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# Probe into the “Mania for School District Houses”

— Research into the Motivations for Purchasing School District Houses from the Perspective of Cultural Capital

Nie Chen\*

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**Abstract:** In recent years, the “mania for school district houses” has disrupted the housing market and undermined education equity and class mobility, thus becoming a common concern. Most existing research focus on market motivations for purchasing school district houses while neglecting the connections between school district houses and cultural and social elements in the process of class reproduction. To make up for this deficiency this article introduces the neighborhood-based cultural capital theory to explore the diversified motivations, the processes of motivation formation, and the determining factors in purchasing school district houses. Reviews and analysis of interview materials revealed that while theories based on western experience can explain the basic purchasing motivations and their formation processes, there are distinct and varied purchasing motivations in China, more comprehensive and complex forms of capital exchange, and more dynamic factors that impact purchases of school district houses. Suggestions on solving the “mania for school district houses” are also presented.

**Keywords:** school district houses, institutionalized cultural capital, objective cultural capital, social capital, economic capital

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## **Introduction: The “Mania for School District Houses” and Worries over “Class Rigidity”**

In recent years, sky-rocketing prices of school district houses have led the trends in the housing markets in first-tier cities. This is particularly notable in many city centers where some school district houses are old, shabby, and small, contrasting sharply with their high prices of 100-200 thousand yuan per square meters, thus triggering public attention and media discussions (Wu, 2015). The mania for school district houses originated from the “nearby enrollment policy” initiated to solve school-choosing problems. Yet, the shift from “school-choosing” to “house-choosing” has led to new social problems. In the short term, the price surge of school district houses can disrupt market order and impact the healthy development of the real estate market. In the long term, since such a mania reflects the unbalanced and unfair distribution of educational resources, it will trigger concerns over class rigidity in the social structure (Lu & Zhang, 2015, pp. 13-17). However, most domestic research regarding the motivations for purchasing school district houses focus on their high market prices (Hu, Zheng & Wang Rui, 2014, pp. 1195-1214), market mechanisms (Zhang, Li & Deng, 2014, pp. 193-206), investment willingness and risks (Zhang, Chen & Shi, 2016, pp. 97-111), mainly touching on the supply and demand relations between household economic capital and educational resources. In the long term, school district houses are closely related to residential stratification, social mobility, intergenerational transmission, status symbols, and other social and cultural elements. Therefore, if we solely rely on the linear interpretation of economic capital competing for quality educational resources, it is impossible to explain the complex mechanisms connecting school district houses and social mobility or to explain why among families with similar economic capital, some choose to purchase school district houses and others choose not to. To fundamentally solve the mania, it is necessary to comprehensively understand the diversified motivations for purchasing school district houses and expound on the complex connections between school district houses and class reproduction.

While researching international housing, I focused on the phenomenon of realizing capital growth through the transition of neighborhood space and the dual functions of cultural capital in preventing downward mobility and empowering upward mobility of filial generations. Using the cultural capital theory, I explain the motivations for purchasing school district houses and the formation of such motivations (Boterman & Bridge, 2015, pp. 249–261; Bridge, 2016, pp. 719–730), thus enabling the theory and conceptual operationalization of the connections between house-choosing and class reproduction. The introduction of this theoretical framework is based on the interviews conducted from May to August in 2017 with 10 families that purchased school district houses and 6 families with similar economic capital that purchased non-school district houses. My goal was to unearth the motivations for purchasing school district houses in China and the determinants impacting the formation of the purchasing motivations. My research can add to, and complement, existing domestic research, and test and develop the housing neighborhood-based cultural capital theory. In practice, I

offer suggestions for solving the mania at the source.

### **Literature Review: Motivations for Purchasing School District Houses and the Theory of Cultural Capital Exchange**

In international housing research, the motivations for purchasing school district houses are generally viewed as increasing family capital by choosing a housing neighborhood. In the west, research in choosing housing neighborhoods and family capital accumulation and integration have undergone three stages of evolution. Research at the first stage mainly focused on the motivation for economic capital accumulation. With the rise of cities in western industrialized countries in the 19th century, individual families moved away from big families bound together through blood relationships, and sought to live together among people with similar economic capital, leading to differences of regional house prices and residential isolation in cities. Against such a backdrop, housing neighborhoods were not only viewed as a space selection but also as a symbol of family economic capital (Keller, 1968).

Research at the second stage focused on the construction motivation of social capital. In the 1970s, community development in cities in western countries stabilized. By introducing the concept of social capital developed by James S. Coleman, Robert D. Putnam, and others (Coleman, 1988, pp. S95–S120; Putnam, 2000), housing neighborhood was understood as a social network organization offering space for the increase of family capital (Warren, 1981). Scholars like Ray Forrest and Ade Kearns explored the operation of neighborhood social networks, namely in harmonious neighborhoods with a high degree of trust, cooperation and mutual benefits. With a strong sense of belonging, families could reduce their costs of commercial and social interactions, enhance efficiency, broaden knowledge, improve livelihoods, and realize the accumulation of economic and social capital, thus realizing class reproduction (Forrest & Kearns, 2001, pp. 2125–2143).

Research at the third stage focused on the motivation for increasing cultural capital. In the late 20th century, with the start of renovation of old city centers in western countries, a large number of middle-class households moved back to city centers from the suburbs and chose to settle down in emerging neighborhoods with sound environments and improved infrastructures, forcing indigenous poor people to move away. Such a process of counter urbanization is also called “gentrification” (Butler, 2007, pp. 162–181). Scholars like Tim Butler explained such phenomenon as not only a process of families with higher economic and social capital replacing those with lower economic and social capital, but also as what Pierre Bourdieu stressed, the spatial accumulation of cultural capital represented by materialized middle-class living styles and residential tastes (Bourdieu, 1984), which generated a class reproduction mechanism in emerging communities with cultural capital accumulation as the core (Bridge, 2006, pp. 1965–1978). Such a perspective integrated the relations between the neighborhood gentrification process and class reproduction and developed into an influential theoretical framework.

However, in western countries, some young families moved out of these emerging communities and relocated to conventional ones that were old, shabby and small in house type, yet with better educational resources, challenging the theoretical explanation of gentrification. Scholars like Michaela Benson conducted qualitative comparisons and research in multiple European countries and developed the cultural capital theory that integrated neighborhood selections. They discovered that the motivation for purchasing school district houses was mainly about the pursuit of institutionalized cultural capital. Therefore, under such a framework, choosing houses that are old, shabby, and small does not mean a denial to cultural capital accumulation, but the ongoing transition of different stock forms and incremental forms within cultural capital (Benson, Bridge & Wilson, 2015, pp. 24–43). For young middle-class families with a certain amount of economic capital as the foundation for purchasing power, they are restricted by the possession of economic capital during their youth and cannot own all three forms of cultural capital at the same time, namely; objectified cultural capital represented by materialized residential environments and living styles, institutionalized cultural capital represented by knowledge and skill qualifications, and the overall reproduction of embodied cultural capital such as knowledge, taste, and thinking style. In order to give offspring opportunities for quality education certification enabled by school district houses, they have to forsake objectified environments and tastes and move to houses that are old, shabby, and small. Finally, Gary Bridge and other scholars further improved the cultural capital theory and built a theoretical framework for the space-time interactions of economic, social, and cultural capital (Butler & Robson, 2003, pp. 5–28). The research of Gary Bridge found that the amount of social capital stock in a present residential neighborhood is the key factor determining whether to purchase houses that were old, shabby, and small (Bridge, 2001, pp. 205–216). Just as Figure 1. shows, limited by economic capital, for Family A, which has a relatively lower degree of embedding into neighborhood social networks and less cooperation and mutual benefits with neighbors, has greater motivation to abandon the lower level of neighborhood social capital stock and purchase school district houses and start the process of converting the objectified cultural capital with a sound residential environment and taste into an incremental quantity of institutionalized

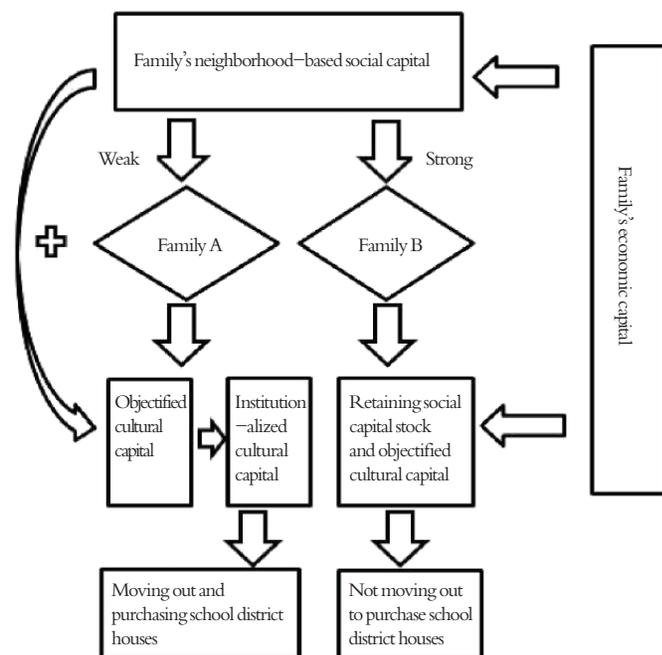


Figure 1. Theoretical Framework of Culture Capital in the Process of Purchasing School District Houses

cultural capital with the opportunity to obtain a quality education certification in the future. For Family B, which has a close neighborhood relationship and relatively stronger neighborhood social capital, they totally lose the stock of social relations accumulated in the original neighborhood after relocating and face an excessive reduction of total family capital. Therefore, Family B chooses to abandon school district houses and no longer seeks to convert the stock of objectified cultural capital into the incremental quantity of institutionalized cultural capital.

Therefore, for the “mania for school district houses” represented by purchasing houses in China that are old, shabby, and small, I introduce the research framework of the cultural capital theory and discuss the following two issues from a Chinese context. First, whether the theoretical framework with cultural capital exchange as the core can explain the motivations for purchasing school district houses, and second, the factors that impact the motivations for purchasing school district houses and non-school district houses, namely the formation of neighborhood choice differences.

## Research Design

According to the cultural capital theory, my research first compared school district houses that are old, shabby, and small in key primary school districts (including key primary schools at the municipal and district levels, and primary schools where graduates can be enrolled directly into key junior high schools at the municipal and district levels) in Beijing, a representative of first-tier cities, and the motivations for purchasing non-school district houses. Second, I analyzed the different modes of capital exchange in the formation of purchasing motivations. Third, I explored factors impacting motivation differences in purchasing school district houses. In order to compare Chinese and western experiences, I used qualitative semi-structured in-depth interviewing. As exploratory research, target groups in Beijing were chosen by combining snowball sampling and purposive sampling. Interviewees were chosen by considering the following requirements. First, in order to better embody the relationships between school district houses and class reproduction, I chose families that purchased school district houses that were old, shabby, and small for the enrollment of their offspring, and those with a demand for offspring enrollment that purchased non-school district houses. Second, I chose families that purchased school district houses from December 2014 to May 2017, a period of rapid price inflation of school district houses in first-tier cities, and families with non-school district houses. Third, in order to reveal factors leading to neighborhood choice differences, I chose families with similar economic capital, namely those purchasing school district houses and those purchasing non-school district houses with similar total prices and owning those houses as their only house. Fourth, in order to make the research more typical in sample selection, attention was paid to ensure that the samples included analogue gender, education background, employment, income, and other social and economic features.

From May to August in 2017, interview materials were gathered in two steps. First, experimental interviews were conducted with purchasers of school district houses and non-school district houses.

Then, based on the results of these interviews, a formal interview was conducted after revising the interview questions. To make field observation of school district houses that were old, shabby, and small, and non-school district houses, interview locations were chosen in areas near to the residence of interviewees, as much as possible. For this study, a total of 16 face-to-face in-depth interviews were conducted, 10 involving purchasers of school district houses that were old, shabby, and small and 6 involving purchasers of non-school district houses. Each interview lasted 40-60 minutes and, with the permission of interviewees, were recorded and later transcribed. For the purpose of anonymity, interviewees were coded, with male starting with letter “M” and female “F”. The basic information of the 16 interviewees is presented in Table 1. The ratio between male and female is 1:1; the educational degrees of the interviewees include bachelor, master and doctor. Their employment types include government agency, public institution, state-owned enterprise, state holding enterprise, foreign enterprise, private enterprise, and self-employment. Among the school district houses that are old, shabby, and small there is one along the North 4th Ring Road, two near the North 3rd Ring Road and the others near the 2nd Ring Road. All were built between 1965 and 1990 with an average price of 102 thousand yuan/m<sup>2</sup> and an average floor area of 48.5 m<sup>2</sup>. Among the non-school district houses with a similar overall price, there are space-time differences in location, area, and time of completion, and differences in the unit prices. All are outside of the 5th or 6th Ring Road and built between 2000 and 2012, with an average floor area 110 m<sup>2</sup>, 2.3 times the size of the school district houses. The average unit price is RMB 51 thousand/m<sup>2</sup>, half that of the school district houses.

Table 1: Basic information for interviewees purchasing school district houses and non-school district houses

No.	School district houses with key primary schools or primary schools where graduates can be directly enrolled into junior high schools	Gender	Education	Work	Location	Completion Time	Unit Price	Floor Area
M1	Zhongguancun No.1 Primary School	Male	Bachelor	Private enterprise	North 4th Ring Road	1981	110 thousand yuan	54 m <sup>2</sup>
M2	China-Cuba Friendship Primary School	Male	Master	State-own enterprise	West 2nd Ring Road	1965	105 thousand yuan	60 m <sup>2</sup>
M3	Yuxiang Elementary School	Male	Master	Private enterprise	North 2nd Ring Road	1985	130 thousand yuan	47 m <sup>2</sup>
M4	Beijing Primary School	Male	Bachelor	Government agency	West 2nd Ring Road	1970	100 thousand yuan	43 m <sup>2</sup>
M5	Fendou Primary School	Male	Doctor	State-holding enterprises	West 2nd Ring Road	1985	92 thousand yuan	50 m <sup>2</sup>
F1	Wanquan Primary School	Female	Master	Private enterprise	North 3rd Ring Road	1990	100 thousand yuan	50 m <sup>2</sup>
F2	Yuzhong Elementary School	Female	Master	State-own enterprise	North 3rd Ring Road	1982	110 thousand yuan	50 m <sup>2</sup>

No.	School district houses with key primary schools or primary schools where graduates can be directly enrolled into junior high schools	Gender	Education	Work	Location	Completion Time	Unit Price	Floor Area
F3	Fensiting Elementary School	Female	Bachelor	State-holding enterprises	East 2nd Ring Road	1985	95 thousand yuan	50 m <sup>2</sup>
F4	Sanlihe the Third Primary School	Female	Master	Public institution	West 2nd Ring Road	1980	100 thousand yuan	31 m <sup>2</sup>
F5	Huiwen First Primary School	Female	Master	State-holding enterprises	East 2nd Ring Road	1986	78 thousand yuan	51 m <sup>2</sup>
M6	No	Male	Master	State-own enterprise	North 5th Ring Road	2001	40 thousand yuan	100 m <sup>2</sup>
M7	No	Male	Bachelor	Self-employment	North 5th Ring Road	2000	40 thousand yuan	95 m <sup>2</sup>
M8	No	Male	Master	Public institution	East 5th Ring Road	2005	50 thousand yuan	105 m <sup>2</sup>
F6	No	Female	Master	Self-employment	West 5th Ring Road	2010	70 thousand yuan	98 m <sup>2</sup>
F7	No	Female	Bachelor	State-own enterprise	South 6th Ring Road	2002	37 thousand yuan	140 m <sup>2</sup>
F8	No	Female	Bachelor	Private enterprise	North 5th Ring Road	2012	70 thousand yuan	120 m <sup>2</sup>

## The Complex Relationship between Purchasing School District Houses and Class Rigidity

By comparing and analyzing the interview materials, I found that, first, the motivations for purchasing school district houses were not limited to what domestic literature focuses on, namely increasing family economic capital through investment, but also value increases in different forms of cultural capital and social capital. Second, the research sought to find the relationship between pursuing capital accumulation and class reproduction from the motivations for purchasing school district houses, which challenged theoretical explanations based on western experiences and showed the more comprehensive and proactive features of purchasers in a Chinese context.

### Diversified Motivations of Capital Exchange

#### School district houses: not only exchange institutionalized cultural capital.

The research finds that the motivations for purchasing school district houses clearly reflect that purchasers hope to acquire quality institutionalized cultural capital by approaching quality educational resources. Among these interviewees, the interview materials of F1 are typical. She explained that by purchasing a school district house, she can ensure that her offspring gain more opportunities for

acquiring a quality educational certification one generation after another, and finally get “good” work. Such a process shows the relations between purchasing school district houses for offspring, acquiring expected social and economic status, and realizing class reproduction.

“Of course, the purpose is to attend a key junior middle school... key senior high school, universities listed in China’s 211, or 985 key university national projects, and finally land a good job. It does not mean that a school district house can guarantee a good university, but it is a question of higher probability.” (F1, May 1, 2017)

Besides, the research finds that the relationship between purchasing school district houses and class reproduction is not limited to pursuing educational certification but shows a more diverse trend. First, families of the interviewees also pursue embodied cultural capital. In the interview materials of M3, I found that compared with “quality educational resources”, he pays more attention to the accumulation of embodied cultural capital of his offspring with the help of a school district house, such as personal disposition and way of thinking.

“It does not mean that I will push my kids too hard for a good school... What I value more is the atmosphere and cultural background of a school, which is conducive to the growth of kids... in terms of confidence, vision, disposition, and way of thinking.” (M3, May 14, 2017)

Second, some families also pay attention to the quality enhancement of social capital. In this aspect, the viewpoint of M1 is typical. By purchasing a school district house, he hoped to acquire opportunities of embedding into a social network of higher quality. He also expected the positive role of social capital in offering short-term education and long-term social and economic status for his offspring.

“Families that tighten their belts to buy school district houses value their kids... Just as a story tracing back to 365 BC goes that the mother of great Chinese philosopher Mencius moved home three times to ensure an environment conducive to her son’s education. With kids of such families as the classmates of my kids, my kids and I will have chance to know such parents and kids. In such an environment, kids will learn from and encourage each other... When they grow up with such classmates and friends, chances are that help from them are more important than the hard efforts of your own.” (M1, May 6, 2017)

Third, the motivation for economic capital increase is somewhat weakened. The research finds that, in recent years, despite a large degree of appreciation in school district houses, families of interviewees do not view capital appreciation as the major motivation for purchasing school district houses. For instance, M5 purchased a school district house at a price of 92 thousand yuan/m<sup>2</sup>. He stressed repeatedly that, in order to exchange the various forms of capital increase brought by a school district house, he is tolerant of economic capital loss.

“The price was very high when the house was purchased. We were ready to accept a price drop, say, 20% or 30%... At the very least, we can pass down the house to my son, so his kids can use it for school enrollment... It is impossible to attend schools in the district by purely paying more fees.” (M5, May 30, 2017)

### **Non-school district houses: pay more attention to objectified cultural capital and economic capital.**

Yet, this does not mean that only school district houses can enable the various forms of capital accumulation, and then a monopoly on class reproduction. The research also finds that families choosing non-school district houses also follow the theoretical framework that explains housing neighborhood choices and class reproduction. These families expect a higher increase of objectified cultural capital and economic capital. First, in terms of objectified cultural capital, the interview materials of F7 are typical. After comparing school district houses with non-school district houses, she chose a bright and spacious house in a community featuring “separation of man from vehicle”, greening, and an amusement park, all hallmarks of the lifestyle and tastes of the middle-class. She believed that the loss of objectified cultural capital will affect the class reproduction of offspring, namely “bad for growth” and “feelings of inferiority”.

“We inspected school district houses of the 1980s... There were no elevators, and a jumble of things were packed on the stairs. In my opinion, living in such an environment will be bad for my kid’s growth and it is easy to be self-abased. At the very least, my kid should live in a spacious house. It does not have to be luxury. The minimum is to ensure life quality... In my current community, there are ‘separation of man from vehicle’, greening, and an amusement park.” (F7, July 2, 2017)

Second, in terms of economic capital, with the interview materials of M7 as an example, he believes that with a similar overall price, non-school district houses are more capable of “maintaining value” compared with “unmarketable” school district houses and can create more family economic capital.

“Since (school district houses are) very old, (for future buyers), it is impossible to get loans of 30 years... Perhaps nobody will buy such houses... In the long run, non-school district houses are more capable of maintaining value and hedging against inflation.” (M7, July 22, 2017)

### **The Process of Comprehensive Capital Exchange**

#### **Trade-offs under the framework of capital exchange theory.**

The research finds that purchasing school district houses, or not, to some degree the process of neighborhood choice is similar to the framework of capital exchange. Both are supported and limited by fixed economic capital and engage in the trade-offs between objectified cultural stock capital and institutional cultural incremental capital. For instance, the interview materials of F1 show that with the limitation of economic capital, in order to obtain a capital increase powered by a school district house, she yielded some of her original objectified cultural capital, such as “pastoral decoration” and “closed-off management”.

“(Our previous house) was decorated in a pastoral style with closed-off management... Yet the current house has no door security, let alone a compound... You can see the illegal construction and advertisements all over the walls... If not for the school, no one would buy such an old house...

Of course, I can only afford such a house.” (F1, May 1, 2017)

Meanwhile, the interview materials show that the process for purchasing non-school district houses also reflects a trade-off among different forms of cultural capital. For example, M6, who purchased a 100m<sup>2</sup> house built in 2001 outside of North 5th Ring Road, said that though “affordable” school district houses can bring opportunities of institutionalized cultural capital increase, they are “unlivable” because of their low objectified cultural capital. Yet he cannot afford to buy “desirable” school district houses that exceed his upper limit of economic capital. So, he had to make a trade-off between different forms of cultural capital.

“I looked at several (school district houses), the affordable ones are unlivable and the desirable ones are too expensive... Unlivable houses are poorly built. So I finally chose a big new house with better quality.” (M6, May 1, 2017)

#### **Replenishment of transfer capital after exchange.**

However, further analysis shows that in China, the process of capital exchange based on neighborhood choice is more comprehensive and complex. Especially, after choosing a neighborhood, the families of interviewees continued exchanges between the forms of stock capital and the incremental capital, and replenish capital centering on their yielded capital forms. With limited economic capital, such a sustained process of capital recombination is happening repeatedly in various forms. For families of interviewees that purchased school district houses, they use the following two strategies to improve living environments and tastes.

First, decoration and renovation. Among the 10 interviewees who purchased school district houses, 7 have finished decoration and renovation of their houses, or plan to do so. For instance, the interview materials of F5 show that she wants to pay a low cost of economic capital to make up for the too low objectified cultural capital and ensure “not too much difference” between the living environment of new houses and school district houses that are old, shabby, and small.

“One good thing about a small house is that you do not need too much money for decoration, and a little bit of decoration and transformation will make a new, cozy house.” (F5, August 6, 2017)

Second, renting a house in a new community. Another three families purchasing school district houses hope to improve their living environments and lifestyles by renting another house. The interview materials of M3 show that he pays relative lower economic capital, namely making up the difference of rent. He chooses to live in a newly-built community nearby with two “livable bedrooms” to avoid the loss of objectified cultural capital.

“I will rent out this one and decide to add a little money to rent a livable two-bedroom house in XX Jiayuan, which is more agreeable.” (M3, May 14, 2017)

Meanwhile, families purchasing non-school district houses have not abandoned the opportunity to approach institutionalized cultural capital, either. They give full play to their initiative and use the following two strategies to make up for the loss of quality educational certification opportunities with economic capital.

The first is attending extracurricular training courses. Most interviewees choosing non-school district houses agree that attending courses of off-campus educational agencies can substitute for key primary schools to some degree, adding to the opportunities of their offspring acquiring institutional certifications in the future. Taking F8 as an example, who purchased a non-school district house outside of the North 5th Ring Road. She believes that there is no difference between attending off-campus training and studying in a key primary school, since they are the “same roads” leading to an increase of institutionalized cultural capital.

“I’ve made some inquiries and I learned that even for students in key primary schools, many of them attend off-campus training... We also plan to choose off-campus training for my kid. There are many training agencies nearby... As long as you keep attending the courses, the effects are the same.” (F8, August 19, 2017)

The second is active parental participation. Some interviewees choosing non-school district houses also stressed the indirect role of objectified cultural capital, such as the interior and exterior environments of the houses, in the acquiring of institutionalized cultural capital for offspring. For example, F7 chose a 140m<sup>2</sup> house with a study in a new community near her work place. She stressed that the sound interior and exterior environment of the house and a short commute time will make her more “energetic” and “be in the mood” to participate in and monitor her kid’s study.

“We can own an independent study, fill the study with books, and read through the books. There is a running track and various kinds of plants in the compound residential complex... We can go downstairs to exercise and learn about the plants. It takes me less than half an hour to commute. Going home, I will be more energetic and be in a mood to care for his study... In my opinion, parental participation, words and deeds are more important for a kid’s growth than teachers.” (F7, July 2, 2017)

### **Factors Affecting the Formation of the Motivations for purchasing School District Houses**

Western experience tells us that the amount of social capital stock in residential neighborhoods is the key factor determining whether to purchase a school district house. Yet, my research for this study finds that amid the background of China with its changing social structure, the atomization of living styles leads to weaker neighborhood social capital (Pan, 2008, pp. 104-110). Therefore, compared with horizontally stationary neighborhood social capital, two vertical dynamic factors have become the main reasons leading to neighborhood choice differences among people with similar economic capital. The factors are, first, the role of quality educational resources in personal experience on the acquiring of personal education and social and economic status, and second, the prognosis of how future institutionalized cultural capital will affect the acquisition of social and economic status.

First, because of differences in personal experience, there is a dispute over whether school district houses can increase the odds of acquiring a quality educational certification. Interviewees

choosing school district houses stressed the key role of school district houses in acquiring a quality education. As a representative of these people, M4, based on his own experience, believed that school district houses can enable an overall capital increase, including institutional certification and social relations.

“I attended an ordinary primary school, and then a key junior middle school, where I got to know many classmates who graduated from key primary schools... Then I realized the great gap, which means not only scores, but also phased goals and the methods to realize those goals... They do not compete with others purposely. Rather, they are naturally affected by their learning – minded classmates.” (M4, May 30, 2017)

On the contrary, interviewees choosing non-school district houses are skeptical of the effects of school district houses. Among these people, M8, who graduated from a top university, with his own experience, believed that acquiring institutionalized cultural capital rests on personal endeavors, namely “whether you have the talent or not” rather than the quality of educational resources made available through school district houses. He believed that the role of school district houses is “exaggerated”.

“I attended quite ordinary schools since I was young, yet was still enrolled by a top university. I have never thought of it as a difficult issue... Primary schools in Beijing are much better than my primary school... Talent is much more important, and the role of a house is exaggerated.” (M8, July 23, 2017)

Second, based on personal predictions, there is a lack of consensus on the importance of institutionalized cultural capital to the acquiring of social and economic status. Generally, interviewees choosing school district houses believe that institutionalized cultural capital, namely the certification of a quality education, is becoming more important for the acquiring of social and economic status. The interview with F3, who works in a state-holding enterprise, is more typical. With a prognosis of “A rising tide lifts all boats” in terms of recruitment standards, she stressed that education degrees and university grades will lead to a great difference in “income” and “career prospects,” namely the ever-increasing importance of educational certifications to acquiring social and economic status and capital accumulation.

“(In terms of recruitment standards), a rising tide lifts all boats. Education background is more and more important. Previously my institution recruited graduates with an undergraduate degree. Now, for the common workers, the minimum requirements are a graduate degree. There are also overseas returnees with PhDs and postdoctoral studies who apply for the posts. Plus, my institution only recruits those who graduated from top universities.” (F3, June 3, 2017)

On the contrary, interviewees choosing non-school district houses believed that the importance of institutionalized cultural capital is on the decline. For instance, from the perspective of starting a business, F6 judged that social demands are not equal to degree requirements, “now society no longer blindly values degrees”, and “what the society really needs” is hard work and working experience.

“When I started a business, I found that I cared more for ability. Society is a real school and

does not blindly value degrees... Unlike the case in the past, when a degree from a good university would ensure a good job, now experience matters more and more... After struggling in the society for years, I now know what is truly needed” (F6, July 1, 2017).

## Conclusion and Suggestions

As exploratory research, this study compares and analyzes the motivations for purchasing or not purchasing school district houses and the factors affecting motivation formation, and finds that, first, the motivations for purchasing school district houses are not limited to what the domestic literature stresses, namely an increase in economic capital, but show a diversified trend of pursuing different forms of increasing cultural capital and social capital. In contrast, the motivations for not purchasing school district houses are more towards the increase of economic capital and materialized cultural capital. Second, the relationship between the process for purchasing school district houses, or not, and class reproduction has exceeded the previous linear connection of using economic capital to compete for quality educational resources, and challenged the western theoretical framework with its internal cultural capital exchange as the core, showing a more comprehensive and complex purchasing process in the Chinese context. Third, factors affecting the purchasing of school district houses are different from the horizontal neighborhood stock of social capital based on western experience, and more of a dynamic vertical understanding and judging of the prospects for acquiring an excellent education.

Theoretically, the neighborhood-based cultural capital theory can explain the motivations, processes and determinants of school district houses purchasing to some degree, yet in China, the path of neighborhood choice and hierarchical reproduction, including school district houses and non-school district houses, is more diverse, dynamic, and complex. This means that on the macro level the relationship between house choice and class in China has not been shown to be a solidified congruent relationship like that in the West, and is still in a fuzzy state (Nie & Fang, 2017, pp. 64-70); on the micro level, individuals with economic resources have more possibilities and a greater initiative to pursue greater accumulation of family capital and class reproduction through housing choice.

In practice, this research offers the following policy suggestions for resolving the mania for school district houses and realizing educational equity and balanced development. In the short term, attention should be paid to equity at the starting points, the spatial monopoly of school district houses over quality educational resources should be removed, and a spatial balance should be pursued through means like famous schools running branch schools, strengthening the construction of poor schools and the flow of teachers. In the medium term, process equity should be given attention to. From the perspective of capital, efforts should be made to check the inequality of economic capital on housing purchases. Continued efforts should be made to expand the middle-income group and narrow the income gap between groups, and policies like “Tenants enjoy the same rights as home buyers”, “encouraging both housing purchasing and renting” and “one school being allocated into different districts” should be pursued to allow families lacking in economic capital to have access to



quality educational resources, and prevent houses from becoming the passage and amplifier leading to unequal transmission of various kinds of family capital. Tradition should be valued to consider the construction of neighborhood social capital, so that families can benefit more from original communities with close links, high degrees of trust, and harmony and mutual assistance, thus avoiding the perceived need to leave their original communities to purchase school district houses. In the long term, more attention should be paid to fairness of outcomes and expanding the channels of upward mobility. Stress should be put on the results of acquiring an education. From the perspective of employers, efforts should be made to gradually change China's higher education and talent assessment institutions and break the practice of degree-centered recruitment. From the perspective of individuals, more attention should be paid to the enhancement of capacity rather than focusing only on degrees to achieve educational and career planning oriented towards social demands.

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