

Family Cultural Capital and University Students' Learning Engagement – A Skill-Oriented Interpretation in Chinese Higher Education

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Abstract – This conceptual paper examines how family cultural capital continues to matter for university students' learning engagement in Chinese higher education. Rather than treating family cultural capital only as parents' education, cultural resources, home reading environment, or cultural participation, the paper interprets it from a skill-oriented perspective. The discussion is based on conceptual analysis and a narrative review of Chinese and international literature. Existing studies have shown that family background affects students' academic development, but they have not fully explained how family-based resources continue to work after students enter university. Drawing on Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital and research on student engagement, this paper argues that family cultural capital may operate through academic skills formed through long-term family socialisation. Four competencies are identified: academic language competence, self-directed learning ability, deep reading literacy, and the capacity to interpret educational rules and developmental pathways. These competencies help students understand academic tasks, organise their learning, read complex texts, and make sense of university expectations. They also show how family cultural capital may shape behavioural, cognitive, and emotional engagement in everyday university learning. The paper concludes that learning engagement is not only shaped by motivation or institutional support, but is also related to hidden academic capacities that students bring with them into university. This framework offers a more specific explanation of how educational inequality may continue within university learning.

Keywords – Family cultural capital, learning engagement, academic skills, skill-oriented interpretation, Chinese higher education

I. INTRODUCTION

Student engagement has become a major topic in higher education research. Universities need to understand not only which students gain access, but also how students learn after enrolment. After entering university, students must attend classes, complete academic tasks, read demanding texts, participate in discussions, and interact with teachers. They also need to understand institutional rules and plan their future development. Recent research has therefore recognised student engagement as an important indicator of students' learning experiences and academic success (Heilporn et al., 2024).

Learning engagement is not a single-dimensional concept. It encompasses how students act and think during the learning process, as well as how they feel. Behavioural

engagement refers to students' participation in learning activities. Cognitive engagement involves the effort students make to understand knowledge and use effective learning strategies. Emotional engagement is reflected in students' interest in learning, sense of belonging, and positive attitude toward study (Fredricks et al., 2004).

This issue is particularly crucial in China. Chinese higher education has moved beyond rapid expansion and now places greater emphasis on quality improvement. Universities should not focus solely on students' enrolment, graduation, or formal academic achievement. They also need to consider whether students are truly engaged in their studies. Long and Ni (2020) pointed out that insufficient learning engagement had already become a major issue in undergraduate education.

Family background also has a significant influence on student development. Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital is useful here because it explains how family resources can become educational advantages. According to Bourdieu (1986), cultural capital includes not only visible resources but also ways of speaking, ways of thinking, reading habits, and dispositions. These qualities are gradually formed through long-term socialisation. Although they may appear as individual abilities, they are closely connected with family environment and early learning experiences.

Recent research has also found that family background continues to matter after students enter university. Wang and Huang (2021) indicated that family cultural capital is related to students' learning engagement and higher education gains during their university years. Zhang and Lin (2022) showed that family capital can help university students develop a growth mindset. Dang et al. (2023) also found that family socioeconomic status may affect higher vocational students' learning engagement.

However, these studies have not clearly explained how family cultural capital is transformed into students' academic capacities in university learning. This article therefore offers a skill-oriented perspective on family cultural capital. In simple terms, family cultural capital is not only about the books, artworks, or cultural resources a family owns. It is also about the academic skills that students develop through long-term family socialisation. These skills help students understand learning tasks, manage their own studies, read difficult texts, and grasp what universities actually expect. Therefore, family cultural capital may influence students' behavioural, cognitive, and emotional engagement through these practical academic skills.

II. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Nowadays, learning engagement has become an important concept for measuring the quality of education in

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universities. Previous research has found that several factors affect students' learning engagement, including teacher support, peer interaction, school support, learning motivation, learning-related emotional state, professional commitment, learning attitude, and overall satisfaction with the learning experience. Wang and Wang (2023) stated that some factors have a direct impact on university students' learning engagement, while factors such as school support and teacher support are more related to underlying structural issues.

This research is quite meaningful, but it has a major issue that remains unresolved. Many studies focus only on the aspects within universities. These explanations are indeed important, but they do not explain why students from the same university react differently to the exact same assignments. Yin (2020) pointed out that studying student engagement should not be limited to visible behaviours; we need to consider psychological factors and sociocultural aspects.

Just relying on individual effort is not enough to bridge this gap. Some students can immediately understand what the university expects from them and know how to arrange their studies. They can also easily handle difficult academic texts and communicate with teachers with greater confidence. However, others may find the same tasks unclear or difficult. After all, students do not enter university as blank individuals. They bring with them their own ways of speaking, past reading habits, learning methods, and views on education. Most of these traits are developed before entering university and are shaped by long-term family socialisation.

Family cultural capital is therefore important for understanding learning engagement. Using Bourdieu's theory, we can understand how family-based cultural resources become advantages in learning (Bourdieu, 1986). However, the key issue is that current research has not clearly explained how this influence actually works. Many studies measure family cultural capital based on factors such as the education level of parents, the number of books at home, participation in cultural activities, and the learning atmosphere at home. These measures mainly show what resources are available at home, but they do not clearly explain what academic skills students develop through family cultural socialisation. Yao and Jiang (2022) showed that family cultural capital can influence students' disciplinary literacy. Zhu and Ren (2023) also revealed that such cultural capital can be helpful for skill development.

To fill this gap, this study proposes a skill-oriented interpretation of family cultural capital. This research focuses on how family cultural capital translates into academic skills that support university learning. These skills include academic language competence, self-directed learning ability, deep reading literacy, and the capacity to understand educational rules and developmental pathways. By looking at this issue in this way, this study explains how family background may influence students' behavioural, cognitive, and emotional engagement through academic capacities that often remain hidden in university learning.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

Bourdieu's Cultural Capital Theory

Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital explains how family background can be transformed into educational advantages. Bourdieu (1986) categorised cultural capital into three forms. The first form is objectified cultural capital, which essentially refers to tangible cultural items such as books and study materials. The second form is institutionalised cultural capital, which refers to officially recognised certificates such as diplomas and degrees. The third form is embodied cultural capital, which appears in people's behaviour, habits, and dispositions. This includes one's speaking style, ways of thinking, reading habits, cultural preferences, and forms of judgement.

The concept of embodied cultural capital is especially important for university students. At first glance, abilities such as clear expression and academic reading may seem natural, but they are often shaped by family environment and early educational experiences. Students who can express their ideas clearly or analyse academic texts may appear to possess these abilities naturally.

Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) pointed out that schools tend to treat the cultural norms of advantaged groups as legitimate academic culture. Consequently, cultural differences between different families naturally affect a child's performance in school. This concept still applies today to higher education. University study requires the ability to read academic papers, understand assessment rules, learn how to study independently, and plan for the future. Yu (2024) argued that cultural capital research in China needs clearer concepts and greater attention to local mechanisms. Yao and Jiang (2022) also showed that family cultural capital can influence students' disciplinary literacy. These studies suggest that cultural capital should be examined not only as family resources, but also as a source of academic capacity.

Learning Engagement in Higher Education

Nowadays, people use learning engagement to assess how students learn and to gauge the quality of education. Astin (1984) argued that student involvement depends largely on the time and effort students invest in academic experiences. Later, Kuh (2009) further connected student engagement with meaningful educational activities and institutional support.

In terms of learning engagement, it can generally be viewed from three perspectives: behavioural, cognitive, and emotional dimensions. Fredricks et al. (2004) developed a commonly used analytical framework. Behavioural engagement refers to whether students attend classes, complete assignments, participate in classroom discussions, and continue with their studies. Cognitive engagement involves the extent to which students invest mental effort, such as engaging in deep reading, regulating their own learning, solving problems, and using various learning strategies. Emotional engagement relates to whether students have interest in learning, a sense of belonging, confidence, and an emotional connection with learning.

These three dimensions are related to each other, but they should not be treated as the same. Some students attend

classes, yet remain cognitively passive, while others study hard but feel little sense of belonging. Therefore, student engagement cannot be judged solely by classroom behaviour. Bond et al. (2020) pointed out that interaction, course design, and learning environment all affect how students engage with learning. Heilporn et al. (2024) also emphasised that understanding students' learning experiences requires considering engagement as a key factor. Yin (2020) suggested that research on the engagement of university students should take into account psychological and sociocultural factors. Wang and Zhao (2021) further mentioned that international research focuses on various factors that influence engagement, learning outcomes, multicultural contexts, and assessment feedback.

The Missing Link between Cultural Capital and Engagement

Research shows that family background and learning engagement are both important factors. Many studies are trying to figure out how to measure a family's cultural capital, such as the educational background of parents, whether there are books at home, whether the family participates in cultural activities, the learning atmosphere, and what expectations parents have for their children. These indicators can indeed help us understand what resources are available in the family. Nevertheless, they do not fully explain how family cultural capital becomes students' capacity to engage in university learning.

Some studies have also shown that family conditions can turn into real skills. Zhu and Ren (2023) found that the cultural atmosphere in the family can help young people develop digital skills. Wang and Wang (2023) also mentioned that students' learning engagement depends on both direct factors and broader environmental influences. However, most current research focuses only on influencing factors, with few studies exploring how family cultural capital actually translates into learning abilities.

A skill-oriented interpretation can address this gap. Family cultural capital is not simply about what books are in the home or the educational background of parents. It is also a set of abilities that students gradually learn during their growth process. These abilities include the ability to understand academic language, to study independently, to read deeply, and to comprehend educational rules and future development paths. These abilities are not innate, but are formed unequally in family life. Moreover, these skills are valued and recognised in universities, where students with stronger academic skills are more likely to be rewarded. In this way, family cultural capital becomes active in university learning through hidden academic abilities.

IV. METHOD

This research employs a conceptual research design. It does not involve the collection of primary data or the use of statistical models to test hypotheses. The main goal is to understand how family cultural capital continues to influence the learning engagement of university students after university entry. For this purpose, a conceptual paper is suitable because it can clarify concepts, connect research

from different fields, and provide an interpretive framework (Jaakkola, 2020).

In addition to the conceptual design, this analysis also reviewed relevant literature. This choice is appropriate because the analysis is not intended to measure the magnitude of effects or to provide a systematic literature review (Snyder, 2019). The reviewed literature can be divided into three main categories. The first category is Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital, particularly the concept of embodied cultural capital. The second category focuses on research regarding university students' learning engagement, especially how students engage in learning through their behaviours, thoughts, and emotions. The third category involves Chinese and international studies on how family background and other factors influence university students' learning engagement.

This analysis is divided into three steps. First, it examines how previous research has defined cultural capital and learning engagement. Then, it compares different explanations of the relationship between family background and student engagement. Finally, this analysis proposes a skill-oriented framework to explain how family cultural capital translates into students' academic language competence, self-directed learning ability, deep reading literacy, and the capacity to understand educational rules.

V. FINDINGS: A SKILL-ORIENTED FRAMEWORK

Reinterpreting Family Cultural Capital as Transferable Academic Skills

This paper adopts a skill-oriented framework aimed at understanding the relationship between family cultural capital and university students' learning engagement. In essence, family cultural capital is not only about what families possess. It also refers to the skills and abilities that students gradually develop through long-term family socialisation.

Many studies measure the cultural capital of a family based on factors such as the educational level of parents, the number of books in the household, participation in cultural activities, and the learning atmosphere at home. These indicators are quite useful in revealing the differences in resources between families. However, they do not fully explain how such resources become useful in university learning. In the classroom, students do not directly use family cultural capital as a learning resource. Instead, they rely on their own abilities such as language, reading habits, learning routines, judgement, and confidence. At least some of these abilities are influenced by family background.

This view is close to Bourdieu's idea of embodied cultural capital. Embodied cultural capital is not a resource outside the student. It becomes part of how the student speaks, thinks, reads, and acts (Bourdieu, 1986). In higher education, this form of cultural capital may appear as academic readiness, confidence in communication, and an ability to understand rules that are not always made explicit.

So, family cultural capital can be understood as a structure of learned academic skills shaped through long-term family socialisation. These skills are essential for university learning. There are many tasks in college: attending lectures, doing homework, studying academic

books, taking exams, and thinking about future development. These activities require the support of such skills. These skills can be described as cultural because they are gradually formed through family socialisation and vary across family environments. These skills are not innate; they can reveal the environment in which a student grew up.

Why is family background still important after entering university? This explanation clarifies the issue. Although students attend the same university, their ways of speaking, learning habits, reading experiences, and views on university life can vary greatly. Therefore, the cultural capital brought by the family may not be as prominent, but its influence may continue in university learning.

Four Skill-Oriented Competencies

The first ability is academic language competence. Studying in college is essentially about using language. Students need to understand various concepts, follow different lines of reasoning, ask questions, complete assignments, and express their thoughts clearly. Academic language is different from everyday speech; it is more abstract and has a stricter structure depending on the field of study. Students with strong academic language competence find it easier to understand lectures, read academic texts, and express their opinions with confidence. However, this ability generally develops before entering university. If family members frequently engage in conversations and discussions, children will have access to various explanations, debates, questions, and arguments. These early experiences are very helpful for students as they develop their ability to express themselves effectively in college.

The second skill is self-directed learning ability. College students have much more freedom compared to high school students. They have to arrange their time, set learning goals, choose learning materials, and keep track of how well they are learning. This freedom can support students' growth, but it can also create difficulties for those who have not yet developed strong self-management skills. Self-directed learning ability helps students turn learning requirements into daily habits such as attending class on time, completing homework, studying for exams, and setting long-term learning plans. This ability depends not only on personal willpower but also on family environment, parental expectations, problem-solving skills, and early learning habits. Students who have learned to plan, adapt, and persevere can adapt to college life more quickly.

The third skill is deep reading literacy. During college, reading short articles or textbook summaries is not enough. Students need to be able to read academic papers, identify key points, compare different viewpoints, and connect various ideas together. Through such reading, students can transform from simple surface learning to genuine understanding while also developing critical thinking skills and the ability to build a knowledge framework. A family reading atmosphere, access to books, and parents' reading practices may help students develop this skill. More importantly, students need patience, concentration, and confidence when facing complex texts. All of these qualities greatly influence their engagement with learning during college.

The fourth skill is the capacity to understand educational rules and developmental pathways. University is not just a place for attending classes; there are both written regulations and unwritten rules that must be followed. Students need to know how to calculate credits, read transcripts, find internships, and how to interact with teachers. Some students quickly grasp these aspects and understand when to seek help, how to choose courses, and how to plan their future. However, some students may miss many opportunities until they suddenly realise the importance of these rules. Students from families with higher educational experience often receive guidance from their parents and learn how the university operates. Understanding these things gives them confidence, reduces confusion, and strengthens their sense of control.

These four abilities have their own characteristics, but they work together in university. Academic language competence enables students to understand knowledge and explain it clearly; self-directed learning ability allows them to sustain learning over time; deep reading literacy helps students extract key information from complex materials; and rule interpretation competence allows students to handle various challenges within the university field. In short, these abilities combined form a skill-oriented structure of family cultural capital.

The Mediating Mechanism between Cultural Capital and Learning Engagement

This skill-oriented framework focuses essentially on how family cultural capital influences students' learning engagement. Family cultural capital does not simply or directly affect the level of student engagement. Instead, it plays a role through the academic abilities that students use during their university studies. These abilities can connect their family background with their behavioural, cognitive, and emotional engagement.

The ability to learn independently is particularly crucial for behavioural engagement. Students must attend classes, complete homework, review for exams, and participate in various learning activities. These tasks require not only motivation but also the ability to plan time effectively, manage oneself well, and persevere over time. Academic language competence and rule interpretation competence are also important. If students can understand what the teacher expects and how grades are assigned, they are more willing to engage in learning activities.

When it comes to cognitive engagement, being able to use academic language effectively and engage in deep reading is crucial. To truly participate in the learning process, students need to think critically. They must understand various concepts, compare different opinions, question certain assumptions, and develop their own perspectives. If students do not master the skills of using academic language and engaging in deep reading, they may remain at the level of surface learning. On the other hand, if students have strong language and reading skills, they will be better able to grasp the inner structure of knowledge.

For emotional engagement, it is important for students to understand educational rules and developmental pathways. If students know where they are now and where they can go in the future, they will be more aware of their college life.

By understanding how the university system works, students can reduce confusion and feel more confident, have a stronger sense of belonging, and have a clearer understanding of their academic goals. When students become aware of various academic paths, they are more likely to see university learning as meaningful for their future.

This framework shows that learning engagement does not depend solely on how hard students try or whether the university provides support. It also relates to the hidden academic capacities that students bring to university. These capacities make family cultural capital active in daily learning. This explains why students from different backgrounds may have very different learning experiences within the same university. This skill-oriented framework can therefore explain why educational inequality persists even in the university stage, rather than just before enrolment.

VI. DISCUSSION

This article focuses on a skill-oriented perspective, examining how family cultural capital continues to influence university students' learning engagement. The concept of embodied cultural capital is applied to the daily learning experiences of university students. Family cultural capital includes not only the educational level of parents, the number of books at home, or the quality of the learning environment, but also skills such as academic language competence, learning habits, deep reading literacy, and rule interpretation. From this perspective, it becomes clear why even when students are in the same university system, their learning engagement can still be influenced by their family background. Additionally, this interpretation aligns well with the needs of studying Chinese cultural capital; it aims to develop clearer concepts and more comprehensive mechanisms (Yu, 2024).

The second point of research concerns student engagement. Many studies have shown that student engagement is closely related to factors such as motivation, teacher support, relationships with peers, and the university environment. These factors are indeed important, but they do not clearly explain why students from different backgrounds engage differently with the same learning tasks. This article argues that student engagement is also influenced by certain hidden academic capacities. These abilities enable students to learn more deeply, build greater confidence in their university studies, and be more willing to engage in the educational process. This perspective aligns with sociocultural views on student engagement, which argue that visible behaviour alone cannot fully explain students' level of engagement (Yin, 2020).

This framework also has practical value. Universities should not simply assume that students are inactive because they lack motivation or have a poor attitude. Some students may appear passive because they do not fully understand academic language, cannot comprehend the requirements, do not grasp the grading criteria, and fail to see the direction of their studies. Academic support should therefore be clearer and focus on teaching practical skills. Universities can offer first-year training, teaching students how to write papers, read academic materials, study independently, manage time

effectively, and plan their class schedules. This kind of assistance should not only be provided to students who have difficulties in learning, but should become a standard feature of university education.

Universities need to provide better guidance and support for students. In China's higher education system, it is particularly important to explain the rules and regulations clearly. In this way, it may be possible to reduce the hidden advantages held by students with stronger family cultural capital.

This article also has several limitations. It is primarily a theoretical discussion and does not use actual surveys or interviews to test whether this framework is effective. Future research could develop methods to measure these four abilities, and data could be used to examine how they interact with each other. Qualitative interviews could also provide a clearer understanding of the differences between students from different backgrounds in terms of academic language, reading comprehension, self-directed learning ability, and school rules. Comparative research could further examine whether this framework applies to other higher education systems.

VII. CONCLUSION

This article has developed a skill-oriented interpretation of family cultural capital in Chinese higher education. It examines cultural capital from a skill-oriented perspective. When students enter university, the family cultural capital they have acquired does not disappear immediately; instead, it continues to play a role in less visible ways. This cultural capital is manifested in many aspects, such as academic language competence, self-directed learning ability, deep reading literacy, and the capacity to understand educational rules and developmental pathways.

These examples show how family background may influence university students' learning engagement. In this regard, family cultural capital works through the academic skills that students use in their daily university studies.

This paper also shows that learning engagement should not be understood only through students' effort or institutional support. It is also related to students' unequal access to hidden academic capacities before university entry. For Chinese higher education, improving engagement requires more than asking students to work harder. Universities must clarify academic standards and provide students with systematic support for academic skill development. In this way, students may become less dependent on family background in university learning.

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