

# Factors influencing the post-school transitions of Chinese middle school students after the high school entrance examination: an exploration through the lens of capital theory

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**Abstract:** Zhongkao, the high school entrance examination in China, is a pivotal component of the Chinese education system, which affects students' future paths. The main destinations of Chinese junior high school graduates are secondary education, vocational education, and entering the workforce. This paper examines the factors influencing the post-school transitions of Chinese middle school graduations through Bourdieu's capital theory, including cultural, social, and economic capital. Key factors such as Zhongkao scores, social value, parents' educational expectations, and family economic status all play critical roles in post-school transitions. This analysis aims to provide decision support for optimizing educational resource allocation and promoting educational equity.

**Key words:** Zhongkao; post-school transitions; capital theory

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## 1 Introduction

The high school entrance examination (Zhongkao) is a crucial component of the Chinese education system, and its results determine students' academic paths. The primary destinations for Chinese junior high school leavers are further education, vocational training, and joining the workforce. According to Wu, only 50% of middle school graduates have the opportunity to pursue higher education [8]. Students who choose vocational education or enter the workforce face significant disparities in future employment prospects and income compared to those attending regular high schools. Using Bourdieu's capital theory, this paper digs into various factors that affect these decisions. Bourdieu's (1997) theory of capital includes the impact of economic, cultural, and social factors on individuals and education, aiding in forming a more systematic understanding of why these factors broaden or limit the pathways of students from three dimensions.

## 2 Cultural capital

### 2.1 Academic performance

Cultural capital refers to students' cultural competence, linking to students' knowledge, skills, and other resources acquired over time (Bourdieu, 1997). These are obtained through education, family upbringing, and society. The performance of junior high school students in Zhongkao reflects their learning ability and critical thinking ability. Wu indicates that students entering prestigious secondary schools are more likely to enrol in prestigious colleges [3]. High scores in Zhongkao and excellent learning skills bring advantages to junior high school graduates, allowing them to have a

broader range of life choices. Conversely, students with lower scores may be forced to choose vocational education or local schools, which impacts their career and social status.

## 2.2 Social value

Traditional Chinese cultural values emphasizing academic excellence and stable careers play a role in influencing decisions. Traditional Chinese culture may delimit the prospects of certain students, yet it has the potential to yield more favourable outcomes for them. As Bourdieu (1997) stated, cultural capital encompasses values, beliefs and knowledge transmitted from generation to generation. Traditional Chinese cultural values prioritize excellence and stable professions, which are often instilled in people early on [11]. These values serve as a form of capital that shapes their preferences, choices and expectations regarding school transitions. For youth specifically, the immense value placed on achievement often leads to a preference for pursuing higher education or securing prestigious and stable careers. This form of capital creates opportunities by guiding them towards fields like medicine, law, or engineering. However, it also limits their exploration of career paths or their artistic or entrepreneurial pursuits [4]. Overall, traditional Chinese culture has expanded opportunities for students inclined towards stable professions, but has constrained the pathways for students pursuing the arts.

## 3 Social capital

### 3.1 Family social capital

Family social capital refers to the interactions within the family, influencing students through parental educational expectations, parental involvement and the network of the family [6]. Low parental educational expectations will limit students' post-school choices. Parents with low educational expectations don't expect their children to get higher education or high scores in school (Yu & Wu, 2020). Most students with low educational expectations only finish junior high school education.

Low educational expectations influence the allocation of other forms of family capital towards student education. Parents are unwilling to provide tuition fees or additional education expenses to support their children's studies. Students from impoverished households with low educational expectations often enter the workforce after completing junior high school to share the family's economic burden [10]. This has detrimental implications for students' post-school transition. Students who opt for work often find it challenging to re-enter high school education or pursue higher education [7]. Parents' low educational expectations lead students to start working after middle school. Due to systemic limitations, it becomes difficult for them to re-enter the educational system.

High educational expectations directly affect the importance they place on their children's education and the resources they devote to it. Parents with high educational expectations are more willing to provide a better learning environment and more educational resources. Xue and Zhao (2023) indicate that parents with high educational expectations are more inclined to hire tutors or pay for enrolment in better high schools. The advantages that students gain from their parents make them more likely to choose academic high schools.

Parents' social networks provide significant support for students. Parents with connections to the education field or high-end professional sectors can provide more information and opportunities. Hu (2020) noted that parents of higher social status tend to be more familiar with teachers and have more acquaintances in the school. As experienced educators, teachers can provide valuable advice on further education and learning strategies, which impacts students' academic performance and provides more pathways for students to pursue higher education. Rural students often miss opportunities for continued education due to a lack of information about school applications, leading them to choose vocational schools or enter the workforce. Hu (2020) indicates that students whose parents engage in non-agricultural work are 2.3 times more

likely to attend general high schools compared to those whose parents are engaged in agriculture. Students with insufficient family social capital are more likely to attend vocational high schools or enter the workforce due to inadequate academic performance or family values [5].

#### **4 Economic capital**

For students, economic capital refers to a family's financial resources, such as income and wealth [2]. Parents with good economic conditions are more willing to invest more in their children's education, which directly or indirectly affects students' educational opportunities and quality. Family economic capital enables students to access high-quality education through participation in tutoring and the selection of better schools. Xue and Zhao (2023) indicate that more than 50% of students from economically advantaged families achieve better academic performance by engaging in tutoring and attending high-quality secondary schools [9]. In tutoring, students can acquire additional exam strategies, while in high-quality schools, they benefit from responsible and experienced teachers, a proactive learning environment, and support that enhances their academic progress. Both factors contribute to their academic performance, enabling them to gain an advantage and get into better high schools.

Wealthy families are more likely to support their children studying abroad to gain broader development prospects. Bahna indicates that students from affluent backgrounds are more likely to seek international educational opportunities [1]. Studying abroad not only requires high tuition fees but also involves living expenses and other related costs, placing high demands on family's economic status.

#### **5 Conclusion**

After finishing junior high school education, most Chinese students have three options: pursuing further education, pursuing vocational training, or entering the workforce. Among these choices, secondary education is generally seen as the best due to societal norms and employment prospects, while entering the workforce is considered less desirable. Understanding the factors that influence the decisions of youth after graduating can help policymakers develop interventions to support their transition into adulthood. It can also assist individuals in making choices that contribute to their personal growth. Factors such as performance, personal aspirations, parental education expectations, parental involvement and traditional Chinese culture collectively shape the school journey of young people. While these factors may pose limitations on opportunities for students, enhancing outcomes depend on how they are approached and embraced by individuals.

#### **Conflicts of interest**

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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