

HONG KONG'S SHADOW EDUCATION

Private Tutoring in Hong Kong

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Research on private tutoring have defined different modes of private tutoring and explained the uprising of private tutoring in different cultural contexts (e.g., Bray 1999, 2005; Kwok 2004; Foondun 2002; Chew & Leong 1995). Due to such efforts, the shady nature of private tutoring has stepped out of the shadows and been put into new light. Yet, the relationships among private tutors, students and parents have been neglected. So to better understand this, my paper looks at the relationship formation and role construction among these three actors. This paper will focus only on one-to-one private tutoring relationships held in either a private tutoring agency or in a student's home. It will also reveal the tutors' purposes, ideologies and behaviors in terms of role performance and identity construction.

I conducted structured interviews and participant observation in order to obtain first-hand information and experiences from private tutors, students and parents. Interviewees include 15 private tutors, 10 secondary students, 5 primary students and 5 parents. Out of the 35 informants, four were conducted through telephone interviews and the rest through face-to-face interviews. Besides conducting structured interviews, I visited three homes. All informants in this paper are from working or middle class families. Therefore, the inter-social class comparison only includes working and middle classes, which is the bulk of mainstream Hong Kong society.

The Shadow Education System: Private Tutoring

Private tutoring has been described as a 'shadow education system' which is supplementary to formal school education (Bray 1999; Stevenson & Baker 1992). Bray describes private supplementary tutoring using the metaphor of a 'shadow' - it only exists because the mainstream system exists. While our society pays much more attention to the mainstream, which is more distinct than the shadow system (1999:17), the size and structure of the tutoring system changes in relation to the mainstream system.

Supplementary private tutoring is a global trend following capitalism. In almost every developed and developing country, private tutoring is a shadow education system of the formal education system. During the Oxford International Conference on Education and Development: 'Learning and Livelihood', private tutoring was found and indicated in a list of countries including Bangladesh, Cambodia, Cyprus, Canada, Egypt, Hong Kong, Japan, Taiwan, South Korea etc. (Bray 2005:3). In Hong Kong, an international city that has intimate

cultural connection with mainland China and the world, supplementary private tutoring is a crucial form of education.

Hong Kong Education Context

The basis of Hong Kong education system is meritocracy and competition. As stated on the Education Bureau official website², in Hong Kong formal school education, the government provides nine years of free primary and junior secondary education to all children attending public schools. Starting from the 2008/09 school year, senior secondary education is also provided free of charge to public school students. Every student in Hong Kong thus has a more or less equal opportunity to receive a basic level of education, but for higher education, each student has to undergo fierce competition (Fung 2003:181). For example, in 2009, around 120,000 students sat the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCEE)³, and more than 38,000 students participated in the Advanced Level Examination (HKAL)⁴, but there were only 14,500 first-year first-degree places (FYFD) available to cater for about 18% of the 17 to 20 age group⁵. This quota implies that the intense competition of matriculating, requires a top 32% performance in HKCEE and then a top 38% in the HKALE. Starting from September 2009, a new education system of three-year senior secondary has been implemented and all students are required to sit for the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE) Examination⁶ to qualify for enrollment into university. However, with the same quotas for FYFD places, competition for university spaces is still tight. With a growing number of international students being admitted each year, this system creates an exceedingly intense competition culture in Hong Kong's meritocratic education system.

Long-standing Confucian cultural values have also influenced the culture of education in Hong Kong. All parties participating in the education system value learning and diligence (Salili 2005:92) echoing Confucianism ideology, "effort for self-improvement rather than acceptance of in-born abilities and existing circumstances" (Bray and Kwok 2003:618). Therefore, Hong Kong students are acculturated with the value of hardworking and continuous improvement. As examinations are the most commanding indicator of learning outcomes, it is not surprising that the whole education system has skewed to being examination-oriented.

Establishing a Private Tutoring Relationship

Private Tutoring – from the perspective of Students and Parents

Bray and Kwok (2003:615) found that around 35% Form 1-3, 47% Form 4-5 and 70% Form 6-7 students had received private tutoring. Kwok (2004:5 Table 1) pointed out the emergence of nuclear families contributed to the increase of private tutoring in Hong Kong. Parents also hire private tutors to enhance their children's cultural capital (i.e. knowledge and examination skills) which can be eventually transformed into economic capital (Bourdieu 2002:280-289). This cultural capital can increase students' competitiveness and help succeed in societal

credentialism and the meritocratic system (Kwok 2004:8). It fulfills the 'desire of betterment' as stated in capitalism ideology (Rich & DeVitis 1992:48).

Both working class and middle class families employ private tutors as an educational investment. The working class families regard private tutoring as a way to attain upward social mobility, while the middle class families wish to remain as social elites. In Bray and Kwok's quantitative research (2003:616), it was found that more than 50% of both low-income and middle-income households in Hong Kong spent 1.1-5.0% of their monthly household income on tutoring fees. However, only 3.6% low-income households spent 15.1-20.0% of their monthly household income on the fees, compared to 12.5% of middle-income households that did so. These numbers reflect that middle class families are more willing to spend money on private tutoring. Moreover, it has been proven that there is a consistent and direct relationship between parents' educational levels and consumption of private tutoring. That is, the higher the parents' education levels, the higher the investment in private tutoring (Bray and Kwok 2002:617 Table 4).

Apart from economic considerations, parents and students also hire private tutors to take care of the individual needs of students. Special care should be provided to students with emotional, behavioral, physical and mental problems. Students with successful academic results should also be given particular attention, so to obtain even higher levels of achievement. Meanwhile students with general levels of accomplishments have some catch-up work to do. Therefore, it is legitimate for most families to hire private tutors to suit "their needs".

Private Tutoring – from the perspective of Tutors

Generated from interviews with private tutors, the reasons for private tutoring are many and are not merely based on economics, that is, to earn money. All informants suggested that *money* is the initial intention of being private tutors. It is a common characteristic in a capitalist society that almost everything can be commercialized; talent, love, experience, skills and patience can be included into private tutoring service that is sold and bought. Another economic reason for private tutoring is the accumulation of cultural capital (experience, knowledge and interpersonal skills) and social capital (social connections) through private tutoring, which can be converted into economic capital (Bourdieu 2002:281).

Apart from economic consideration, some private tutors regard private tutoring as a means of *self-realization*. Through educating students, private tutors can realize their potentials and abilities and in turn gain satisfaction and a sense of significance. A private tutor remarked that there was a huge sense of satisfaction in correcting his student's bad behavior and attitude. Being respected, needed, appreciated, thanked and cared for by both parents and students, allowed private tutors to find a sense of significance in their work. For instance, a male private tutor felt very touched when his student's parents cooked for him after his tutorial lessons. Another way of self-realization is by viewing the students as past selves,

whereby private tutors can compensate their own past mistakes through helping students. This is important as some private tutors view some parts of their past as failures, and through their work, tutors can actually help their past selves to become who they wanted to be.

Self-growth and advancement is also a reason for private tutoring. Private tutoring enables tutors to observe different layers of the society, experience various family cultures, explore diverse living styles, and hear stories from different families. They experience spiritual growth and become more mature and confident in the face of parents and students. This attitude reflected how a private tutor felt as she transformed from being merely a university student to a teacher through private tutoring.

Self-search is another purpose of private tutoring. During private tutoring, one's lost memories can be re-traced. It is a chance to re-taste the feeling of being at school and relive these times. Another tutor revealed that by understanding a student's needs and ways of thinking, which were different from the tutor's own, due to a generation gap for example, one can understand oneself better. Private tutoring can also help private tutors experience the career of teaching.

The term '*rite of passage*' can be used to describe private tutoring among university students' stages of growth. Private tutoring is one of the five *must-dos* in a university student's life. The others four include, skipping lessons, joining student clubs and societies, dating and living away from home in university dormitories. The significant symbolic connotations of private tutoring exist under the veil, highlighting the transformation of someone being taken care of (student), to someone who takes care of others (private tutor). In other words, it also marks the transformation from a teenager into an adult.

However, this signature phase into adulthood is not formally recognized by corporations and organizations in the 'outside' business world as working experience. Instead, it is valued only among students, parents and online businesses. The Education Bureau does not recognize private tutoring nor does it provide subsidies for working class family. Moreover, the income generated through private tutoring is not taxed by the government. So, it seems that private tutoring will continue to remain as the shadow of formal education system in the foreseeable future.

Operation of Private Tutoring in Hong Kong

In Hong Kong, the most common and efficient way to match students with private tutors is via the internet, while other ways include advertising on notice-boards in major supermarkets and making personal recommendations. There are numerous online websites that act as channels between students and private tutors. The usual operation starts with the registration of private tutors through completing online forms. The forms require the information of private tutors, such as personal details, academic achievement, skills, available time slots and expected hourly rate.

Parents or students who want to find private tutors are also required to fill in a form to

indicate their preferences. Then it is the agents, who play the role of the middlemen. They match parents or students with private tutors. When a match is successful, most agents charge a commission fee from the private tutors, the rate usually being two weeks of tuition fee, with parents and students using this service for free.

Parents or students will not meet their private tutors until they begin their private tutoring sessions. Thus the two parties only knowledge of each other is through the descriptions provided by the agents. Parents or students can choose from a wide range of services to suit their needs, for example, academic disciplines including accounting, English, history, mathematics, and physics; non-academic disciplines consisting of sports, music, languages and other hobbies. Usually, what parents and students look for in making their selection are the experiences of instructors and the professions of related fields, although individual qualities such as patience, activeness and gender are usually not considered.

The private tutors' qualifications are displayed online, so that parents and students can easily access the information. All of the tutors' profiles can be easily browsed and parents and students are then able to pick whoever they prefer, as if they were shopping in a supermarket. This exemplifies the *objectification* and *commodification* of teaching service, or even to private tutors themselves. In a meritocratic society, private tutors are valued not because of whom they are, but because of what credentials they hold.

The whole private tutoring relationship actually starts with a *mutual bluff* relationship (Baumeister 1991:361) as the core product sold in private tutoring is the dream and hope of being future 'elites' in society. It is a given that the middlemen do not fully know the private tutors' qualifications due to a lack of certificate verification with the online system. Meanwhile, parents and students can only describe briefly their needs to the middlemen, which is usually done by phone. Therefore, agents are able to earn money by creating the illusion of there being a higher possibility of becoming 'social elites' after selecting the 'perfect' private tutors. A mutual bluff happens when parents also believe in the 'perfect match' of the private tutors and students, as promoted by agents' glorious marketing techniques. If eventually the private tutoring relationship does not work out well, the agents will normally claim that this is a special one-off case, or act as victims who were also cheated by the tutors. Then they will resell the dream and hope to the parents and students by offering another 'product' – another private tutor - whose qualifications are more exaggerated than the first.

Proceeding Private Tutoring Relationship

From participant observation and interviews, 12 roles performed by private tutors can be ascertained. These roles symbolize the uniqueness of private tutoring in the cultural context of Hong Kong. Some private tutors can perform several roles from time to time, shifting from one to another in different contexts. The willingness to perform such roles is driven by three factors: private tutors' objectives, parents' pressure and requirements, together with the

students' cooperation. Therefore, how private tutors perform various roles is a dynamic process of constant adjustment and compromise among private tutors, students, and parents.

The relationship between private tutors and students/parents can be illustrated by performing these roles. The relationship is a subtle, fluid, flexible, dynamic and interactive process that has certain variation from case to case. Although at times, these roles are created intentionally by private tutors themselves to construct a sense of identity and reinforce power relations, yet they are also generated through daily practices to solve problems or satisfy the needs of parents and students. Therefore, these roles should be viewed from a functionalistic aspect.

Roles performed by Private Tutors – Reinforcing Capitalism and Meritocracy

Private tutoring reinforces capitalism and meritocracy through the privatization of education and commodification of relationship. Private tutors are being objectified and commercialized. Private tutors are hired to perform specific roles so that students can get support and can get a higher chance to obtain societal credentials. It reinforces social stratification and class inequality because richer families can access better education through employing private tutors with higher qualification and teaching ability.

Role 1: Knowledge Disseminator

The primary role of a private tutor is as a knowledge disseminator. Technically, a private tutor is employed to disseminate knowledge related to academic subjects and examination skills. It is interesting that no informants would mention it in greater detail. When asked about it, every informant just talks about it briefly and then switches the topic.

In a meritocratic system, based on achievement rather than ascription (Rich and DeVitis 1992:102), levels of knowledge are certified by an objective system of verification. For instance, public examination results are recognized by society as objective evidence proving one's ability and knowledge. Therefore, as long as tutors can provide genuine credentials, even the most skeptical parents will believe in the tutors' capability of teaching. This kind of '*result reductionism*', where selection criteria of private tutors is reduced to academic results, is further proven by the result-driven regime of online private tutoring businesses, where students' good examination grades are considered the equivalent to perfect tutors. This phenomenon exists not only in school subjects but also in areas of music, language and cooking, where certificates are necessary to prove one's ability and knowledge in that specific domain.

Role 2: Motivator

Hong Kong secondary students apparently favor the usages of rote-memorizing and rote-learning. According to Biggs and Watkins, rote learning is "the mere exercise of memory without proper understanding of, or reflection upon, the matter in question" (1996:270). These

two methods employed are teacher-dependent and the second one involves self-selection (Watkins 1996:115). Given the result-oriented culture and the habits of utilizing these methods by Hong Kong students, teachers are depended upon for selecting examination materials for them. Yet, school teachers and group tutors cannot satisfy the individual needs or give enough attention to each student, so students seek private tutors for individualized attention. Individualism has intensified the need for privatization of education and learning, making one-to-one private tutoring a popular option. During interviews, parents often complain how their children lack self motivation to learn; instead they usually believe that this is due to their failure to compete with peers in this competitive meritocratic society.

Vocabularies are practiced, textbooks are recited, and current issues memorized. All these involve a high degree of repetition and memorization skill, with examination being the ultimate goal. In such cases, students find it difficult to remain self-motivated, so the duty rests upon private tutors. A private tutor confided that she was specifically asked by the student's mother to motivate a Primary One student. The mother claimed that the student was clever, but he had little interest towards study, which coincided with his terrible academic results. In this case, the private tutor's job required the tutor to bribe the child into study by offering sweets upon completion of various parts of his homework.

Some private tutors have devised various ways to motivate their students. They set up small targets or checkpoints for the students and encourage them to fulfill these task by task. However, this method requires a lot of time and effort. Moreover, some parents thought it was too time-consuming and ineffective, so not a lot of tutors were able to adopt this method. In fact, one informant complained about her role as a motivator because she felt that the entire responsibility of motivating the students has been shifted onto her. It seemed as if it was her fault when the students weren't actively involved in their studies. The private tutor pointed out that the son's attitude was exactly like his mother's: evading responsibility.

Demerath, Lynch and Davidson coined a term called 'psychological capital' (2008:279-289). The components of psychological capital include pronounced expectations for personal advancement, strong beliefs in students' capacities to success, and self-conscious development of a strong productive work ethic (2008:286-287). In short, psychological capital is the mental capacity of competitiveness in a capitalist society. In this case, the students with low motivation build up their psychological capital through private tutoring, because willingness to compete is always the first step to success in a capitalist meritocratic society.

Role 3: Role Model / Idol / Gender Role Facilitator

Being a role model is the expectation that most parents have towards the private tutors. When they employ private tutors, they expect tutors to have a standard code of ethics, such as no smoking, no drinking, no swearing, knowing how to dress properly, presenting good behavior, and also adopting a polite attitude. A private tutor said the parents of one family always asked

their children to learn from her attitude and merits, such as being independent, and being able to generate income while studying. Moreover, the grandmother regarded her as an exceptional role model because of the Chinese view of a teacher as an expert in both disciplinary knowledge and moral standards.

The concept of idol is different from that of role model in terms of the degree of worship. A role model sets an example, students can choose to follow or not. In one case, the private tutor said his student really treated him like an idol. The student mimicked his hairstyle, clothing style, tone of speaking, behavior and even his personality. The student went to the same hair salon, found the same hairstylist, went to the same boutiques and bought the same style of clothes as his private tutor. According to his parents, before receiving tutoring, the student always spoke foul language and acted violently, but now he has become much more gentle and polite towards others. The private tutor explained that the student lacked a proper model to follow, so all that he learnt from his peers was foul language and bad-behavior.

As for gender role facilitator, Chodorow (1974) theorizes during socialization, girls become 'little women' by direct and gradual imitation of mothers. Boys reject femininity both psychologically and culturally and fantasize masculinity abstractly. Although this phenomenon is not universal and absolute, it provides us a window to look at gender construction in Hong Kong society. In most families in Hong Kong, both fathers and mothers are working, so children often lack enough parental attention. So, during my interviews, I found that most students prefer hiring private tutors with the same gender as them. Private tutors can also serve as a model for gender role and masculinity/femininity in the way that they dress and behave; they can be regarded as gender role facilitator.

Role 4: Preacher / Inspector

The role of preacher does not mean to preach one's religion, but to preach social norms and moral values. This role is different from the role of role model in that the previous takes an active position, while the latter is positioned passively. The term 'preacher' was described by a female private tutor who had strong sense of social norms and moral values. She thought students should follow sets of codes of ethics and social norms. For example, students must show their respect to seniors, and that they should not wear cosmetics.

An inspector also takes an active role in monitoring students' attitudes and behaviors. Besides inspecting academic performances, parents may ask private tutors to monitor students' friends, love relationships, daily activities and hobbies. A private tutor remarked that the parents requested him to inspect the student's love relationship rather than doing it directly themselves. They expected the tutor to guide the student without provoking the student's fear, anger and hatred. So, the private tutor checked on the progress of the student's love relationship every time in tutoring and reported to the parents afterwards.

The students' daily activities and hobbies are also monitored by private tutors. Assigning homework, regulating leisure time, prohibiting computer games, and even the formation of

habits, is under the supervision of private tutors. One private tutor checked the online history of the student every week during the tutoring period, as required by the mother who was unfamiliar with computer, to see if he had visited any violent or pornographic websites.

Role 5: Adviser

Both parents and students depend on private tutors very much in terms of seeking advice. Parents seek advice from private tutors because they are more experienced with teenage problems and have smaller generation gap with students. One mother asked a private tutor's opinions on how to deal with her daughter's issues on dating and having a low self-esteem. The mother believed the tutor had undergone a similar experience. The mother's main concern was potential online deluders on money and sex. She had limited knowledge about online dating and sought help from the private tutor.

On the other hand, students were also able to seek various forms of advice from private tutors, including relationship problems, academic difficulties, time management issues and personal growth stages. Instead of seeking advice from someone very close to them, like parents and siblings, they are more willing to share with private tutors. For example, a Primary Six girl always asked the private tutor about her problems on dating. She kept this a secret from her family members because she knew they would not permit it, yet she felt more comfortable to talk about it in front of the private tutor.

Future planning is the most important matter for most students. Acting as future planners is specifically useful when students are facing decisional choices, like choosing a secondary school, selecting subjects to study in Form Four, deciding which high school to complete Form Six and Seven, and also university choices. All interviewed private tutors who have students in these phases have been asked for advice in these areas. Parents and students believe the experiences of private tutors are valuable and useful enough to be taken into consideration. An informant said she even helped a Primary Six student go through each secondary school, and discussed each option with the parents before they eventually made up their mind.

Apart from the study path, private tutors are also responsible for helping the students to set up their future career path. Although private tutors are still in college, parents and students value their advice on choosing the right career path. For example, a private tutor said when she was still studying for her Bachelor's degree in business; the parents had already regarded her as a successful businesswoman. The parents were eager to ask the tutor which aspects of business the student should choose in the future. Although the private tutor had no real experience in trying each aspect in business, she still gave the answer the parents expected: finance and accounting. She understood that the parents already had an answer in mind, but just wanted to hear the same answer from the private tutor.

Private tutors can also keep an eye on the money management of students. They may teach students about money management, or they may teach parents how to control the

children's spending patterns. A private tutor taught the student about financial planning and money saving schemes. At the same time, he talked to the father, who controlled financial matters, about how he should give out an allowance to the student. Initially, the father was giving the student the amount he wanted, but took on the suggestions of the private tutor, making the student save money and making the student help to do chores, before buying the items he wanted.

The above five roles performed by private tutors can help students prepare for examinations, meet social expectations and strive for improvement. All of these are assisting them into becoming 'social elites'. There are some other roles performed by private tutors that contribute to an altruistic and intimate relationship between tutors, parents and students.

Roles performed by Private Tutors – a Way out of Competitive Learning

Private tutoring enables tutors, students and parents to experience intimate and altruistic relationships. Foondun (2002:505) describes tutoring as a leveler in which it is free from the labeling and stigmatizing effect in school education. He believes in this way, there are positive effects on students' personal growth which school education may not be able to provide. In fact, many students who are neglected in school find confidence, self-awareness and meaning through private tutoring because these students are usually given little attention by their parents, teachers and classmates.

Wolcott has provided us an insight that may also be applied to private tutoring in Hong Kong. He mentions antagonistic feelings of Indian American students towards school because of failing to integrate into the mainstream society (1987:137). It seems that *antagonism* also arises among Hong Kong students because of the failure to succeed in this meritocratic education system. Their disappointment and frustration arises as they cannot assume the position of 'elites' from their compulsory formal school education. A number of students reported that they felt miserable about going to school; they were disappointed by their failures in countless examinations and the feeling of being 'useless' in boring classes. In their opinion, compared to school education, private tutoring was a much more desirable way of learning because private tutors can directly teach them without assigning unnecessary activities and exercises. Moreover, a much more harmonious and supportive relationship can be built with private tutors, thus minimizing alienation. They prefer the encouragement and appreciation from private tutors than the stingy criticism from teachers. Most importantly, they said they could get rid of the exceeding and unbearable intense competition with their classmates and schoolmates. Therefore, private tutoring can act as another way of learning that meets individual needs outside of the prescribed competitive mode of learning.

Role 6: Elder Sister / Brother / Mother

Students respect their tutors like respecting elder siblings. Many students admit they have a sense of dependence on their private tutors. This dependence is generated not because of

seniority, but is more importantly due to the knowledge, experience and life values of private tutors. One-to-one relationships allow private tutors to share their life experiences and values with their students. An student even described the sharing by her private tutor as “a widening of world vision and a growth in spirit”.

Parents also recognize and grant private tutors the status as elder sisters/brothers. Name calling of ‘elder sisters/brothers’ by parents can reflect this situation to an extent. Yet, it is more obvious to observe this recognition at the dinner table. During a home visit, a private tutor was having dinner with her student’s parents before private tuition. Since the student had already eaten, the parents and the private tutor dined together. During the dinner conversation, the topic was related to recent conditions of the student, the private tutor and the parents. The parents talked about their worries and concerns, while the private tutor listened quietly most of the time. At the end of the dinner, the private tutor reassured the parents by promising to take care of the student, as the identity of an ‘elder sister’. After the home visit, the private tutor recalled once the student’s mother even cried during a dinner time conversation when talking about the hardship of raising her son. Usually, the role of ‘elder sisters/brothers’ is played ‘naturally’ without specific request, but in some cases, the parents may specifically ask the private tutor to take up such a role.

Private tutors can also position themselves as ‘elder sisters/brothers’ at the start of a private tutoring service. It is a common strategy to build up an intimate relationship with the students. A private tutor remarked that by sharing life stories, personal experience and individual preferences, it was easy to start a new one-to-one relationship. She also said that one of her students who did not have any friends, opened her heart to her and treated her like an ‘elder sister’.

Role 7: Cousin

Instead of direct sisterhood/brotherhood, some tutors preferred to describe themselves as ‘cousins’ of their students, because they are a little bit more intimate than friends, but not close as real siblings. Private tutors, who have a ‘cousin’ relationship with their students, may have occasional gatherings outside of private tutoring. They may also engage in some family activities like family dinner. This ‘cousin’ relationship seems to be the intermediate relationship between ‘elder sisters/brothers’ and ‘peers/friends/playmates’.

Role 8: Peers / Friends / Playmates

Almost all informants have described the relationship between private tutors and students as peers, friends or playmates. The three terms are used to describe three different levels of relationship differentiating by not the actual age, but by the sense of seniority and the sense of feeling generated by private tutors and students.

Peers are characterized by equal status and power relationship. For instance, a private tutor regarded his relationship with the student as peers because he felt like there was no

hierarchy or a sense of age difference between them. They went swimming, watched movies, played football and went to church together. To some students, private tutors are like their peers with whom they can discuss issues outside academic areas. One Form Five student said there were limited common topics between his female private tutor and himself, until the pair talked about the latest online games.

Friends differ from peers in terms of power relationship. A private tutor said she would treat her students as friends but not as peers because she wanted to create a sense of power and authority in order to guide the students' behaviors more easily. Therefore, being a senior friend can maintain affinity and power at the same time. She would give advice and suggestions to the students' daily matters as a friend. Yet, her influence was more than a normal friend, as the students and the parents would most likely accept the advice she gives.

'Playmate' is a term described by a mother who has a Kindergarten Two boy. She was frustrated and tired since the boy was always hyperactive and disturbed the whole class. He desired the attention from someone otherwise he would scream and run around. To relieve this burden, his mother decided to hire a private tutor specifically to play with her child for two hours during weekdays. It was a deal between the mother and the kid that he will study after playing for two hours. Therefore, instead of employing a private tutor to teach the kid, she chose a private tutor to play with him.

Role 9: Mediator / Messenger

Private tutors sometimes are involved in or pulled into family conflicts. The tutors act as the mediator between parents and students. There was this one time a male private tutor received a call from a student's mother at 3am. She said her son ran away from home after a quarrel with her. The parents called the son, but he was not willing to go back home or disclose where he was. She was very worried and asked the private tutor to call the student for her. As the tutor did so, the student agreed to talk to him face-to-face in a park. Eventually, the student agreed to resolve the argument with the mother with the mediation of the private tutor.

Private tutors also play the role of messengers at peaceful times especially when generation gap is a concern for parents. Private tutors can be the one bridging the gap between parents and students. Parents find it difficult to communicate with their children due to generational gaps, tone of speaking, cultural background and technological changes. A messenger here means helping students and their parents communicate their thoughts in their 'own' language and cultural contexts. A father complained about the usage of 'fashionable language' and disrespectful tone of speaking by his daughter. He found difficulties in understanding his daughters' true feelings and thoughts. Because of the misunderstanding of language and attitude, he often started a quarrel with his daughter, leaving him very depressed every time. On the other hand, the ever-changing technology was far above his knowledge, so he became really confused about online cultures such as indulging in violent and online games and chatting with friends online. He discussed his concern with the private tutor and

after that, the private tutor started to become the messenger between the father and daughter. She did the job well by interpreting the thoughts of the father in terms of the daughter's language and relaying it to his daughter, and vice versa.

Role 10: Listener / Social Worker

Both students and parents need private tutors as listeners. A Form Seven student loved talking to someone older and more mature than her. Her private tutor is the best choice because the student had no siblings, and some topics are better kept secret from her parents and teachers. Since she was already in Form Seven, she did not like others to guide and monitor her all the time. She preferred someone to just listen to her, instead of commenting or giving out advice. She recalled once, after her father had scolded her about academic performance, she cried in front of the private tutor. The private tutor just sat there, held her hand and listened. After fifteen minutes, she felt relieved.

Parents also find private tutors good listeners. Private tutors also know more about the family through visiting their homes at least once per week. There are few conflicts of interest between private tutors and the family. Therefore, private tutors are the best candidates to be the listeners of family problems, especially concerning the students. Some parents may share the feeling and difficulties of raising children in front of the private tutors and some may grumble at the children's improper behaviors. A private tutor recalled a mother telling her the financial difficulties and marriage problems she was encountering. It seemed that the mother had a lot of pressure, but no one was listening to her. She felt like the private tutor was there to listen to her and there was no risk of disclosing her concerns.

Social worker is a role where private tutors deal with students' emotions and behavioral problems, as well as providing extra help such as financially and emotionally for the family. A private tutor said one of her students had serious attitude problems like fighting, cheating and stealing. The parents of a Form One student asked the private tutor to correct their child's behavior. The private tutor found out it was the family environment that triggered the student's behavior. She asked the child's families to give more attention, love and respect to the child, rather than scolding and punishing him all the time. Eventually, the student's attitude, behavior and academic results significantly improved. This tutor has also provided financial help to another family. These included receiving a very low pay-package from private tutoring, and offering much more tutoring time than what he was supposed to be paid, joining additional activities like attending book fairs with the students, as well as buying stationery and books for them.

Several informants had the experience of tutoring students who have psychological problems like attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), autism and dyslexia, and those who have physical problems like weak hearing and weak motor coordination. Private tutors of these students need to be more patient. However, only one tutor persisted tutoring a student who has weak hearing, while the others have already quit their jobs. As for that private tutor,

she still kept her job because she did not want to further irritate the mother who was going through a serious depression because of her son.

Role 11: Mother

The idea is that private tutors can also substitute the mother. This is an interesting case of a male private tutor. The informant regarded himself as fulfilling the daily duty of a mother apart from cooking and doing housework, which could be substituted with the domestic helper. He monitored and controlled the behavior of his student, comforted the student when he was frustrated, and guided his direction and life path. The private tutor reckoned his student depended and trusted him more than his real mother who was always busy with work. Since the student was still a teenager and needed someone to be with him most of the time, his mother employed the private tutor to in lieu of her presence as a mother.

Role 12: Babysitter

“I feel like a babysitter,” many private tutors exclaimed. However, they hold different attitudes towards this role. Some take up this role themselves by caring for their students in many respects. One female private tutor said she dissimilated a lot of knowledge on how to maintain a healthy female body to her female students. She reminded the students not to violate the ‘golden rules’ of being a healthy woman, such as drinking cold water or being deprived of sleep every time she saw them.

Nonetheless, some private tutors became babysitters without intending to be so. This situation usually happens to tutors of kindergarten and primary students. During tutoring, private tutors spend lots of time dealing with students’ requests like toilet breaks, snacks, drinks, television, chess or card games etc. The children are easily distracted when studying for more than 15 minutes. A female private tutor had to play with a primary one child for 10 minutes to exchange for a 5 minutes of studying; she gave the child a break every 20 minutes.

To conclude briefly, *private tutoring is both a way of reinforcing meritocracy and capitalism and a way out of normative competitive education.* The interaction of private tutors, students and parents may transform, alter and shift from role to role under different contexts. On one hand, the roles co-exist with each other, like the roles of being a social worker and a listener; on the other hand, some roles conflict with each other, like the roles of being friends and inspectors.

Identity and Power Construction

Identities of private tutors are actively constructed by private tutors themselves when negotiating with students and their parents. Power is the key to identity construction. Gaining greater power is the aim of identity construction and at the same time, it also enables the tutors to have the freedom to adequately perform their roles.

Sources of Power

The sources of power can be from different aspects: students, students' parents, knowledge and experience, identities constructed, or roles played by the private tutors. The degree of power from each source varies from case to case. Students can exercise a great degree of power, especially for those who are familiar with playing the game of power. Students are the evaluators of the private tutors' performance. Most parents will ask the students about their opinions after the first or second tutoring session. If the students complain about the private tutors, the parents may terminate the present private tutors and find someone else. Since there is zero cost to find a replacement private tutor online, most parents will not hesitate to lay off private tutors. Therefore, it is important for private tutors, before actually teaching the students, to build up friendship with the students.

In some cases, parents' authorization is the greatest source of power for private tutors. Some parents intend to hire private tutors to perform certain roles such as motivators, inspectors and role models. They choose private tutors carefully through interviews. They choose the right candidate after considering his/her experience, knowledge, character and ability to fulfill relevant roles. Usually these parents trust private tutors more than their own children. They regard private tutors as the representatives of themselves, deputizing the roles that they should perform. For example, if the students fail to listen, the private tutors threaten the students by the possibility of reporting to their parents. After each lesson, the tutors report directly to the parents. Parents may also listen to their children, but in case of contradictions, they prefer to support the private tutors.

Low status of private tutors is more commonly found in tutoring students from middle-class families where parents' knowledge and qualifications have exceeded that of the private tutors'. In order to gain respect, private tutors try to manipulate their soft power - love and care, expression of knowledge, decision on teaching, gift-giving, praising and encouragement, tones of speaking, mode of behavior, dress code, role performances and proper language.

Manipulation of Soft Power

Soft power is the power established or exercised without violence. "The student spat on my face during the first time of tutoring," remarked by a female private tutor who had taught an ADHD primary student. Since his mother pressured him to listen to the private tutor, he transferred all the anger onto the private tutor. When the private tutor first met the student and introduced herself, he spat on her face and loudly scolded her. The mother saw what happened and rushed to apologize. The private tutor decided not to quit the job immediately, and that by being patient and loving, were what was needed to help the child. Later, their relationship improved.

"The whole family treated me like their Filipino domestic helper," noted a male private

tutor who taught piano lessons to a student from middle-class background. On his first visit, the mother deliberately ordered him to take off his shoes and wash his hands only in the kitchen, not in the bathroom where he had walked into. The reason was that the bathroom was a place designated for 'masters' of the house, whereas the 'maids' could only wash their hands in the kitchen sink. This symbolized the hierarchical status in the household. The private tutor felt uneasy about this kind of prescribed power status, so he decided to gain power by building up a stern and knowledgeable image. He adopted a very serious attitude and set-up rules for the student to follow, plus intentionally showing off his skills and talents. In this way, the parents and student would give him greater power and more respect. Cultural capital is a way to gain respect for a person in Hong Kong society. As Foucault puts it, "Power and knowledge directly imply one another. There is no power relation that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations (Cole 2008:43)." One can therefore gain power by exhibiting his knowledge and skill, and this is the way some private tutors make use of knowledge and power.

Although parents usually require private tutors to teach specific domains and subjects, the choices and final decisions are left to private tutors. For example, one informant said he was supposed to just teach his students to play piano, but it turned out sometimes he had to teach history, geography and general education too. Another informant said she would like to teach daily knowledge such as culture, current affairs and international issues beyond of textbooks to increase the students' knowledge and interest in learning. From this, it is concluded that parents may participate in deciding the area of tutoring, but the power of final decision making is still left to the hands of private tutors.

Gift-giving is also a kind of soft power frequently used by private tutors. By giving gifts at different occasions, the reciprocal relationship is strengthened. It is also a way to increase students' obedience and at the same time strengthen the private tutors' power. Gifts include stationery, books and small ornaments, which symbolize the power of the giver and a constraint for the recipient. After receiving the gifts, the recipients are to reciprocate the giver. Many private tutors have a gift-redemption system which the students may not notice. For instance, when the students get good examination results, or they have put enough effort into revision, the private tutors may give candies. If they really do well, they may be given more expensive gifts. The gifts are used to motivate the recipient encouraging him or her to put in more effort and to establish a bond between the two. Gifts can act as an intangible obligation and liability for the students to pay back. In some cases, the students require gifts, otherwise they threaten not to work hard or not take the examinations seriously. This is the power struggle between private tutors and students.

On some occasions, certain rituals are performed by private tutors and the family. During the Lunar New Year, parents will give out red money packets to private tutors, who also bring some presents to visit the family. At Christmas, some private tutors may offer small gifts to students. Private tutors and students may also give birthday cards and presents to each other.

After traveling, they may also bring souvenirs for one another. Balanced gift-giving, which requires the three fundamental stages of gifting – to give a gift, to have that gift received, and to receive a reciprocal gift in a system that repeats itself (Wilk and Cliggett 2007:154) - maintain and reinforce the social relationship between private tutors and the families. Other than material gains, private tutors also pay back by focusing more on the students and helping the students as much as possible.

Encouragement is another form of soft power. The behavior of the students can easily be changed with enough approval, especially for those who usually get little recognition from parents. Attitude, tones of speaking, behavior and dress code also carry symbolic meanings that can raise one's power status. When private tutors speak and perform like a professional teacher, parents will trust them more and give them higher authority. At the same time, students will respect them more if private tutors can show their seniority and expertise. For example, most female private tutors avoid wearing mini-dresses and sexy clothes; some male private tutors will wear glasses or other accessories to look more professional even when they have good vision.

The role of being an adviser is an example of performing certain roles to gain power. The manipulation of information of what to advise and how to advise is the key in the game. For example, when parents force a child to study the subjects he does not like, the child will ask his private tutor to 'advise' parents on the importance of personal interest and individual freedom.

Other methods include titling, which is the externalization of relationship. A private tutor clearly recalled that he was called by one of his students as 'Sir' at the very first beginning. Then, they started to become friends and his title changed to 'elder brother'. By now, the student is calling his nickname. In this case, 'Miss / Sir' symbolizes the higher respect and power with less intimacy. 'Elder Sister / Brother' has medium power and intimacy. The calling of highest intimacy is by nickname, but those private tutors can enjoy the least power and authority.

Parents are experienced in playing this game too. Some parents give out bonus to encourage private tutors to perform better. Some parents even install hidden surveillance cameras to record everything the private tutors have done. Since the parents usually do not notify the private tutors beforehand, some private tutors only know that when they are caught by the parents.

Manipulation of Hard Power

Hard power here means how private tutors are scolded, threatened and punished as means to gain power and to control students. Enforcement of hard power on the students is effective in some cases, especially for the stubborn ones. The exercise of hard power is usually useful to affect students' behaviors but it might cause tension.

Scolding is usually used without the presence of the parents. Some parents prefer private

tutors to scold their children because they think it is an effective method. Using parents to threaten the students is the most common way. It is noticeable that students can also use warnings to fight against private tutors and gain their power. For instance, some private tutors admitted that they allowed some of their students to sleep on the bed, play computer games, or chat on MSN / SMS during tutoring because otherwise they are not willing to study. Corporal punishment on students is a violation of law, so most private tutors use threatening to help students finish the assigned work on time.

Inter-Social Class Comparison

Most parents in middle class families have higher education, but their knowledge and time have been used intensively on economic production instead of giving guidance to their children. Kwok mentions the “insufficiency of free academic guidance from elder family members” (2004:6) by using the data of higher rate on private tutoring from families with higher educational qualifications. Education helps social class reproduction and those who can afford to go to elite private schools pay for the special ‘status rights’ and social networks providing ‘passage of privilege’ (Ballantine and Hammack 2009:88).

Middle class families treat private tutoring as a way of elite reproduction. In Hong Kong, there are more students in high-ranking schools being tutored than those in low-ranking schools (Bray1999:42). Parents from middle class are likely to employ private tutors who have attended famous secondary schools and universities. The wage for these private tutors is usually higher. Private tutors do not only teach knowledge, a cultural capital, but also psychological capital that contributes to students’ competitive individualism that maintains their future middle-class positions (Demerath, Lynch and Davidson 2008:286).

Some middle class families employ private tutors as a means to symbolize their social prestige and status. Spending large amounts of money hiring private teachers represents their wealth and care for their children. One father was willing to spend more than HK\$200 per hour to hire a private tutor for his daughter in kindergarten. Moreover, employing students from famous universities who are already ‘social elites’ means that the employers (i.e. the parents) are the bosses of social elites. This symbolic meaning implies that identity formation stirs up an intense competition between families.

On the other hand, parents from working class employ private tutors mainly because they lack knowledge and experience to teach children. They regard private tutoring as a means of mobilizing upwardly to middle class. Since social class mobility is very high in Hong Kong, it is a common wish in middle class families to have their children to become social elites. An effective method is to employ someone who is already an elite to assist the students’ development.

Modes of Private Tutoring

Students from middle class often have more than one private tutor. They may have a private

tutor for each subject they study. This multiple-tutors pattern makes it more difficult for private tutors to gain respect from these students because they are less likely to treasure the chances of private tutoring. Some private tutors refuse to teach children from middle class because of the unbearable pressure of teaching the students. A private tutor regarded her experience tutoring a middle class student as a disaster. Each time he failed to finish his homework, he scolded the private tutor in front of the mother and blamed her for failing to teach. Although the mother knew her son's personality very well, she did not see it as a problem because she took it for granted that the private tutor was paid to bear it. Since then, the private tutor never taught students from middle class families.

On the other hand, since parents from working class usually are not able to afford several private tutors, students cherish the opportunity. It is easier for private tutors to establish a close relationship with the students. Although they are paid less than in middle class families, some private tutors prefer to teach students from working class families.

Expectations from Parents

Parents' expectations differ among middle and working class families. Parents from middle class families expect private tutors to subrogate their roles of acculturating students. They usually prefer private tutors to take up titles such as 'elder sister/brother', 'mother', 'cousin', 'peer/friend/playmate' and 'babysitter'. Some parents hire private tutors only to take care of their children. Therefore, the quality that they look for is more focused on personality such as patience and gentleness. If the parents want to promote their social prestige through employing tutors from renowned universities, they will also take university reputation and degree mastery of private tutors into consideration.

Parents from working class are more focused on practical functions. They expect private tutors to play the roles such as 'knowledge disseminator', 'motivator', 'role model' and 'adviser'. Since fewer parents from working class have studied in university, they rely a lot on information provided by private tutors in order to help their children enter into university.

Other Sides of Private Tutoring

Although most private tutors have fulfilled their roles and responsibilities expected by students and parents, some of them may evade responsibility and simply work for earning tuition fees. For instance, a student revealed his secret arrangement with his private tutor. Since his parents were at work during the private tutoring session, his private tutor simply came to his home and they did whatever they wanted. He usually played computer games, while the private tutor slept on the bed or did his own work. If the parents came home, they would pretend to be revising textbooks. When asked if the parents checked his academic progress, he replied that the parents only hired him to accompany their child.

Some private tutors lied about their qualifications and personal information, because higher qualification brings higher tuition payment. Since parents seldom require private tutors

to provide evidence on their academic achievement and experience, it is easy for tutors to pretend that they are from famous universities. A private tutor confessed that she had lied about her age. She pointed out the reason was that seniority gave parents a misconception of more experience and a more reliable personality. Parents did not find this out because they did not check her identity card.

Parents can also fail to perform their roles; the most serious case was a mother who evaded tuition fees of up to half a year. Since no contracts or written documents were signed, the private tutor could not legitimately reclaim the salary.

Ending Private Tutoring Relationship

As mentioned, the relationship between private tutors and students is reciprocal. Once this reciprocal relationship ends, parents/students do not hire the private tutors anymore and the linkage between them can be easily broken. Without receiving money, few private tutors still keep in touch with their students. The interview results show that most private tutors have little contact with their students after having stopped private tutoring. Some private tutors admitted that they would like to be in contact with their students but what eventually led them to give up was the failure to generate a proper definition of their relationship. “Should I still care about them without charging tuition fees? Should I still teach them and help them with their examinations? I could not figure out...” remarked a confused post- private tutor informant.

Not all private tutors experienced this confusion, as some of them have successfully kept continuous post-tutoring contact with their students. However, their contact methods usually do not include face-to-face meeting. In previous tutoring relationships, it was the private tutors who went to the students’ home regularly. It was the private tutors who took initiative and active role to maintain the relationship. In a post-tutoring relationship, this situation seldom changes. Some less active tutors have already cut off the contact with their previous students. As for those who still keep in touch with their students, chatting on MSN or sending text messages is a more common and convenient way. Few private tutors keep meeting with their students or treat them as close friends.

Following the ending of the tutoring relationship, roles performed by private tutors have withdrawn into friends or strangers. Without money as a motivator and a medium of exchange, private tutors unload the burden and responsibility of performing previous roles.

Summary

Using Hong Kong as a cultural context, this paper describes the relationship among private tutors, parents and students. Mainstream capitalist culture, meritocracy and societal credentialism, all of which encourages competition, alongside influential Confucian traditions further intensify the level of competition and the hope of becoming ‘social elites’, have in process, created this exam-oriented education culture that creates and boosts private tutoring

business in Hong Kong. By in-depth interviews and home-visit observations, the relationship between private tutors, students and parents is understood not just from the angle of an outsider, but more importantly, from the emic perspectives of private tutors, parents and students. They are not passive receptors of culture and tradition; instead, they are all active social agencies that shape and recreate culture. The most obvious evidence is how private tutors play their roles strategically and actively, and how they construct their identity and power through various means. The central argument of this paper is that under a meritocratic capitalist society like Hong Kong, private tutoring realizes the privatization of education and the commodification of human relations by the act of hiring private tutors to perform these diverse roles. On the one hand, it is also a way of realizing societal credentialism and by so doing it reinforces social stratification and class inequality because richer families can employ private tutors with higher qualifications. Private tutoring is also a way out of the competitive mode of learning because parents feel that it is distinctive from normative compulsory school education and enables private tutors, students and parents to experience intimate and altruistic relationships rather than mere cliental relationships.

The whole private tutoring business begins with a mutual bluff relationship, where private tutors provide a dream or hope of molding students into social elites, where parents and students believe in a higher possibility of realizing this dream after being reassured by the middlemen. Moreover, parents and students seldom doubt the ultimate effectiveness of private tutoring.

The reasons for private tutoring varies from students/parents and private tutors. For students/parents, private tutoring is a way of competing to become social elites. It is an educational investment for future success, since it helps accumulate cultural and psychological capital for students. Students/parents in every family can therefore find legitimate reasons to spend money on private tutoring. As for private tutors, apart from economic consideration, some of them choose to engage in this work because they obtain self-realization, personal growth and advancement, and self-search through the private tutoring relationship with students and parents. It also serves as a rite of passage for university students as a 'must-do' thing in university life.

As the relationship goes on, the central argument of this paper is found through analyzing the twelve roles performed by private tutors. The roles include 'knowledge disseminator', 'motivator', 'role model/gender role facilitator/idol', 'preacher/inspector' and 'adviser', capitalism and meritocracy have been reinforced. Meanwhile, by performing the roles of 'elder sister/brother', 'cousin', 'peer/friend/playmate', 'mediator/messenger', 'social worker/listener', 'mother', and 'babysitter', intimate, supportive and altruistic relationship can be found as a way out of normative competitive education.

Private tutors are active social agents, who strive for more power in identity construction. The sources of power are from multiple dimensions, including students, parents, knowledge and experience, constructed identities, and performed roles. They manipulate soft power

through various means such as by showing love and care, exhibition of knowledge, decision on teaching, gift giving, praising and encouragement, attitude, tones of speaking, mode of behavior, dressing, roles performance and name calling. In the meantime, they also manipulate hard power through scolding, warning and punishing students.

Focusing on middle and working classes, the inter-class comparison provides a framework of studying families from different social classes. In terms of aims of private tutoring, middle class families aim at elite reproduction through private tutoring, while working class families' purpose is for upward mobility in this hierarchical society. In terms of modes of private tutoring, middle class families can afford employing multiple private tutors who are responsible for different subjects and aspects of students, while most working class families can only afford to pay for a single private tutor. In terms of expectations from parents, middle class parents wish private tutors to subrogate their roles so that they can focus more on their work and business. Parents from working class usually prefer private tutors to perform practical functions such as teaching students the knowledge and examination skills which parents are not knowledgeable enough to teach by themselves. These parents also treasure a lot on private tutors' life experiences and psychological capital because they regard these as the link to university, and therefore to becoming social elites.

While most relationships between private tutors and students end with the termination of private tutoring relationship, some can prolong the relationship as friends, which is the most legitimate one. Their contact methods often limited to online or phone communication, where few of them meet face-to-face.

Concluding Remarks

What will the future hold for private tutoring in Hong Kong? This market is very likely to keep expanding due to its continuous popularity. However, will the government interfere with this 'shadow' mode of supplementary education, such as subsidizing the working class families or to impose hefty tax on private tutors, and so change the operation of private tutoring?

Notes

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²<http://www.edb.gov.hk/index.aspx?nodeID=139&langno=1>

³http://www.hkeaa.edu.hk/DocLibrary/HKCEE/Release_of_Results/Exam_Report/Examination_Statistics/ceexamstat09_7.pdf

⁴http://www.hkeaa.edu.hk/DocLibrary/HKALE/Release_of_Results/Exam_Report/Examination_Statistics/alexamstat09_2.pdf

⁵ <http://www.edb.gov.hk/index.aspx?nodeID=7002&langno=1>

⁶ <http://www.hkeaa.edu.hk/en/hkdse/>

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