an educational investment aimed at improving school admission chances. Such practice, which require parental investment of money and time, might not be affordable for families from less privileged backgrounds.

Extracurricular activity is also an important component of cultural capital, and also relates to school choice (Wu, 2013a, 2013b). For those students with perceived higher academic potential and a resultant higher chance to get into higher quality schools, parents enrol children in various forms of shadow and extracurricular education to enhance their chances of having greater school choice (Liang, 2009). Other major strategies include acquiring educational credentials and becoming a special talent student (Wu, 2012).

As an embodiment form of social capital, social connection (*guanxi*) also plays an important role in school choice in China. Acquiring the inner admission information via *Guanxi* is one way to improve the chances of enrolling children in a high-quality school (Wu, 2012). Parents can use their *Guanxi* to gain educational information when making school choice decisions (Zhou & Lu, 2009). *Guanxi* is a vital, even determining factor in gaining the necessary access to be able to pay a school choice fee, and negotiation of the amount of the choice fee (Wu, 2012; Xu, 2009). In addition, social capital can assist in practicing school choice, through

helping parents gain an exceptional quota for a better school, or through the child becoming a co-operative student[2].

Method

Data

The study used data from the 2014 wave of the China Family Panel Studies (CFPS). The CFPS is a longitudinal dataset conducted by the Institute of Social Science Survey of Peking University. The CFPS covers around 20,000 households across 25 provinces. A series of social issues are covered in the CFPS, including educational participation, family relationships, economic development and health. The CFPS adopted a multistage probability proportional sampling (PPS) strategy. Stage one and two were conducted based on the characteristic of the county and community, and households were selected on stage three. Within each household, all family members aged over 9 years old were interviewed, while information for younger children was collected by interviewing parents. To date, five waves of data, for 2010, 2012, 2014, 2016 and 2018, have been released. Wave 2014 was selected due to the data availability of key variables, and we have selected the sample of children at compulsory educational stage (primary and junior middle school level).

Although the CFPS is a nearly nationally representative dataset, it has the potential bias

[2] A cooperation relationship refers to a partnership established between key schools and influential government departments or big companies. The schools may admit children of parents from certain working units, and the working unit would in return donate some co-operative fee to the high-quality schools (Wu, 2012).

of under representation of the migrant population (Xie & Hu, 2014), therefore the school admission problems of the migrant children are less likely to be reflected in the current study. Furthermore, the CFPS was also less representative of the wealthiest population in China (Xie & Jin, 2015), who might be an active group of making school choice, therefore, we may not be able to capture their choice behaviours.

Measures

Economic capital can directly convert to money in the form of property rights (Bourdieu, 1986), and it represents the capability of purchasing products (Lee & Bowen, 2006). In this study, economic capital was measured by 1) the total family annual income last year; 2) the total educational expenditure (including tuition, books, educational software, transportation, board fee; accommodation; extracurricular activities and school choice fee); and 3) whether the family has an educational saving plan for children's education. *Cultural capital* was measured taking into consideration both institutionalized capital that refers to educational credentials and the credential system, and objectified cultural capital that pertains to cultural goods, such as books, dictionaries, and fine art (Bourdieu, 1986) .Therefore, the measures include: the length of education of both father and mother, and the number of books at home. For educational level, we coded '<=6 years'[3] as 1 =low (reference group); '7 to12 years'[4]was coded

[3] Includes illiterate, pre-primary, primary school

[4] Includes junior middle school, senior middle school, and vacation school

as 2=middle; '>12 years' [5] was coded as 3=high. In the CFPS survey, the number of books (excluding newspaper, magazine, and electronic books) were asked with the following option: 0 as no book; 1: 1-10 books; 2: 11-20 books; 3: 21-50 books; 4: 51-100 books; 5: 101-500 books; 6. 501-1000 books; 7. 1001 books and above. We recoded option 1 & 2 (<=20 books) as 1=low (reference group); option 3 to 5 (21 to 500 books) as 2=middle, and option 6&7 (over 500 books) as 3=high. In addition, since gifting is a common way to accumulate social connection (*Guanxi*) in China (Knight & Yueh, 2008; Smart, 1993), we measure social capital by 'the approximate amount in cash equivalent to all the monetary /material gifts that family sent out last year'.

The key /beacon schools were envisaged as beacons for the school system overall (Wu, 2008). The goal was for key school personnel to accumulate effective school-leadership experience and then to spread the good practice to other mainstream schools. More resources and governmental energy were invested in key schools, which improved their material conditions, afforded them higher quality teachers, allowed them to optimise teacher-student ratios, and increased the rate at which students were promoted to higher level-schools — all as compared to normal schools. The benefits of attending a key school were recognized in local communities, and families competed fiercely to enter them (You, 2007). *School quality* was measured through the question of 'Whether the child is studying in a beacon (*Shi fan*) school, including key (*Zhong dian*) school?'. We coded the answer yes as 1 and no as 0.

[5] Includes junior college, college, master degree, and doctoral degree

CFPS collected information on the school admission approach each family adopted to enrol children into their current school. Options include: 1. neighbourhood enrolment; 2. computer lottery; 3. high academic/special talent; 4. pay sponsorship fees/temporary students fee; 5. social connection (*Guanxi*). Based on previous literature, we recoded 2—5 to 1 as practicing school choice, and recoded 1 to 0 as no school choice. In addition, there is another question asking whether the parents have changed Hukou status for children's school admission, and we viewed this as a form of school choice as well, as parents attempt to enrol their children in schools different from the original assigned districts.

Child characteristics were controlled for, including study stage, gender, age and Hukou status. Child's study stage is a binary variable (0=primary school, 1=junior middle school), as is gender (0=girl, 1= boy), and child Hukou status (0=rural, 1=urban). Children's age is a continuous variable.

Data analysis

In the current study, the major relationship of interest is between family origin and quality of school, with quality of school as the dependent variable, and the three forms of family capital as the main independent variables. For data analysis, firstly, bivariate analysis was performed to explore the correlations between each independent variable and the dependent variable, applying chi square tests for categorical variables and t-tests for continuous variables to generate a basic profile of family capital by school quality and school choice. Effect size tests

were also conducted, with Cramer's V calculated after chi square test and Cohen's d after t-test (Lakens, 2013). Secondly, to explore the association of different forms of family capital with children's school quality and parental school choice, logistic regressions were conducted taking into account the dichotomous nature of the dependent variable (Stoltzfus, 2011). An odds ratio (OR) greater than 1.00 indicates that the independent variable is associated with an increased possibility of the dependent variable-quality of school. We reported the Akaike information criterion (AIC) and Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC) as indicators for model fitness comparison, and the best model was detected based on the lowest value of AIC and BIC (S-PLUS4, 1997).

The aim of mediation analysis is to understand if and to which extent the effect of an independent variable X (e.g. economic, cultural and social capital) on a dependent variable Y (e.g. quality of school) is mediated through a variable M (e.g. school choice) (Grotta & Bellocco, 2013). In the current study, we are interested in the extent to which school choice may mediate patterns of the quality of school that children attend, and due to the dichotomous nature of the testing mediator (school choice), we performed the binary mediation test (Ender, 2010; Li, Schneider, & Bennett, 2007). Model-fit statistics were evaluated through stepwise addition to determine the best fitting model, including likelihood ratio chi-square (χ^2) and degrees of freedom and likelihood ratio (LR) tests between models. STATA 14.0 was used for data analysis.

Results

Table 1 presents the sample characteristics. The sample size was 3,307 with 734 the children study in Beacon schools, while 2,573 the children attend ordinary public schools. 79.50% were rural population and 20.50% were urban. The gender distribution was almost equal (girls: 48.01%). The binary analysis results indicated significant difference in family economic capital (family annual income, educational expenditure, and educational saving) and cultural capital (father's educational level, mother's educational level and number of books) between different pupils from different qualities of schools, that children in beacon schools were more likely from families with higher level of capital. In addition, there was a significantly higher proportion of school choice for children studying in beacon schools, compared to their counterparts in ordinary schools.

[Table 1 about here]

To further explore the relationship between family capital and school choice, as well as the relationship between family capital and quality of school, a series of logistic regressions were performed (Table 2). Natural logarithmic transformation of annual income, educational expenditure and the total amount of gifting out was conducted to normalize the data distribution (John & Draper, 1980). Model 1-1 and Model 1-2 show the relationship between school quality and family economic and cultural capital respectively. As there is no significant difference by family social capital among school groups in bivariate analysis, we did not include

social capital forward into the regression model. For economic capital, we did not see a significant association between family annual income and the quality of school that children attend, but there was a strong positive relationship between educational expenditure and school quality (OR=1.206, $p<0.001$). Furthermore, children from families with educational saving plans were more likely to attend beacon schools compared to those whose families do not save for children's education (OR=1.448, $p<0.001$). For cultural capital, compared to children of mothers with a low educational level, those with middle (OR=1.247, $p<0.05$) and high educational levels (OR=1.672, $p<0.05$) were more likely to attend a better school. In addition, compared to the lower number group, children from families with higher number (OR=1.730, $p<0.05$) of books were more likely to study in beacon schools. The next model carries forward both economic and cultural capital (Model 1-3). In this model, we can see a strong positive association between family economic capital for both educational expenditure (OR=1.200, $p<0.001$) and family educational saving plans (OR=1.390, $p<0.01$). Regarding cultural capital, households with a higher number of books also were more likely to have children attending better quality schools (OR=1.659, $p<0.05$). In model 1-4, school choice was added and it has a strong positive relationship with quality of school (OR=2.691, $p<0.001$). The associations between family economic and cultural capital with quality of school decrease when adding school choice into the model, suggesting a potential mediation effect.

[Table 2 about here]

Since school choice has an important influence on the relationship between family capital and school quality, beyond this, we are interested to explore the influential factors within family capital on school choice. Table 3 shows the data description and bivariate analysis of family capital by school choice. The number of families practising school choice was 652(19.72%). There were significant positive relationships for both family economic capital (educational expenditure, education savings) and cultural capital (father's educational level, number of books) with school choice.

[Table 3 about here]

Logistic regressions were also conducted to reveal the role of family capital in understanding school choice. Model 2-1 and Model 2-2 (Table 4) show the relationship between school choice and family economic and cultural capital respectively, and Model 2-3 is the result incorporating both family economic and cultural capital with school choice. For economic capital, families with higher educational expenditure (OR=1.404, $p<0.001$) and educational saving plans (OR=1.338, $p<0.01$) were more likely to practice school choice. Regarding cultural capital, father's educational level was positively correlated with the likelihood of practicing school choice: compared to the low educational group, the middle (OR=1.409, $p<0.001$) group has a higher probability of performing school choice, while the

number of books was not statistically significant. When including both forms of capital in Model 2-3, there was a similar pattern, with educational expenditure (OR=1.394, $p<0.001$), educational saving (OR=1.310, $p<0.05$), and the middle group of father's education (OR=1.243, $p<0.05$) having positive associations with school choice. The significant interaction results in Model 2-4 suggest that the impact of father's education level on school choice varied depending on educational expenditure and educational saving.

We plotted the results graphically in Figure 1 using values of 1 *SD* below the mean and 1 *SD* above the mean of educational expenditure, and education saving, on the possibility of school choice. Graphs a and b illustrate the difference in predicted likelihood of school choice on father's educational level by education expenditure and educational saving respectively. Graph c highlights how families with high educational expenditure were more likely to practice school choice. Specifically, those with high educational expenditure and educational saving had the highest probability of school choice, and this increases with father's educational level. Families with low educational expenditures had lower possibility of school choice, and the likelihood decreased with father's educational level. Families with low educational expenditure and no educational saving plans had the lowest likelihood of school choice.

[Table 4 about here]

[Figure 1 about here]

To explore the role of school choice in influencing the relationship between family capital and quality of school, mediation tests were conducted. Figure 2 is the mediation model of family capital on quality of school via school choice. The upper part of the figure shows the direct effect of family capital on school choice, and the triangle figure presents the indirect effect of family capital on quality of school through school choice. Table 5 shows the mediation effect of school choice on the association between family capital and children's school quality. About 30.00% of the effect between educational expenditure and quality of school was mediated by school choice, and 13.69% of the mediation effect was in the relationship between educational saving plan and quality of school. The size of the total indirect path suggests that approximately 20.30% of the total association between cultural capital and quality of school was mediated through the number of books at home, and 13.98% was mediated through father's educational level.

[Figure 2 about here]

[Table 5 about here]

Discussion

This study considers a Bourdieusian framework to explore the relationships of different forms of family capital—economic, cultural and social— with the type of school that pupils attend in China. We sought to reveal any patterns of educational stratification via school choice and provide evidence of the practice and prevalence of school choice across China. This study

underscores the persistent inequality in terms of who does and who does not have access to schools that are locally regarded as being of 'higher quality', that children from privileged families remain more likely to study in a high-quality school.

Since the 1980s, substantial achievement in promoting universal education has been achieved in China (China Statistical Yearbook, 2016). However, after quantitatively achieving the goal of universal compulsory education, the matter of the uneven quality of education merits attention. These are also in line with the prediction of the theory of social reproduction and EMI hypotheses, which suggest that even with the universal access of education, the quality of education that children receive may still be differentiated (Lucas, 2001; Lucas & Byrne, 2017a, 2017b). Therefore, as argued by Lucas and Byrne (2017a), EMI suggests that equalising quantity is insufficient to undermine inequality 'because inequality in the *types* of education obtained can effectively reproduce patterns of advantage and disadvantage.' This study adds evidence in emphasizing the persistent inequality of quality of education in compulsory education, with those from less privileged backgrounds continuing to be disadvantaged.

We also observed a positive relationship between family capital and parental school choice, and the interaction between cultural and economic capital in underlining the mechanisms of intergenerational reproduction (Bosetti, 2005; Forsey et al., 2008). In prior studies, social capital has been demonstrated to play a fundamental role in school choice in the Chinese context (Qin, 2008; Tsang, 2003; Wu, 2012). However, we did not see a significant

relationship between 'gifting out' and school choice in our study. This might be due to the limited measurement of social capital in the CFPS, and perhaps more importantly, considering the rigorous implementation of neighbourhood enrolment policy and the anti-corruption movement happening in China, there might be fewer opportunities for gaming the system directly by using social connection and political power (Lee, 2017).

While school choice programmes in the West are largely driven by government policies, practices of school choice are parent-initiated in China (Wu, 2011, 2012). Much of the discourse around school choice in the West is around the importance of parents having the freedom (and responsibility) to choose, even though in practice many families from disadvantaged backgrounds are more constrained in their choices. The school choice phenomenon in China is arguably not about freedom but more a means to an end in a highly competitive education system and society; however, similar to the situations in systems with school choices, the level of freedom to exercise choice largely depends on one's background.

There are different possible explanations of school choice phenomenon in China. First, the individualism (Hofstede, 1980) brought by the open market and dramatic socioeconomic transformations in China has been playing an increasingly important role in influencing ways of thinking among Chinese people. This means a greater emphasis on the family as an individual unit being dedicated to seeking the best interests of its child(ren). Second, because of Confucian philosophy and a long history of standardized testing, Chinese families place a high value on education and its value for preserving socioeconomic privileges or for realising upward

mobility in an exam-oriented system. In addition, due to the former one-child policy, as the 'only hope', most Chinese children bear additional high expectations from their family. Parents often invest more in their children's education (Deutsch, 2006), and try their best in facilitating children's academic and social activities, thereby ensuring a better future potential for their children and for themselves (Wang & Fong, 2009).

There are some limitations to note in the current study. First, it is limited by the existing measures of family capital in CFPS dataset, in that we were not able to capture diversified dimensions of capital, such as the size and density of networks of social capital (Lin, 1999). In addition, measurement of capital in prior studies are contested (Dumais, 2002; Smala, Paz, & Lingard, 2013; Yamamoto & Brinton, 2010). The current study was not able to employ specific standardized measures of the forms of capital. The effect sizes of some measures included in this study were small. These all call for further exploration to develop and validate standardized measures of Bourdieu's important concept of capital. Second, due to the cross-sectional design we were unable to trace back to the status of family capital at the time point when the school choice was made. This study thus affords only associational rather than causal interpretations. Longitudinal analysis could be conducted in the future, depending on the availability of key variables inclusion in future waves of CFPS data. As discussed earlier, the data provide limited information for further investigation on 'Chinese middle-class' habitus. We are aware that school choice is not only a resource-informed behavior, that having more capital does not necessarily indicate a higher probability of making school choice. It is also an expression and

enactment of parental identity (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2014; Holme, 2002), as well as educational expectations of parents and students (Escardibul & Villarroya, 2009). Therefore, future studies may explore the values informing school choice decisions of the Chinese parents.

Despite these limitations, our study provides empirical evidence based on national data about the persistent inequality in the provision of schools, and illustrates the prevalence of parental school choice practices in China's officially 'no-choice' system. It underscores that school choice is not only an individual behaviour, but one that has public consequences for educational segregation (Saporito, 2003) effectively leaving concentrations of disadvantage behind. The core of school choice in China lies in the disparity of school quality (Qin, 2008), therefore, to reduce tension, improving the overall quality of public schools is urgent. In addition, steps should be taken to improve the transparency of the school admission system and to discourage any gaming (Francis & Hutchings, 2013). Ultimately, the phenomenon of parents finding ways to exercise school choice in a no-choice system is intractably linked to the wider context of a deep-rooted examination culture and increasingly fierce educational competition. This context is also connected to social competition in China and addressing these issues will require cultural and systematic changes.

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