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*Pathways and Social Consequences of High School Transition in China: An Exploratory Study of High School Students in Urban Nanjing*

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Abstract

This proposal seeks funding to support the second wave of an exploratory panel study of the educational transition of 987 high school students, who are randomly selected from 11 schools in urban Nanjing. Education has become an increasingly important channel for upward social mobility in China after 1978. The expansion of higher education and proliferation of university programs in the 1990s further raises the normative expectation for education, particularly in the urban areas. Opportunities for higher education in other countries are also accessible to Chinese young people if their parents can afford them. High school graduates in China nowadays can take various transition pathways, for example, entering university or joining the labor force, going to a key university or a non-key university, staying in China or going overseas for university education, etc. Previous studies suggest that the pathways they take are influenced not only by their results in the national university entrance examination, but also by their educational and occupational aspirations, and the resources (cultural, social, and material) provided by their families and schools. Moreover, the different pathways young people take will put them into social settings with different constraints and opportunities, which may further affect their aspirations and life chances.

However, little research attention has been given to the possible pathways taken by Chinese young people after high school and the implications for personal aspiration, cultural and social capital, which have been found to significantly influence social mobility. A exploratory panel study is thus developed to (1) identify the various pathways high school graduates in urban China may take, (2) examine the effects of personal aspirations, and resources provided by family and school (cultural, social, and material) on transition pathways, and (3) assess the impacts of different transition pathways on subsequent personal aspirations and the stocks of cultural and social capital.

The first wave of data was collected in early 2010, when the students were in Senior Two, i.e., the year before they took the national university entrance examination. The data collected provide relevant baseline information for the proposed study, including family background, school experience, personal and perceived parental aspirations for education and occupation, family cultural capital, and personal social capital. We have been making informal contact with these students via sending email messages and greeting cards since the first wave of study. A short questionnaire will be sent to the students in early 2012 to collect updated information about their current activity status and whereabouts. The proposed project is a follow-up survey, which is expected to be conducted in 2013. Detailed information about the respondents' transition pathways, personal aspirations, and stocks of cultural and social capital after the transition will be collected.

The proposal study would provide valuable information to illuminate the intergenerational transmission of social status through education and the impact of school stratification on educational attainment and life transitions of young people in urban China. Findings can also inform future large-scale national studies in similar areas.