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How the excellent working-class student becomes a cultural capital constructor: Reflections on the theories of cultural reproduction

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Abstract

Although the theories of habitus evolution enrich the perspective of cultural reproduction, their agentic approach doesn't explain how excellent working-class students exercise agency to create cultural capital for themselves. In order to examine this issue, this study employed nonparticipant observation and interview methods to collect data about an excellent working-class student. The findings showed that the subject actively adopted creative strategies for discovering and using academic resources available outside her family social space. This agency was initiated by the subject's envisagement of education as a path of liberation from the expected fate of the working classes. Its practice was further supported by significant others, who provided the subject with crucial help, including inspiration, encouragement, instruction and educational resources. These correlations imply a principle that if working-class students can become cultural capital constructors, the structural constraints of their family social space may be substantially attenuated, facilitating successful academic achievement.

Key words: cultural reproduction, social space, habitus evolution, agency, cultural capital construction

Introduction

Known as one of the Four Asian Tigers, Taiwan, with a population of around 23 million, is a highly industrialized society, renowned for its advanced technologies in semiconductor manufacture, ICT and other industries. Nevertheless, a considerable number of Taiwanese people are situated at the bottom level of social class structure. The official statistical data shows that 144,863 families, 1.64% of the total number of 8,832,745 in 2019, were classified as low-income and were receiving financial aid from

the government (MOHW, 2020). In reality, the number of low-income citizens is likely to be much higher than this official statistic, on two main accounts. In order to overcome a shortage in the labour force in the 1980s, the Taiwanese government introduced the Foreign Labor Policy in 1989, which has steadily increased the number of overseas laborers in Taiwan to around 710,000, constituting 5.93% of the total number of employees (11,968,000) in July 2019 (Phoenix Manpower Agency, 2020). Furthermore, since the early 1990s, many capitalists have moved their manufacturing sites from Taiwan to other regions, mainly Mainland China, to cut production costs, and this shift has dramatically reduced labour demand. The above two factors have not only decreased job opportunities for domestic laborers, but also undermined their salaries. It was reported that in 2015 the salaries of 879,000 workers (8.39%) were below the basic wage (The Storm Media, 2015). This unpromising situation has unexpectedly boosted the development of international marriage agencies, facilitating the marriage of a considerable number of females from developing regions such as Mainland China and South Asia to Taiwanese men, the majority of whom are manual workers. Such international marriages not only signify a crisis in social transformation, but also foreground inequity in education results associated with cultural reproduction. This is because the children of such couples, termed neo-Taiwanese children, tend to be the student group that suffers most from a shortage of economic and cultural capital, as evidenced by their underachievement in school results (RDEC, 2006). Unfortunately, the population of this group increased from 4.94% (129,917) to 9.36% (166,801) between 2008 and 2018 (MOE, 2019). In light of their working-class backgrounds, this student group seems to be the best subject for examining the notion of cultural reproduction, as it has been consistently documented that SES exerts a profound influence on students' learning outcomes (Matherly, Amin and Nahyan, 2017; Saraví, 2015; Yang, 2001). For Pierre Bourdieu, this educational inequity needs to be conceptualized as cultural reproduction because it is rooted not in students' mental abilities but in their habitus – an inner disposition regulating the actor's perception of outside information and subsequent judgements and reactions (Bourdieu, 1993, 2000). While actors may develop their own aptitudes, they need to comply with the structural constraints of the social space they inhabit, so that a habitus results from the internalization of the features of social structure (Bourdieu, 1990b, 1998, 2000). Furthermore, the one-way convertible relation from economic capital to cultural capital reduces the possible variety of habitus into collective forms associated with social classes (Bourdieu, 1997, 1998). More specifically, by assimilating a large volume of cultural capital, middle-upper class students tend to develop the academic habitus required by academic curricula. In contrast, a shortage of cultural capital in working-class families leads to the construction of a practical habitus, hindering the ability of

children from such families to achieve high academic performance (Bourdieu, 1998). Through the above theoretical lens, a series of studies have documented the phenomenon of cultural reproduction, finding that middle-upper class parents actively invest cultural capital in their children through education actions in order to secure their children's educational attainment (Bæck, 2010; Covay and Carbonaro, 2010; Gaddis, 2013; Hek and Kraaykamp, 2015; Lancee and Werfhorst, 2012). While the notion of cultural reproduction has become predominant in educational research, there are some deviations. The perspective of cultural mobility emphasizes the environmental influence on education results, indicating that it is much easier for middle-upper class students to reap the advantages of their cultural capital in less competitive contexts, such as schools with more working-class students (Andersen and Jæger, 2015; DiMaggio, 1982; Jæger, 2011). Nevertheless, like the viewpoint of cultural reproduction, this environmental approach is also based on structuralism associated with social classes, with the result that these two perspectives both fail to include the influence of agency on students' performance. The absence of this element stimulates another approach examining how excellent working-class students proceed with habitus evolution. Although the notions of habitus transformation (Lehmann, 2013) and habitus segmentation (Jin and Ball, 2019; Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2009) have focused on the survival skills exhibited by such students in elite universities, this agential outlook hasn't provided insight into how these students combat the structural constraints of their family social space, in which cultural capital is almost nonexistent. To address this crucial and meaningful issue, this study sets out to explore how this kind of student group succeeds in schools through a case study focusing on the issue of cultural capital construction, aligning its agential practice with the shift of social spaces.

2. Cultural capital, social space and habitus

Related studies have systematically documented inequity in education results, as evident in the phenomenon that the majority of middle-upper class students have better academic performance than their working-class counterparts in primary schools (Yang, 2001), secondary schools (Cheng and Kaplowitz, 2016; Møllegaard and Jæger, 2015) and higher education institutes (Matherly, Amin and Nahyan, 2017; Saraví, 2015). For Pierre Bourdieu, this phenomenon rejects the assumption of equality in education, which assumes a distribution of social stratification according to the applicants' abilities impartially acquired in schools. As credentials function as a kind of cultural currency in the labour market, education integrates political, economic and cultural fields into a single entity. Specifically, academic credentials embody dual functions, namely scholastic and economic capital, by which the middle-upper classes are able to extend their dominant power from the political and economic fields to the cultural sphere

(Bourdieu, 1990a). This power relay permits middle-upper class culture to attain the status of orthodoxy, and thus become the source of school curriculum development (Bourdieu, 1971). As a result, curriculum knowledge has come to value theoretical notions and systematical arrangements addressing logical relations, and this kind of knowledge formation acquires academic status, so that comprehending the academic curriculum requires reasoning ability, a specific form of cultural competence. This competence is often possessed by middle-upper class students, creating an implicit pedagogy that reallocates this student group to a privileged position in schools (Bourdieu, 1973). In this sense, education enables dominant classes to conceal the inherent privilege which enables them to maintain their dominant position in society (Bourdieu, 1973). As this built-in exclusive selection further legitimates and certifies the claims of the aristocracy to possess outstanding ability (Bourdieu, 1998), education serves as a political instrument, veiling the interplay between class power, ability and social stratification (Bourdieu, 1977). These correlations indicate that cultures align the political aspect with other spheres, and this alignment fosters the circulation and reproduction of class power across different fields (Bourdieu, 1993).

All these suggest that education carries out the mechanism of symbolic violence, facilitating dominant classes to impose their meanings as legitimate on dominated classes (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). Although this perspective is able to account for how dominant groups apply class power to support their ruling status, this macro-led approach is unable to narrate how this power array develops and is implicitly transmitted at the micro level of families, or how its linkage with the generation of class power operates at the macro level of fields. Accordingly, Bourdieu invokes the concepts of social space and habitus. Specifically, educational achievement is not mainly determined by mental abilities but by habitus, which refers to an inner disposition regulating the actor's perception of outside information and subsequent judgements and reactions (Bourdieu, 1993, 2000). While students may act as constructors and develop their own aptitudes, their habitus is largely molded in a social space because they have no choice but to comply with its necessary, visible and imperative requirements (Bourdieu, 1990b, 2000). Families are normally the initial social space in an individual's life course, so that this compliance results in an ongoing process of assimilation, guiding children to internalize the structural features of the social space in which parents invest cultural capital in their children (Bourdieu, 1977). Both assimilation and internalization imply that the actor's behavior patterns project such structural features. This connection then suggests that we can trace a person's social background from their conduct and manners (Bourdieu, 1990b, 1998). Because there are different volumes of cultural capital in individual family social spaces, comprised of objectified, embodied and institutionalized forms, various and individualized types

of habitus may be engendered (Bourdieu, 1986). However, social classes come to compress this possible variety of habitus into a collective character, due to a one-way convertible relation from economic capital to cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1997). This relation provides a convincing reason to explain why most working-class students cannot achieve excellent performance as frequently as their middle-upper class counterparts. This is mainly because their parents are incapable of providing them with an adequate volume of cultural capital, due to constraints of economic capital. This circumstance impedes this student group from developing an academic habitus that facilitates engagement in logical reasoning (Bourdieu, 1998).

The linkage between economic capital and cultural capital thus bestows a collective character on habitus, constructing a milieu that makes the reproduction of habitus possible. This generation further produces and sustains the phenomenon of cultural reproduction. At any rate, as this self-sustaining power cycle is masked by the interplay between cultural capital, social space and habitus, inequity in educational results is often recognize as a natural outcome (Bourdieu, 1998). Furthermore, habitus exerts its influence unconsciously because it grows through assimilations that bridge time units from the past to the present and future, the continuum of which constitutes a natural trajectory depriving social members' of their critical faculties. In addition, cultural factors reinforce such unconsciousness and this connection breeds a fixation emptying the exercise of rational calculations, because when habitus develops from historical experiences with subjective intentions, subjectivity consistently adheres to its operations, and this situation strongly depresses reflections (Bourdieu, 1969, 1977, 2000). In this case, it is difficult for the public to discern the built-in mechanism of academic curriculum that aligns reasoning ability with cultural capital, so that education implicitly performs the role of a hereditary system in modern society, securing the dominant status of the middle-upper classes.

It has been systematically proven that middle-and-upper class students have better educational attainment than working-class students. This inequity in educational results occurs equally across different stages of education, from preschool education (Linberg, Schneider, Waldfogel and Wang, 2019), primary schools (Yang, 2001) and secondary schools (Cheng and Kaplowitz, 2016; Møllegaard and Jæger, 2015) to higher education institutes (Matherly, Amin and Nahyan, 2017; Saraví, 2015). It is argued that this inequity can be conceptualized as cultural reproduction because of the one-way convertible relation from economic capital and cultural capital. More specifically, family financial conditions affect access to educational resources (Blanden and Gregg, 2004; Pishghadam, 2011), educational opportunities (Acemoglu and Pischke, 2001) and university department selections (Werfhorst, Sullivan and Cheung, 2003). In addition, middle-class parents are good at applying the advantages of their high incomes

to create cultural capital for their children (Hek and Kraaykamp, 2015; Lancee and Werfhorst, 2012) through such actions as cultural participation (Gaddis, 2013; Hek and Kraaykamp, 2015), reading (Cheng and Kaplowitz, 2016; Kraaykamp, 2003; Loh and Sun, 2020), books (Xu and Hampden-Thompson, 2012; Sullivan, 2001), extracurricular activities (Covay and Carbonaro, 2010; Jæger, 2011), learning participation and help (Reay, 1998), school selections (Ball and Gewirtz, 1997; Brantlinger and Majd-Jabbari, 2000; Wells and Crain, 2000) and school policy participation (Bæck, 2010; Codd, Gordon and Harker, 1997). In addition, researchers of the cultural mobility perspective have uncovered that middle-upper class students have more chances to show the advantages of the embodied form of their cultural capital in less competitive contexts such as the schools with more working-class students (Andersen and Jæger, 2015; DiMaggio, 1982; Jæger, 2011). The embodied form is further transmitted and consolidated through the curriculum of high tier universities, which gather together students with highbrow cultural tastes (Börjesson, Broady, Roux, Lidegran and Palme, 2016). In this regard, schools serve as a proxy interlinking three forms of cultural capital.

When schools activate cultural capital, this context opens up a huge legitimate space for middle-upper class parents to participate in schools and children's learning processes (Bæck, 2005), through which their children become capable of developing an academic habitus that supports learning skills and abilities matched to the core competences for understanding school curricula (Jæger and Møllegaard, 2017). That is why habitus works as a kind of atavism, reproducing itself from generation to generation through inheritable social genes legitimizing the existing structure of class power (Møllegaard and Jæger, 2015). All these correlations confirm that habitus is the core component mediating the connection of cultural capital and educational attainment.

While habitus is the structured outcome of a social space, drawing upon the perspective of constructive structuralism or structural constructivism, Bourdieu carefully elaborates the formulation of habitus by pointing out that when the gap between social spaces is overloaded, rational calculations may reactivate, and this change will evoke the evolution of habitus (Bourdieu, 1999; Davey, 2009). Related studies have verified this hypothesis, as evidenced by cases of working-class students in top universities who were committed to achieving upward mobility in contravention of their working-class fate by engaging in habitus transformation. Although this transformation helped them fit into middle-class-oriented university cultures, they distanced themselves from their working-class roots at the cost of social networks of working-class associates (Lehmann, 2013). Unfortunately, related studies have not sought to explore the possibility that the influence of social class on educational results

may not always persist, as suggested by the performance of these excellent working-class students. Instead, other findings have concluded that this survival skill may lead not to habitus transformation but to divided habitus, as witnessed by the compartmentalized actions of working-class students in elite universities, who took the academic route as a conduit for certifying their excellent abilities or earning self-confidence to counteract inferior social status (Jin and Ball, 2019; Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2009). Despite the nuanced differences between these survival techniques, the above adaptive strategies foreground the reflexive rather than fixed nature of habitus, and the way in which is often induced by students' subjective interpretations of the gaps between different social spaces (Ferrare and Apple, 2015). Because university campus climate has been reported by some to devalue the status of working-class students (Aries and Seider, 2005; Soria, 2014), their habitus is often defined as inherent inferiority or deficit (Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2009). This scenario is likely to exaggerate their negative perceptions, so that if a school context become supportive, working-class students may develop an academic habitus, which will in turn benefit their learning outcomes (Barrett and Martina, 2012; Roksa and Robinson, 2017).

To sum up, the influence of SES on educational attainment is strongly regulated by cultural capital. Even though the perspective of cultural mobility is different from cultural reproduction, with the former addressing the effect of environmental conditions on the demonstration of cultural capital, both of these approaches are based on structuralism. This is evident in the one-way convertible relation from economic capital to cultural capital, which reduces the possible variety of habitus into a collective formation, as shown in the tight relation between habitus and social class. Nevertheless, the exercise of cultural capital cannot exclude agency entirely. When schools activate cultural capital, middle-upper class parents gain a legitimate space for employing cultural capital to the benefit of their children. This correlation implicitly reveals that agency is a hidden element in transmitting cultural capital to the next generation, so that agency is implicitly recontextualized into the practice of habitus. However, the boundary between agency and structure should display a fluid nature across individual family social spaces, which is strongly modified by economic capital. The relay of cultural capital in middle-upper class family social spaces is not constrained by economic capital, and this situation grants parents much agency to engage in cultural consumption, through which their children are likely to develop an academic habitus and subsequent excellent performance in school. In this case, the children can be interpreted as cultural capital receivers, who take over educational resources provided by their parents. In contrast, such constraints are rigid in working-class family social spaces, and this context in turn largely diminishes such agency. Accordingly, their children become conformists to structural constraints, through which their practical

habitus is hatched. If they want to succeed in school, they need to develop an academic habitus through creative action. Although the theories of habitus transformation and habitus compartmentalization provide great insights into habitus evolution, they only portray how this student group employ adaptive strategies to fit into university culture. Their survival skills tell us nothing about how they exercise agency to create cultural capital for themselves in order to grow an academic habitus. This gap is particularly important because it is almost impossible for students to grow an academic habitus from their family social spaces, in which cultural capital is almost nonexistent, so if working-class students can utilize resources available in other social spaces, they are no longer likely to suffer from the structural constraints of their family social spaces. In this sense, excellent working-class students may act as cultural capital constructors.

3. Research design

According to the above correlations, a logic model of cultural capital construction emerges that details the interplay between all core theoretical concepts of cultural capital and habitus. In Fig. 1, the left part, shown in single unbroken lines, represents theories of cultural reproduction. The middle part, profiled in double unbroken lines, portrays the perspective of habitus evolution, consisting of habitus transformation or habitus compartmentalization incarnated in survival skills in school. The right part, displayed in double dotted lines, indicates the issue of cultural capital construction ignored by both perspectives of cultural reproduction and habitus evolution. In order to develop an academic habitus ensuring better academic performance, excellent working-class students should be able to discover cultural capital for themselves in other social spaces, such as those in which social institutes and significant others can provide them educational resources. However, such creative actions should be initiated by determined wills and strong motivation, which may be molded by the structural constraint of their family social spaces, leading them to envisage education as the gateway to safeguarding upward mobility. The right part not only highlights the importance of such creative actions associated with cultural capital construction but also suggests related research focuses. Becoming cultural capital constructors requires students to discover education resources outside their families, and this relation prompts a research question: How do excellent working-class students uncover such resources outside their family social spaces? Social institutes, such as schools, libraries and cultural centers, can be conceptualized as other types of social spaces different from those of their families, which contain large volumes of cultural capital. Accordingly, some interrelated research questions appear: Why are the educational resources in these institutes so important to these students? How do they create cultural capital from these institutes? More specific questions are: How often do they visit these institutes? And

which type of educational resources in these institutes do they search for? Besides these institutes, significant others, like teachers and relatives, may be able to provide them with educational resources such as books, learning methods and instructions. The notion of significant others thus suggests a series of research questions: Who are significant others for excellent working-class students? What can significant others do for them? How do they disclose significant others? How do they interact with them and why? What do they learn from them? Apparently, excellent working-class students are situated in difficult contexts, in which parents are incapable of providing them with cultural capital, so that if they want to become cultural capital constructors, they need to possess determined wills. This situation proposes three research focuses: How do they develop such wills and why? How are they motivated? And who inspires them? Such determined wills often aim for upward mobility through educational credentials, and this correlation implies two research questions: What do these students envisage as the relation between educational performance and upward mobility? What kinds of creative actions, including learning plans and strategies, do they put into practice in their attempt to achieve upward mobility?

INSERT [FIG. 1 NEAR HERE]

As this study set out to explore how working-class students succeed in schools and why, excellent working-class students became our ideal objects. Because the number of such students is very small, a qualitative approach was deemed most suitable for clarifying the issues of how and why. In light of these accounts, we adopted a case study approach to examine the above research questions. In order to recruit an appropriate case for this study, we engaged in a systematic sampling strategy. As students in higher grades are more mature mentally and have more stable patterns of academic achievement, we targeted excellent working-class students in junior high schools as potential subjects of this research. As educational resources tend to be lacking in rural areas, we started to look for potential schools in certain areas of Tainan county, Taiwan. While Tainan county was merged administratively with Tainan city in 2010, it is still identifiable as a geographic region with many remote zones in which agriculture is the main industry. We consulted targeted junior high school class teachers for recommendations. After several contacts and visits, an excellent working-class student in grade 7 was chosen, due to some important advantages, including her family background, geographical location, easy accessibility and the willingness of the student, her parents and her schools to participate. The academic purpose of this study was explained clearly to the student and other participating parties, and appropriate steps taken to protect their anonymity, including the use of pseudonyms for all people and

schools in this article. We also avoided any interference in the case's family life when we conducted nonparticipant observations. All interview tapes, transcripts and observation notes were kept confidential, in accordance with human research ethics.

She had been on the list of top three students in her class from grade 5 to 7. Her family had seven members, including two grandparents, two parents and two sisters. Her grandfather and grandmother were illiterate, and worked as a farmer and a housekeeper respectively. Her father, a junior high school graduate, used to be a steel smith working at constructing sites but was unemployed at the time the nonparticipant observations were carried out. Both her grandfather and father were alcoholic. Her mother was from Vietnam and had been introduced to her father through an international marriage agency. The mother had completed a primary school education in her home country, but this was of very limited value in Taiwan. While she struggled to communicate in Mandarin, she spoke Taiwanese dialect fluently. The family was living in a fairly dilapidated three-section compound on a hill far away from the township, the location of which was not easy to be spotted due to its isolated locality. The living room was about 140 square feet, with no decorations but equipped with simple facilities including a color TV, a shabby sofa and a small coffee table. This living room was also the dining room. The kitchen was small and constructed of tin. The toilet was a separate tin building about 10 meters away from the house. It was in poor condition and only about 35 square feet in size, which made it difficult to accommodate any person of larger than average size. The subject case shared her bedroom with two-younger sisters. It had an area of about 530 square feet, and had obviously not been painted for many years, with red bricks showing through the wall paint in many places.

Data collection was mainly reliant upon non-participant observations carried out at the case subject's home over a period of four months. These were carried out three times per week, mainly at night and on weekends. Each of the family observations lasted between 90 and 120 minutes, and a total of eighty-two hours of observations were completed. Besides this, we conducted interviews when questions arose from observations. When the case subject could not respond to the questions adequately, other persons who might know the answers were included in the interviewee group. Family members were the insiders, able to report true stories about the subject, so grandparents, parents and sisters were often targeted as informants. As the subject often mentioned her cousin in interviews, he was interviewed as well. Her primary school class teacher and junior high school class teacher also provided us with valuable intelligence related to her learning situation. Twenty three individual interviews were completed, the details of which are listed in Table 1.

INSERT [TABLE 1 NEAR HERE]

All observation notes and audio tapes were transcribed by the third author and double-checked by the first author in order to ensure their accuracy. Observation notes and interview transcripts were analyzed over eight times using the technique of content analysis, in order to identify key words and concepts, which were further categorized into the themes for presentation in the findings. While this analysis was based on the tenet of neutrality and non-predetermined assumptions, the theoretical relationships of the logic model in Fig. 1 helped us classify a huge number of keywords into themes.

4. The findings

4.1. The mother's miserable life

Although the subject's family had 7 members, her father was unemployed and an alcoholic. In order to prevent the family from suffering a financial crisis, her mother worked three part-time jobs daily, with low pay.

The family is totally reliant on my wife. She is a sales-assistant at the market in the morning, a cleaning-lady at noon at a restaurant and a waitress in the afternoon at another restaurant. All these jobs are part-time, with poor pay. (200911031935, interview tape 8, father)

However, the mother-in-law didn't appreciate the mother's financial contribution to the family. Generally speaking, paternalism is common in working-class families, and fathers are family masters. As this culture tends to promote the status of males, the subject's mother was expected to produce boys. The three children she had given birth to were all girls, and this circumstance devalued her standing in the family as can be seen from the complaints of her mother-in-law:

We spent hundreds of thousands of dollars buying a wife for my son. Well, my son is not handsome because he has a vessel tumor on his face. No local girls want to marry him. Otherwise, we wouldn't spend so much money on this matter... It is very sad that she hasn't produced any boys. She has failed in the mission of lineage (200912151920, interview tape 15, grandmother)

Paternalism also refers to the distribution of authority in the family, which is normally seized by senior members in Chinese society. In this regard, the mother-in-law's attitude came to form a family culture disdaining the subject's mother. Through socialization, the subject's two sisters displayed a similar attitude to their grandmother.

The interactions between the two younger sisters and their mother were limited. When they went out for shopping or leisure activities, they always held their father's hands intimately, and their mother was walking behind them. Their tone and attitude towards their mother were not nice. Their manner and tone toward her were pretty similar to those of their grandmother. (200911281730, observation note 22, research team)

In contrast with such disappointing scenarios, the subject had compassion for her mother because she fully witnessed and experienced the harsh life her mother experienced:

I never approve of my sisters' attitudes towards my mother. They are not filial (The subject spoke in an angry voice) ... I won't bother them... I never ever do that to my mother. I really feel she is very miserable (The subject was head down and silent after she replied to this question). (200912011930, interview tape 13, the subject)

When I can earn money, I want to take my mother to return to Vietnam. I want to buy a big house for her, so that she can have her own room... My mother hasn't gone back to Vietnam since she married my father. She is very sad during new year holidays every year because of homesickness. I really want to help my mother out of this bitterness. (201004132030, interview tape 20, the subject)

4.2 Mental torment, precocity and determined will

Her mother's miserable life not only evoked the subject's compassion but also stimulated her determination to pursue a successful career, so as not to reproduce the same fate as her mother. In this case, she envisioned education as the window of access to upward mobility. Nevertheless, this determination was partly attributed by some to an attempt fight off the negative label of the daughter of a "mail-order bride", which imposed a considerable amount of pressure on the subject.

Most mail-order brides' children don't want to expose their mothers' ethnic backgrounds. A mother from Vietnam was invited to present some Vietnamese cuisine at a multicultural festival held in this school. She said if your mothers come from Vietnam, please raise your hand. The subject did, but in a head-down gesture after looking at me. I can see that she feels inferior to others. (200912041010, interview tape 14, junior high school class teacher Cheng)

I don't want to let my classmates know my mother is Vietnamese... Because they are overly curious about this issue and will ask me many stupid and annoying questions... For example, what do those people look like? And are they the same as the pictures in the textbook? They don't know my mother's background yet... When I was a primary school student, a classmate said that I was a Vietnamese communist gangster and barbarian. For me, he was a lower animal. His examination scores were always far behind mine. How dare he call me a barbarian? (201001111010, interview tape 18, the subject)

The above circumstances illustrate how the subject was situated in an oppressive context in which she had no choice but endure mental torment. Unexpectedly, this hardening made her precocious.

The subject had attended the Free Tutorial After School Program that offers students extra learning opportunities for free... She was precocious and behaved like an adult. For example, she privately requested me to let her two sisters attend this program... She also wanted to collect my last year's reference books for them... She really worried about her family's financial conditions. She declined to attend the swimming club because she said she was afraid of water. Actually, it was because of the financial issue. (200911120810, interview tape 10, primary school class teacher Hou)

Such precocity further incubated a determination to use education as the portal for avoiding a repetition of the class fate of her mother.

Regarding my wishes for this year, I wish I could have better academic results this year. I hope I can grow up faster, so that I can earn money for my family. I hope my dad won't be unemployed and my mother won't work so hard... I also wish that my grandmother could be nice to my mother... Professionals have much higher incomes than others. That is why I study so hard. (201001051900, interview tape 17, the subject)

This endeavor somehow projected an attempt to protect her self-respect because excellent academic performance enabled her to demonstrate her superior ability to others, and prevented her from being tainted with the above stigma.

I study very hard not because my classmates laugh at my mother's social background but for my own future... People believe that children of mail-order

*brides are inferior to others... At least, my academic attainment is very good.
(201001111010, interview tape 18, the subject)*

4.3 Acting as an independent learner using sophisticated strategies

While the subject had a determination to be academically excellent, she was confronted with structural constraints derived from her family's poor economic capital and parental absence from her learning. In this regard, if the subject wanted to accomplish her goals, she had to become an independent learner. In fact, the evidence shows that she was able to effectively self-monitor and manage her time.

*The subject seldom asked me questions, but concentrate intensely during class... She was very good at using unstructured time. For example, when she came to the recorder band early, she always memorized English vocabulary.
(200911120810, interview tape 10, primary school class teacher Wang)*

The subject is quiet in class but studies very hard. She always makes notes during class... I have observed that she often recites English vocabulary or Chinese classic literature in class breaks. She is good at using free time... She always carries out her study plan in a self-study class. (200912211030, interview tape 16, junior high school class teacher Cheng)

Due to the shortage of family economic capital, a coffee table in the living room and a bed board in her bedroom were the only tables that the subject could use for study. What made study even more difficult was that it was very noisy at home because her father often drank with friends and talked loudly in the living room, even at night. The two young sisters also played and shouted in the bedroom. In order to overcome such structural constraints, the subject got up to study very early in the morning, around 4:00 a.m. each day.

If it is noisy in the living room, I will study in my bedroom. Actually, I get up early in the morning to study because it is very quiet... My mother wakes me up at 4:00 a.m. ... After this, she will go out to work, so I do not have too many chances to talk to her. (200910272150, interview tape 7, the subject)

Besides being a self-regulator, the subject acted as an independent learner and a self-improver, as witnessed by her self-initiated reviewing, previewing, marking and noting, through which she could produce outstanding accomplishment.

I don't want to go out to play because I need to understand the answers of the school examination today, so that I can predict its possible focus next time. You know, it covers many subjects. If I know this focus, it won't take me too much time to review textbooks before the school examination. (200910201940, interview tape 5, the subject)

I just finished homework, so I have spare time to preview the textbook units that the teachers are going to teach this week and next week. Previews let me keep up with the pace of teaching of the teachers who speak fast. The math teacher always teaches very fast because he thinks the students already understand... Many students have attended cram schools, so they have learned related knowledge. (200910040900, interview tape 01, the subject)

I mark important contents of textbooks and school examination papers in various colors which indicate different meanings. Red means the most important. Pink reminds me to be proficient in it. If it is blue, I just need to read it once. A teacher told me about this reading skill... I have to identify my mistakes and correct them. The teacher always reminds us that the best way of mastering textbook contents is to make reading notes because the school examination is comprised of several subjects and you won't have too much time to review textbooks before it. (200910201950, interview tape 6, the subject)

While the teachers instructed the subject in these sophisticated learning strategies, she also discovered important learning skills from others.

Sometimes, the teachers give me books. Sometimes, I collect books from my cousin. However, it is much better for me to have my cousin's books... This is because he has already marked important paragraphs and made notes on the reference books, which help me comprehend the key notions of the individual units easily. (200910201940, interview tape 5, the subject)

4.4 Meeting significant others

Realizing plans or projects normally requires resources. However, the subject was blocked within a context in which virtually no cultural capital could be provided by her parents. This structural constraint could potentially impede her ability to exercise agency through the above learning skills and strategies. Fortunately, significant others came to help her in time. One of them was her mother, as evident in her waking of the subject to study in the early morning around 4:00 a.m. every day. Classroom teachers

and the subject's cousin also played a constructive role in her learning processes by offering consistent encouragement, learning opportunities and material support:

I helped her to attend the free supplementary class... She had been academically excellent and responsible, so I appointed her student tutor in charge of homework inspection. (200911120810, interview tape 10, primary school teacher Wang)

I applied for the priority education program for her (the subject) in order to let her have extra learning opportunities after school... Well, her primary school class teacher phoned me and mentioned her family situation. That is why I did that application. (200912211030, interview tape 16, junior high school teacher Cheng)

I haven't bought books for my daughter... Well, most of her books were given by her teachers free. They also gave her reading materials such as self-study and reference books. Sometimes, she borrowed books from her cousin. (200910201925, interview tape 4, the father)

In addition to their substantial material aid, the personalities of these significant others also inspired the subject. In order to show her gratitude to these two teachers, she was self-motivated to achieve better results.

I made two wishes. I shouldn't reveal them – otherwise, they won't come true... At any rate, I hope I could be a school teacher (Chinese culture views teachers as professionals in Taiwan) and the other wish is to become a billionaire... If I were a teacher, I could help many students. You know teacher Cheng and teacher Wang have been very helpful in my life (The subject's eyes were full of tears) ... It is not easy to become great teachers like them. However, I will study harder and harder in order to show my appreciation to them. (201004132030, interview tape 20, the subject)

4.5 Performing as a cultural capital constructor

Apparently, the subject's parents were not able to provide her with adequate educational resources. In order to surmount this structural constraint, she obtained educational resources available outside her family. One of her creative actions was to borrow books from libraries, teachers and the cousin.

Books are very expensive. If I borrow books from libraries, it won't cost me a

penny. It is very convenient to borrow books from the school library. That is why I often go there. I borrowed these books from it after the school examination last week... I am planning to visit the county library this Saturday. Well, it is far away from my house but it is ok for me because I don't need to spend money on purchasing books. (200910201940, interview tape 5, the subject)

Besides books, the subject actively availed herself of educational resources at school, such as the Free Tutorials After School Program supported by the government. More importantly, she converted the cousin and teachers into free personal tutors by consulting with them about any learning problems. Such actions created cultural capital for her without financial cost.

She visited me to discuss her homework and I taught her... Most of her questions were about mathematics. Because I took related classes, it was easy for me to teach her... Besides, I also taught her learning skills, such as answering tests, making learning notes, marking important contents and organizing study plans... She often rummaged my reference books and I lent her the books she wanted. If she could not understand the key points of these books, she came back to ask me... She hasn't come to see me for a few months. Well, my father had some quarrels with her father and her father asked her not to bother me. (200911211000, interview tape 11, the cousin)

The subject was very quiet but concentrated during class. Sometimes, she reminded me of the teaching progress in last class and the requirements I gave to students... She often consulted me about learning questions in private. What I felt was that she was well prepared because she categorized them in different colors. Basically, these questions belonged to textbooks, workbooks or supplementary readings. (200911120810, interview tape 10, primary school teacher Wang)

Usually, I finish homework at school. If I cannot figure out some answers, I will ask the teachers... I always check math homework at school in order to identify those items beyond my grasp, which are normally open questions. In this case, I will consult with the teacher about these questions at school... If I cannot answer the questions at home, I will consult with the teacher at school on the next day. (200910201940, interview tape 5, the subject)

5. Discussion

The findings show that the parents were unable to provide the subject case with

educational resources due to their poor financial situation. This phenomenon is consistent with the expected one-way convertible relation from economic capital to cultural capital that is the core element in constituting the theory of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1997). Although the subject case was situated in an oppressive context, the structural constraints of which did not lead her to become a conformist, as argued by Bourdieu (1977, 1990b, 2000). Instead, she performed as a cultural capital constructor, as evidenced by the fact that she utilized educational resources available in other social spaces through such creative actions as borrowing books from libraries and others and transforming the teachers and cousin into her free personal tutors. These creative actions not only brought her cultural capital but also articulated her rational mind, which overruled unconscious actions triggered by the fixation of habitus (Bourdieu, 1969, 1977, 2000). Perhaps, the exercise of such agency was facilitated by her ability to demonstrate the advantages of cultural capital in a less competitive context like the rural school in which she was enrolled. At any rate, a more accurate doctrine may be that these constructive behaviours permitted her to reallocate herself to other social spaces containing a high volume of cultural capital. As this locality shift changes the fixed relationship between social spaces, cultural capital and habitus, the actor won't be confined within the matrix of structural constraints of social class. This suggests that the perspectives of cultural reproduction (Blanden and Gregg, 2004; Bourdieu, 1986, 1998; Hek and Kraaykamp, 2015; Lancee and Werfhorst, 2012; Reay, 1998) and cultural mobility (Andersen and Jæger, 2015; DiMaggio, 1982; Jæger, 2011; Møllegaard and Jæger, 2015) overemphasize structural constraints, neglecting the influence of agency on educational outcomes to some extent. The stories of our case consistently support a rejection of the principle that social class is an unavoidable structural factor in educational inequity. This study also uncovers that her cultural capital construction derived from a vision of academic performance as a gateway for demonstrating excellent ability, in order to shield herself from her perceived inferior social status and the social stigma associated with being the daughter of a "mail-order bride". This finding was consonant with other studies that have reported a close relation between successful performance and self-confidence of excellent working-class students (Jin and Ball, 2019; Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2009). Our evidence further reveals that this self-confidence afforded protection against her classmates' prejudice towards the children of mail-order brides. This alignment is similar to related research unfolding the interplay between the self-confidence protection and unfriendly school cultures (Aries and Seider, 2005; Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2009; Soria, 2014). At any rate, at a deeper level, her academic endeavor was substantially stimulated by her understanding of education as a vehicle for upward mobility that could liberate her from her presumed working-class fate in the future. This correlation corresponds with related

studies illustrating the principle that excellent working-class students were committed to having upward mobility through education (Lehmann, 2013). Our study further found that in order to accomplish this commitment, the student in the case study performed as an independent learner and self-regulator, as evident in her learning strategies, such as time management, study planning, early-rising study method, and learning skills including noting, marking, reviewing and previewing. Furthermore, in her case, while the habitus evolution was steered by a rational mind, this rationality was not driven by the gap of social spaces (Bourdieu, 1999; Davey, 2009) but the practice of career ambition through cultural capital construction. Both her self-confidence protection and career vision were carried out by her determined will, which was molded by a repressive context in which she witnessed and empathized with the hardships experienced by her mother. More specifically, the suffering of her mother not only engendered her compassion but also drove her precocity, leading her to envisage education as her last hope, and providing the foundation for the development of her determination and willpower. Another striking finding of this study is that the practice of this determined will needed to be supported by significant others, who offered educational resources, instruction, encouragement and inspiration. Her mother, teachers and cousin were significant others in her life course because they opened a portal of hope by providing her with substantial material and spiritual aid, which significantly contributed to her excellent educational attainment.

6. Conclusion

The subject experienced firsthand the hardships suffered by her mother, and this mental torment not only induced her compassion for her mother but also incubated her precocity, leading her to envisage education as the last hope for her future, and the key to avoiding the same working-class fate as her mother. Her commitment to education was reinforced by self-dignity because outstanding education performance enabled her to prove her talent, freeing her from the social stigma associated with being the child of an immigrant bride. However, the context in which she was situated was in many respects oppressive, in that her parents were absent from her learning and economically incapable of providing her with alternative learning schemes such as personal tutors or cram schools. These conditions imply that she felt she had no choice other than to become a determined and independent learner, as evident in her strong focus on study, unlike ordinary children whose lives center around play and games. Even though organized learning strategies, such as marking, noting, previewing and reviewing, showed that she was a self-reliant learner, a more profound challenge for her was to acquire educational resources, which were almost nonexistent in her family social space. Fortunately, significant others came to provide her with assistance such as inspiration,

encouragement, learning opportunities, books and instruction. With their aid, the subject transformed herself from an independent learner into a cultural capital constructor, who was able to disclose and use educational resources available in other social spaces. As this construction was geared by an iron will with a strong ambition to achieve high educational results, her own endeavors largely diminished the structural constraints created by her family social space, through such innovative maneuvers as borrowing books from libraries and transforming teachers and cousin into her free personal tutors.

The above scenarios imply a principle that the matrix of structural constraints can be remolded by agency. More specifically, when working-class students can accomplish cultural capital construction, this approach substantially attenuates the structural constraint of their family social space because the combination of their creative actions and those of significant others facilitates them to apply educational resources available in other social spaces to their learning. As the shift of social spaces alters the distribution of cultural capital, those working-class students who exercise agency can benefit because they are reallocated into other social spaces. According to this doctrine, if we could optimize the potential advantages of schools and teachers, and allow them to function as other social spaces and significant others, working-class students' performance could be enhanced. Nevertheless, this shift is initiated by personal perceptions and cognitions such as precocity, determined will, commitment and ambition. As these psychological elements lead to the construction of cultural capital, the researchers of cultural reproduction should pay attention to this linkage. In this regard, the findings of this study lay a solid groundwork for this research paradigm, which it is hoped may inspire other researchers who are interested in this approach.

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Fig. 1 A logical model of cultural capital construction

Table 1 Details of Interviews

Interviewee	Relationship with subject	Number of interviews	Location of interviews
The subject		8	The subject's home
T.H. Wang	Father	6	The subject's home
Y.C. Wang	Mother	1	The subject's home
H.M. Wang	Grandmother	1	The subject's home
P.P. Wang	Sister	2	The subject's home
S.J. Wang	Cousin	1	The cousin's home
S.S. Hou	Primary school teacher	3	Teacher's office
C.C. Cheng	Junior high school teacher	1	Teacher's office