

# The Resurgence and Development of Private Universities in China: An Analysis of Educational Equity Based on Bourdieu's Theory

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## Abstract

This paper examines the resurgence and development of private universities in China with Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital and social reproduction. It provides an overview of the history and development of private schools, introducing their initial forms and the transformation of their forms after the Reform and Opening-up Policy. It explores the relationship between the development of private schools and educational equity, and how private schools can become tools for the accumulation and transformation of cultural and social capital in their development. The paper emphasizes the educational injustice brought about by the resurgence of private schools and their impact on social justice. It concludes that Bourdieu's theory offers a compelling explanation of the resurgence and development of private schools in China, and it reveals how the education system has intensified the social class division. Understanding and applying Bourdieu's theory can guide future developments in Chinese education, promoting educational equity and social justice.

## Keywords

Private schools; Bourdieu; Cultural capital; Social reproduction; Educational equity

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## 1. Introduction

This paper focuses on the resurgence and development of private schools in China. Private universities have experienced a resurgence in China since the early modern period, which is closely related to the Reform and Opening-up Policy. Under the influence of globalization and new educational thought, the nature and purpose of these schools have changed significantly from the

past, and the development of private schools is still a controversial topic in China.

Understanding the history of private universities is crucial to comprehending the significance of their resurgence and development, which has profound implications for the field of education and social equity and justice. This paper employs Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital and the role of education in social

reproduction to analyze this issue.

## 2. The development of private schools

### 2.1. History and primary form

In China, the concept of private universities was first proposed at the end of the Qing Dynasty. After the end of the imperial examination system, private universities were generally funded by the state government or private enterprises, relying in whole or in part on students' tuition fees to maintain the university's operation<sup>[1]</sup>. At that time, there was no formal higher education, resulting in a prevalence of low-level institutions within the private university sector.

Between 1912 and 1927, private universities matured significantly. Several accredited private universities have come out simultaneously, which later evolved into famous educational institutions such as Nankai University and Xiamen University. "The establishment of new schools and even the new education system, as drafted in 1922, were largely the outcome of private actors' engagement"<sup>[1]</sup>.

During this period, private universities can be categorized based on their primary funding resources:

- (1) Government-assisted schools: Institutions like Nankai University were supported by national and provincial treasury funds. It is a development model with official assistance and was rare in China in the first half of the 20th century<sup>[1]</sup>.
- (2) Tuition-based schools: There were private universities with tuition as the primary source. Schools such as Daxia University and Fudan University belong to this type. Such private universities account for the vast majority in early modern China.
- (3) Donation-and-enterprise-funded schools: Some universities were supported by donations, rents, and enterprise grants. Such private universities also existed in early modern China<sup>[2]</sup>.

After 1928, the government ended the Warlord period and strengthened its control. "...many of the regulations concerning state-provided education were never implemented nationwide, and education continued to be delivered mainly by private actors<sup>[3]</sup>."

The turning point occurred after the founding of the People's Republic of China. In 1949, "...the state strove

for an encompassing, public education system, pursuing the ambitious aim to replace all private schools with public schools"<sup>[4]</sup>. The government passed the Law of Compulsory Education in 1986, guaranteeing nine years of schooling, and "efforts were intensified to eliminate all private schools by the year 2000"<sup>[2]</sup>.

### 2.2. Resurgence and development

In 1978, the Reform and Opening-up Policy was implemented. As Schulte researched, "...China embarked on a comprehensive modernization project which was accompanied by processes of privatization and accelerated urbanization"<sup>[4]</sup>. At that time, "...private schools were to disappear, new types of private schools emerged"<sup>[4]</sup>. They included the education of rural children and immigrants in urban areas. After 1992, some educational enterprises began to develop cram schools, and the nature of private schools was gradually shifting.

The private schools that emerged in the 1980s began to diversify. "...about half were trade schools, and the rest were academic institutions"<sup>[5]</sup>. The most noticeable feature of these schools is that they are entirely privately owned, run by individuals with minimal government interference. These school owners provided tailored courses to attract students. The socialist principle that the country and the government should provide education, so the official media called them "people-run schools," which reflected "government discomfort with these schools' character"<sup>[5]</sup>. However, the re-emergence of private schools was a logical and essential part of China's educational development.

Nowadays, private schools cover all levels from kindergartens to universities. In recent years, China's population has proliferated. Private schools have solved more efficiency problems as a combination of education and the market. According to Renmin News, there were about 187,700 private schools nationwide. More than 1/3 of the total number of schools at all levels and types in China<sup>[6]</sup>.

However, the rapid development of private schools has also brought some new problems. For example, a particular form of "noble schools" has emerged in China. These schools are often in the form of Sino-foreign joint ventures, charging high tuition fees and providing bilingual or multilingual education, targeting

the wealthiest people in China <sup>[4]</sup>. This aroused the dissatisfaction of many ordinary people. Even though there are many traditional types of private schools in China, the name “private school” has gradually been equated with “advanced,” “rich,” and “privileged.”

### 3. The relationship between this issue and educational equity

In China, the revival of private schools has sparked considerable debate. Initially, private schools aimed to provide higher education and promote educational equality, particularly for children in remote and underdeveloped areas <sup>[4]</sup>. After 1949, the government pursued a goal to establish a comprehensive public education system. By the late 1980s, the vast majority of schools had become public.

In the process of development, private schools began to re-emerge and gradually take on two main forms. One type is the aristocratic school, characterized by high tuition fees and exclusive enrollment criteria, catering to the elite. The other type continues the tradition of private schools, built in remote areas to provide basic education for rural children, embodying the original mission of promoting educational equity <sup>[4]</sup>.

On the issue of justice, there are differences between the Chinese and Western ethical traditions <sup>[7]</sup>. The Western concept of justice shapes the political and legal system and pays attention to the justice of the social system. In contrast, traditional Chinese ethics pay more attention to the moral cultivation of individuals, so they sometimes ignore the social equity system. Rawls’ theory of justice can play a significant role in studying problems in Chinese society. Rawls believes that justice is the primary value of the social system, and the concept of justice should dominate a well-ordered society <sup>[8]</sup>. He states that first, everyone has the same freedom. This applies to citizens’ fundamental freedoms, including freedom of expression, political freedom, financial freedom, and freedom of thought. All social values, such as wealth, opportunity, and knowledge, should be distributed equally. Secondly, suppose there is social and economic inequality, it is necessary to guarantee the best interests of the minor beneficiaries under the principle of justice and abide by the principle of fairness and equity of

opportunity <sup>[7]</sup>.

The original form of private schools in China embodies educational and social equity. Most private schools are funded by enterprises, providing teachers for areas with scarce educational resources and narrowing the education gap between the poor and wealthy populations. With development, private ownership has been strongly supported, gradually expanding the scale of private schools and becoming a large number of privatized <sup>[4]</sup>. As a result, there has been an uneven distribution of educational resources.

According to Rawls, everyone should have equal opportunity. Traditional private schools, located in remote areas, primarily serve rural and impoverished students <sup>[6]</sup>. In contrast, private schools in urban centers, owned by enterprises or individuals. The enrollment depends on students’ family backgrounds, certificates obtained, and even parents’ jobs and contributions, making it difficult for ordinary people to access these private schools, which contradicts Rawls’ theory of social equity.

Secondly, one of the biggest problems of private schools is the inequity of educational resources. The Education Bureau manages public schools, allocates educational resources relatively reasonably. According to the Renmin News surveys, the costs of private schools in remote areas mostly come from enterprises funded or donated, and the shortage of funds led to outdated facilities and scarce teachers <sup>[6]</sup>. Conversely, aristocratic private schools can afford advanced teaching equipment, luxurious campuses, and experienced teachers. These schools offer a wide range of courses that provide students with comprehensive development opportunities and help students develop in all aspects. For students in ordinary and backward areas, entering these private schools is an educational privilege <sup>[8]</sup>.

For society, the inequity of educational resources can lead to many problems. For example, the gentrification of some private schools highlights social class differences. A good family background determines access to quality education and a better life, while the benefits of ordinary students’ efforts are little, which violates Rawls’ principle of distribution.

Despite these challenges, the existence and development of private schools are understandable. Even if they reflect social injustice, their development is worth

exploring. Analyzing the causes of the development and change of private schools, explaining them theoretically, and seeking solutions are meaningful for the development and progress of Chinese pedagogy and social equity.

## 4. Theoretical analysis

### 4.1. Introduction of Bourdieu's theory

Bourdieu, a prominent French thinker, categorized students' capital into three types: economic, social, and cultural—these three kinds of capital run through almost the whole educational life of students<sup>[9]</sup>. Economic capital includes wealth such as stocks and real estate. Social capital involves relationships that can actually or potentially help people achieve economic or status development. Cultural capital encompasses knowledge, skills, and cultural cultivation, divided into three forms<sup>[10]</sup>:

- (1) A disposition of the mind and body. For example, a person born in a scholarly family has been influenced by culture since he was a child, and his cultivation is exceptionally high.
- (2) The state of objectivity. When transforming cultural capital into objects that people can touch, watch, and feel. It is called cultural products.
- (3) The cultural system. It means institutionalizing the culture and knowledge, like graduation certificates, qualification certificates, and professional title certificates.

Jenkins introduces “three of Bourdieu's most important ‘thinking tools’—the concepts of practice, habitus, and field”<sup>[10]</sup>. He thinks that practice is the result of a person's habitus and capital in the social field.

According to Grenfell, “Habitus is a characteristic of a social actor”<sup>[11]</sup>. Habitus is often related to people's material conditions, such as family circumstances and educational experience<sup>[12]</sup>. It connects society and individuals; it is “a dialectic between external internality and internal externality”<sup>[11]</sup>. Habitus is a kind of intermediary that emphasizes relations between. It is an abstract concept, and the effect of habitus can only be felt through practice and belief<sup>[10]</sup>. The field is a competitive land area. “...Social actors use various strategies to maintain or change their position”<sup>[11]</sup>. The bargaining chip in the field is capital accumulation. Fields and habitus

coexist.

The above theory constitutes Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction. Bourdieu deeply analyzed the hidden dark side of the educational process: the education system controls the production, transmission, and conversion of cultural capital, shapes the social status of individuals, and reproduces unequal social structures. He believes that the educational process is an indirect, cultural, and social control<sup>[9]</sup>.

### 4.2. Analysis of Bourdieu's theory

It is compelling to explain the resurgence of private schools in China with Bourdieu's theory.

Since 1949, the field of education has long been dominated by the government, with public schools taking the leading role. However, with the development of the Reform and Opening-up Policy, private schools have gradually entered this field, forming a diversified education market.

The development of private schools cannot do without the support of economic capital, which includes financial resources, land, equipment, and other material resources. In China, the main sources of funding for private schools include tuition fees, social donations, and corporate investments. The accumulation of economic capital enables private schools to provide high-quality educational resources, such as excellent faculty, advanced facilities, and a rich curriculum<sup>[4]</sup>.

Private schools accumulate cultural capital by hiring high-quality teachers and offering courses and high-tech educational tools to meet the educational needs of middle-class and above families. The accumulation and transformation of this cultural capital have made private schools occupy a unique position in the education field. What's more, private schools are social bonds among families of similar social classes and promote the sharing of resources within these families.

High-quality private education resources are usually accepted by high-capital families, and the habitus they cultivate helps their children maintain class advantages, creating a new cycle of educational division. This process reflects the logic of capital conversion and class reproduction in Bourdieu's theory.

When it comes to educational equity, poor students often have limited access to quality educational resources

<sup>[13]</sup>. They have limited job choices because of their educational background. China's job market attaches great importance to diplomas, which means the poor students may be eliminated early and engage in physical work or jobs with lower social status, and their lives may always be in the same social class.

In contrast, wealthy students enjoy rich educational resources, engaging in activities such as traveling and studying abroad, which build up their cultural capital. Unlike quickly acquired economic capital, cultural capital is time-consuming, and it requires personal experience <sup>[9]</sup>. Wealthy parents invest economic capital in education and convert it into cultural capital for their children, who can use this capital to gain economic and social advantages. This cycle extends the gap between the rich and the poor.

To address these issues, the Chinese government has implemented policies aimed at promoting educational equity <sup>[14]</sup>. These measures include increasing funding for rural schools, providing scholarships for students from low-income families, and expanding the enrollment scale to ensure that poor students have access to education. These measures have significantly protected the right to education of poor students and maintained educational equity.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper examines the resurgence and development of private schools in China, analyzing the issue based on Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital and social reproduction. These theories offer valuable insights into the phenomenon.

Bourdieu's theory focuses on social class dynamics and highlights how education serves as a tool for converting cultural and economic capital. His concepts "habitus," "field," and "practice" provide an explanation of how educational systems maintain and reproduce social structures, and offer critical views for China's educators.

After analyzing, this paper concludes that Bourdieu's theory is compelling in explaining the resurgence and development of private schools in China. It not only illustrates the underlying social dynamics but also provides theoretical support for addressing the unfair matters that exist in the education system.

In conclusion, Bourdieu's theory offers a clear and persuasive explanation of the resurgence and development of private schools. They emphasize that it is essential for the public and policymakers to focus on the role that private schools play in the education system and society. Understanding Bourdieu's theory can help guide the future development of private schools and promote educational equity in China.

### Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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