

From Poor Families to 'Noble Sons'? Education, Social Mobility, and Structural Barriers in Contemporary Chinese Literary Narratives

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Abstract. This paper critically examines the disjunction between the cultural ideal of hanmen chu guizi ("a noble son from a poor family") and the reality of education-driven social mobility in contemporary China. Through an interdisciplinary analysis of Lu Yao's seminal novel *Ordinary World* and contemporary nonfiction narratives, and framed by Pierre Bourdieu's theories of cultural capital, habitus, and field, this study argues that education functions not as a mere "great equalizer" but as a contested arena that paradoxically offers limited opportunity while systematically reproducing social inequality. The analysis demonstrates how structural barriers—manifested in the divergent trajectories of the Sun brothers in literature and the plight of migrant and left-behind children in reality—consistently prevent disadvantaged youth from accessing the full spectrum of cultural capital necessary for success. Consequently, the widely celebrated individual success stories, rather than invalidating systemic critiques, often operate as a potent form of symbolic solace that inadvertently legitimizes the very structures of inequality they appear to challenge. By bridging literary and sociological inquiry, this research offers a nuanced understanding of educational equity in China and reflects on the implications for fostering more culturally literate and inclusive pedagogical practices.

Keywords: Education and Social Mobility, Cultural Capital, Inequality and Structural Barriers, Contemporary Chinese Literature

1. Introduction

Education has long been heralded as the "great equalizer," a paramount pathway to social mobility in societies where inherited privilege often dictates opportunity. In China, this belief is crystallized in the enduring proverb, "hanmen chu guizi" — the expectation that a noble child, and thus a redeemed future, can emerge from even the poorest of families through the transformative power of education. This ideal formed the bedrock of my own early understanding: that diligence in study was a sure means to transcend one's origins. Yet, this powerful narrative frequently masks a more complex reality, as the expansion of schooling in China has not eradicated the deep-rooted, structural inequalities that persistently obstruct rural children and disadvantaged regions [1-3]. In this context, the promise of education too often rings hollow.

This study interrogates the gap between the cultural ideal of “hanmen chu guizi” and its tangled enactment. It begins by tracing the ideal’s deep cultural weight and its long-standing influence on how education and mobility are imagined. The discussion then moves to contemporary Chinese fiction, focusing on Lu Yao’s *Ordinary World* [4], to show how the narrative undercuts the ideal by laying bare enduring social inequalities. Bourdieu’s sociology frames the analysis, highlighting how schooling simultaneously opens doors and replicates hierarchy. The paper closes by asking what these findings mean for educational equity and how such a critique can guide practice toward more inclusive institutions.

2. Theoretical framework: Bourdieu and educational equity

Pierre Bourdieu’s framework exposes how schooling, though officially meritocratic, quietly perpetuates inequality by meshing cultural capital, habitus, and field. Cultural capital, he argues, appears in three guises: embodied, objectified, and institutionalized [1]. Embodied cultural capital consists of lasting mental and bodily dispositions—linguistic ease, cultural references, ways of carrying oneself—first shaped at home. Middle-class children absorb speech rhythms, tastes, and interaction styles that mirror school norms, turning inherited advantage into seemingly earned merit [5]. In rural China, pupils often enter without these dispositions, so their social background clashes with the school’s implicit codes. Objectified cultural capital covers material goods—books, computers, instruments—that extend learning. Rural homes, short on such items, limit education beyond the classroom. Institutionalized cultural capital means credentials like diplomas. In China the gaokao still governs its allocation, yet effective preparation—elite schools, tutoring, informed parents—remains sharply uneven, so the exam tends to recycle privilege rather than level it [1].

Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus and field help explain why these disparities endure. Habitus captures the lasting dispositions forged in early socialisation, guiding what people hope for and how they act. In rural households, this mindset typically prizes practical solutions and day-to-day survival above distant educational pay-offs, a view strengthened by scant contact with the kinds of cultural capital the school system rewards. Field, meanwhile, names the competitive arenas whose rules favour some participants over others. Within China’s education landscape, urban schools form well-resourced pockets that draw the best teachers and heavy parental spending, leaving rural schools structurally behind.

Pierre Bourdieu’s theoretical framework reveals that, despite schooling’s claim to meritocracy, it functions to reproduce inequality by weaving cultural capital, habitus, and field. Bourdieu argues that cultural capital can take three forms: embodied, objectified, and institutionalized [1,2]. Embodied cultural capital embodies long-lasting mental and bodily dispositions—ease of expression, cultural references, and ways of moving through space—shaped first in the home. Middle-class children will absorb speech patterns, tastes, and styles of interacting with others that mirror the norms of the school, transforming inherited advantage into ostensibly earned merit [5]. Children entering rural Chinese schools typically will come without such dispositions, so the background and dispositions the children get from the home and community will clash with the implicit codes of the schools. Objectified cultural capital includes material items—books, computers, musical instruments—that serve as extensions of school learning. Rural/remote homes simply will not have the same offerings available in the students’ learning process beyond the classroom. Finally, institutionalized cultural capital refers to credentials—like educational diplomas. In China, access to cultural capital is still largely determined by performance on the gaokao, yet there is a disparate opportunity to prepare for it—through elite schooling, private tutoring, or even

engaged parents—contributing to the gaokao recycling privilege, rather than equalizing opportunity [1].

This dynamic exemplifies Bourdieu's critique of meritocracy, which argues that schools present outcomes as products of effort and talent while in reality converting inherited privilege into achievement [2]. Similar patterns appear elsewhere; Reay shows that in the United Kingdom, education legitimizes rather than eliminates class inequality [6]. In China, despite the expansion of higher education, social stratification has deepened and social mobility has declined [7,8], elite exclusion persists [9], and credential inflation weakens the value of degrees [10]. Even successful rural students often lack the social and cultural capital required to translate credentials into genuine mobility. Bourdieu's framework therefore illuminates *Ordinary World's* portrayal of education as both aspiration and exclusion.

3. Textual analysis I: *Ordinary World*

Lu Yao's *Ordinary World* (Pingfan de Shijie), which emerged in the mid-1980s, has a significant place in contemporary Chinese fictional narratives for its uncompromising representation of village life, and its insights into ordinary people's lives during the reform period. The story centers on the potential of education to provide social mobility. Through contrasting the lives of brothers Sun Shaoping and Sun Shao'an, the narrative exposes an inherent contradiction: while schooling implies possibilities and self-improvement, it is highly bounded by existing inequalities. Read through Bourdieu's concepts of cultural capital, habitus, and field, the novel demonstrates how rural youth strive for upward mobility at the same time their means of mobility is curtailed by limited resources.

Sun Shaoping, the younger brother, personifies the intellectual ideal forged in poverty. He borrows books, reads by a flickering oil lamp, and once said that "knowledge is the only light in my dark life," a line that condenses both his hope of change and the acute shortage of resources around him. In Bourdieu's vocabulary, Shaoping's reading is an attempt to stockpile objectified cultural capital where it is scarcest; the curiosity and discipline he displays while doing so amount to embodied cultural capital, a set of dispositions that steer him toward upward mobility. Yet the novel insists that neither stock is enough on its own. His unfamiliarity with urban cultural codes, thin social networks, and limited access to institutional channels slow his advance, reminding the reader that individual talent and grit cannot fully dismantle the structural barriers ahead of him.

Empirical studies resonate with this literary portrayal. It is demonstrated that rural children in China continue to face significant disadvantages due to limited resources and parental support [11], while Wu illustrates how the hukou system restricts migrant children's access to urban schools [12]. Similar to Shaoping, rural students are often misaligned with the expectations of the educational field and lack the institutionalized cultural capital needed for upward mobility. Studies on the gaokao further show that the examination system, while often celebrated as fair, actually reproduces inequality by favoring students who have access to better resources [13]. Shaoping's struggles, then, dramatize the gap between the promise of education and the systemic disadvantages that prevent rural students from succeeding.

Unlike his younger sibling, Sun Shao'an answers the structural limits of village life with a down-to-earth realism. Barred from prolonged schooling, he turns to the land and to small business, carving out a modest but steady income from local ventures. His trajectory shows that, for many rural households, schooling is neither the sole nor the surest route to security; working the soil and staying close to neighbours can also yield a reliable living and a measure of self-respect, even if it never earns the outward prestige of a diploma. In Bourdieu's vocabulary, Shao'an holds little

institutionalised cultural capital, yet he fashions a workable strategy out of the dispositions that compose a rural habitus.

Shao'an's story is less a chronicle of academic defeat than an account of how, within tight limits, he fashioned a life of dignity and a different kind of success. His experience forces us to ask what truly defines a 'noble son': must the title hinge on exam scores and a move to the city, or can it rest on the steadiness, hands-on sense, and village-level leadership that keep rural society alive?

By placing the two brothers side by side, the narrative exposes how rural Chinese communities imagine schooling: it glows as a promise of escape yet just as often bruises those who chase it. gaokao champions. The 2021 case of a Henan farm boy who topped the provincial score sheet, entered Peking University and was celebrated nationwide keeps that tension in view. Media cast him as living proof of hanmen chu guizi, but later reports dwelt on his disorientation in the city, a replay of Sun Shaoping's ordeal.

Although such stories are celebrated as uplifting, the very fact that they make headlines highlights how uncommon they are. For most disadvantaged students, structural barriers still rule the outcome. In Bourdieu's vocabulary, even when these exceptional students gain institutionalised cultural capital, their scarce embodied and social capital frequently forms a 'capability ceiling' that blocks them from turning academic qualifications into lasting mobility and full social inclusion.

The Sun brothers' trajectory provides a vivid literary illustration of Bourdieu's claim that education is not a neutral leveler but a field whose very structure mirrors the unequal distribution of cultural capital. Raised in the same disadvantaged household, they end up on different paths largely because structural constraints outweigh personal effort. Ordinary World stages the contradiction embedded in the Chinese ideal of schooling: the promise that 'a poor family can nurture a noble son' still stirs imagination, yet its fulfillment remains an outlier that underscores, rather than breaks, systemic inequality.

4. Textual analysis II: contemporary nonfiction narratives

Recent nonfiction—ranging from newspaper features to ethnographic fieldwork—highlights how disadvantaged young people in China are blocked from moving up the social ladder. Their stories echo the concerns of Ordinary World, showing that schooling still reproduces inequality even as it is hailed as the main route to a better life [11,12,14].

The migrant-school phenomenon starkly illustrates how rural children living in cities are shut out of public schooling by the hukou system. Denied a place in state classrooms, they often have no option but to crowd into unofficial 'migrant schools' that operate on tiny budgets, where classes overflow, teachers lack training, and basic facilities are scarce [12,14]. A recent Sixth Tone analysis shows that, after many private schools serving migrant families were closed or had their enrollment capped from 2021 onward, the number of migrant children enrolled in private primary schools fell by 281,000 in a single year, sharply curtailing their access to urban education [15]. Because access to cultural capital—both the intangible kind found at home and the material kind found in books, devices, and safe study spaces—remains so uneven, migrant children struggle to turn schooling into real upward mobility [7].

The situation of rural China's left-behind children reveals another crack in the "from poor to noble" narrative. With parents working far away in cities, these youngsters are usually cared for by grandparents or other relatives, a setup that often leaves them emotionally unsupported and educationally short-changed [11,14]. Ethnographic studies show that, compared with their peers, they tend to earn lower grades, miss school more often, and report markedly higher levels of anxiety and depression—consequences of limited contact with quality teaching and urban cultural cues

[11]. Without daily parental input and with only thin access to educational resources, their chances of building the cultural capital required for upward mobility shrink considerably [3,11].

Although headlines occasionally celebrate a rural or migrant student who cracks the gaokao, such cases remain outliers. These stories are praised as proof of individual grit, but they mask the structural barriers those same students meet once inside elite universities. A degree grants them institutionalized cultural capital, yet the embodied and social capital taken for granted in middle-class milieus is still missing.

The migrant school and the left-behind child are two sides of one systemic divide: the first is shut out at the city gate, the second left behind in the village. Each is cut off from the cultural capital needed to move confidently through the education system. These documentary accounts echo Bourdieu's challenge to meritocracy. They show how China's schools, filtered through institutions such as the hukou, reward students who already possess the right kind of capital, so that structurally produced advantage appears to be the result of personal talent and hard work.

5. Conclusion

This paper has explored the complex interplay between the enduring cultural ideal of hanmen chu guizi and the structural realities of education in contemporary China. Through the lens of Bourdieu's sociology, our analysis of Ordinary World and contemporary nonfiction narratives reveals that education functions not as a straightforward great equalizer, but as a profoundly contested field. Here, the promise of mobility is constantly negotiated against, and often thwarted by, entrenched structural barriers. While celebrated stories of individual triumph sustain social hope, they often function as a potent form of symbolic solace, one that inadvertently legitimizes the very structures of inequality they appear to challenge.

By setting literary and nonfiction narratives side by side, the study shows that the myth of meritocracy endures less for its moral allure than for the emotional comfort it offers amid entrenched hardship. Together, the paths of the Sun brothers, migrant pupils, and left-behind children depict a school system where hope and exclusion are locked in step.

These findings shift how we interpret educational inequality. By showing how the label of "hard work" masks unequal access to cultural capital, they undercut the tidy contrast between "diligent" and "lazy" students. The lesson for pedagogy is not simply to include more voices, but to read the class-specific habitus and life histories pupils already carry, treating them as assets rather than shortcomings. Equity, then, depends less on applauding the few who vault over systemic hurdles and more on dismantling the barriers that make such leaps so rare.

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