

Redeeming the Lost Years: the Resumption of Higher Education after the Chinese Cultural Revolution

The Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976 constitutes a significant episode in the contemporary history of China, when the established political structure, economic orders, and social norms were disrupted nationwide. As a result, a whole generation of young Chinese were deprived of the opportunities of higher education. In 1977, after higher education was outlawed for 11 years, universities and colleges resumed recruitment based on academic merit. Students from different cohorts sat for the entrance examinations for four years, until an age limit of 25 for college admission was imposed in 1981. Due to severe supply constraints, many of those who lost their chances during the Cultural Revolution years never managed to resume their formal education. However, a sizable stock of disadvantaged students succeeded in overcoming the life course interruption and eventually acquired postsecondary educational credentials.

Evidence exists that the disadvantaged generation exhibited substantial resilience against adverse historical circumstances. Based on a 1% sample of 1990 Chinese Census data and 10% sample of 2000 Census, Xie (unpublished report) provided a rough estimate of 5.5 million who obtained junior college or college credentials beyond the age of 25 between 1990 and 2000. The cohorts who took most advantage were 25-40 years old in 1990, whose college entrance were particularly constrained due to the Cultural Revolution.

Nevertheless, little is known about the characteristics of those individuals who eventually made up for their lost educational opportunities, except for some hints based on aggregate level data. Deng and Treiman (1997) argued that during the Cultural Revolution years, children of “bad” class backgrounds (that is, from intelligentsia and cadre families) were disadvantaged. Things were more difficult for intelligentsia parents, because they lacked political power to protect their children. Meng and Gregory (2002) analyzed Chinese population data and concluded that the negative impact of the Cultural Revolution on later educational attainment was amplified for children with parents of lower level of education and lower occupational status.

The above findings lead to the central hypothesis: *children with higher parental socioeconomic endowments (higher parental educational attainment, in particular) are more likely to overcome the interruption caused by the Cultural Revolution and proceed to acquire higher education credentials.*

Using retrospective data on personal life histories (Survey of Family Life in Urban China in 1999, Chinese General Social Survey 2003-2006, Chinese Family Panel Survey 2008 Pilot), this study proposes to examine the factors that contribute to such human resilience against adverse historical circumstances. The key individual-level factor is parental education, but we also include spouse's education, sent-down experience, occupational history, etc. Some occupational-level predictors, such as the average level of education of peers, will also be considered. The results are expected to contribute to the documentation of an unusual cohort in the contemporary Chinese history.

References:

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