Family Background and Higher Education in China

Asian Family Matters

Changing Family in Asia Cluster
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This brief is intended to provide an overview of research produced by the Changing Family in Asia Cluster at the Asia Research Institute.

Jean Yeung is Research Leader of the Changing Family in Asia Cluster at the Asia Research Institute and Professor at the Department of Sociology, NUS. This edition of *Asian Family Matters* features her article about the role of family background and gender in accessing college education in contemporary China before and after the rapid college expansion since 1999.

**Background**

Higher education policies have long been part of China’s strategy towards modernisation. After the disruption of the Cultural Revolution, when intellectuals were denounced and colleges closed, Deng Xiaoping reinstated the National College Entrance Examination in 1978 and emphasised the important role of higher education for China’s developmental strategy to become a global economic power. In 1999, the Chinese government announced a new policy which aimed to achieve “mass higher education” through expansion of the higher education system. Although Chinese college attendance rates remain low by international standards, after a decade of educational expansion the annual college enrolment had nevertheless increased quickly from 1 million in 1998 to 6.3 millions in 2009.

As tertiary education holds the key for professional, managerial, and government positions, access to higher education has important long-term implications for an individual’s life chances and intergenerational mobility. In particular, higher education is a golden ticket for China’s rural youth to gain the urban *hukou* status. Drawing on data from the Chinese General Social Survey collected between 2005 and 2008, Yeung compares educational stratification before and after the 1999 college expansion. Has the college expansion policy served as a great equaliser by providing more opportunities for upward mobility for youth who had been more disadvantaged before the reform? Or has the reform increased inequality by improving access to higher education disproportionately for those who are already privileged? Yeung’s analysis shows how access to higher education in China has changed since 1999 and contributes to a growing international, comparative literature on higher educational expansion and social stratification.

**Key findings**

Yeung found that to some extent the recent college expansion has acted as an equalising force in the sense that nowadays more youths of different social characteristics are able to attain college education than before the 1999 reform. Tertiary education has become less elitist as more children from the emerging middle classes manage to access the college gates. Gender inequality in higher education has also declined and even reversed. Women have about 20 percent higher odds of transitioning to vocational or technical colleges and an equal chance of transitioning to academic colleges than do men in post-expansion years. However, Yeung cautions that this
could also be due to other social forces such as the one-child policy, which may have prompted parents to invest in their only child regardless of gender.

Despite an overall improvement in access to higher education and an increase in the number of college graduates, important intergenerational inequalities persist. Yeung finds that family background becomes a stronger factor for college attendance after the education expansion. Young people from more socioeconomically advantaged families maintain their edge by obtaining more years of schooling and better quality education than others. In particular, those with highly educated parents have significantly higher chance of attending college. In addition to having a higher income in general, parents with a higher education background tend to have higher expectations of their children’s schooling, invest more in their children’s cultural capital and are more involved in their children’s educational activities. These are long-term benefits that go beyond a family’s ability to finance college tuition and will contribute to the widening of the gap in educational attainment of children from different family backgrounds.

In addition to class-based and intergenerational inequalities, the rural-urban divide is crucial for understanding patterns of higher education stratification in contemporary China. Yeung highlights that rural youth face a range of structural challenges that make it difficult for them to obtain a college education and also lower their expectations to pursue high school education. She suggests that the root of their disadvantage lies in their transition from junior high to high school as rural youth have a much lower chance (about 30 percent) of attending either vocational or academic high schools. In addition, the lower quality of elementary and junior high school in rural areas weakens students’ competitiveness in high school and college entrance exams. Finally, rural youth are disadvantaged not only because of their rural hukou status that restricts their opportunity to attend secondary schools and colleges in urban areas, but also because of their disadvantaged family background as indicated by the much lower occupational status and educational attainment of their parents.

The impact of college expansion policy on social stratification in China will be long lasting. Given that secondary school attendance presents a bottleneck for a large part of the population, making secondary school education free will be a critical step in equalising access to tertiary education in China in the long run. Relaxing or abolishing the hukou system to equalise development and social safety nets provided in urban and rural areas would be another important measure. More resources and opportunities should be channelled to those from disadvantaged family backgrounds, particularly the rural underclass, starting with a greater investment in school systems much earlier than college.

Further reading
For further reading of the article, visit the website of *Chinese Sociological Review*:
http://mesharpe.metapress.com/app/home/contribution.asp?referrer=parent&backto=issue,4,6;journal,2,9;linkingpublicationresults,1:122370,1
Forthcoming conference and call for papers

International Conference: Growing Up in One-Parent Family in Asia (July 1-2, 2014)

Conveners: W. Jean Yeung and Hyunjoon Park.

The Changing Family in Asia cluster will hold an international conference on Growing Up in One-Parent Family in Asia, which will take place at the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore, 1 - 2 July 2014. This conference aims to bring together scholars, practitioners and policy makers to examine the trend and prevalence of one-parent family in Asia as well as the consequences of such family structure for the well-being of children. We invite original paper proposals using qualitative and/or quantitative methods. The deadline for submission of abstracts is 1 March 2014.

More details about this conference and the proposal submission form can be found here:

http://www.ari.nus.edu.sg/events_categorydetails.asp?categoryid=6&eventid=1513

Paper presentations by cluster members

Several of our cluster members and cluster associates presented papers at international conferences.

Living Alone: One-person Households in Asia, ARI, NUS, 5-6 December 2013


Premchand Dommaraju, “Single-person Households in South Asia”.

Discrepancies between Behavior and Attitudes towards Marriage in Asia, ARI, NUS 13-14 February 2014

Erin Hye Won Kim and Adam Cheung “Impacts of Life Stage Transitions on Women’s Family-related Attitudes in Korea”.

Gavin W. Jones, “Convergence of Marriage Systems in Asia?”

Jean Yeung and Shu Hu “Family Value and Marriage Behaviour in Modern China”.

Maznah Mohamad, “Islam, State and Patriarchal Dividends: A Study of the Family Support Division of the Syariah Judicial Department of Malaysia”.

Yingchun Ji “Trapped between Traditional and Modern Roles: Single, Educated Women in Shanghai”.