

## **Revisit Children of the Cultural Revolution: Adversity and Resilience over Life Course <sup>1</sup>**

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### *Abstract*

In this proposed study, the author uses the 2003 Chinese General Social Survey and ventures to identify the adversity embodied in the consequent life events of the “sent-down” cohort in terms of educational attainment, marital status and fertility, initial work status and economic well-being. The author also seeks to figure out the resilience of, and inequality between “sent-down” cohorts exhibited in educational attainment and economic well-being. By doing so, the author brings together the literature on life course and resilience versus that on the inequality differentials, in the historical context that a state socialist regimen’s policy affects citizens’ long-term life experience. Explanation of the mechanism for such resilience through the theoretical framework is provided with according theoretical framework.

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<sup>1</sup> This is a research proposal that would turn to full paper given more time. It is for my Mom and Dad, and the resilient, great generation of “sent-down” youths who went through the tough years of Cultural Revolution and who have exhibited their toughness in later lives. I love them all.

## **Background**

Large-scale social changes inevitably shape and alter individuals' life courses, producing lasting effects on their perceptions and behaviors (Elder and Clipp 1988; McAdam 1989). Among the line of research, "Children of the Great Depression" (Elder, 1974) stands as a milestone in sociological approach linking large-scale social changes to the individual life course; it provides a research agenda for studying social changes through their effects on individual's life experience. The life course paradigm, which uses the age-graded life patterns embedded in social institutions and subject to historical change, emerged in the twentieth century as an important way to understand the social change and individual development. The life course consists of interlocking trajectories or pathways across the lifespan that are marked by sequences of social transitions."(Elder, 1992) The temporal dimension is made up of age, social time and historical time.

In this study, I would like to examine the presentations of adversity in later life-course events of the "send-down" experiences on the children of the Cultural Revolution in China, and to study the resilience of these sent-down youth in their consequent life course compared with the cohorts who were not sent-down. It could mirror social changes happened during the period between 1960s and nowadays that have been structuring the life course experience.

A short background introduction to the drastic national policy of the send-down: The

send-down policy in China targeted the urban youth who had completed their secondary (or in extreme cases, primary education and were entering the labor force). Scholars used to identify them as “the cohort of young people who were in transition to adulthood.” (Zhou and Hou, 1999). Mao Zedong, then the Chairman of China, started the movement in 1968 by stating that “It is necessary for the educated youth to go to the country side, and be re-educated by the poor peasants. We need to persuade cadres and others in urban areas to send their children who graduated from junior high, senior high and college to rural areas. Let us have a mobilization. Comrades in rural areas should welcome them.” His “instruction” became slogans at that time, and millions of youth were sent down to the rural areas from 1968 to 1978. China's drastic policy of sending millions of urban youth to the countryside (given the drastic differences of livability and welfare policies, as well as cultural differences between urban and rural China, the policy substantially interrupted normal life and development of these youth) during the Cultural Revolution (usually identified from 1966-1976) changed a cohort-specific generations' lives in a particular historical context profoundly. For the majority of these sent-down youth, their suffering from disrupted education, heavy labor, delayed marriage, hunger, poor hygiene protection and medical care and so on, had made the send-down experience dramatic and even traumatic. However, not every urban youth were sent down, and the length of time they stayed in the countryside varied greatly. The send-down movement as a large-scale social experiment provides a rare chance to study the effects of state policies on people's life courses in a socialist society, and the aftermath of the event

exhibited profound affects to specific cohorts.

Table 1 and Figure 1 below present the national statistics of the number of sent-down youth by year and the total.

Table 1: Number of Send-down Youth by Year

(Source: Chinese Labor and Wage Statistics, Chinese Statistics Press, 1987)

Year	Number
1962-1966	1,292,800
1967-1968	1,996,800
1969	2,673,800
1970	1,064,000
1971	748,300
1972	673,900
1973	896,100
1974	1,724,800
1975	2,368,600
1976	1,880,300
1977	1,716,800
1978	480,900
1979	247,700
Total	17,764,800



Figure 1: Number of Send-down Youth by Year

### **Previous Study and My Questions**

There was one unique piece of work that focused on the link between state policies, the life course, and social stratification processes in a state socialist society by exploring how China's state policy and social capital affected the sent-down generation (Zhou and Hou, 1999). Its contribution lies in two aspects: First, it clarifies how state policy effects on the life course are mediated by existing social stratification processes (part of a massive state effort aimed at 'destratification' and affected all social groups; but the send-down policy was by no means uniformly implemented); second, it accesses the consequences of the send-down experience on the children of the Cultural Revolution from 1979 to 1993/1994. For the sent-down youth, time spent in rural areas interrupted their education and delayed their accumulation of skills and work experience in the urban labor force. As a result, subsequent life events, such as the timing of marriage and childbearing, were likely to be interrupted or delayed. Time spent in rural areas also may have deprived sent-down youth of other opportunities available to urban residents, such as job assignments in favorable occupations and work organizations.

Overall, Zhou and Hou's pioneer work in their life-course studies of the send-down cohort has found that the send-down experience had significant and negative effects on individuals' life courses and that the negative consequences were exacerbated by longer stays in rural areas. However, despite the fact that a great number of sociological work on the life course and large-scale social change support that a breakdown of the normal life course tends to produce negative effects on subsequent

life experiences (especially in war time, vast economic depression and hunger), the most amazing finding from Zhou and Hou (1999) analysis is the finding of some positive consequences of the send-down experience, including educational attainment, favorable employment in urban labor force, and higher income in later years. They give two un-tested factors as an explanation: one, major social changes in the economic reform era had great impact on the reshaping of the sent-down cohort life courses upon their return to urban areas. The emerging market economies opened new job opportunities and sectors which may have alleviated some of the negative impacts of the send-down experiences. Two, the rural experience may have fostered the sent-down youth's unique life perspectives, bolstering their perseverance and risk-taking attitudes as they faced new opportunities. They are especially benefited from their adaptation to large-scale social changes taking place in China today.

Although these explanations may be plausible, they are quite ambiguous and untested. If we treat the differentials to the structural and institutional changes over time, how can we differentiate the cohorts (born during the same period) going through different events (being sent-down and stayers) ? The adaptation thesis sounds interesting, but we should be able to find the theoretical support and empirically test the hypotheses. If we could do that , we may as well add a significant theoretical modification of the life course approach that the interference or impact of negative state policies on individuals' normal life course could be trigger a resilience mechanism that mediate short-term negative effects with long-term positive consequences. Despite the shifting state policies and political campaigns in China often dramatically disrupt and alter

individuals' life courses, a life course perspective could be useful to discover the mechanism of resilience of individuals as a counter balance effects.

Hence, my question is based upon the insufficiency of previous study in specific, and lines of life course research in general that I would go in detail.

### **1.1 My Concern**

My major concern in this study is a double-folded one: first, I would like to examine the consequences of the “send-down” experiences on the children of the Cultural Revolution in China in educational attainment, marital status and initial work status by using a different data set from what was used in a previous milestone study, and test the similarity and differences. Second, I would like to study the resilience of these sent-down youth in their consequent life course, as represented in educational attainment and economic well-being, compared with the cohorts who were not sent-down (those who were sent down but never got the opportunity to come back to the city were automatically excluded from the study as the survey was exclusively conducted in urban China households). If there are significant differences, I would use socialization theory and status attainment theory to analyze the mechanism of differences.

### **1.2 Objective: what's new in this study?**

Although a voluminous literature has already appeared on the “send-down” campaign during Cultural Revolution, the study of reliance is new, and I would contribute in this respect. Further, using most recent survey data is helpful to assess the economic well-being of the cohort who have experienced “sent-down” adversity. My objective

is to study the cohort with experience of send-down versus the cohorts that stayed in the urban area (who would be regarded as “control group”), their adversity during the “send-down” period and their setbacks from 1978 to 2003.

My data source is a general social survey conducted by the cooperation of Chinese government and universities in 2003, with the same/similar variables as Zhou and Hou’s survey completed 10 years before. A screen of the data found that the sample size, geographical distribution and the number of respondents who had been “sent down” are quite similar. Therefore, comparison between the results of analyses of both data sets would make more sense. There might be some new findings, especially considering the profound economic reform that has triggered intuitional and structural change in the society as a whole (not to mention the changes in work organizations), and also changed the life chance of individuals. Even the same respondents surveyed in both data sets are aging, many of them reached their 50s and 60s. Thus the revisit of the children of Cultural Revolution is at the right time to check out their early life adversity and later resilience over the life course.

## **Theory**

My theory comes from three parts. The life-course Paradigm and human ecology approach are general rules of life course principles; the resilience theory is one system that is made up of several social psychological approaches.

### **2.1 Life-course Paradigm**

Started by Elder, the Life-course Paradigm(Elder, 1996: 39-41) has four distinctive themes in theory: (1) the interplay of human lives and changing historical times and

places, which is especially significant in rapidly changing societies, and illustrates cohort effects, one of the ways in which lives can be influenced by social change. History can also be expressed as a period effect when the influence of social change is relatively uniform across successive birth cohorts; (2) human agency in choice making and social constraints: within the constraints of their world, people would plan and choose from options that become the building blocks of their evolving life course; (3) the timing of lives: the social meanings of age have brought a temporal, age-graded perspective to social roles and events; and (4) linked or independent lives: human lives are typically embedded in particular configurations of social relationships with kin, friends, and others across the life span. Social regulation, support and patterning occurs in part through these relations and relationships with significant others.

## **2.2 Human Ecology Approach**

The life course orientation emphasizes the potential importance of trajectories, transitions and their timing (Clouse, 1986; Elder, 1985); the human ecology approach would emphasize the significance of context and viewing development as a joint function of characteristics of the person and the environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Transitions and events experienced in adulthood always occur within the context of ongoing life trajectories, therefore, adults confront the stressors of adulthood equipped with differing levels of social and personal resources would have different levels of resilience in the face of stressors.

## **2.3. Resilience theory**

Resilience, a more psychological term, can be defined as the capacity to cope with life's setbacks and challenges. The concepts of resilience and protective factors are the obverse of vulnerability and risk factors. There are two sets of protective factors promote resilience in face of adversity: social resources and personal resources (Rutter, 1987; Schaefer & Moos, 1992). Social resources pertain to social integration or connectedness and consist of social bonds different forms, such as multiple role occupancy, the presence of a confidant relationship, good relationship with family and friends, and access to support networks. *Such social connectedness enables individuals to withstand stressful events and strains.* Personal resources encompass subjective dispositions such as self-reliance, self-understanding, empathy, altruism, maturity and basic values and priorities. One important psychological resource is a sense of mastery, involving assessments about how well one can deal with ambiguous or stressful situations. *Such attributes contribute to an individual's capacity to cope with adversity.* Both personal and social recourses have been termed as psychosocial recourses, or coping recourses. (Moen and Erickson, 1995). Overall, individuals with high levels of personal and social resources are typically more effective in the face of life stressors and strains than those who have less such assets.

Current theoretical approaches used in studying intergenerational connections are socialization and status attainment. (Moen and Erickson, 1995) Socialization theory would suggest the importance of early childhood experiences and social learning in "significant others" in family, school and general transmission of ideologies, orientation and behavior. Status attainment approach models educational and

occupational achievement and underscores the importance of both socioeconomic background and parental encouragement for educational, occupational and economic success (Blau&Duncan, 1967; Featherman & Hauser, 1978; Sewell&Hauser, 1975) What matters most for children’s resilience as adults is their family of origins’ position in social structure. Both socialization theory and status attainment approach should be combined in a complex, interactive way and each would modify the effects of the other (Moen and Erickson, 1995).

### **Research Objectives and Hypotheses**

#### **3.1 Research Objectives**

Given the findings in previous study (Zhou and Hou, 1999) of the sent-down youth that negative effects on individuals’ life courses and reported resilient educational attainment and economic wellbeing in the long run, I would mark my starting point.

My research question in this study is (1) to identify the adversity embodied in the consequent life events of the “sent-down” cohort, in terms of educational attainment, marital status and fertility, initial work status and economic well-being; (2) to figure out the resilience of, and inequality between the “sent-down” cohorts exhibited in educational attainment and economic well-being (measured in recent previous year’s monthly income in the 2003 survey) and compare it with the cohorts that stayed in the city from 1968 to 1978, and (3) explain the mechanism for such resilience through the theoretical framework I listed before.

#### **3. 2 Hypotheses**

(1) To examine the adversity consequences of the “send-down” experiences on the children of the Cultural Revolution in China, I have these hypotheses:

*Hypotheses 1: The longer time the “send-down” youths stayed in the country, the fewer year of education they would obtain.*

Although the “sent-down” youth had almost all been interrupted the opportunity to get further education, to show the adversity side of the event on educational achievement, I have this hypothesis. Even though Chinese government allowed equal opportunity and opened college entrance exam as a pathway of mobility in 1977/1978, “send-down” events had virtually reduced the opportunity of further education for these youth.

*Hypotheses 2: The longer time the “send-down” youths stayed in the country, the older they were at the age of first marriage.*

I set up this hypothesis to test a finding in the previous study, which could also show the adverse effects of “send-down” event to life-course timing.

*Hypotheses 3: The longer time the “send-down” youths stayed in the country, the less likely they would find a job in government/military/state-owned enterprise that represented higher prestige as first job.*

I set up this hypothesis to test the adverse effects of “send-down” event to career development. The first job of these “sent-down” youth after they came back to the city could indicate their SES. Although Chinese government had started the early “open and reform” efforts, a job in government/military/state-owned enterprise still represented the higher prestige than jobs in other organizations, or no job at all.

(2) To find out the possible resilience the “sent-down” cohort exhibited in educational attainment and economic well-being, and compare the results with the cohorts that

stayed in the city from 1968 to 1978, I have these hypotheses:

*Hypotheses 4: Controlling for age, the percentage of getting college degree is higher among the “send-down” youths compared with that of the “stay-in-the-city” youth.*

If this hypothesis is proved, it is justified to say that “sent-down” youths are more resilient in educational attainment than the reference group.

*Hypotheses 5: Controlling for age, the “send-down” youths get higher income(measured in recent previous year’s monthly income in the 2003 survey) compared with that of the “stay-in-the-city” youth.*

If this hypothesis is proved, it is justified to say that “sent-down” youths are more resilient in economic well-being than the reference group in China’s market transition.

## **Hypotheses, Data and Methods**

### **4.1 Data**

The empirical data in this study is based on 2003 General Social Survey of China (released in 2007, CGSS 2003 for short), a multi-stage stratified national probability sample of 5894 adults aged from 18 to 69 from all regions of mainland China (except for Tibet, Hong Kong and Macao). 2835 male and 3059 female respondents were sampled across the country, and all the samples came from urban China<sup>2</sup>. While the survey gathered extensive information on respondents’ social, political, and economic conditions, some modules of the data dealt with respondents. life histories and job activities.

I choose this data for two considerations: first, it is the most recent national data set

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<sup>2</sup> Due to historical traditions and policy differentiates, urban and rural parts of China are not comparable in terms of labor markets and educational attainments and returns. Although comparison of the two would be interesting, the data collection in rural areas is more complicated and existing data sets are usually confined within a limited geographic area.

officially released, and could capture new trends in the topic this study concerns; second, it has an ideally fitted comparable variables with previous studies, so that I could test some confirmed effects suggested by earlier studies and develop the explorations. The data set used by Zhou and Hou (1999) in their “The State and Life Chances in Urban China” Project was collected in 1993 and 1994. They selected 6 provinces (Hebei, Heilongjiang, Gansu, Guangdong, Jiangsu, and Sichuan) with each representing a conventional geographical region with different levels of development. Their sample size is 2793, of which 855 had been sent down. CGSS 2003 has covered all the 6 provinces in Zhou and Hou’s paper, and of the 5253 effective samples, 628 had been sent down.

## **4.2 Variables**

### *Response variable*

*Income:* Sum of monthly earned income, including regular wages, bonuses, subsidies, or profits from market businesses. For majorities of respondents, I take monthly earnings from a job (averaged over the 12 months in the preceding year of survey), which was measured in RMB (1 yuan=U.S.\$1.4). For respondents without a fixed rate of wages, I would divide the net income from their family (of family business) by the number of working family members and 12 months.

### *Explanatory variable*

*Send-down:* A dummy variable to identify if the respondents were sent down to the country side from the city and with yes=1 and no=0.

*Years in the Countryside:* A continuous variable measure by years, could be from 0 to

11 or more. I approximate it by taking the difference of the year the respondent returned to the city and the year sent down to the countryside.

*Age:* Age is included to capture any cohort, period, and age effect. CGSS 2003 surveyed respondents' birth year; I approximate the difference between 2003 and birth year to get the age. Respondents were aged from 18 to 69. I will only choose the respondents within the age range of the sent-down cohort.

*Sex:* Gender differences may affect the life-course consequences in either adversity aspects or resilience aspects. This variable is coded as a dummy variable, with 1=male and 0=female.

*Education:* As a key variable, education is included in the models for analyses. The CGSS 2003 data recorded respondents' education level by 11 different categories. I recode the education variable into two dummy variables: college, senior high school, with junior high school or below omitted.

*Party membership:* This variable is a popular one for indicating respondents' political capital, and is of particular significance in studying the inequality of state socialist countries, even the focus is a transitional market. The CGSS 2003 survey asked people's political membership, and in this study, it is coded as a dummy variable with yes=1 and no=0. There might be a problem because getting party membership might just had happened close the year of survey.

*Social Origin* Father's education and occupational status are indicators of social origins, according to Zhou and Hou's 1999 coding. A set of dummy variables indicates father's origins are created: college, senior high school, with junior high

school omitted. Father's sociopolitical status is a key factor that defines "social origin". CGSS 2003 has different categories that could be useful for me to classify father's occupations into 5 categories: high-rank cadre, low-rank cadre, high-rank professional, low-rank professional, and worker as a reference category.

*Traditional Class Background* This is an old-fashioned categorization used in China before its abolition in 1979, but it could be a useful historical classification of social class, especially during the Cultural Revolution. As Zhou and Hou did in 1999, I would classify them into four dummies: workers/poor peasants; cadre; middle class (small business owners, idle-rich peasants, and intellectuals); "exploiting class" (large business owners, landlords, "rightists", "bad elements") and make middle class background as the reference category and omit it.

*Type of Work Organization:* In a socialist redistributive economy, type of work organization is related with SES. The state sector includes government agencies, public organizations and state firms. A hybrid choices are the nonstate sector. I use this variable as an indicator for the differentiation of SES for the "sent-down" youth as their first job after returning to the city.

### **4.3 Methods**

I will use chi-square test to that the null hypothesis that no substantive differences are observed in major life course events (education attainment, age of first marriage, first job type)

For the income, I will choose Log (Y), logarithm of monthly earnings as the response variable. (Y is the monthly manifest income). The income determinants will be the

conventional OLS estimation of a multivariate linear regression model.

For the reliance thesis, I will use log-linear modeling. Given the interest in moderating factors rather than simply linear effects, I would present the data in the form of higher order interactions, and examine the relationships among variables. To access possible interactions between explanatory characteristics, I use the logit form of log-linear analysis. Log-linear analysis is a method used within a group of categorical variables, which generates expected frequencies that could be compared with the observed frequencies to evaluate the fit of the model, and choose the most parsimonious model that fits the data.

Although I can also use multiple regression and avoid having to dichotomize any of the continuous variables, log-linear analysis could avoid making the invalid assumptions that are inevitable in linear regression analysis about the linearity of effects.

## Notes:

Human lives carry the imprint of their particular social worlds and times of rapid change can bring personal disruption and incoherence of one kind or another. Robert Redfield (1955:63; Elder 1995: 101) observed that in times of drastic change, the lifeway of “any one kind of person, man or woman, factory worker or business man, becomes within itself inconsistent and inconclusive... the ends of life become obscure”. The idea inspired my proposal presented here.

It would be great if this study would map out the adversity and resilience of the send-down cohorts as children of Cultural Revolution. Due to the current limitation of

data that has too few variables on parental emotional well-being and socialization variables, as well as later life-wellbeing both economically and physically, I would have difficulty in clearly modeling the resilience mechanism. If the CGSS in following years could include these data, that would be a suitable one. The key element is to be quick. After all, children of Cultural Revolution are aging. (The respondents who have experienced “send-down” event (1966-1978) are between 50 to 70 years old in 2008; data collection should catch up quickly, otherwise there would not be enough respondents.

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