

The impacts of an early biographical experience on later subjective-well-being: the case of China's Cultural Revolution cohort?

Qianhan Lin

Abstract

Based on the first wave of the China's General Social Survey, this paper aims to explore the impacts of an adverse biographical experience on subjective well-being (happiness) and relative deprivation of one particular cohort of Chinese urban residents whose transition to adulthood was greatly disrupted by the Cultural Revolution - the rusticates. To achieve the goal of this paper, comparisons are made not only between the rusticates and non-rusticates, but also between rusticates and preceding and succeeding cohorts when other factors are held constant.

1 Introduction

Happiness, or subjective well-being in a broader term, has been enlisted in recent years by social scientists, especially economists as one of the important measures of quality of life. It attempts to capture people's well-being beyond a mere evaluation of economic resources. Past literature suggests various factors determine the level of life satisfaction, such as age, income, marital status, employment status, etc. Yet only limited studies look at the impact of adverse biographical experiences like fighting in the war, growing in economic hardship, childhood abuse on later subjective well-being. The turmoil experienced by the Chinese young people during China's Cultural Revolution offers a natural experiment for us to examine this. Between 1966 and 1978, about 17 million Chinese urban school graduates were rusticated from their cities of origin to become rural labourers, many spending several years in the rural areas before returning to their original homes. Most of them were once the hot-blooded 'Red Guards' owing to the vital role they played during the early years

of the Cultural Revolution, but are now labelled as the ‘Lost Generation’ because of their deprived youth spent in the mountainous areas or farming villages where they were engaged in back-breaking agricultural and manual work in the field, cut off from families and lost the social networks and lifestyle they once had. The wide participation in the Cultural Revolution led to the disruption of formal education for the youths in cities. Only a few of them resumed their schooling during or at the end of the Revolution.

Several studies on the generation of the rusticates have found that the rustication episode disrupted the social lives of this generation, and caused prolongations in entry to matrimony, parenthood and the urban labour market (Chen, 1999; Zhou and Hou, 1999; Meng and Gregory, 2002). They are also more likely to be lay-offs as they were close to the marginal age of retirement when the industrial reforms took place in the late 1990s, and lack of educational credentials and seniority due to their interrupted schooling and delayed entry into the urban labour market (Hung and Chiu, 2003). Their life experience appears to be vulnerable to the misfortunes of history.

Painful memories of the years away from home, vulnerable feelings regarding their situation during the country’s transitional period are common traits disclosed in memoirs or short essays collected from former rusticates (Jiang and Ashley, 2000; Xu, 1998; Chen, 1999; Hung and Chiu, 2003). Compared to the broad consensus on the marked role the rustication episode played in interfering with life course transitions of the affected generation, there is lack of empirical evidence to unravel how the rustication episode is related to later depression. This paper, hence, aims to investigate the consequences of the rustication, but on softer outcomes, precisely it examines rusticates subjective welling-being, relative deprivation and social behaviours. To examine the unique characteristic of the rusticates, I contrast the outcomes of the rusticates against their non-rusticated counterparts, also against the preceding and succeeding cohorts.

2 Data Source and Methods

For the empirical analysis of this paper, I use the attitudinal part of the 2003 China's General Social Survey. As part of the main themes of the CGSS to examine the quality of life and perceptions toward important social issues (Bian and Li, 2005), the survey includes a handful of indicators which are sufficient for answering the inquiries. I selected four questions after the initial data exploration. Each of them intends to represent one aspect of an individual's general well-being, relative deprivation and social behaviour. For each question I present the results of two models. The first includes all the respondents who were born before 1967 in the survey, and intends to show whether there are significant differences not only between the rusticates and non-rusticates, but also between rusticates and preceding and succeeding cohorts when other factors are held constant. The second model includes only the rusticates and non-rusticates. Rusticates are further classified based on the duration of their sent-down experience.

Happiness is coded in five categories: very unhappy, unhappy, so-so, happy and very happy. To simplify its interpretation I use a linear regression model for the analysis. Relative deprivation is measured based on two survey questions relate respondent's current socioeconomic situation to that of three years ago and those of peers in their age groups. Both questions intend to measure relative deprivation, each with different reference group. The responses to each question are "better", "same" and "worse". I adopt ordered logit regression model and multinomial regression model for the analyses of relative deprivation.

References

Bian, Yanjie. and Li, Lulu. *China's General Social Survey 2003 (CGSS 2003): a methodological report*. Proceedings of JGSS Colloquium, Osaka University of Commerce, 2005.

- Chen, Yixin. Lost in Revolution and Reform: the socioeconomic pains of China's Red Guards Generation, 1966-1996. *Journal of Contemporary China*, 8(21):219-239, 1999.
- Hung, Eva. P. W. and Chiu, Stephen. W. K. The lost generation: life course dynamics and Xiagang in China. *Modern China*, 29(2):204-236, 2003.
- Jiang, Yarong. and Ashley, David. *Mao's Children in the New China: Voices from the Red Guard Generation*. Routledge, 2000.
- Meng, Xin. and Gregory, R. G. The impac of interrrupted education on subsequent educational attainment: A cost of the Chinese Cultural Revolution. *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, 50(4):935-959, 2002.
- Xu, Youyu., editor. *1996: Women na yidai ren de huiyi (1966: The Reminiscences of Our Generation)*. Beijing: Zhongguo wenlian chuban gongsi, 1998.
- Zhou, Xueguang. and Hou, Liren. Children of the Cultural Revolution: The state and the life course in the People's Republic of China. *American Sociological Review*, 64:12-36, 1999.