

# How Does Education Promote the Mobility of Social Class?: Empirical Analysis Based on CGSS2017

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**Abstract:** Education has been given significant responsibilities as a way of promoting social class mobility. With the development of the market economy, there is growing concerns about whether and how much more education can still change social class. This paper uses the data of Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS)2017 to examine the effects of education and marriage matching on social mobility; used multiple linear regression to explore the pathways and specific effects of education on individual social class change. It is found that education has a significant positive effect in promoting the improvement of social class, and indirectly affects the improvement of individual social class through personal income and social capital; marriage matching is also a factor to affect people's social class, but its effect is limited and there is a two-way pattern. In response to the findings, relevant countermeasures are proposed to increase the acceptance of social mobility and promote social fairness for a healthy development of society.

**Keywords:** Education; Social class mobility; Influencing factors

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## 1. Introduction

As an important means of social class circulation, education is often considered to have an important mission of promoting social mobility, maintaining social fairness and stability. Since the beginning of the Western Zhou Dynasty, education has been closely linked to the system of selecting officials and with the implementation of the imperial examination system, promoting social class has been the motive and aspiration of study for all generations.

Even in modern times, there is a saying that "knowledge changes destiny." However, in the context of many changes in the economy and culture of the society in the new era, the circulation of social classes have also undergone new changes. The emergence of "rich second generation" and "poor second generation," also other class solidification phenomena, begins to make people question the real function of education in promoting the mobility of social class. Is there still a noble son from a poor family? This question has prompted us to think about the actual role and specific ways of education in modern social class mobility.

This study uses data from the China General Social Survey (CGSS)2017, and attempts to explore the pathways and specific effects of education on individual social class mobility from the perspective of individual education level and marriage matching.

## 2. Literature Review and Hypotheses

### 2.1. The function of education

The function of education in the circulation of social classes has been divided into two major theories: the educational functionalist theory and the educational conflict theory.

### **2.1.1. Educational functionalism theory**

Functionalist theory believes that education plays a positive role in the circulation of social classes. With the development of economic refinement and division of labor, the labor market has more demand for professional and technical talents. Education allows individuals to maintain a high level of competitiveness in the labor market which means giving everyone an equal opportunity to be exposed to the learning of professional and technical skills. At the same time, as economic development's pursuit of specialization and efficiency is different from the important role of contacts, family capital and other factors in traditional society in career selection and social status distribution, thus education combined with new economic backgrounds has created a new environment for social groups. Relatively fair employment opportunities and the principle of social status distribution.

### **2.1.2. Educational conflict theory**

The theory of educational conflict holds that education is actually a powerful weapon for the solidification of social classes. Education is an important tool for the development of social classes <sup>[1]</sup>. Advantageous social class groups use their own money, culture and other advantages to influence the education level of their children, so that their children have higher quality than children of non-dominant social classes. Educational resources are invested on this basis for children to inherit their original social class, so as to achieve the inter-generational succession of the social class.

## **2.2. The division of social classes**

The academic community has not formed a unified conclusion on how to accurately divide the social class. Marx believes that economic factors are the basic criteria for social stratification, as all other stratifications are based on economy too. Therefore, the division of social strata should proceed directly from their profession <sup>[2]</sup>. Based on the money owned by social classes, Bourdieu believes that the division of social class should include economic capital, cultural capital, and social capital <sup>[2]</sup>. Economic capital refers to the capital related to the money and assets owned by individuals, and cultural capital is refers to the capital related to the use and possession of cultural resources, while social capital refers to the actual or potential social resources possessed by individuals that can be mobilized and integrated, generally in the form of contacts, social prestige, etc.

## **2.3. Influencing factors of social class mobility**

### **2.3.1. Education**

Yuxiang Xie (2019) pointed out that the increasing mobility of inter-generational education can significantly promote the developing transmission of inter-generational classes <sup>[3]</sup>, and Aili Chen (2020) pointed out that the level of education has a significant impact on the inter-generational mobility of social class, and inter-generational mobility of education is an important way to achieve the ascending mobility of social class <sup>[3]</sup>. Based on this, the first hypothesis of this paper is proposed:

- (1) Hypothesis 1: Education has a significant positive impact on the mobility of individual social classes.

In addition, the level of personal education as a kind of information plays the role of informative screening in the job recruitment market. People with higher education levels are more likely to get higher-paying jobs and improve their class status. Wanlian Li (2010) believes that education has a significant positive effect on the increasing or decreasing mobility of inter-generational occupational status <sup>[4]</sup>, and

Yuxiang Xie (2019) believes that inter-generational education and occupational mobility are always important as it's a way to achieve social class improvement <sup>[3]</sup>. This means that education is linked to individual income and social class form an interconnected whole. This leads to the second hypothesis of this paper:

(2) Hypothesis 2: Personal income is a mediating variable in the change of education affecting individual social class.

The concept of social capital was first proposed by Bourdieu in his relational methodology. He believes that individual social capital affects the energy and social resources that he can mobilize <sup>[2]</sup>. Rong Hu (2003) pointed out that high-educated groups are in an advantageous position in social interactions. On the other hand, the relationship between classmates and social participation that accompany the learning process allows high-educated groups to have a greater space for communication, which makes human capital and the stock of social capital show an obvious positive correlation <sup>[5]</sup>. Hanqing Fang (2013) shows that as the new generation of female migrant workers have been working in the city for a long time, they have more knowledge about various aspects of the city, have more work experience, and their human capital and social capital are increasing. Thus, they are more likely to choose jobs that are suitable for them. As a result, the frequency of occupational mobility is decreasing and the opportunities for developing mobility is increasing <sup>[6]</sup>. This provides the possibility for individuals to change their occupations and social class status through the social capital they possess. The third hypothesis of this paper is proposed:

(3) Hypothesis 3: Social capital is a mediating variable in the mobility of social class of individuals through education.

### **2.3.2. Marriage matching**

Due to the acceptance of the market and the changes in people's ideological concepts, the pairing in marriage is not the only criterion for young people to choose a spouse. They also consider other non-priority factors such as each other's character, personality and educational background when choosing a spouse. Thus, the choice of marriage is somewhat open, and there are many examples of mobility in social class brought by marriage matching.

Ma Lei (2015) pointed out that, women in the education and income dimensions show an obvious increasing gradient of marriage. Among all the effective samples of first marriages, 23.58% and 25.61% of the families are in the above two dimensions respectively. It is an increasing marriage gradient <sup>[7]</sup>. The results of this research shows that it is feasible to achieve personal social class mobility through marriage matching.

In general, the most important way to promote an individual's social class is to rely on one's own efforts to achieve social class promotion. However, since marriage allows individual social classes to circulate, marriage is also a way to achieve a social class change. Based on this, the last hypothesis of this article is proposed:

(4) Hypothesis 4: Marriage matching has a significant impact on mobility in individual social class.

## **3. Materials and Methods**

### **3.1. Data**

This study uses the data from the Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS)2017 for analysis. The questionnaire contains a total of 783 variables, when cleaning and screening the data, we considered the division of social class and other variables present. Then, finally obtained a sample of 8023.

### **3.2. Variable selection**

The core issue of this research is how education promotes the mobility of people's social class. The measurement of variables involved mainly includes two types. The first is the measurement of education's

influence on the mobility of individual social class, and the second is the measurement of marriage matching on the mobility of social class.

In terms of measurements related to social class, this study uses Marx's view of social class division as a basis for transforming the occupations of survey respondents into corresponding social classes by using the ISCO-08 international standard occupation numbers of respondents and their parents and spouses provided by CGSS<sup>[8]</sup> against the official descriptions of ISCO-08 to classify several hundred subcategories of occupations into officially defined names of 10 broad occupational categories, which are ranked from lowest to highest because they inherently carry certain differences in socioeconomic status. The change in social class was obtained by comparing the prior social class (parents' occupation at age 14) with the self-induced social class (current occupation) of the questionnaire respondents.

For variable personal education, this research uses the question "What is your current highest education level?" The variable is assigned a value, and the education level is converted into years of education, thus effectively quantifying the variable.

For the variable personal economic income, this research uses the question "What was your personal total income last year (2016)?" to measure.

For the variable social capital, this study uses the question "Are there any people you know who are engaged in the following occupations?" to measure the amount of individual social capital.

For the variable marriage matching, this paper compares the social class of the interviewee and his spouse to form three types of marriage matching: upward marriage, downward marriage and equal marriage.

In addition, in order to accurately measure the role and path of education affecting individual social class changes, this paper selects variables such as gender, ethnic, political status, urban-rural, marital status, age group, and parental social class as control variables with reference to previous relevant studies on individual social class mobility. Due to the limitation of space, the specific presentation of descriptive statistics of variables is not made.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. The impact of education on individual social class

From the column of **Table 1**. (1), we can see that after controlling for the relevant variables, the influence of personal income, social capital, and personal education on the individual's social class are all significantly correlated ( $P < 0.05$ ), and personal education has the greatest effect on personal social class (regression coefficient = 0.516) implying that relative to personal income (regression coefficient = 0.044) and personal social capital (regression coefficient = 0.029), education has a greater effect on changes in people's social class. This confirms the previous conclusion that education is the most important factor that promotes the mobility of individual social classes.

Next, the test of mediating effect was conducted, and as shown in column (2) after controlling for the same control variables as in (1), education has a significant positive correlation with personal income, where  $B = 0.127$ ,  $P = 0.000$ , indicating that mediating effect of personal income holds. Similarly, education has a significant positive correlation with personal social capital ( $B = 0.109$ ,  $P = 0.000$ ), and the mediating role of personal social capital is established.

As a result, education is not only the most significant factor affecting individual social class, but also indirectly affects individual social class by affecting personal income and personal social capital.

### 4.2. The impact of marriage matching on individual social class

Regressing marriage matching to individual social class mobility, from the column (1), we can see that the effect of marriage pairing is significantly negatively correlated with individual social class ( $B = -0.081$ ,

P<0.001). with upward marriage leading to decreasing change in individual social class change and downward marriage leading to increasing change in social class change instead. This is inconsistent with our daily experience, so we will further explore the reasons.

First consider the relationship between personal factors and the social class of the spouse. From column (4), it can be seen that personal social capital (B=0.071, P<0.001) and personal education (B=0.036, P=0.04<0.05) have a significant impact on the spouse class and the higher the personal education and personal social capital, the higher the social class of their spouse will be. However, with the increase in individual social class due to personal education and its resulting increase in social capital, the opportunity for individuals to marry upward gradually decreases. On the one hand, it may be that people with higher education are more likely to seek for a good match and tend to marry equally. On the other hand, because individuals who have changed their social class through education are less likely to face another upward mobility through marriage than individuals who have not changed their social class through education but have changed their social class through marriage matching. This explains why marriage type moves inversely with social class change. This is somewhat similar to the “two-way pattern” of female gradient marriage as mentioned by Ma Lei (2015), where the middle and upper classes inter-marry downward and the bottom class inter-marries upward<sup>[7]</sup>.

**Table 1.** Data analysis results

Variable	Regression model	Intermediate inspection		Regression model
	The dependent variable is individual social class (1)	Independent variable personal income (2)	Independent variable spouse social (3)	Independent variable spouse social class (4)
<b>Standardized regression coefficient</b>				
Gender	-0.077***	0.038***	0.044***	0.075***
Ethnic	-0.005	0.009	0.017	-0.024
Urban and rural	0.077***	0.028**	0.068***	0.115***
Marital status	0.002	0.038***	0.027***	0.024
Father's class	0.031**	0.018	0.011	0.077***
Mother's class	0.018	0.015	0.01	0.052
Politics status	0.075***	-0.002	0.02	0.021
Age group	0.076***	0.004	-0.074***	-0.089***
Personal income	0.044***			0.032
Social capital	0.029**			0.071***
Personal education	0.516***	0.127***	0.109***	0.036**
Marriage matching	-0.081***			
	F=246.508 P=0.000	F=23.934 P=0.000	F=42.511 P=0.000	F=76.267 P=0.000

Note: \* means P<0.01, \*\* means P<0.05, \*\*\* means P<0.001

## 5. Conclusions

This paper uses data from the CGSS 2017 to explore the effect of education on social class mobility and specific pathways to influence it. Its marginal contribution lies in the introduction of education and marriage matching into the model of social class mobility. It is found that education directly affects the improvement of individual social class, and indirectly affects the increase of individual social class by affecting personal income and personal social capital. Secondly, education and personal social capital together act on the social class of spouses. However, the more people who improve their own class through education, the more difficult it is to improve their social class again through upward marriage, and the chance to improve their own class through marriage matching for people with lower levels of education is more effective. Thus, its effect is also limited and much less strong than the effect of education.

This article believes that suggestions can be made from the following three aspects. First of all, the government should provide everyone with more quality and equal educational resources. Specifically, it should optimize the allocation of educational resources, reduce the difference in educational resources between urban and rural areas, and between eastern and western regions, and achieve a dynamic balance of regional space for the allocation of high-quality educational resources. Secondly, we must pay attention to ensuring the accessibility of educational resources for children of disadvantaged and poor groups, and provide effective assistance and compensation through poverty alleviation and other means to enhance the equality of educational opportunities among different social strata groups<sup>[9]</sup>. Finally, we should not only adjust educational resources, but also provide equal employment and equal conditions for people of lower social strata, to break the employment concept of diploma-only, to narrow the gap between positions in different social strata, and to promote the fair development among social strata.

## Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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