

Original Paper

School District Housing Buyers and Educational Investment Returns: A Case Study of X District in Shanghai

Lei Zhang¹

¹ Fudan University, Shanghai, China

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Abstract

As a dual carrier of educational resources and economic assets, school district housing has become an important tool for family educational investment and social class reproduction. This paper takes Shanghai's X District as an example to explore, from a sociological perspective, the purchasing behaviors of different groups regarding school district housing and their educational investment returns. It reveals the key role of school district housing in the accumulation of cultural and social capital. The study finds that high-income families, the middle class, and the working class in X District exhibit different demand tendencies when purchasing school district housing, reflecting goals of obtaining high-quality educational resources, expanding social capital, and achieving upward social mobility, respectively. The phenomenon of school district housing exacerbates the imbalance in the distribution of educational resources and limits social mobility.

Keywords

School district housing, housing buyers, educational returns, investment returns

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background and Problem Statement

In contemporary China, housing is not only a basic need for living but is also closely related to the distribution of social resources and the maintenance of family social status. Especially school district housing, as a unique type of real estate, represents a family's investment in children's educational resources and carries the expectation of achieving social class reproduction through education. With the increasing scarcity of high-quality educational resources, the price of school district housing continues to rise, making the purchase of school district housing one of the main ways for many families to obtain high-quality education. Among urban high-income and working-class families, school district housing has become a symbol of social mobility, with families seeking competitive advantages for their

children in education and future society through its purchase.

As China's economic and cultural center, Shanghai exhibits uneven and hard-to-regulate distribution of high-quality educational resources, making school district housing a target for various groups. Shanghai's X District possesses abundant educational resources, attracting numerous families to purchase school district housing. Such housing not only increases the investment returns of real estate but also plays a key role in the accumulation of family cultural and social capital. However, this phenomenon exacerbates inequality in the distribution of educational resources, further solidifying social classes and limiting social mobility. Therefore, studying the purchasing behaviors of different groups regarding school district housing and the educational investment returns behind them holds significant sociological importance.

1.2 Research Significance

The phenomenon of school district housing reflects not only economic issues in the real estate market but also deep-seated social concerns regarding resource distribution, class reproduction, and social inequality. By studying the purchasing behaviors of school district housing in Shanghai's X District, we can reveal the strategic choices of different social classes in acquiring educational resources and how school district housing, as a means of accumulating cultural and social capital, affects a family's social status and future development. Additionally, this paper will explore the impact of school district housing on social mobility and educational equity, further analyzing its long-term effects on the entire social structure.

1.3 Research Objectives and Questions

The main objective of this paper is to explore, through the study of Shanghai's X District, the behavioral patterns exhibited by different social classes during the purchase of school district housing and the educational investment returns behind them. The specific research questions are:

What are the motivations and behavioral differences of families from different social classes when purchasing school district housing?

How does school district housing, as a tool for accumulating cultural and social capital, affect a family's educational investment returns?

What impact does the phenomenon of school district housing have on social mobility and educational equity?

By answering these questions, this paper hopes to reveal the underlying mechanisms behind the phenomenon of school district housing and provide new perspectives for improving the distribution of educational resources and promoting social equity.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Relevant Research at Home and Abroad

The phenomenon of school district housing is not uncommon globally, especially in areas with uneven distribution of educational resources. As carriers of educational resources, school district houses have

become the primary choice for family educational investment (Black, 1999). In foreign research, developed countries like the United States and the United Kingdom have long attracted researchers' attention to the school district housing market, particularly concerning educational equity and social class reproduction (Gibbons & Machin, 2003; Reardon & Bischoff, 2011). American scholars have studied the correlation between school district housing prices and school rankings, finding that high-quality educational resources significantly drive up housing prices. Purchasing school district housing has become an inevitable choice for middle-class families to obtain quality education (Figlio & Lucas, 2004). Simultaneously, school district housing is closely related to the solidification of social classes; low-income families, unable to afford the high prices of school district housing, are excluded from high-quality educational resources, leading to inequality in educational opportunities (Owens, 2016).

In China, attention to the phenomenon of school district housing has been increasing. Although policies like "key schools" and "nearby enrollment" were introduced as early as the last century, the concept of school district housing didn't truly emerge until around 2005 and rapidly gained traction around 2010. Researchers point out that the formation of school district housing is not merely the result of combining "key school" and "nearby enrollment" policies but is also influenced by housing market reforms and real estate development (Chen, Shi, & Ji 2017). With accelerated urbanization and uneven distribution of educational resources, school district housing has become the focal point of family educational investment. Researchers have revealed the premium mechanisms of school district housing prices and their profound impact on the distribution of educational resources by comparing the prices of school district housing and educational resources in different cities. Mao et al. (2014) used data from Hangzhou's main urban area to study the impact of high-quality educational resources on school district housing prices, finding significant premiums for houses with access to such resources. Additionally, Chen et al. (2017) point out that the formation of school district housing is inseparable from cultural traditions and social structural changes. Chinese families have always valued investment in their children's education, and the implementation of the one-child policy has further strengthened this educational expectation. Families concentrate their limited resources on their children's education, making the purchase of school district housing an important way to access high-quality educational resources and achieve social class reproduction.

2.2 School District Housing and Social Class Reproduction

Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital provides an important theoretical foundation for studying the phenomenon of school district housing (Bourdieu, 1986). Bourdieu posits that cultural capital includes education, language, knowledge, taste, etc., and becomes a key factor in maintaining and reproducing family social status through intergenerational transmission (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). In the context of school district housing, high-quality educational resources are manifestations of cultural capital. Families acquire these resources by purchasing school district housing, not only preparing their children for future competitiveness but also reinforcing the family's social status

(Lareau, 2003). Thus, school district housing becomes an important tool for transmitting cultural capital, especially in the context of social class solidification, providing middle-class families with a way to maintain their class advantages (Nash, 1990).

Moreover, James Coleman's social capital theory offers another perspective for understanding school district housing (Coleman, 1988). Coleman believes that social capital comprises the resources and support obtained through interpersonal networks (Coleman, 1994). In purchasing school district housing, families not only gain access to high-quality educational resources but also form beneficial social networks for their children's development by interacting with other families possessing high cultural and social capital (Horvat et al., 2003). This accumulation of social capital enables families to enhance their children's cultural capital through educational resources and lay a foundation for their future social competitiveness through interpersonal networks (Putnam, 2000).

Researchers also point out that local governments and real estate developers play crucial roles in the formation of school district housing. Local governments use high-quality school resources to drive real estate development and gain fiscal revenue (Jiang, 2010). Real estate developers enhance property values by collaborating with prestigious schools, further driving up housing prices (Li & Yu, 2015). Chen et al. (2017) also pointed out that school district housing has evolved into another means for governments, schools, developers, and related stakeholders to extract wealth from families.

2.3 Multi-dimensional Analysis of School District Housing Purchase Behavior

From an economic perspective, as a scarce resource, the price of school district housing is mainly influenced by supply and demand (Rosen, 1974). Due to the scarcity of high-quality educational resources, school district housing prices are often higher than ordinary residences, and purchasing such housing is considered a form of educational investment by families (Glaeser & Mare, 2001). Economists have found that these prices reflect families' emphasis on education and are closely related to future economic returns (Brunner et al., 2012). Purchasing school district housing not only brings direct cultural capital accumulation as children receive high-quality education but also contributes to family economic capital through property appreciation (Hilber & Mayer, 2009). Chen et al. (2016) pointed out that the high premium of school district housing reflects the additional costs homeowners are willing to pay for their children to enjoy superior educational resources.

The purchasing behavior of school district housing is closely related to social stratification and social mobility (Savage et al., 2005). Such behavior is not only a manifestation of a family's economic capability but also part of accumulating social and cultural capital (Ball, 2003). Middle-class and high-income families ensure their children's advantages in educational competition by purchasing school district housing, thereby achieving class reproduction (Reay et al., 2011). In contrast, the working class views school district housing more as an opportunity for upward mobility, attempting to help their children break existing social class limitations by accessing high-quality educational resources (Brooks, 2008). However, some studies indicate that the popularity of school district housing leads to further imbalance in educational resources, exacerbating social class solidification (Chen, Shi,

& Ji, 2017). Additionally, this phenomenon has triggered widespread societal anxiety. Chen et al. (2017) believe that the craze for school district housing reflects major social concerns such as educational inequality, residential stratification, and the solidification of social classes.

2.4 Innovation of This Study

Although domestic and international studies have revealed the multiple functions of school district housing as a tool for educational resources and social capital accumulation, most research focuses on either economic or singular sociological perspectives. The innovation of this paper lies in combining cultural capital and social capital theories to comprehensively explore school district housing as a dual carrier of family educational investment and social class reproduction, analyzing its impact on families of different social classes. Additionally, using Shanghai's X District as an example, this paper adopts both quantitative and qualitative research methods to conduct empirical analysis of school district housing purchasing behavior, further revealing its profound impact on educational equity and social mobility.

3. Research Methodology

To deeply explore school district housing as a dual carrier of family educational investment and social class reproduction, this paper takes Shanghai's X District as an example, adopting a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods to systematically study the purchasing behaviors of school district housing from 2020 to 2022. By analyzing families from different social classes, we aim to reveal the motivations behind purchasing school district housing and its impact on educational investment returns.

First, we selected Shanghai's X District as the research object. This district, rich in educational resources and with a mature school district housing market, can typically reflect the differences and commonalities among various social classes regarding such purchases. The research subjects include high-income families, the middle class, and the working class, representing different economic capabilities and social statuses. High-income families possess strong economic strength and tend to purchase premium school district housing to obtain better educational resources and social capital; the middle class mainly aims to maintain their existing class status by purchasing school district housing to ensure their children enjoy quality education; the working class aspires to achieve upward social mobility by purchasing school district housing, hoping education can change their children's social standing.

For data collection, this paper adopts a combination of questionnaires and in-depth interviews. To understand the motivations and educational investment returns of different families purchasing school district housing between 2020 and 2022, we designed a standardized questionnaire. The questionnaire includes core parts such as family income, purchasing motivations, expected educational investment returns, and criteria for selecting school district housing. A total of 200 questionnaires were distributed, and 180 valid responses were collected, covering families with various income levels and occupational

backgrounds to ensure data representativeness and reliability.

Additionally, to delve deeper into the real motivations of families when purchasing school district housing and their evaluations of educational returns, we conducted in-depth interviews with 10 representative families. These families came from high-income, middle-class, and working-class backgrounds, selecting 3 to 4 typical representatives from each class. The interviews mainly focused on the purchasing decision process, expectations versus actual experiences regarding educational returns, and the impact of school district housing on family economics and social life. Through face-to-face, in-depth communication, we obtained rich qualitative data, providing important background support for quantitative analysis.

In data analysis, quantitative data were mainly processed using R programming language. First, we conducted descriptive statistical analysis to depict the basic characteristics of families from different social classes, purchasing motivations, and educational investment expectations, identifying the overall characteristics of school district housing purchasing behavior. Second, we used multiple regression models to analyze the impact of purchasing motivations, family income levels, cultural capital, and social capital accumulation on educational returns, revealing the relationship between purchasing behavior and educational returns. Finally, we conducted significance tests on the differences in purchasing motivations and educational investment returns among high-income families, the middle class, and the working class, clarifying the differences in purchasing behaviors among different classes. For qualitative data, we adopted Thematic Analysis. By repeatedly reading and coding the interview records, we extracted key themes such as purchasing motivations, decision-making processes, and educational expectations. Similar codes were grouped to form core themes regarding the purchasing behaviors of families from different social classes. Combining the specific contexts of the interviewees, we deeply explained the differences in strategies for accumulating cultural and social capital among various social classes.

4. Empirical Analysis

Based on surveys and interviews with school district housing buyers in Shanghai's X District from 2020 to 2022, this paper deeply explores the characteristics, motivations, and educational investment returns of families from different social classes during the purchase of such housing. By combining quantitative and qualitative analysis methods, we found that the phenomenon of school district housing presents significant differences among social classes, profoundly impacting educational equity and social class reproduction.

First, the characteristics of school district housing buyers vary significantly across social classes. High-income families with a monthly household income exceeding 50,000 yuan have significant economic strength. When purchasing school district housing, they focus on acquiring top-tier educational resources and view such housing as a crucial means of accumulating cultural and social capital. These families actively participate in school and extracurricular activities, establishing close

connections with other families possessing high cultural and social capital, thereby expanding their children's social networks. For them, school district housing is not only a means to access quality educational resources but also a strategic investment to ensure their children's future competitiveness.

The income of middle-class families ranges between 20,000 and 50,000 yuan, and these families have relatively stable economic conditions. Their main purpose in purchasing school district housing is to ensure their children receive quality education to maintain the family's existing social status. In the purchasing process, these families pay more attention to the property's value retention and appreciation potential, viewing school district housing as a long-term investment that offers both educational and economic returns. However, compared to high-income families, middle-class families have relatively limited accumulation of cultural and social capital. They rely more on the educational resources of the school district itself and are less proactive in expanding social networks.

Working-class families generally have a monthly income below 20,000 yuan and face greater economic pressures. Despite limited financial capacity, they strive to purchase school district housing, hoping to achieve upward social mobility through quality education. Their purchasing behavior often entails significant economic burdens, with the cost of school district housing consuming a large portion of household income, potentially affecting their quality of life. However, they hold high expectations for educational investment returns, hoping their children can change the family's social status by entering high-quality schools.

Second, purchasing motivations for school district housing differ across social classes. While access to quality educational resources is a common primary motivation, there are evident class-specific characteristics concerning cultural and social capital accumulation, as well as the preservation and appreciation of economic capital. High-income families emphasize accumulating cultural and social capital through school district housing, actively engaging in social activities to build advantageous networks for their children. Middle-class families balance educational needs with economic affordability, focusing on the cost-effectiveness and long-term value of the housing. Working-class families concentrate mainly on acquiring cultural capital, aiming to help their children overcome social class limitations through quality education, but economic pressure limits their investment in social capital accumulation.

Third, there are noticeable differences in educational investment returns among social classes. High-income families often achieve significant educational returns, with children attending key schools, excelling academically, and gaining more opportunities for further education and employment through extensive social networks. Middle-class families' children benefit from good educational environments and perform well academically but have relatively limited access to social capital. The educational returns for working-class families are uncertain; some children gain entry into quality schools, but the high housing prices and living costs impose heavy burdens on the family, potentially affecting educational investment and overall life quality.

Finally, the phenomenon of school district housing has profound implications for social class

reproduction. High-income families consolidate their social status through such housing, with their children maintaining advantages in education and career development, achieving stable class reproduction. Middle-class families strive to maintain their existing social status, but opportunities for upward mobility are limited. Working-class families attempt to achieve upward mobility through school district housing, but economic and resource constraints make this goal difficult to attain, potentially exacerbating economic pressures.

In summary, as an educational investment tool, school district housing plays different roles across social classes. To some extent, it exacerbates inequality in educational resources, reinforces social class solidification, and limits equitable social mobility. Addressing this phenomenon requires in-depth policy considerations to promote balanced distribution of educational resources, alleviate social inequities arising from school district housing, and foster positive societal development.

5. Conclusion and Discussion

5.1 Conclusion

Through empirical research on school district housing buyers in Shanghai's X District, this paper reveals the significance of such housing as a tool for accumulating cultural and social capital and its profound impact on social stratification and class reproduction. The main conclusions are:

5.1.1 School District Housing as a Dual Carrier of Cultural and Social Capital

School district housing is not only the primary means for families to access high-quality educational resources but also an essential tool for accumulating cultural and social capital. By purchasing such housing, high-income families not only provide their children with superior educational resources but also transform these resources into measurable educational achievements, such as admission to prestigious schools and better career prospects. Additionally, the communities and school environments associated with these houses offer rich social capital. Through parent meetings, school activities, and social networks, they enhance connections with other high social capital groups, providing strong support for their children's social mobility and future career development.

5.1.2 The Phenomenon of School District Housing Exacerbates Social Stratification and Class Solidification

The high prices of school district housing result in significant disparities among social classes in accessing high-quality educational resources. High-income families can easily afford these costs, ensuring their children enter key schools and consolidate their social status. While middle-class families can purchase such housing, their actions mainly aim to maintain their current status, making upward mobility difficult to achieve. The working class faces greater economic pressures; their original intention in purchasing school district housing is to achieve upward mobility through education, but in reality, this goal is often unattainable, and the purchase may even reduce the overall quality of family life. This situation further exacerbates class solidification, making inequalities in educational resource competition among different social classes more apparent.

5.1.3 Uneven Distribution of Educational Resources Limits Social Mobility

The linkage between school district housing and high-quality educational resources makes access heavily dependent on a family's economic capability. This phenomenon makes it challenging for middle- and low-income families to obtain quality educational opportunities through such housing, limiting their children's social mobility. Although middle-class and working-class families have invested significant economic resources in school district housing, the divergence in educational returns further reinforces social inequalities. Particularly for the working class, their disadvantaged position in educational resource distribution limits social mobility, leading to a more rigid social structure and pronounced issues of educational equity.

5.1.4 Discrepancies Between Expected and Actual Educational Investment Returns

Although school district housing is widely regarded as an important investment to obtain high-quality educational resources and enhance children's social status, there are discrepancies between the expected and actual returns across social classes. High-income families typically realize their anticipated educational returns, with children excelling in high-quality educational environments and smoothly progressing into higher education. For middle-class and especially working-class families, despite paying high costs for school district housing, they may not receive corresponding educational returns. This gap between expectations and reality further reflects inequalities in resource distribution within the context of school district housing.

5.2 Discussion

The underlying mechanisms of the school district housing phenomenon are not merely economic but also involve the operation of social and cultural capital. This study's empirical analysis demonstrates the central role of school district housing in educational resource competition. Different social classes attempt to secure or enhance their social status through its purchase, but the high costs create inequitable competition. Future research could extend to other regions to compare differences in this phenomenon and utilize longitudinal data to analyze its long-term effects on family educational returns and social mobility. Additionally, examining the impact of policy changes on the school district housing market and educational resource distribution should be a focal point, aiding policymakers in optimizing existing systems to achieve educational equity and sustainable social development.

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