Introduction

The Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976 constitutes a significant episode of the contemporary history of China. As the established political structure, economic orders, and social norms were disrupted across the entire country, a whole generation of young Chinese were deprived of the opportunity of higher education. In 1977, after eleven years of higher education suspension, universities and colleges resumed recruitment on the basis of academic merit. Despite the life course interruption, many individuals who lost their chances during the Cultural Revolution years eventually go back to campus and acquire postsecondary educational credentials (either junior college diploma or college degrees).

Evidence exists at the population level that the disadvantaged generation indeed exhibited substantial resilience against adverse historical circumstances. Based on an 1% sample of 1990 Chinese Census data and 10% sample of 2000 Census, Xie (unpublished report) provided a rough estimate of 5.5 million who obtained junior college or college credentials beyond the age of 25 between 1990 and 2000.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.

However, we lack a nuanced understanding of the life course resilience of the Cultural Revolution generation. This study performs individual level analysis and compares the cohorts whose college entrance was constrained during 1966-1976 with non-Cultural Revolution cohorts. We found that the effects of certain predictors of the likelihood of attending college at non-normative ages (21-50) differ toward the Cultural Revolution cohorts and non-Cultural Revolution cohorts.

Data and Method

Populations of Interest: Chinese urban residents who were not enrolled in higher education institutions by age 20.

Data: Three City Survey fielded in Shanghai, Wuhan, and Xi’an in 1999 (N=4,444).

- Those who were younger than 21 at the time of survey and those who were enrolled in junior college or college before 21 are dropped, yielding an analytic sample with 4,112 cases. (Cf. Table 2.)
- Retrospective information on respondents’ educational history and early life circumstances are used to construct person-period data. The exposure to risk (enrollment in higher education institutions) starts at age 21. The observational window extends to the year 1999. In addition, if an individual hits 59 and still is not enrolled in higher education, he/she is censored.

Method: Discrete-time event-history model.

- Outcome: Person-year exposure to the risk of enrollment in junior college or college over ages 21-50.

Results and Conclusion

As presented in Table 3, most effects operate in the expected direction. Men are more likely to go back to college campus. Age and competing life course alternatives (i.e., marriage and the first job) suppress the likelihood of adult higher education. On the other hand, political capital (party membership) and academic preparedness (years of schooling) have a positive impact.

For the Cultural Revolution cohorts, party membership matters even more than the same direction, possibly due to the historical circumstances. However, marriage means more of a concerted educational investment. Years of schooling is less effective, which may be due to poor education quality during and shortly before the Cultural Revolution.