

Beneath the Leisurely Surface: An Analysis of the Piano Lesson Frenzy among Chinese Middle-Class Parents

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Abstract : In the past two decades, there has been a great 'piano lesson frenzy' among Chinese middle-class families, with a large number of parents adding piano training to children's extra-curriculum lists. Superficially, the frenzy reflects a rather 'leisurely' attitude: parents typically claim that pianos lessons are 'just for fun' and will hopefully render children's life more exciting. However, a closer scrutiny reveals that there is great social-status anxiety hidden beneath this 'leisurely' surface. Based on pre-interviews of six Chinese middle-class parents who have enthusiastically signed their children up for piano lessons, several tentative analysis are made: 1. Owing to a series of historical and social factors, the Chinese middle-class have yet to establish their cultural norms in the past few decades, resulting in great confusion concerning how to cultivate cultural tastes in their offspring. And partly due to the fact that the middle-class status of the past Chinese generation is mostly self-acquired rather than inherited, parents are much less confident about their cultural resources—which require long-time accumulation—than material ones. Both factors combine to lead to a sort of blind, overcompensating enthusiasm in culture-related education, and the piano frenzy is but a demonstration. 2. The piano has been chosen to be the object of the frenzy partly because of its inherent characteristics as well as socially-constructed ones. Costly, large in size, imported from another culture and so forth, the piano has acquired the meaning of being exclusive, high-end and exotic, which renders it a token of top-tier status among Chinese people, and piano lessons for offspring have therefore become parents' paths towards a kind of 'symbolic elevation'. A child playing piano is an exhibition as well as psychological assurance of the families' middle-class status. 3. A closer look at children's piano training process reveals that there is much more anxiety than leisurely elements involved. Despite parents' claim that 'piano is mainly for kids to have fun,' the whole process is evidently of a rather 'ascetic' nature, with the demands of diligence and senses of time urgency throughout, and techniques rather than flair or styles are emphasized. This either means that the apparent 'piano-for-fun' stance is unauthentic and is only other motives in disguise, or that the Chinese middle-class parents are not yet capable of shaking off the sense of anxiety even if they sincerely intend to. 4. When viewed in relation to Chinese formal school system as well as the job market at large, it can be said that by signing children up for piano lessons, parents are consciously or unconsciously seeking to prepare for, or reduce the risks of, their children's future social mobility. In face of possible failures in the highly-crucial, highly-competitive formal school system, piano-playing as an extra-curriculum activity may be conveniently transferred into an alternative career path. Besides, in contemporary China, as the occupational structure goes through change, and the school-related certificates decline in value, aspects such as a person's overall deportment, which can be gained or proved by piano-learning, have been gaining in significance.

Keywords : extra-curriculum activities, middle class, piano lesson frenzy, status anxiety

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