

IRSTI 14.35.19

<https://doi.org/10.26577/JES87220265>**Jin Xiaogang** , **A. Alchimbayeva*** 

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EXAMINING THE MODERATING ROLE OF EDUCATIONAL INTERVENTION IN THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FAMILY BACKGROUND AND CAREER ADAPTABILITY

This study aims to explore the moderating role of school career education in the relationship between family socioeconomic status (SES) and the career adaptability of university students. Grounded in social capital theory and career construction theory, we hypothesize that while family background significantly influences students' career adaptability, systematic school-based career education can mitigate this effect, thereby fostering a more equitable competitive environment. Methodology and Methods: using a cluster sampling method, 650 undergraduate students from Huanggang City and Huangshi City in Hubei Province, China, were surveyed. After excluding invalid responses, 618 valid questionnaires were retained (95.0% effective response rate). Hierarchical regression analysis was employed to test the main and moderating effects. Results: the findings indicate that: (1) Family SES significantly and positively predicts students' career self-concept clarity, career adaptability, and career exploration behaviors; (2) The participation level and quality of school career education independently and positively influence students' career adaptability; (3) Most importantly, career education plays a significant negative moderating role in the relationship between family background and career adaptability. Specifically, career education has a stronger enhancing effect on the career adaptability of students from disadvantaged family backgrounds. Scientific novelty. This study empirically validates the "compensatory effect" of school career education, demonstrating its role as a "social leveler" that can disrupt the intergenerational transmission of educational inequality. Practical significance: the results suggest that systematic, high-quality school career education is an effective intervention strategy for promoting educational equity, compensating for deficiencies in family capital, and preparing all students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, for their future careers.

Keywords: career education, family background, career adaptability, educational equity, moderating effect.

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Отбасы аясы мен мансапқа бейімделу арасындағы байланыста білім беру араласуының модерациялық рөлін зерттеу

Бұл зерттеу отбасылық әлеуметтік-экономикалық жағдайдың (SES) университет студенттерінің мансапқа бейімділігімен байланысындағы мектептегі мансаптық білімнің модерациялық рөлін зерттеуге бағытталған. Әлеуметтік капитал теориясы мен мансап құру теориясына негізделі отырып, біз отбасылық орта студенттердің мансапқа бейімділігіне айтарлықтай әсер етсе де, жүйелі мектептегі мансаптық білім бұл әсерді азайтып, бәсекелес ортада әділеттілікті арттыруға мүмкіндік береді деп болжам жасаймыз. Әдістеме және әдістер. Қытайдың Хубэй провинциясындағы Хуанган және Хуанши қалаларынан кластерлік іріктеу әдісімен 650 бакалавр студенті сауалнамаға тартылды. Жарамсыз жауаптарды алып тастағаннан кейін 618 жарамды сауалнама қалдырылды (95,0% тиімді жауап беру көрсеткіші). Негізгі және модерациялық әсерлерді сынау үшін иерархиялық регрессиялық талдау қолданылды. Нәтижелер. Жеткен қорытындылар көрсеткендей: (1) Отбасылық SES студенттердің мансаптық өзіндік түсінігі айқындылығы, мансапқа бейімділігі және мансаптық зерттеу әрекеттерін маңызды және оң нәтижелі түрде болжайды; (2) Мектептегі мансаптық білім беруге қатысу деңгейі мен сапасы студенттердің мансапқа бейімделу қабілетіне дербес және оң әсер етеді; (3) Ең бастысы, мансаптық білім беру отбасының әлеуметтік жағдайы мен мансапқа бейімделу арасындағы байланысты маңызды теріс реттеуші ретінде атқарады. Атап айтқанда, мансаптық білім беру әлеуметтік жағдайы төмен отбасылардан шыққан студенттердің мансапқа бейімделу қабілетін анағұрлым күшейтеді. Ғылыми жаңашылдық. Бұл зерттеу мектептегі мансаптық білім берудің «компенсациялық әсерін» эмпирикалық түрде дәлелдейді, оның білім беру теңсіздігінің ұрпақтан

«әлеуметтік теңестіруші» рөлін көрсетеді. Практикалық мәні. Нәтижелер жүйелі, жоғары сапалы мектептегі мансаптық білім берудің білім беру теңдігін қамтамасыз етудегі тиімді араласу стратегиясы болып табылатынын, отбасының ресурстарындағы кемшіліктерді толықтыра алатынын және барлық студенттерді, әсіресе әлеуметтік жағдайы төмен отбасылардан шыққандарды, болашақ мансаптарына дайындайтынын көрсетеді.

Түйін сөздер: кәсіби білім, отбасылық жағдай, мансапқа икемділік, білім беру теңдігі, модераторлық әсер.

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Исследование модеризирующей роли образовательного вмешательства в зависимости между семейным фоном и карьерной адаптивностью

Цель исследования – изучить модерационную роль школьного карьерного образования во взаимосвязи между социально-экономическим положением семьи (SES) и карьерной адаптивностью студентов университетов. Опираясь на теорию социального капитала и теорию построения карьеры, выдвинута гипотеза о том, что, несмотря на значительное влияние семейного фона на карьерную адаптивность студентов, систематическое школьное карьерное образование способно смягчить этот эффект, способствуя более справедливой конкурентной среде. Методология и методы. С использованием метода кластерной выборки было опрошено 650 студентов бакалавриата из городов Хуанган и Хуанши провинции Хубэй (Китай). После исключения недействительных ответов было оставлено 618 действительных анкет (эффективность отклика 95,0%). Для проверки основных и модерационных эффектов был использован иерархический регрессионный анализ. Результаты. Полученные данные показывают, что: (1) социально-экономический статус семьи существенно и положительно предсказывает ясность карьерного самопонимания студентов, их карьерную адаптивность и поведение в области изучения карьеры; (2) Уровень участия и качество школьного карьерного образования независимо и положительно влияют на карьерную адаптивность студентов; (3) что наиболее важно, карьерное образование играет значительную отрицательную модераторную роль во взаимоотношениях между семейным происхождением и карьерной адаптивностью. В частности, карьерное образование сильнее повышает карьерную адаптивность студентов из неблагополучных семей. Научная новизна. Данное исследование эмпирически подтверждает «компенсирующий эффект» школьного карьерного образования, демонстрируя его роль как «социального выравнивателя», способного нарушить межпоколенческую передачу образовательного неравенства. Практическая значимость. Результаты показывают, что систематическое и качественное школьное карьерное образование является эффективной стратегией вмешательства для продвижения образовательного равенства, компенсации недостатков семейного капитала и подготовки всех студентов, особенно из неблагополучных семей, к их будущей профессиональной деятельности.

Ключевые слова: профессиональное образование, семейный фон, адаптивность карьеры, образовательное равенство, модераторный эффект.

Introduction

In today's uncertain labor market, possessing strong career adaptability—defined as the psychological resources and capacities to cope with occupational tasks, role transitions, and career obstacles—has become crucial for university students to successfully transition from school to work (Savickas, 2013). The significance of career adaptability extends beyond vocational success; it is closely linked to individuals' mental health and overall well-being, playing a central role in how individuals navigate career challenges and achieve meaningful work (Blustein et al., 2019). However, the development of career adaptability does not occur in a

vacuum; it is profoundly shaped by the individual's social environment. Among these influences, family socioeconomic status (SES) is widely recognized as a core ascribed factor affecting the career development of young students (Rojewski, 2005). High-SES families can provide their children with richer social, cultural, and economic capital, granting significant advantages in access to occupational information, role models, and internship opportunities. This “determinism of origin” casts a shadow, exacerbating the intergenerational transmission of social inequality.

Against this backdrop, schooling, particularly systematic career education, is entrusted with the hope of acting as a “social leveler.” China presents a

uniquely compelling context for examining this potential. China's rapid economic transformation and social mobility have created a dynamic environment where the interplay between family background and educational interventions is particularly pronounced. Deeply ingrained Confucian cultural values place a high premium on education as a means for self-cultivation and family advancement, making educational equity a salient social issue. China's vast geography and historical urban-rural divide result in significant disparities in family resources, thereby creating a natural laboratory to test whether institutional support like career education can compensate for these inequalities. Furthermore, recent top-down policy initiatives, such as the nationwide "New College Entrance Examination Reform" which mandates career guidance in high schools (State Council, 2014), and the Ministry of Education's requirement since 2007 for all universities to offer career planning courses (Ministry of Education Office, 2007), provide a uniform policy backdrop against which the effectiveness of career education can be assessed. Thus, investigating this topic within China not only addresses a local concern but also offers internationally relevant insights into how educational systems can mitigate social stratification.

However, a critical theoretical and practical question remains insufficiently answered: Can school career education effectively moderate the relationship between family background and career adaptability? Does it reinforce existing advantages, or does it empower disadvantaged groups, thereby genuinely leveling the competitive playing field? This study aims to empirically test the moderating role of school career education in the "family background – career adaptability" pathway, providing evidence for understanding the efficacy of educational interventions in promoting social equity and offering references for optimizing national career education policies and practices.

Literature review and Research hypotheses

This section reviews key theories and empirical findings to build the foundation for our research hypotheses. We first define our core concepts and then explain their proposed relationships.

Family Background and Career Adaptability. Career adaptability refers to an individual's readiness and resources for coping with current and anticipated vocational development tasks. To understand how family background shapes this, we draw on two complementary theories.

Social capital theory posits that the family is an individual's primary source of social capital—the networks and relationships that provide information and support (Lin, 2001). High-SES families, with their broader professional networks, can offer children invaluable informal resources like internship leads and career advice. This advantage during the school-to-work transition is well-documented, even among Chinese university students (Cheng & Yuen, 2022).

Cultural capital theory (Bourdieu, 1986) suggests that families transmit attitudes, knowledge, and behaviors that align with success in education and the workplace. Educated parents are more likely to cultivate their children's aspirations, planning skills, and self-confidence—all psychological resources central to career adaptability's core dimensions: concern, control, curiosity, and confidence (Savickas, 2013).

Extensive research supports this link, showing a positive correlation between family SES and students' career decision-making self-efficacy, career exploration, and career maturity (Zhang et al., 2018; Deng et al., 2021). Therefore, we propose:

H1: Family socioeconomic status has a significant positive impact on adolescents' career adaptability.

The Role of School Career Education. Career education is a purposeful, organized intervention designed to equip students with the knowledge and skills for making informed educational and occupational choices (Hooley et al., 2017). Its content typically includes self-awareness activities, exploration of career paths, and decision-making training.

High-quality career education can directly foster career adaptability by creating a standardized learning platform. Through courses, workshops, and career experiences, it provides all students—regardless of background—access to occupational information and structured self-exploration. This pathway is effective; research confirms that career education in higher education develops students' career management skills, a core part of adaptability (Hughes et al., 2021). Thus, we hypothesize:

H2: The participation level and quality of school career education have a significant positive impact on adolescents' career adaptability.

The Moderating Role of Career Education: Competing Possibilities. The central question of this study is how career education interacts with family background. Two main theoretical possibilities exist:

The Reinforcement Effect (or “Matthew Effect”): Career education might primarily benefit students from advantaged families who already possess higher career awareness and are better positioned to utilize such resources, thereby widening the existing gap (Rojewski et al., 2021).

The Compensation Effect (or “Social Leveler”): Alternatively, career education could be most beneficial for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. For these students, who lack family-based social and cultural capital, the school’s systematic intervention becomes the primary, perhaps only, source of career support, yielding greater marginal gains (Shi & Wang, 2023).

From an educational equity perspective, we align with the compensation effect. Institutionalized school support can substitute for the informal family capital that disadvantaged students miss, thus weakening the link between background and adaptability.

H3: School career education plays a negative moderating role in the relationship between family background and career adaptability. This means career education has a stronger enhancing effect on career adaptability for students from lower family backgrounds.

Methodology

This study used a cluster sampling method. A total of 650 students were surveyed from four local universities in Hubei Province, China: Hubei Normal University, Huanggang Normal University, Hubei Polytechnic University, and Huanggang Polytechnic College. After excluding invalid questionnaires, 618 valid samples were obtained, resulting in an effective response rate of 95.0%. Among the participants, 48.5% were male and 51.5% were female; the average age was 18.7 years ($SD = 0.68$).

Family Socioeconomic Status (SES): A composite index was used, including the highest educational level of parents, parental occupational status (measured using the International Socio-Economic Index of Occupational Status, ISEI), and monthly household income. The three indicators were standardized, and their average was calculated.

School Career Education: A self-developed scale was used to measure students’ perceived participation level and quality of school career education. It included three dimensions: “Richness of Course Content,” “Professionalism of Teacher

Guidance,” and “Effectiveness of Activity Experience,” comprising 12 items in total, rated on a Likert 5-point scale. In this study, the scale’s Cronbach’s α was 0.89.

Career Adaptability: The Chinese revised version of the Career Adapt-Abilities Scale (CAAS) compiled by Savickas and Porfeli (2012) was used. It includes four dimensions: concern, control, curiosity, and confidence, totaling 24 items. A Likert 5-point scale was used. In this study, the overall scale’s Cronbach’s α was 0.92.

Control Variables: Gender, age, and academic performance.

Data Analysis Strategy

Data were processed using SPSS 26.0. Common method bias was tested first, followed by descriptive statistics and correlation analysis to provide an overview of the variables’ relationships. Hierarchical regression analysis was then employed to test the main effects (H1, H2) and the moderating effect (H3). Specifically, control variables were entered in the first step; the centered independent variable (family SES) and moderator variable (career education) were entered in the second step; and their interaction term was entered in the third step. If the interaction term was significant, simple slope analysis was further conducted to interpret the pattern of moderation.

Results

Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis.

The means, standard deviations, and correlation coefficients of the variables are shown in Table 1. The average scores for career education ($M=3.62$) and career adaptability ($M=3.78$) were in the medium-high range. The standard deviation of Family SES was 0.85, indicating sufficient variation for moderation analysis.

As shown in Table 1, Family SES, career education, and career adaptability were all significantly positively correlated with each other ($p < .01$). Family SES was significantly positively correlated with career adaptability ($r = .22, p < .001$), and career education was significantly positively correlated with career adaptability ($r = .41, p < .001$). These findings provide preliminary support for H1 and H2.

Table 1*Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Matrix (N=618)*

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5
Gender (a)	0.52	0.50	1				
Age	18.71	0.68	-.04	1			
Academic Perf (b)	3.45	0.82	.01	-.08**	1		
Family SES (c)	0.00	0.85	-.03	.05	.24***	1	
Career Education	3.62	0.76	.02	-.01	.18***	.12***	1
Career Adaptability	3.78	0.71	.05	-.06*	.31***	.22***	.41***

Note: a Gender is a dummy variable (0=male, 1=female). b Academic performance was converted from a percentage average to a 5-point scale (1=very poor, 5=excellent). c Family SES is a composite index, standardized (mean=0). * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Source / Note: This table was compiled by the authors based on the analysis of materials

Hierarchical Regression Analysis.

Table 2 presents the results of the hierarchical regression analysis testing the main and moderating effects on career adaptability.

Model 1 included only the control variables, explaining 10.2% of the variance in career adaptability ($R^2 = .102$, $p < .001$). Academic performance was a significant positive predictor ($\beta = .30$, $p < .001$).

In Model 2, the main effects of family SES and career education were added. This significantly increased the explained variance by 16.3% ($\Delta R^2 = .163$, $p < .001$), bringing the total R^2 to

.265. Family SES had a significant positive effect on career adaptability ($\beta = .15$, $p < .001$), supporting H1. Career education also had a significant positive effect ($\beta = .36$, $p < .001$), supporting H2.

In Model 3, the interaction term (Family SES $\times$ Career Education) was entered. This resulted in a small but significant increase in explained variance ($\Delta R^2 = .010$, $p < .01$). The coefficient for the interaction term was significantly negative ($\beta = -.10$, $p < .01$). This indicates that career education significantly moderates the relationship between family SES and career adaptability, providing initial support for H3.

Table 2*Hierarchical Regression Analysis Results for Career Adaptability*

Predictor Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Step 1: Control Vars			
Gender (a)	.04	.03	.03
Age	-.06*	-.05	-.05
Academic Performance	.30***	.22***	.22***
Step 2: Main Effects			
Family SES (Centered)		.15***	.14***
Career Educ. (Centered)		.36***	.35***
Step 3: Moderation			
Family SES $\times$ Career Educ			-.10
Statistics			
R^2	.102	.265	.275
ΔR^2	.102***	.163***	.010**
F value	44.82***	94.17***	88.52***

Note: a Gender is a dummy variable (0=male, 1=female). Coefficients reported are standardized regression coefficients (β).

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Source / Note: This table was compiled by the authors based on the analysis of materials

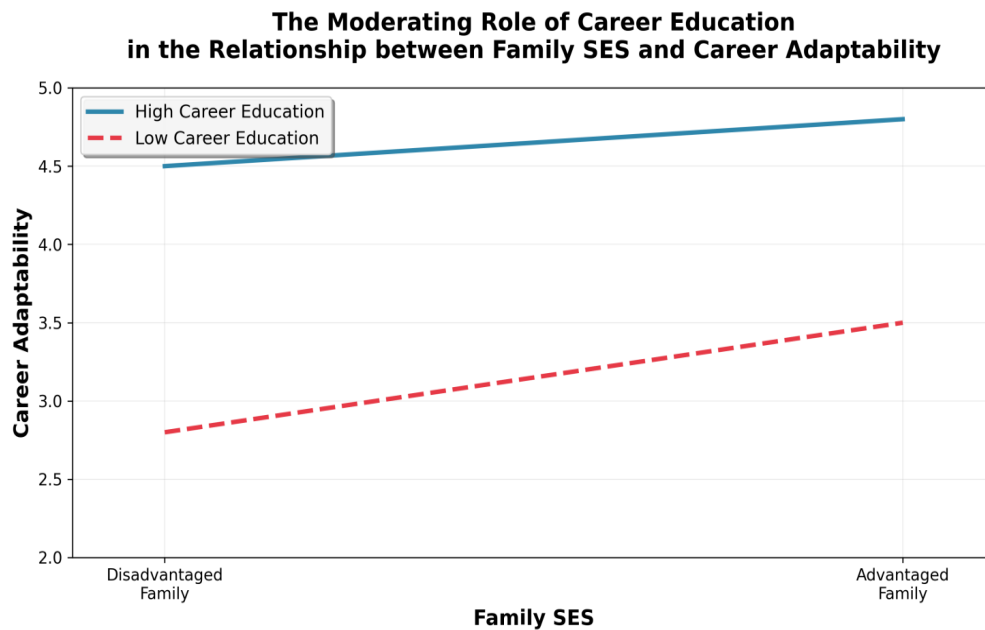
Simple Slope Analysis

To interpret the significant negative interaction, a simple slope analysis was conducted. As illustrated in Figure 1, the relationship between family SES and career adaptability was plotted for students with low career education (one standard deviation below the mean) and high career education (one standard deviation above the mean).

The analysis revealed that for students with low levels of career education, family SES had a strong positive relationship with career adaptability (simple slope = 0.24, $p < .001$). In contrast, for students with high levels of career education, the positive relationship between family SES and career adaptability was substantially weaker and non-significant (simple slope = 0.04, $p = .48$).

Figure 1

The Moderating Role of Career Education in the Relationship between Family SES and Career Adaptability.



(The figure would typically show two lines:

- *A steeper line for the Low Career Education Group, showing a strong positive relationship between Family SES and Career Adaptability.*
- *A flatter line for the High Career Education Group, showing a weaker relationship between Family SES and Career Adaptability.*

The lines would converge at higher levels of Career Education, visually representing the weakening effect.)

Source / Note: This figure was compiled by the authors based on the analysis of materials

Discussion

This study aimed to investigate the moderating role of school career education in the relationship between family SES and university students' career adaptability within the Chinese context. The findings offer robust support for all three hypotheses and provide compelling evidence for the "compensatory effect" of career education.

Main Effects: Family Background and Career Education.

Consistent with H1 and a large body of literature (Rojewski, 2005; Deng et al., 2021), our results confirm that family SES is a significant positive predictor of career adaptability. Students from higher-SES families reported greater psychological resources to manage their career development. This finding reinforces the pervasive influence of ascribed status on individual outcomes and highlights the social justice challenge inherent in career development.

The strong positive effect of career education on career adaptability (H2) is equally important

and encouraging. It demonstrates that structured, school-based interventions are effective in building students' career-related skills and confidence, irrespective of their background. This finding aligns with international evidence on the effectiveness of career guidance programs (Hughes et al., 2021).

The Compensatory Moderating Effect of Career Education.

The most significant finding of this study is the confirmation of H3: career education negatively moderates the family SES-career adaptability link. The negative interaction term, coupled with the simple slope analysis, provides clear evidence for the compensation effect, not a reinforcement effect.

Our results show that in the absence of robust career education, students' career adaptability is highly dependent on their family's resources, creating an inequitable playing field. However, when students have access to high-quality career education, the advantage conferred by a high-SES background nearly disappears. The "social leveler" effect is graphically demonstrated in Figure 1, where the line for the high-career-education group is almost flat.

Crucially, this equalization occurs primarily through the substantial boost in career adaptability for students from low-SES backgrounds. For these students, school-based career education appears to function as a critical substitute for the career-specific social and cultural capital they may lack at home. By providing standardized access to occupational information, career exploration activities, and guidance, the school compensates for familial deficiencies. This finding is consistent with recent Chinese research showing that university career services can compensate for the lack of family capital among first-generation college students (Shi & Wang, 2023).

Theoretically, this study integrates social capital and career construction theories to demonstrate how institutional support can interact with, and disrupt, the process of social reproduction. The compensatory effect we identified suggests that career education, when effectively designed and implemented, can fulfill its promise as an instrument of social justice (Hooley et al., 2020). The practical implication is profound: investing in universal, high-quality career education is not merely about enhancing individual skills but is a targeted strategy for promoting greater equality of opportunity. This is particularly relevant in rapidly developing countries like China, where education is seen as a key driver of social mobility. The ultimate value of enhancing career adaptability,

as noted by Mai et al. (2022), lies in its potential to improve long-term employment outcomes, suggesting that the equalizing effect observed here may have lasting impacts on graduates' life trajectories.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study empirically validates the negative moderating role of school career education in the "family background – career adaptability" relationship. The conclusion indicates that systematic, high-quality school career education is not only an effective way to enhance the overall career adaptability of students but also an important intervention strategy for promoting educational equity and blocking the intergenerational transmission of poverty. Through institutionalized support, it partially compensates for the lack of family capital for disadvantaged students, providing a more equal starting line for career development for all students, regardless of their origin.

1. **Strengthen Policy Support and Resource Allocation:** Education authorities should further integrate career education into the core evaluation system of basic education and prioritize the allocation of special funds and teaching resources to economically underdeveloped regions and disadvantaged schools to ensure a "baseline of fairness" in career education.

2. **Enhance the Quality of Career Education:** Avoid formalistic "lecture-style" career education. Promote student-centered, experience-oriented educational models that focus on cultivating general competencies adaptable to future societal changes (e.g., critical thinking, resilience, cooperation).

3. **Focus on Disadvantaged Student Groups:** Schools and teachers should consciously identify and pay special attention to students from weaker family backgrounds, providing them with more targeted, personalized career guidance and resource connections to maximize the compensatory effect of career education for them.

Limitations and Future Research. This study is cross-sectional, making it difficult to establish causal relationships. Future research could adopt longitudinal tracking designs to more clearly reveal the dynamic relationships between variables. Furthermore, this study primarily examined the "quantity" and "quality" of career education; future research could further deconstruct the respective mechanisms of different components of career education (e.g., curriculum, mentoring, internships).

Funding

This research did not receive any specific grant.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Acknowledgements

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to all colleagues and reviewers whose valuable comments and support contributed to the improvement of this study.

Author Contributions

Jin Xiaogang: responsible for all aspects of the work, ensuring data reliability and integrity, reviewing and addressing potential issues, collecting, analysing, and interpreting the research findings.

Alchimbayeva A.: contributed significantly to the conceptualization and design of the study, critically reviewed and edited the manuscript, and approved the final version for submission and publication.

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Авторлар туралы мәлімет:

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Received 02.12.2025

Accepted 20.05.2026