

Differentiated Experiences and Intergenerational Educational Transmission in the Cultural Revolution:

A Comparative Study of “Red” and “Black” Class Rusticated Youth in China

Research Overview

This study examines whether and how the Cultural Revolution reshaped patterns of intergenerational educational transmission in China. Drawing on life-history interviews with rusticated youth from diverse political backgrounds, it analyzes how political stratification structured unequal life chances and informed parental educational strategies. The findings reveal both a disruption in educational transmission for the affected cohort and a stratified rebound in the subsequent generation.

Purpose of Study

A substantial body of research has shown that the Cultural Revolution disrupted the educational trajectories of an entire generation, most notably through the Send-Down Movement (1968–1980). This movement relocated approximately 16 million urban youth to rural areas, forcing them to interrupt their schooling and thereby exerting a profound impact on their subsequent life chances. Existing quantitative studies further suggest that, despite these disruptions, this cohort developed stronger educational aspirations for their children, exhibiting a compensatory effect in intergenerational educational transmission.

However, prior research has largely treated rusticated youth as a homogeneous group, overlooking internal stratification. As earlier studies indicate, political background played a crucial role in shaping life chances during the Cultural Revolution, especially in determining access to opportunities such as returning to urban areas.

Against this backdrop, this study asks: How did political stratification during the Cultural Revolution shape differential patterns of intergenerational educational transmission among rusticated youth?

To address this question, the study compares individuals from “red” (politically privileged groups, such as cadres, workers, and peasants) and “black” (politically stigmatized groups, such as landlords, intellectuals, and rightists) class backgrounds. It argues that unequal historical experiences, structured by political stratification, translated into differentiated parental educational strategies through distinct mechanisms across groups.

Research Methods

This study adopts a qualitative life-history approach. A total of 11 former rusticated youth were interviewed, all of whom experienced rustication during the Cultural Revolution but differed in political background: (1) six participants from “black” class backgrounds (politically stigmatized groups, including capitalists, rightists, and landlords), and (2) five participants from “red” class backgrounds (politically privileged groups, including workers and poor and lower-middle peasants).

Using a comparative analytical framework, the study examines: (1) the duration and intensity of rustication experiences; (2) access to educational and employment opportunities during and after the Send-Down Movement; and (3) parental educational aspirations and strategies toward their children.

By analyzing how differentiated experiences during and after the Cultural Revolution varied across political backgrounds and were linked to parents’ educational practices and aspirations for their children, this study provides a nuanced understanding of how politically stratified experiences shaped subsequent parental strategies. More broadly, it demonstrates how macro-level political forces interact with family-level agency and, in turn, indirectly shape intergenerational transmission strategies.

Results and Discussion

The findings demonstrate that political stratification during the Cultural Revolution fundamentally structured divergent life trajectories and intergenerational educational strategies among rusticated youth.

First, individuals from “red” class backgrounds experienced significantly shorter rustication periods and typically returned to urban areas within approximately two years, often before 1970. They subsequently gained access to opportunities such as military recruitment, employment in state-owned enterprises, and higher education, thereby achieving upward social mobility relative to their parents even during the Cultural Revolution.

In contrast, participants from “black” class backgrounds experienced more prolonged and severe educational disruption, with an average rustication duration of 8.6 years. Some remained in rural areas throughout nearly the entire Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). Even when they performed well in rural settings, they were systematically restricted from accessing educational and employment opportunities. As a result, they experienced pronounced downward mobility both during and after the Cultural Revolution.

These unequal experiences translated into differentiated parental strategies. While prior research emphasizes a general compensatory effect, this study shows that such compensation is stratified. Parents from “black” class backgrounds, who experienced the most severe disruption, exhibited a stronger drive to achieve upward mobility through their children’s education. By contrast, parents from “red” class backgrounds tended to frame educational investment as a rational response to the emergence of a credentialist society in the 1980s, rather than as a form of compensation.

Furthermore, this study explains an apparent paradox: despite limited immediate resources, “black” class families were able to promote upward mobility through their children’s education. This can be attributed to their pre-revolution elite backgrounds, which endowed them with enduring cultural capital. Such capital persisted through latent intergenerational transmission within family networks, highlighting its invisible yet durable influence.

Overall, these findings suggest that the Cultural Revolution disrupted one generation’s educational trajectory but did not fundamentally break intergenerational transmission. Rather, it reconfigured it in a stratified manner, shaped by political institutions and differential access to cultural capital.

Keywords: Cultural Revolution, Intergenerational educational transmission, Political stratification, Rusticated youth, Cultural capital