Full-time adult undergraduates as a new group in Chinese public universities in the 21st century: An intrinsic case

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Introduction
This paper explores an adult undergraduate’s educational experiences. The data form part of my research on the recent new phenomenon of full-time adult students studying at Chinese public universities. This research addresses a wider range of issues than is reported in this paper, including adult students’ motives for attending higher education, their experiences of being at university and the influence of higher education on them.

As an intrinsic case, one participant (SG) experienced specific events over a span of 50 years. He grew up in the Cultural Revolution and worked in several state work units in the 1980s. He started to run his own business in the early 1990s. Then, he prepared for his dream of being a full-time university student from 2004 and realised it in 2006. Thus, his story included two periods: the period of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976); and the period of the reforms and opening-up (1980s- Present). Through this case, I explore how social forces have influenced people’s learning lives in a Chinese context in terms of exclusion from and access to learning.

Background: policy changes
During the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese government focused on political mobilisations and campaigns, which disrupted economic and educational progression (Zhou, 2004). In particular, the Cultural Revolution involved a form of collective violence against teachers and intellectuals (Gong, 2003). Many schools and colleges were closed while many intellectuals were sent to rural labour camps. The university entrance exams were suspended from 1967 and instead entrance was based on political criteria favouring students with worker and peasant origins in order to achieve social equality. Middle school and high school graduates had to have work experience in the rural areas before they could be recommended for entry to university (Hayhoe, 1996). In this regard, government policies and priorities completely dominated people’s educational and life chances; thus, people had no control over their lives. In brief, the education system and its expansion based on student demand were brought to a visible halt. One whole generation, China’s ‘lost generation’, had no education.
After the Cultural Revolution ended, the government developed a new ‘open door’ policy and initiated Chinese economic reforms in 1978 in order to pursue Chinese modernisation. Education was viewed as a key element to realise this goal. As a result, the higher education system was rebuilt in the late 1970s (The World Bank, 1997). The national university entrance examination was restored in 1977, thus establishing a merit-based system instead of the previous political criterion. At the beginning of the 1980s, the government also started to seek international support in order to strive for the development of higher education and alleviate the manpower shortage caused by the Cultural Revolution (Hayhoe, 1996). Under the support of the World Bank, the government was encouraged to expand university enrolment and establish large comprehensive universities through the amalgamation of specialised institutions. Moreover, the projects of the World bank and Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) offered university staff opportunities to study and do research abroad. International specialists were also invited to enter Chinese institutions in order to support curriculum and research development. With the increase of international activities, English became one of the main subjects in the annual university entrance exams (Turner and Acker, 2002).

With the expansion of Chinese higher education, the Chinese government has adopted new policies to adapt to this tendency. In particular, the limitations based on marital status and age for national college entrance examinations were abolished in 2001. That is, Chinese adults have more access to higher education than in the decades before 2000. They received higher education through informal routes such as night schools until the 1990s. However, adults who are older than 25 years old or married can currently qualify for entry as full-time students in public higher education sectors on condition that they pass the annual national entrance examinations. This significant change allows adults to pursue full-time undergraduate programmes at institutions through the formal traditional route.

**Theoretical and methodological basis**

In this paper, regarding the individual’s transition to higher education, Zang’s (2000) work on the children of the Cultural Revolution and Vernon’s (1972) theories on human interaction are quoted frequently to explore how the individual’s life course was greatly shaped and altered by social contexts and state policies in a Chinese context in terms of identity. To interpret the individual’s perceptions of his own life course, phenomenology was selected as research paradigm as a result of its emphasis on people’s perceptions of what happens. Thus, the life history interview was also employed to obtain the subjective accounts of the participant.

The three hour audio-taped interview with the individual focused on his own understanding of his learning journey. He started to introduce his family background and told his story chronologically. In narrating, SG reconstructed the connections between events with or without his consciousness so an insight was gained into how policy-induced life events in the Cultural Revolution have affected individuals’
subsequent life courses. This reflects the special importance of narratives, through which people express their own understanding of events and experiences (Atkinson, 2004). More importantly, in agreement with Atkinson, SG referred to how his life has been greatly affected by external circumstances. This provided short cuts to a Chinese context and forged the connections between his life events and political, economic, and social changes. As a result, these made his experiences meaningful and understandable. His narrative also contributed to a good understanding of his identity. In common with Gibbs (2007), SG disclosed what kind of person he thought he was or would like others to think he was. Especially when talking about key events in his life, he made reference to the instances of how he saw himself.

Additionally, SG actively provided his informal essays without them being solicited so the method of documentary research was used. These essays, which he had written in the last few years, included his previous and current experiences, his own feelings about these experiences and his perspectives on Chinese situations. In agreement with Yin (2009), all of these were adjuncts to his life history interviews. The essays provided more detailed information about the context of events such as the Cultural Revolution, and supported corroborative evidence of the findings from the life history interview. His writings also helped to explain and verify the particular vocabulary used in the Cultural Revolution. Some of the words and terms used in his interviews were unknown to me. Therefore, the multiple sources of evidence contributed to an in-depth understanding of the intrinsic case.

Research findings

Programmed life in the Cultural Revolution: exclusion from learning

The Cultural Revolution completely affected SG’s learning and further changed his life. As the prestigious head of a primary school and a lecturer in a teacher training college, SG’s mother and father were considered to be the old elite and, therefore, ready targets in political campaigns; they were sent to labour camps at the beginning of the turbulent period. As a consequence, SG was labelled ‘bad class’ (coming from an intellectual family) and he had to stop learning after graduation from primary school. As he expressed it:

I belonged to the ‘bad’ class during the Cultural Revolution. Only Children from the families of workers and peasants were permitted to study at that time. If parents had political problems, their children couldn't learn. This policy was brought in in the 1960s... My parents were denounced. Could I study at school? No, I couldn’t.

SG was deprived of educational chances due to his family origins. This was because the government aimed to redistribute educational opportunities in favour of the youth of the labouring class by restricting or removing the chances of those of other classes (White, 1976). Under such circumstances, in order to help SG redress his negative class background and build a new positive self image, his mother
suggested physical work, saying ‘Now you aren’t eligible for learning. You’re going to learn how to do manual work and how to be a good person.’ As Zang (2000) suggests, this parental approach contributed to the establishment of a new social identity among disadvantaged children. This was because at that time, the government also focused on sending urban youth to the rural and mountain areas to do physical work, through which they could learn from peasants and be re-educated (Liu, 2007). Thus, SG started his programmed life in which he had no choice but to perform physical work in the countryside near his city.

However, after a gap of six years, SG had an educational opportunity to restart his learning because Deng Xiaoping was rehabilitated and became China’s vice-premier in 1973, with the result that schools opened again (Chang, 1991). His parents were released and returned to work at school. However, another political campaign began several months after SG started his studies. As a consequence, he had to leave school again. As SG remarked:

Deng Xiaoping returned to work in 1973. At that time, my mother was already out of the camp and she was later appointed as head teacher in a school. My mother was very worried that I only finished my studies at primary school. She tried her best to place me in a junior secondary school and in fact I studied there for some months… Another political campaign started… My mother was sent to a labour camp again. She didn’t come out of the camp until the Cultural Revolution ended in 1976. I didn’t attend school until then, so I worked in the countryside for ten years.

Owing to his family origins, he lost another educational opportunity. During this period of his second exclusion from education, SG clearly realised that he had to do something to strive for the ray of hope of becoming university educated; otherwise he would have no chance to receive such an education as a result of his family origins in the Cultural Revolution. As Zang (2000) points out, deprivation causes individuals to be sensitive to others’ attitudes and further to seek ways of adapting to threatening situations. As mentioned previously, the state admissions policy gave priority to workers and peasants. During this particular period, students were required to participate in productive labour for three years before they applied for universities and colleges or were recommended for admission to these institutions (Chan, 1978). Accordingly, in order to cross the ‘class line’ in education and strive for eligibility for an educational opportunity, SG decided to go to a remote mountain area and become one of the ‘educated youth’ (Zhou, 2004, p.125) through hard manual labour. As he commented in his writings:

When I was 18 years old, I insisted on returning to my hometown to be a peasant. Lots of people around me disapproved of my decision. I was stubbornly persistent… I left school twice. My short-term education in a junior school had revived my interest in learning. If I had continued to work in the countryside, I would never have had any chance to study at school.
because my parents were victims of political campaigns. I thought that it was right behaviour if I could gain an opportunity to learn as a result of hard work in the village. At that time, I tried to seek a ray of hope from extreme disappointment. This was because I understood that nobody could actually guarantee me an education after I had done physical work.

SG aspired to recoup his impaired education through positive behaviour consistent with the official policy. However, his dawn-to-dusk work did not create any educational opportunity for him. As he commented in his writing, 'I remember that my last wish was to study in a local training college... However, this wish wasn’t fulfilled'. This evidence supports the findings of Zang (2000) that the deprived children affirmed the official ideology to re-establish their positive perceptions of themselves but failed. It is thus suggested that society as an invisible hand constrained people's behaviour and further formed their lives. They had neither the ability nor space to change their lives during the Cultural Revolution. Accordingly, SG continued his rural life, which was fully programmed and controlled by the government, with a strong sense of deprivation until the Cultural Revolution ended in 1976.

**Access to learning after the Cultural Revolution**

When Deng Xiaoping re-emerged in 1977, he re-introduced the college entrance examination system, which offered SG an educational opportunity and changed his life. He passed the exam and enrolled to study at a technical school in order to seek employment afterwards. As he remarked:

My initial idea was that I would go to a high school... My mother told me, ‘You are 23. Now the first thing is to think about employment. You could go to study in a technical school first.’ Then I studied at technical school after I passed the exam... I didn’t like this course at technical school very much... But I took the test without thinking. I didn’t know anything. It would be OK for me as long as I could learn... At that time... I thought that few people would like to study in that school. And I didn’t know whether I would be able to compete with high school graduates... I chose this major, which wasn’t the most attractive subject and wouldn’t be popular with many people.

SG showed an instrumental motive for learning. The short term goal of having an opportunity to learn took precedence over his long term goal of attending higher education. As Vernon (1972) points out, to achieve an interest may mean to subordinate other interests; therefore, the justification for motive decisions may change. However, his initial goal of going to university re-emerged when graduating from technical school. He said, ‘I burnt all professional books used at technical school when I graduated... I did want to go to university after graduation.’ Nevertheless, owing to his excellent study results, the technical school allocated him a teaching post. His parents persuaded him to take this good job. Thus, his academic ambition was delayed until 2001.
While working, SG continued to read works on Chinese traditional culture, written by Chinese gurus who had studied abroad. This facilitated his in-depth understanding of these works at university. This supports Gallacher, et al.’s (2002, p.501) points of view that persisting in informal learning can facilitate adults’ return to formal learning. Informal learning is regarded as a ‘stepping-stone’ to formal learning.

**Life chances in economic transformation: economic capital for learning**

Since the late 1980s, the government has aimed to transform the economy from a centralized state-control model into a dynamic market model. This facilitated new job opportunities for employment in the private sector (Zhou, 2004). However, the majority still chose to work in the state sector, as it resulted in higher social status and more stable economic resources. In contrast, SG refused to continue his professional career in a government sector and chose to start his own business in the early 1990s. Although he had lost welfare benefits (such as health care and housing) provided by the state sector, he was successful in running his business and became a boss, thus gaining high economic payoffs.

In this way, SG started his ‘choice biography’ (Fuller, 2007) with the changes in state policies. This life choice made it possible for him to become a full-time learner at university 10 years later. As Gallacher, et al. (2002, p.504) point out, financial support was ‘important both as an initial incentive that encouraged people to become involved in a learning career, and as a means of support that might enable them to proceed and become more fully engaged with this career’.

**Going to university in the 21st century**

SG aspired to compensate for the missed educational opportunities as a consequence of the Cultural Revolution, and to realise his dream of pursuing studies at university. When in 2001 a government policy was introduced that relaxed the age limitations for university entrance, his academic ambition began to be realised. As he remarked:

> In the first year when age limitation was cancelled, I went to attend a training class for the university entrance examinations. I paid tuition fees. But I had many things to deal with in my business at that time, so I stopped going after a while. I was very busy. It wasn’t realistic. But I have paid less attention to the business since then.

SG’s imagined identity as a university student conflicted with his actual role as a boss of his private factory, which occupied most of his time, thus causing the failure of his first attempt to learn. However, his second attempt to study at high school in preparation for a university entrance examination was successful. This was because he chose to be a full-time learner at high school by giving up his actual role as a boss in 2004. As he commented, ‘I gave the running of my factory to my brother-in-law. Then I started to learn’. This shows that adult students’ decision to study causes them to separate from their past lives and identities (Baxter and Britton,
SG’s escape from his previous role and identity meant that his commitment moved to his new identity as a full-time learner. He studied at high school for two years, during which he developed an ancillary motive, outside of this paper, for attending higher education. Later he became a full-time undergraduate in an elite university.

**Summary**
Being one of the lost generation in the Cultural Revolution, SG’s experiences of transition to higher education were explored in terms of identity. Social capital, which was not discussed in this paper, also impacted on his learning experiences. During the Cultural Revolution, class origins became the determining factor prescribing people’s future. Thus, SG had a programmed life: he was deprived of educational chances and had to do physical work in the rural areas for the 10 years in which he should have studied at school. With the changes in the government policies that started in 1978, he had opportunities to learn and further made his life choices; in particular, he became a full-time adult undergraduate through the formal traditional route. His story illustrates the interaction of government policies, global influences and an individual’s identity, in constructing chances and limitations for the individual’s choice-making process in China.

**References**


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