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*School-to-Work Transition in Urban China: High School Students from Urban Nanjing as a Case Study*

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Abstract

This proposal seeks funding to support the fourth wave of an exploratory panel study of life course transitions of 987 high school students randomly selected from 11 schools in urban Nanjing. The life course transitions of young people in socialist China have been significantly shaped by state policies. Earlier historical events, such as the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, greatly disrupted the life courses of many urban youth by creating limited access to higher education and displacement in urban employment. The economic reform implemented in the late 1970s, in contrast, has increased life choices in education, work, and family formation for young people in China. Existing studies have mainly captured the patterns of transition to adulthood for young people born before or at the early period of the economic reform (early 1980s). Little is understood about the transition patterns for young adults born after the 1980s and growing up at a time when the economic reform is implemented in full force.

Of the various transitions to adulthood, the school-to-work transition has received much research attention. The importance of school-to work transition lies in the profound effects it has on young people's transition to partnership, parenthood, living arrangement (e.g., leaving the natal home and setting up one's own household through homeownership), and subsequent career-life. These changes in the life course, in turn, have significant implications for status attainment and social inequality, intergenerational and intra-generational alike. They also have profound impacts on young adults' well-being and intergenerational relationships. The proposed study is developed as a pilot investigation of the school-to-work transition of young people in urban China. The expansion of higher education in the late 1990s has increased the enrollment rate of higher education among young people, leading to a delay in the school-to-work transition. Thus the research focus will be placed on the transition after

tertiary education. Specifically, the proposed study aims to (1) identify the pathways of the school-to-work transition, (2) examine the effects of family origin, school, and personal aspirations on the transition, and (3) assess the impacts of transition pathways on personal well-being and social networks.

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. The transitions after high school were identified in the Wave-2 and Wave-3 surveys, in which information about educational destinations or employment outcomes, social participation (extra-curricular activities, use of social media, dating, and friendship ties), personal aspirations, and stocks of social capital and cultural capital were collected. The proposed project is the Wave-4 survey designed to collect data on about the respondents' transition pathways after tertiary education and subsequent impacts on personal well-being and social networks.

The proposed study would provide evidence to illuminate the dynamics between structure and agency in the school-to-work transition in urban China. It is expected to contribute to the understanding of the intergenerational transmission of social advantages, the impact of school stratification on labor market attainment, and the social consequences of the transition. It would also inform future similar large-scale studies at the national level.