

Hard to Realise, Harder to Relinquish: Young People's Attachment to the Promise of Higher Education in Contemporary Mainland China

Xiao Ma, School of Education, Durham University, Durham, UK

Research Overview

Drawing on young people's life histories and lived experiences, this study examines how young people in mainland China interpret the better life promised by higher education and remain attached to it when the promise itself becomes increasingly fragile.

Purpose of Study

This study analyses young people's attachment to higher education in contemporary mainland China. It investigates how higher education is imagined as a promise of liveable futures, and how this promise is learned, sustained, questioned, and renegotiated across contexts. This focus helps to move beyond broad and often polarised debates over whether participation in higher education does, or does not, lead to a better life. Rather than offering a generalised answer, the study seeks to provide a more contextually sensitive account of how young people make sense of the promises of higher education in relation to their own life histories and social locations. Furthermore, by detailing the everyday complexity of this attachment, the study avoids treating students' views as either marginal and irrelevant or as easily reducible to structural factors, thereby contributing to a more grounded reflection on inequality and injustice in higher education.

Research Methods

This study addresses these issues through 78 phenomenological interviews with 27 Chinese third-year undergraduate students. Purposive and snowball sampling were adopted for recruitment. Participants came from different fields of study and were drawn from a wide range of institutions, including key universities (n=8), regular universities (n=10), and vocational and technical colleges (n=7), to capture the diversity of the national higher education sector. Online interviews were transcribed verbatim by the author and analysed using NVivo.

Results and Discussion

During high school, participants commonly regarded higher education as a natural next step. Their attachment to higher education, jointly produced by school and family, was shaped by a narrative of delayed reward: present hardship would be compensated by a better

future. Yet this promise was often abstract and weakly grounded. Parents' expectations of the continuity between higher education and decent jobs reflected a historically situated imagination shaped by the pre-massification era of higher education, while schools' claims that university would bring a "better", "easier" life and enable social mobility often served to justify present exam-oriented practices. Consequently, participants entered university with either no clear expectations (n=7) or only vague and sometimes unrealistic imaginaries of university life (n=20).

After entering university, participants began to encounter the promise of higher education in its concrete complexity and fragility. Having no higher education experience or credential remained almost unimaginable, yet the convertibility of higher education into employment, security and mobility was perceived as conditional; university became another competitive field in which participants had to find their own ways to win. Such diffuse uncertainty reflected their perceptions of wider social conditions, including credential inflation (n=16), a highly hierarchised higher education system (n=15), and intensified competition (n=14). It was also verified in everyday experience, through peers' employment difficulties (n=11) and uncertain graduate destinations (n=8).

Drawing on the concept of cruel optimism, participants' university experiences can be understood as an educational *impasse*. Participants continued to devote themselves to university life but without a secure sense that such movement would lead to the futures promised by higher education. Subsequently, their responses, or everyday *gestures* of adjustment, varied. Some sought to become "better" through richer experiences and higher credentials, in order to maintain their self-identity and self-narrative (n=17); some questioned whether higher education was an endless and even pointless rat race, and sought to explore their life purpose outside this framework (n=9); some accepted their perceived "mediocrity" and lowered expectations (n=11); others embraced a logic of contentment, believing that happiness comes from wanting less (n=15); others saw university as a period in which they did not have to remain constantly tense, but could try out different possibilities (n=6).

It is noteworthy that students are neither merely victims of structural pressure nor fully autonomous agents. Instead, they live through uncertainty through affective attachment, pragmatic reasoning, and intuitive adjustment. Furthermore, these gestures remain open-ended: will they spark new practices or even changes, or will they be swiftly absorbed by the existing structures? The outcome remains to be seen. Finally, participants' capacity to manage this impasse is unevenly distributed across family resources, fields of study, institutional hierarchies, social networks, and labour-market opportunities. The study therefore suggests

that educational equity and justice should not be assessed only through readily measurable indicators, such as academic performance or graduate starting salaries. They should also be understood in relation to young people's uneven capacities to integrate higher education into their life narratives and convert it into liveable futures, and particularly to the unequal distribution of support systems that make such conversion possible.

Keywords

Higher education; Youth transitions; Precarity; Educational equity; Mainland China