

Creating Choice: Families' Efforts to Transform the Rules of the Middle School Admissions Arena in China (one chapter of dissertation, "Changing the Rules of the Game: Educational Strategies of Socioeconomically Advantaged Families in Post-Reform China")

Abstract: Much empirical research within the sociology of education field portrays the conversion of socioeconomic resources into advantages at school as a relatively natural, seamless process. Largely overlooked is how social actors struggle to shape the "rules of the game" within the education field to their advantage, despite the importance Bourdieu assigned to this process when outlining the concept of field. Contexts in which privileged families face policies aimed at equalizing educational opportunities may be ideal for investigating efforts to change the "rules of the game." In this paper, I look at one such case: the middle school admissions arena in China. I draw on nationally representative survey data to reveal that despite official restrictions on school choice at the compulsory-level of education in China, almost a quarter of Chinese middle school students' families used social connections, special testing, unsanctioned fees, or other strategies to gain access to preferred middle schools, and that engagement in these strategies, which I conceptualize as "informal school choice", is strongly associated with social class. I argue that informal school choice represents an effort on the part of socioeconomically advantaged families to transform the "rules of the game" within the education field in their favor, although findings also suggest that there may be differences among these families in their incentives to change existing structures.

I. Introduction

The sociology of education literature has highlighted various ways in which middle class and affluent families draw on socioeconomic resources to help their children within the educational system. Scholars have observed, for example, that middle class and affluent families are able to draw on their stores of cultural capital to satisfy the expectations of teachers and school administrators, and that this translates into advantages for their children at school (Lareau 1987, 2000, 2011; Lareau and Horvat 1999; Francis 1999; Calarco 2011). In addition, socioeconomically advantaged families employ cultural, social, and economic capital to gather and synthesize information that can be valuable for making educational decisions. This includes information about school choice opportunities (Ball, Bowe, and Gewirtz 1996; Wells and Crain 1992; Carnoy and McEwan 2003; Levin 1991; Gauri 1999; Walford 2003; V. J. Martinez et al. 1995), advanced academic programs at school (Baker and Stevenson 1986; Useem 1992; Hallinan 1994, 1996; Lareau 2000; Lareau and Weininger 2003; LeTendre, Hofer, and Shimizu 2003), tutoring and other educational support services (McDonough 1997; Park, Byun, and Kim 2011), and university admission procedures and

policies (McDonough 1997). Moreover, middle class and affluent families can draw on their economic resources to purchase tutoring services and expensive extracurricular activities for their children (e.g. violin lessons, ballet classes, organized soccer) (Kim and Lee 2010; Buchmann, Condron, and Roscigno 2010; Lareau 2011; Park, Byun, and Kim 2011; Bray and Lykins 2012; Zhou and Wang 2015), which can assist in obtaining access to university; economic capital can also be used to pay the high tuition charged by elite private schools and universities (Cookson and Persell 1987; Cook and Frank 1993).

Overall, the previous literature has documented various pathways through which middle class and affluent families convert socioeconomic resources into advantages for their children at school. But what if features of the educational system restrict the extent to which socioeconomic resources influence schooling? In other words, how do middle class and affluent families operate when faced with policies aimed at equalizing educational opportunities? Although this is likely a situation encountered by privileged families in a wide variety of contexts, this issue has attracted much less scholarly attention than those instances in which socioeconomic resources are relatively seamlessly converted into advantages at school. From the perspective of theory, this is an oversight. Much of the research on the transmission of advantage within and through the educational system draws on Bourdieu's concepts of capital, field, and social reproduction. Yet central to these concepts is the notion of conflict and struggle: social actors are constantly competing for power and advantage within particular fields, and the "rules of the game" are continuously being shaped and (re)defined as a result of this struggle. By overlooking the ways in which middle class and affluent families react to and struggle against structural barriers to transmitting their advantage within a particular field, we are missing a key part of the story.

The arena of school admissions in China represents an ideal context in which to investigate this issue. School choice is officially restricted at the compulsory level of education in China (grades

1-9), yet Chinese families have strong incentives to choose where their children attend elementary and middle school. How are Chinese families, particularly those from comparatively privileged backgrounds, responding to barriers to engaging in school choice? There is some preliminary evidence that Chinese families are struggling against official restrictions on school choice by carving out new, unofficial pathways for engaging in school choice – what I conceptualize as “informal school choice.” We have a limited understanding, however, of how widespread this phenomenon is in China, as well as whether there are social class differences in the use of informal school choice. In the current study, I draw on a newly available, nationally representative survey of middle school students in China to investigate the prevalence of informal school choice in China, as well as its association with social class and socioeconomic resources. I deploy Bourdieu’s concept of field to interpret my findings and their implications for educational inequality in China.

II. Conceptual Framework

Bourdieu put forth the concept of field to describe relational social spaces in which agents (i.e. social actors) compete and struggle for advantage. The relative position of agents within a particular field is determined by the quantity and nature of the capital they possess, as well as by the rules of the game that govern the field. Using a gambling analogy, Bourdieu described agents as players with different quantities and colors of tokens at their disposal for playing the game. Notably, however, Bourdieu did not conceive of the rules of the game and relative positions of players within fields as static:

[P]layers can play to increase or conserve their capital, their number of tokens, in conformity with the tacit rules of the game and the prerequisites of the reproduction of the game and its stakes; but they can also get in it to transform, partially or completely, the immanent rules of the game. They can, for instance, work to change the relative value of tokens of different colors, the exchange rate between various species of capital, through strategies aimed at discrediting the form of capital upon which the force of their opponents rests...and to valorize the species of capital they preferentially possess.
(Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 99)

Thus, if social actors encounter a field in which their capital has little value, they can struggle to transform the rules of the game so that the value of their capital is inflated. China is an ideal context in which to explore this situation, given that new social actors with new socioeconomic resources at their disposal are emerging in the post-reform era. These social actors are coming to the education field with strong incentives to secure positions of advantage, given the power the education field exerts over other fields in Chinese society. Yet, not all socioeconomic resources are of equal value when “playing the game” in the education field in China, particularly in the context of policies aimed at increasing equality of educational opportunity. This may create incentives for social actors to transform and re-shape the rules of the game in their favor.

III. Background

Social Change in Contemporary China

Over the past few decades, China has experienced dramatic change in its social structure. Following the death of Mao Zedong and the ascendancy of Deng Xiaoping to the top leadership position in 1978, China underwent major economic reforms, transforming the economic system from a command economy to one with capitalist elements. These reforms created new opportunities for Chinese citizens to accrue wealth by establishing businesses or obtaining highly compensated employment in the growing private sector. The emergence of an entrepreneurial class of corporate managers and small business owners has contributed to rising levels of income inequality in China: while there was little variation in family income among China’s urban population in the pre-reform period (Li 2006), incomes vary dramatically within Chinese society today. The China Research Foundation for Economic Reform, for example, found that the top 20th percentile of household incomes in urban China were 67 times those within the bottom 20th percentile in 2012 (Song 2013).

Alongside the new entrepreneurial class, an educated elite has emerged in China. Qian and Smyth (2008, 138) estimated that the GINI coefficient for educational inequality, as measured by transition rates to senior high school, had reached 0.49 by 2000. Moreover, although average educational attainment has increased for all socioeconomic groups in China since the 1980s, according to an OECD report in 2010, only about 10 percent of Chinese citizens aged 25-64 had completed tertiary education (OECD 2016). This suggests that a select group of Chinese families today have very high levels of cultural capital, relative to the general population. Although some members of the educated elite are employed in business or government, many work in professional occupations, given that advanced academic credentials are often required to enter this career pathway.

Finally, a third privileged group exists in China – the political elite or “cadre class”. Members of this group continue to enjoy comparatively high social status in the post-reform era. While this is particularly true of those who are members of the Chinese Communist Party, even low-ranking civil servants in China are advantaged in terms of the resources at their disposal, relative to members of the working class. In summary, a number of privileged groups with different combinations of socioeconomic resources occupy the top of the social hierarchy in post-reform China. One of the major challenges facing these families, however, is the transmission of their advantages, many of which are newly acquired, to the next generation. How can they ensure that their children will secure a position within the top rungs of the new social hierarchy?

The Chinese Educational System as Site of Struggle

The Chinese educational system represents an important site of struggle for China’s socioeconomically advantaged classes. Advanced academic credentials, particularly elite credentials, are increasingly important for securing and/or improving social status in post-reform China (F. Li,

Morgan, and Ding 2008; Kwok 2010). In other words, the education field wields power over many other fields in China, in that those who are able to secure a dominant position within the education field are advantaged when competing for power and position within other fields.

Despite educational expansion, access to academic high schools and four-year universities is still limited in China. While the vast majority of middle school students in China transition to high school (“Promotion Rate of Graduates” 2016), about 40 percent of these students enroll in vocational, as opposed to academic, programs (“Distribution of Enrolment” 2018). Moreover, according to the World Bank, the gross enrollment ratio for tertiary education in China was around 40 percent in 2016 (“World Development Indicators” 2018), and less than 60 percent of undergraduate students were enrolled in bachelor degree-granting programs (“Distribution of Enrolment” 2018) . Finally, many students who do obtain bachelor’s degrees struggle to find suitable employment, with many accepting low-paying jobs or employment for which they are overqualified. This situation has contributed to rising competition for spots in elite universities and STEM and business majors, given that graduates from these programs generally experience better placement on the job market (Stapleton 2017).

China’s socioeconomically advantaged classes have begun to draw on their resources to help their children within the highly competitive, high-stakes education field. For example, Young and Hannum (Forthcoming) have documented that Chinese families in the top quintile of the income distribution are heavily investing in academic tutoring and other extracurricular activities for their children in the hopes of providing an extra “boost” in the competition for educational credentials, spending almost 4 times as much as middle income Chinese families. It is important to note, however, that socioeconomic resources are not naturally converted into advantages for one’s children at school. In order to convert their resources into advantages, social actors must constantly compete to shape the rules of the game in their favor. That is, they must create structures that place

themselves in an advantaged position relative to other social actors in the field, while also struggling against and dismantling structures that limit their power in the field (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992).

I argue that the arena of middle school admissions in China offers a unique vantage point for examining struggle on the part of China's socioeconomically advantaged classes to shape the rules of the game in their favor. As I discuss in the next section, school choice at the compulsory-level of education is officially restricted in China, posing a barrier to the transmission of advantage, and thus a limit on the power of China's socioeconomically advantaged classes. Recent research suggests, however, that socioeconomically advantaged Chinese families may be carving out new, unofficial pathways for school choice by leveraging a variety of resources. That is, these families may be struggling against a structure that poses limits on their power within the education field by creating new structures serving their best interests – new pathways through which they can influence where their children go to school, which can give their children an extra “edge” in the competition for educational credentials.

School Choice in China

Beginning in the 1980s, the Chinese government decentralized primary and secondary education, transferring responsibility for administration, management, and financing of schools to local governments (Liu and Dunne, 2009: 463). Decentralization of the educational system has resulted in greater variation in public school quality, as some school districts have been more successful at attracting funding and implementing effective practices than others (Tsang, 2003:171-172). Elementary schools (grades 1-6) and middle schools (grades 7-9) that are more effectively managed and better funded are generally more successful at preparing students for China's high-stakes high school and university entrance examinations (Wu 2014). This creates incentives for Chinese families to engage in school choice – that is, to exercise control over where their children

attend elementary school and middle school. Due to official policies aimed at promoting equality of educational opportunities, however, there are few official pathways through which Chinese families can secure preferential access to top-performing elementary schools and middle schools for their children.

While high schools in China are permitted to admit students from outside of the local school district, according to official policy, students at the compulsory level of education are required to attend schools within their allotted school district (Wu 2013a). Parents have the option of sending their child to a private school, but this is an unpopular choice; the vast majority of Chinese students enroll in public schools, particularly for secondary education (Liu and Xie 2015). Even if families are fortunate enough to reside within a school district with more than one elementary school and/or middle school, in many cases school enrolment is determined by the local government¹ and there are few, if any, official pathways for families to influence the local government's decisions regarding their child's school placement. Moreover, in those cases in which school enrollment is open to the public, school administrators are the primary decision-makers in determining which students are accepted, and the way they make decisions is often unclear (Wu 2014). This effectively limits the "choice" parents have in terms of where their child attends school. In summary, most Chinese parents are faced with few formal opportunities to engage in school choice at the compulsory level of education, and thus have limited control over which elementary schools and middle schools their children attend.

Despite barriers to school choice at the compulsory level of education, media reports and research within certain areas of China suggest that many Chinese families are making every effort to exert control over where their child goes to school (Zhang and Wang 2006; *People's Daily* 2011; Wu 2014; OECD 2016). In particular, there has been much media attention to the payment of unsanctioned "school choice fees" to gain access to schools outside of one's catchment area, as well

as to the use of personal connections, gift giving, and special academic testing to sidestep the official, sanctioned process for allocating students to schools. Perhaps in part driven by this media coverage and public debate, there has been a small, but growing body of scholarly research on these informal, unsanctioned forms of school choice in China, thanks in large part to the work of education scholar Xiaoxin Wu (Crabb 2010; Wu 2012, 2013a, 2013b, 2014; Xie 2016; Xie and Postiglione 2016; Wen, Xiao, and Zhang 2017). Many of these studies have argued that informal school choice is contributing to educational inequality in China, since middle and upper class families are believed to engage in informal school choice to a greater extent than other families.

Due to the limited availability of nationally representative data with information about informal school choice, however, it has been difficult to estimate the pervasiveness, and, consequently, impact of informal school choice in China. Moreover, Wu appears to be one of the only scholars to have investigated empirically whether social class differences exist in the use of informal school choice, and his research is based on data collected within a single city in southern China (Wu 2012, 2013b, 2013a, 2014). As such, Wu's findings cannot be generalized to other areas of China. By drawing on a newly available, nationally representative survey of middle school students and their families in China, the China Education Panel Survey, I am able to overcome these limitations and provide a better understanding of the scope of informal school choice in China today, as well as its relationship to social class and, consequently, its potential implications for educational inequality.

IV. Methods

Data

The China Education Panel Survey (CEPS) is a large-scale, nationally representative survey conducted by the National Survey Research Center at Renmin University. The baseline survey was

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conducted in academic year 2013-2014 and collected data on 19,487 seventh and ninth grade students from 112 schools spread across China. CEPS employs a stratified, multi-stage sampling design. In the first stage, 28 counties/districts were randomly selected from a sampling frame of 2,870 counties/districts across 31 provinces and/or autonomous regions or municipalities (Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macao were excluded from the sampling frame). In the second stage, four schools were randomly selected within each county/district. The third stage entailed randomly choosing two classes within each grade (two seventh grade classes and two ninth grade classes) to participate in the survey. In addition to student questionnaires, a parent or guardian of each sampled student completed a parent questionnaire, and classroom teachers and school administrators completed their own questionnaires.

Measures

Informal School Choice

The CEPS parent questionnaire includes a question about the strategies parents used to gain access to the middle school in which their child is currently enrolled. Parents were asked, “to get your child into this school, did your family do any of the following? (select all that apply): 1) find a friend who could help; 2) give a gift to relevant leaders; 3) pay an additional fee; 4) buy a house in the school district; 5) change household registration (*hukou*); 6) ‘anchor’ household registration (*hukou*) to a relative or friend’s home; 7) have the child participate in special academic contests or acquire talent certificates; 8) other methods; 9) none of the above.” These strategies represent an effort on the part of families to exert control over where their children attend middle school in the face of few official pathways for choosing their children’s schools. As such, I conceptualize the use of one or more of these strategies as engagement in “informal school choice.” Students whose

parents report using at least one of these strategies are thus coded as “1” on the “informal school choice” variable.

Social Class

Sociologists disagree on the best way to measure social class (Goldthorpe and Hope 1974; Treiman 1977; Nakao and Treas 1994; Jonsson et al. 2011). In this paper, I adopt an approach that uses information on parents’ occupations to sort families into social classes (Goldthorpe 1980; Erikson, Goldthorpe, and Portocarero 1979; Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992; Jonsson et al. 2011). I combine the occupations that scholars generally conceptualize as part of China’s working class (X. Y. Lu 2002; C. Li 2005; Wu 2013a, 2014) into one group, which I then compare to four high status and/or highly compensated occupations thought to differ from each other in resources, attitudes, and lifestyles: professionals; government workers; corporate managers/executives; and small business owners (Bian et al. 2004; Lin 2006; Goodman 2008; Zang 2008; Carrillo 2008; Yang 2008; Wang and Davis 2010; Xie 2016).

Socioeconomic Resources

In addition to testing for social class differences in engagement in informal school choice, I examine the association of three socioeconomic resources— parental education, financial resources, and political capital – with this strategy. I use mother’s education as a measure of parental education. While I did consider using a composite measure of mother’s and father’s education, cross-national research indicates that mother’s education is a strong, consistent predictor of student outcomes across a wide variety of contexts (Marks 2008). Parental education is categorized as follows: 1=mother has an elementary school education or less; 2=mother has some secondary education, but did not complete academic high school; 3=mother obtained an academic high school degree, but did not pursue tertiary education; 4=mother obtained some tertiary education. The financial resources

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variable is based on the question “how would you describe your current financial situation?” (dichotomized as 1=“relatively well-off” or “very well off” and 0 = “average,” “relatively difficult,” or “very difficult”).² Finally, political capital is operationalized as membership in the Chinese Communist Party.

Control Variables

I include the following control variables in the models: gender, migrant status, ethnic minority status, household registration (agricultural household registration [rural *hukou*]=1), family structure, whether or not the child has siblings, and grade (dichotomized as seventh grade=0 and ninth grade=1). I also include a control for whether the child attends school in an urban area and for county of residence, since families living in particular areas of China may be more likely to use informal school choice, and region or county of residence may also correlate with social class. Finally, I add a control for the child’s performance on a test of logical reasoning in language, math, and graphical forms.

Analytic Approach

First, I produce estimates of the proportion of parents of middle school students in China who used informal school choice to obtain access to their child’s current school. I then run a series of logistic regression models to test for a relationship between social class and the odds of engaging in informal school choice. In the baselines model, I regress engagement in informal school choice on the full set of control variables. I then introduce dummy variables for social class (measured by occupational group) to the baseline model. Finally, I estimate a series of logistic regression models to test for relationships between informal school choice and three socioeconomic resources: parental education, financial resources, and political capital. To account for CEPS’ sampling design, I use sampling weights and clustered standard errors in all analyses.

V. Results

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 provides some general, descriptive statistics of the CEPS survey sample and the variables included in the models. As shown in Table 1, about fifty-three percent of sampled students are male.³ Although almost half of the students attend middle schools in urban areas (49 percent), a slight majority (64 percent) have agricultural household registration (i.e. rural hukou). Migrants account for 10 percent of the sample and ethnic minorities account for 15 percent of the sample. In terms of social class, around three quarters of students come from working class backgrounds (66 percent). About half of the remaining students' families are categorized as small business owners (roughly 17 percent of the overall sample). Each of the other three socioeconomically advantaged occupational groups – professionals, government workers, and corporate managers – accounts for about 5 percent of the overall sample. In terms of parental education, there is a fair amount of variation: about a third of students have mothers with no more than elementary school education, almost half (47 percent) have mothers with middle school and/or vocational high school education, about 12 percent have mothers who attended academic high school, and around 8 percent of students have mothers with some tertiary education (i.e. an associate's, bachelor's and/or graduate degree). Regarding other socioeconomic resources, about 4 percent of students' families report their financial situation as “relatively well-off” or “very well-off” and close to 11 percent of students' parents report that they are members of the Chinese Communist Party.

Prevalence of Informal School Choice

How widespread is informal school choice in China? As shown in Figure 1, almost a quarter (24 percent, 95% CI: 21-27) of middle school students' parents report engaging in informal school choice to obtain access to their child's current middle school. This strategy is slightly more common

among students who attend urban middle schools (30 percent, 95% CI: 27-35), although it is still observed among students who attend schools outside of cities (18 percent, 95% CI: 15-21). Notably, informal school choice does not appear to be restricted to China's advantaged eastern region, where 24 percent of students' parents report employing this strategy (95% CI: 20-28); it is also observed within central (18 percent, 95% CI: 13-24) and western China (32 percent, 95% CI: 27-37). It is particularly interesting to note that western China, which is relatively underdeveloped, has the highest reported levels of informal school choice. Families in this region may be particularly concerned about the quality of the middle schools their children attend, given that many of the schools in this region are poorly funded and have difficulty attracting highly-trained teachers (Sargent and Hannum 2005; Hannum and Meiyang 2006; Cao 2008).

What strategies are those families who engage in informal school choice using to help their children obtain access to a preferred school? The bottom half of Figure 1 displays estimates of the prevalence of particular strategies among families of Chinese middle school students. The most common strategy reported by parents is getting help from a friend; in other words, these families activated their social networks to help their child get into a preferred school. An estimated 14 percent (95% CI: 12-16) of Chinese middle school students obtained admission to their current school through this strategy, accounting for around 57 percent (95% CI: 53-60) of all middle school students whose families engaged in informal school choice during the transition from elementary school to middle school. Although survey respondents were not asked to describe the specific assistance their friends provided, Wu (2013) observed that parents in the southern Chinese city of Nanning used their networks with relatives, friends, and friends of friends to "gain exceptional entry" to public schools outside of their school district, which is officially prohibited at the compulsory-level of education, or to obtain "insider information" about unpublicized aspects of the enrollment process for top-performing public schools within their local school district. Qualitative

studies in the U.S. have similarly revealed the importance of social capital in obtaining access to preferred schools (Wu 2013b; Lareau, Adia Evans, and Yee 2016). Social capital is a particularly powerful resource in contemporary China, as indicated by recent research on the use of *guanxi* – interpersonal ties that are cultivated for instrumental purposes – for obtaining access to scarce resources and opportunities in post-reform China (Bian 1997; Logan, Bian, and Bian 1999; Wu 2014; Bian and Zhang 2014; Xie 2016).

Signing one's child up for academic contests or acquiring talent certificates is the second most common informal school choice strategy, although it is substantially less common than finding help from friends. Based on CEPS data, an estimated 6 percent (95% CI: 5-7) of middle school students participated in academic contests to gain admission to their current school, or applied to the school as a special talent student. Winning prizes in academic competitions can be a way to signal that a student is a top academic performer, which is generally attractive to school administrators (Wu 2014). Many schools are also interested in recruiting students with special talents in the arts, music, and other non-academic domains; talent certificates can help one gain entry as a special talent student (Wu 2014).

The third most common informal school choice strategy is purchasing a house in the catchment area of a preferred school – an estimated 4.4 percent (95% CI: 3-6) of middle school students' parents bought a house in the local school district to obtain access to the student's current middle school, and an estimated 17 percent (95% CI: 11-23) of those families who engaged in informal school choice for middle school used this particular strategy. Taken together, about 85 percent of all middle school students whose families engaged in informal school choice used one of these three strategies (social networks, academic contests/talent certification, purchasing a house). As seen in Figure 1, no other informal school choice strategy included in the survey questionnaire was reported by more than 4 percent of parents.

Social Class Differences in Informal School Choice

In this section, I investigate whether there is an association between social class and engagement in informal school choice. First, I estimate a baseline model in which I regress the odds of engaging in informal school choice on a set of control variables. As shown in Table 2, informal school choice is associated with a few covariates in the baseline model. I observe, for example, that a one-unit increase in a student's score on a test of logical reasoning is associated with a decrease in the odds of engaging in informal school choice ($p < 0.01$). This observation suggests that informal school choice may be particularly appealing to families whose children have lower levels of academic ability, or that it may be less appealing to families whose children have strong academic skills.

Another interesting association observed within the baseline model relates to student gender: on average, male students' parents are more likely to engage in informal school choice than female students' parents. This observation may indicate a tendency on the part of Chinese families to invest more resources into helping male children succeed within the educational system. Other research in China has similarly suggested that gender bias and a preference for sons persists in the post-reform era, although to a lesser extent than in the past (Y. Lu and Treiman 2008; Hannum, Kong, and Zhang 2009; Lee 2012). Alternatively, male students may be more likely to exhibit behavioral issues, leading their parents to be more concerned with the type of school they attend and the support these schools provide to students who experience difficulty paying attention in class, following orders, completing assignments, and so on.

Finally, migrant status, household registration, and school location are all associated with engagement in informal school choice. Students who are migrants are more likely to have obtained access to their current school through informal school choice strategies than non-migrants. Migrant families often face uncertain access to schools for their children (Liang and Chen 2007; Chen and Feng 2013), which may push them to try to influence the school admission process to a greater

extent than non-migrants. The results also suggest that informal school choice is particularly common in urban areas: students attending urban middle schools are more likely to have used informal school choice to get into their current school than students enrolled in non-urban schools. Finally, students with agricultural household registration (*nongye hukou*) are less likely to have accessed their current middle school through informal school choice than students with non-agricultural household registration (*feinong hukou*).

In model 2, I add dummy variables for the key independent variable of interest – social class – to the baseline model. As shown in Table 2, I find the odds of engaging in informal school choice during the transition from elementary school to middle school to be higher among students from government worker, corporate manager, and small business owner families, relative to students from working class families. Compared to working class families, the odds of engaging in informal school choice are 1.3 times higher for government workers ($p < 0.05$) and small business owners ($p < 0.001$) and 1.6 times higher for corporate managers ($p < 0.001$). Notably, in contrast to the other socioeconomically advantaged occupational groups, professionals are no more likely to engage in informal school choice than working class families.

Controlling for social class does not appear to substantially change the associations observed in the baseline model between engagement in informal school choice and gender, migrant status, school location, and logical reasoning. For example, the strong negative relationship between engagement in informal school choice and performance on a test of logical reasoning persists in Model 2. The one exception is the negative relationship between agricultural household registration (*nongye hukou*) and engagement in informal school choice, which is no longer statistically significant after controlling for social class.

Association between Socioeconomic Resources and Informal School Choice

In the previous section, I found evidence of an association between social class and engagement in informal school choice. Interestingly, I observed that three socioeconomically advantaged occupational groups – government workers, corporate managers, and small business owners – were more likely to engage in informal school choice than working class families, but that another high status occupational group – professionals – was no more likely to deploy this strategy than members of the working class. This suggests that engagement in informal school choice may be an educational strategy unique to particular types of socioeconomically advantaged families.

To investigate this issue further, in this section I test whether certain socioeconomic resources are more closely associated with the use of informal school choice than others. Important socioeconomic resources in post-reform China include financial resources, education, and political capital. These socioeconomic resources are unevenly distributed across families, and although they tend to be concentrated in the hands of those individuals with high-status/highly compensated occupations, not all groups at the top of the occupational hierarchy have equal access to each of these three resources. Moreover, the relative value of each of these resources within the education field varies, as do the pathways through which these resources can be converted into educational advantage.

In Table 3, I present results from a series of logistic regression models in which I regress engagement in informal school choice on financial resources, education, and political capital. In the baseline model, I regress engagement in informal school choice on a set of control variables (gender, migrant status, minority status, family structure, siblings, household registration [*hukou*], school location, and performance on a test of logical reasoning in math and graphical forms). In Model 2, I add a measure of parental education to the baseline model. As shown in Table 3, I do not find any evidence of a relationship between parental education and engagement in informal school choice. In

Model 3, I remove parental education from the model and instead add a measure of financial resources to the model. I find evidence of a positive relationship between financial resources and engagement in informal school choice ($p < 0.01$). Specifically, the odds of engaging in informal school choice are 1.4 times higher among middle school students whose families report their financial situation as “relatively well-off” or “very well off”, compared to other middle school students. Next, I remove financial resources from the model and instead test for a relationship between engagement in informal school choice and political capital, operationalized as membership in the Chinese Communist Party. As shown in Model 4 in Table 3, I observe a positive, statistically significant relationship between political capital and engagement in informal school choice. On average, the odds of using informal school choice to gain access to middle school are 1.4 times higher if the student’s parent is a member of the Chinese Communist Party. Finally, in Model 5 I add all three socioeconomic resources to the model, as well as a control for occupational group. As observed in models 2-4, political capital and financial resources are positively associated with engagement in informal school, even after controlling for occupational group. Parental education, on the other hand, remains unassociated with informal school choice. Notably, corporate managers and small business owners still have higher odds of engaging in informal school choice than members of the working class, even after controlling for education, financial resources, and political capital. In contrast, once I control for these three socioeconomic resources, government workers are no more likely than members of the working class to obtain access to middle school through informal school choice.

Overall, these findings suggest that families with high levels of financial resources and political capital are more likely to engage in informal school choice than other families. Parental education, on the other hand, is unassociated with engagement in informal school choice. This is surprising, given that previous studies on school choice, both in the U.S. and in other contexts, have

generally found a positive association between parental education and engagement in school choice (Fuller 1996; V. Martinez, Godwin, and Kemerer 1996; Ball, Bowe, and Gewirtz 1996; Plank and Sykes 2003; Carnoy and McEwan 2003; Daun 2003). Highly educated parents are believed to possess the cultural capital necessary to seek out, digest, and act on information about school choice opportunities and procedures. In the discussion section that follows, I will propose some explanations for this somewhat surprising finding, as well as the finding that professionals are no more likely to employ informal school choice than members of the working class.

VI. Discussion

In this paper, I have drawn on nationally representative survey data to reveal that almost a quarter of middle school students in China obtained access to their current school through unofficial, oftentimes unsanctioned forms of school choice, and that engagement in informal school choice is strongly associated with social class. Notably, however, I find evidence of differences among socioeconomically advantaged families in China in terms of their odds of engaging in informal school choice. First, while government workers, business owners, and corporate executives are more likely to engage in informal school choice than members of the working class, professional families are no more likely than working class families to employ this educational strategy. Second, there is evidence that two socioeconomic resources – political capital and financial resources – are positively associated with informal school choice, while a third resource – parental education – is unassociated with this strategy. What can account for differences among socioeconomically advantaged Chinese families in their use of informal school choice?

One explanation is that not all members of China's emerging socioeconomically advantaged classes are equally invested in changing the rules of the game that govern the school admissions arena. Professionals and parents with high levels of education may be less likely to engage in

informal school choice than other socioeconomically advantaged families because they are already in a position of advantage within the education field. Both professionals and highly educated parents possess comparatively high levels of cultural capital due to the knowledge and skills required for professional work and as a result of highly educated parents' personal experience – and success – within the educational system. As Bourdieu has argued, cultural capital is a powerful resource within the education field. Those social actors or “agents” with comparatively high levels of cultural capital have historically had the most success in securing positions of advantage within the education field, and in reproducing their dominant position (Bourdieu 1973; Bourdieu and Passeron 1979).

In contrast, other socioeconomically advantaged groups in Chinese society, particularly members of the emerging entrepreneurial elite (i.e. corporate managers and small business owners), may be comparatively disadvantaged in terms of their stores of cultural capital. These social actors may have incentives to carve out new pathways through which their resources, such as economic capital and social capital, can be transformed into educational advantages. One strategy might be to draw on economic capital and social capital to “purchase” cultural capital by enrolling one's child in a top-performing school: while professionals and highly-educated parents already possess skills and knowledge valuable for helping their children succeed on China's high-stakes entrance examinations, families lacking cultural capital may feel their only hope is to get their child into a school whose teachers and administrators possess the cultural capital needed to ensure students' success on high-stakes tests. Consequently, these families may have stronger incentives to carve out new, unofficial pathways for influencing the middle school admissions process than professional and highly-educated families. The negative association between student performance on a test of logical reasoning and engagement in informal school choice provides additional evidence in support of this interpretation, in that it suggests that this strategy primarily appeals to families who have been

unsuccessful at cultivating academic excellence in their children, perhaps due to a deficit of cultural capital.

Moreover, professionals and highly educated families may already have preferential access to top-performing schools and thus may not need to engage in the informal school choice strategies listed in the parent questionnaire. These families are more likely to come from privileged social origins than members of China's new entrepreneurial classes, many of whom have only acquired privileged social status in recent years (Xiang and Shen 2009; C. Li 2010); consequently, professionals and highly-educated parents may already reside in elite neighborhoods with elite schools, eliminating the need to engage in informal school choice to obtain access to top-performing schools outside of one's district. In addition, children from professional or highly educated families may already be advantaged in the competition for spots within top-performing schools in the local district. Middle schools that have autonomy over their admission process will often look at students' grades and rank in middle school, or they may ask students to participate in an exam or interview, when deciding whom among the students in their district to admit (Wu 2014). Given that professionals and parents with high levels of education are generally more successful at cultivating academic excellence in their children than other families, these families may not need to engage in informal school choice to obtain access to top-performing schools. In fact, this could be another reason – or alternative explanation – for the negative association between performance on a test of logical reasoning and engagement in informal school choice.

Although there are a number of reasons to expect professionals and highly educated families in China to have fewer incentives to change the existing rules of the game in the education field, it is also possible that the lower levels of engagement in informal school choice observed among professionals and highly-educated parents are simply the result of response bias. Professionals and

highly-educated parents may be aware of the questionable legality of some of the strategies for obtaining access to preferred schools, leading them to underreport engagement in informal school choice. This explanation is less convincing, however, given that one would expect government workers to be the most aware of what is and isn't officially sanctioned by the government, yet this occupational group reports engaging in informal school choice at comparatively high rates.

Nevertheless, even if professionals and highly educated parents are systematically underreporting their use of informal school choice, this does not change the overall conclusion in this paper that informal school choice is relatively widespread in China and strongly associated with social class. If anything, this paper may underestimate the extent to which socioeconomically advantaged families are carving out unofficial, unsanctioned ways to influence where their child attends school and, in the process, (re)shaping the rules of the game in the school admissions arena, and the larger education field, in their favor.

VII. Conclusion

The sociology of education literature has revealed various pathways through which middle class and affluent families transmit advantage to their children within and through the educational system. There has been less attention, however, to how these pathways come into being. In this paper, I have put this process under the microscope by investigating a context in which the value of socioeconomic resources is limited by structural features of the educational system. Specifically, I have looked at the arena of middle school admissions in China, a context in which the power of families to exercise school choice is officially restricted, despite strong incentives for families to control where their child attends middle school. I have shown that socioeconomically advantaged families are struggling to (re)shape the rules of the game in their favor by creating pathways through which their resources can influence middle school placement. From a policy perspective, this raises

challenges and concerns for those seeking to reduce educational inequality. Although governments may engage in efforts to equalize the educational system through structural reforms, findings from this study suggest that the impact of these policies may be diluted as a result of creative strategizing on the part of privileged families to create and/or preserve advantage. Other researchers might turn their attention to how this process works in other countries, perhaps by comparing the strategies of middle class and affluent families before and after the introduction of “equalizing” educational reforms.

In addition to contributing to our understanding of mechanisms that assist in the emergence and persistence of educational inequality, this paper has implications for our understanding of class in contemporary China. While many scholars acknowledge that segments of China’s emerging socioeconomically advantaged classes differ in lifestyles, values, and resources, few have explored empirically the differences among these families in how they strategize about their children’s education (Goodman 2008; Young 2017). Findings from the current study suggest that there are differences among socioeconomically advantaged families in how they approach the middle school admissions field, and that this may be related in part to differences in the combinations of socioeconomic resources they have at their disposal. Future research should continue to explore distinctions between different forms of privilege, not only within China, but also within other countries (Zanten, Ball, and Darchy-Koechlin 2015).

¹ For example, I found that 50 percent of middle school administrators sampled in the China Education Panel Survey reported that they did not have control over admission to their school; school placements were determined by the local government.

² Ideally, I would have liked to use household income as my measure of financial resources. Given that asking children and adolescents to report household income can result in high levels of missingness

and bias, however, the research team did not include a question about household income in the student questionnaire, nor was the questionnaire included in the (much shorter) questionnaire provided to parents of the sampled student. As a result, I use subjective financial well-being as a measure of the family's financial resources.

³ All descriptive statistics were calculated with sampling weights.

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Tables and Figures

Table 1: Weighted Descriptive Statistics for Variables in Models

I. Control Variables			II. Key Independent Variables		
	Mean	Missing (%)		Mean	Missing (%)
Male	0.53	0.00	Parental occupation		
Ninth grader	0.50	0.00	<i>Professional</i>	0.07	2.33
Agricultural <i>hukou</i>	0.64	0.78	<i>Government worker</i>	0.05	2.33
Migrant	0.10	0.62	<i>Corporate manager</i>	0.04	2.33
Ethnic minority	0.15	0.26	<i>Small business owner</i>	0.17	2.33
Score on reasoning test	-0.15	0.00	<i>Working class</i>	0.66	2.33
Family structure			Financial resources		
<i>Both parents at home</i>	0.72	1.49	<i>Well-off</i>	0.04	0.31
One or more siblings	0.48	0.94	Political capital		
School Location			<i>CCP Member</i>	0.11	6.89
<i>Urban</i>	0.49	0.00	Parental education		

Figure 1: Prevalence and Means of Engaging in Informal School Choice

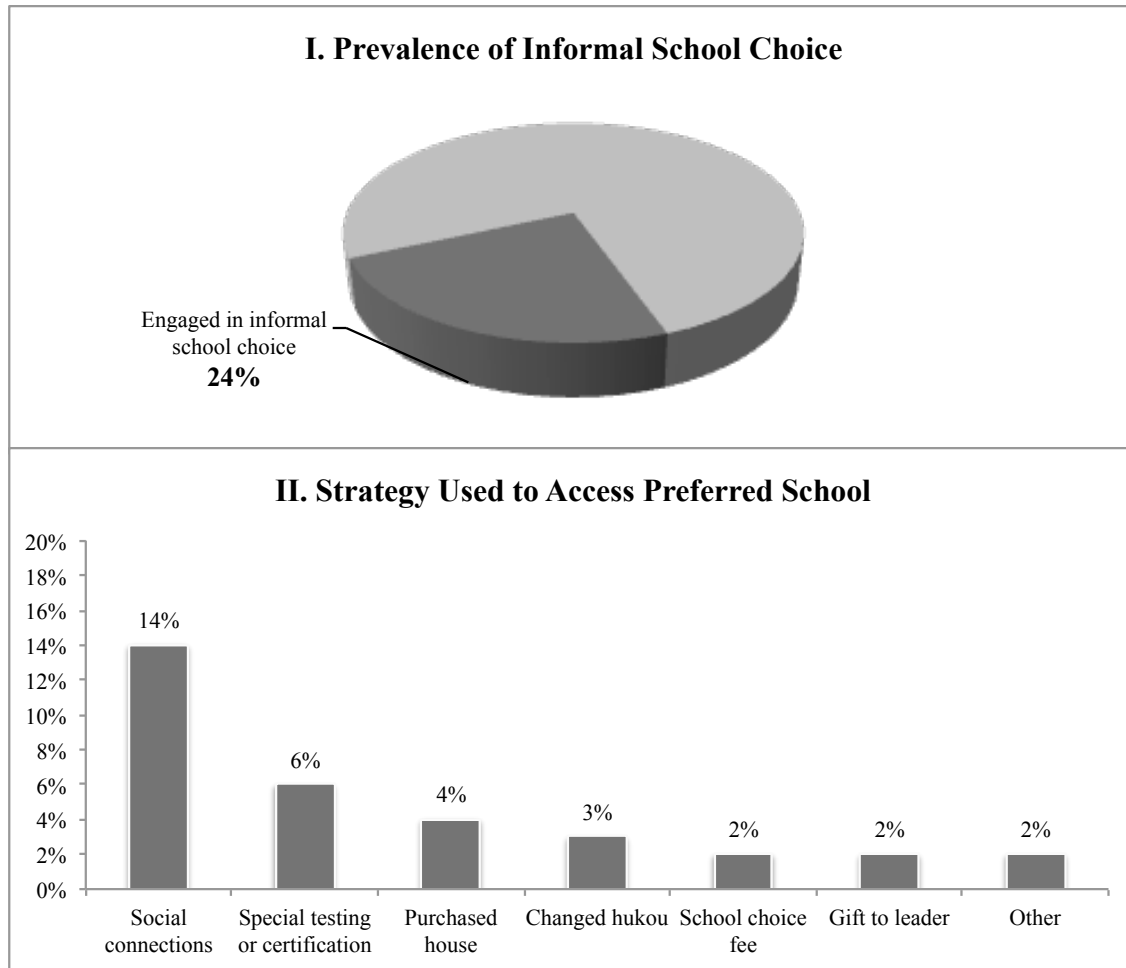


Table 2: Logistic Regression of Engaging in Informal School Choice on Social Class

	Model 1	Model 2
Parental occupation (Ref: Working class)		
<i>Professional</i>		0.068 (0.0964)
<i>Government worker</i>		0.286* (0.114)
<i>Corporate manager</i>		0.466*** (0.102)
<i>Small business owner</i>		0.262*** (0.0743)
Logical reasoning	- 0.086** (0.0326)	-0.095** (0.0335)
Male	0.221*** (0.0607)	0.222*** (0.0610)
Grade 9	0.102 (0.0779)	0.097 (0.0762)
Agricultural household registration	-0.162 (0.0846)	-0.113 (0.0847)
Migrant	0.542*** (0.104)	0.523*** (0.103)
Minority	0.199* (0.0784)	0.204** (0.0787)
Family structure (Both parents=1)	-0.089 (0.0590)	-0.097 (0.0595)
Sibling(s)	-0.059 (0.0525)	-0.047 (0.0539)
Urban area	0.618*** (0.137)	0.560*** (0.133)
Control for county?	Yes	Yes
N	17790	17790

Standard errors in parentheses. *p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001

Table 3: Logistic Regression of Engaging in Informal School Choice on Socioeconomic Resources

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Parental education (Ref: Middle school)					
Elementary		0.006 (0.0625)			
Academic HS		0.120 (0.0726)			
Tertiary		-0.049 (0.0962)			
Financial situation (1="affluent")			0.337** (0.119)		
Political capital (1=CCP member)				0.350*** (0.0742)	
Parental occupation (Ref: Working class)					
<i>Professional</i>					0.084 (0.105)
<i>Government worker</i>					0.207 (0.122)
<i>Corporate manager</i>					0.419*** (0.106)
<i>Small business owner</i>					0.245** (0.0798)
Logical reasoning	-0.082* (0.0325)	-0.082* (0.0331)	-0.083* (0.0325)	-0.086** (0.0324)	-0.090** (0.0337)
Male	0.241*** (0.0590)	0.240*** (0.0589)	0.236*** (0.0586)	0.239*** (0.0589)	0.233*** (0.0584)
Grade 9	0.112 (0.0801)	0.113 (0.0800)	0.111 (0.0800)	0.112 (0.0806)	0.106 (0.0784)
Agricultural household registration	-0.163 (0.0868)	-0.162 (0.0859)	-0.159 (0.0869)	-0.141 (0.0869)	-0.116 (0.0869)

Migrant	0.542*** (0.106)	0.541*** (0.106)	0.545*** (0.106)	0.555*** (0.106)	0.527*** (0.106)
Minority	0.175* (0.0756)	0.170* (0.0761)	0.179* (0.0762)	0.171* (0.0753)	0.174* (0.0778)
Family structure (Both parents=1)	-0.087 (0.0617)	-0.085 (0.0615)	-0.087 (0.0618)	-0.096 (0.0616)	-0.097 (0.0622)
Sibling(s)	-0.022 (0.0550)	-0.022 (0.0540)	-0.021 (0.0549)	0.001 (0.0551)	-0.002 (0.0553)
Urban area	0.630*** (0.142)	0.628*** (0.141)	0.626*** (0.142)	0.615*** (0.141)	0.573*** (0.136)
Control for county?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
N	17246	17246	17246	17246	17246

Standard errors in parentheses. *p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001