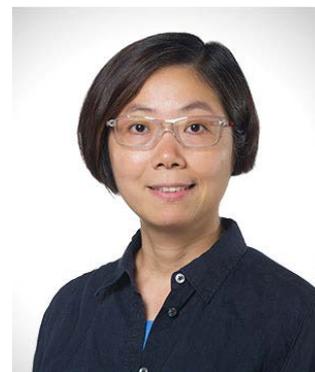


YOUTH TRANSITION IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA: A PANEL STUDY OF HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS IN URBAN NANJING

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Key implications

- Educational inequality persists in contemporary China despite educational expansion and takes the form of qualitative rather than quantitative differentiation.
- Intergenerational transmission of social advantages tends to be school-mediated in the era of mass education. This brings various consequences to the social life of Chinese young people nowadays.



Background

Existing research on life course transitions of young people in China has mainly captured the transition patterns of young people born before or at the early period of the economic reform (early 1980s). Little is understood about the life transition of young adults who were born after the 1980s and grew up at a time when the economic reforms were implemented in full force, increasing life choices for young people and allowing young people to enjoy greater autonomy and flexibility in charting their life trajectories. Moreover, existing studies on youth transition mostly rely on published statistics or retrospective data from cross-sectional surveys and are prone to the problems of uncertain time order in causal analysis and recall errors. The ramifications of the rapid economic, social, and cultural transformation for young people's life transition thus need a close investigation with longitudinal data.

Focus of study

The research project aims to (1) identify the pathways of youth transition in urban China, (2) examine the influences of family origin, school context, and personal aspirations on the transition, and (3) assess the impacts of the transition on individual well-being. Special focus is given to school-to-work transition.

Research methods

Using the multi-stage probability sampling method, a probability sample of 989 students was drawn from 11 senior high schools at different rankings in urban Nanjing in 2010. A series of six self-administered surveys were conducted in 2010, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, and 2016 to collect

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information about respondents' personal characteristics, family background, high school characteristics, transition to higher education, transition to the labor market, university experiences, job search, dating, social networks, social capital, cultural capital, personal aspirations, and parental expectations.

Key findings

There is a near universal transition to higher education after high school among the respondents. However, family background makes a difference in educational destinations (local vs. overseas as well as elite vs. non-elite institutions) and the family advantage tends to be channeled through elite high schools. Respondents entering elite universities, particularly those from privileged family backgrounds, are more active in extra-curricular participation than those in non-elite universities. Participation in extra-curricular activities is linked to network expansion. Family advantages in social capital are transmitted to the younger generation directly and indirectly through elite institutions via the homophily principle, further exacerbating social capital inequality. Access to social capital tends to negatively affect male respondents' psychological well-being, particularly men from better family background. Family capacity needs to be strengthened for disadvantaged groups in order to promote educational equality. Institutional support is needed to provide a favorable environment for students of disadvantaged background to engage in activities that help them to expand their social networks and accumulate social capital.

Significance of findings for practice and policy

The findings imply that educational inequality persists despite mass education and takes the form of qualitative rather than quantitative differentiation. Family capacity needs to be strengthened for disadvantaged groups in order to promote educational equality. Institutional support is needed to provide a favorable environment for students of disadvantaged background to engage in activities that help them to expand their social networks and accumulate social capital.

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RELATED PUBLICATIONS

Lai, Gina, Odalia Wong, Song Jing, and Feng Xiaotian. 2016. "Transition to Higher Education in Contemporary China: A Study of High School Graduates in Urban Nanjing." *Journal of Sociology* 52:83-102.

Lai, Gina, Odalia Wong, Xiaotian Feng. 2015. "Family, School and Access to Social Capital among High School Students in Urban Nanjing." *American Behavioral Scientist* 59(8):946-960.

REQUEST FOR MORE DETAILS

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