Sponsored Mobility and Educational Attainment: An Explanatory Model of Social Mobility

by

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Abstract

This paper examines sponsored educational opportunities and upward social mobility dynamics in contemporary urban China. Life history data collected from in-depth interviews with 82 urban well-offs is used, to illustrate two different processes of how educational attainment influences recruitment in urban China over time. The results show that, before the economic reforms, early recruitments were common among those without a higher education who would be sponsored subsequently for education and career advancement; and in the post-reform era, later recruitments are more common among those with a university education who have already attained professional success. The results also show that when a university education is becoming universal among elite candidates, the party/state sponsorship offers opportunities for qualitatively better education to young elites within the party/state system. This paper argues that the upward social mobility mechanisms are driven by the communist party state, which intervene the modernization and marketization process to promote the social mobility of some groups at the expense of others. A tentative explanatory model for social mobility is then put forward. The essence of its explanation lies in selective party/state treatment for people recruited from different family background at different time periods.
Key words
sponsored education, upward mobility, early recruitment, reform, party/state

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Introduction

To date, most studies on class inequalities in educational attainment have mainly used industrial-capitalist societies as the referential social settings. These studies use the hypothesis that educational expansion ameliorates class inequalities in attainment by creating more opportunities for participation in education (e.g. Shavit & Blossfeld 1993; Ishida et al. 1995; Breen & Jonsson 2000). Empirical studies have set out to demonstrate that across different industrialized countries, advantaged family class background consistently has a positive effect on children’s education, leading to higher level employment and better jobs (e.g. Raftery & Hout 1993; Shavit & Blossfeld 1993; Lucas 2001). A considerable number of quantitative studies—particularly status attainment models—have contributed to the explanation of this trend. In these studies, as well as class origin, researchers identified other plausible causes—such as households’ socioeconomic situation and parents’ educational attainment. However, quantitative explanations based on statistical analyses are incomplete because they lack a micro foundation (e.g. Boudon 1987). Moreover, the existing research focuses on industrialized societies, ignoring transitional societies, such as contemporary urban China with different mobility mechanisms.

This paper examines the role of institutional arrangements play in education and career advancement of different urban Chinese social groups, as a part of my PHD research
on upward mobility mechanisms in contemporary urban China. Institutional arrangements here refer to the stable channels through which resources are allocated among social groups and transferred from generation to generation, thereby linking social origins with attainment (Zhou et al. 1998). The paper offers a sponsored-mobility model to examine how institutional factors influence different social groups’ life chances, in addition to family class background. This examination will provide a micro foundation for the mobility patterns observed at the macro level, and an explanation of mobility mechanisms in a society in which state policies intervene in industrialization and market development to promote the social mobility of some groups at the expense of others. In the following sections, I will first describe the research design of this study. Using interview data from 82 gated community residents, I will examine how party/state sponsorships shaped their educational attainment and career advancement opportunities. Finally, I will discuss an explanatory model for social mobility.

**Methodology and Data**

This is a qualitative study of social stratification and mobility in post-socialist China. A qualitative approach is preferred because qualitative data capture information that elucidates mobility processes and consequences better than quantitative data. In-depth interviewing was chosen to document privileged access to valuable resources among advantaged social groups. Informants were recruited from among gated community residents in the city Shenyang in northeastern China. The majority of the residents in the gated communities are high-level public servants (that is, leading cadres), professionals, and private entrepreneurs, who are considered the urban well-offs in today’s China. Interviews were carried out with 82 residents from nearly twenty gated communities in Shenyang. All of the interviews ranged from 45 minutes to two hours (the average being one hour) and concentrated on the informants’ life history, particularly their educational attainments and
career mobility experiences. The average age of the informants was 46. Ninety percent of them had obtained a university or higher level education. About 40 percent of the informants had entered the workforce in 1960s and 1970s (before the economic reforms) and 60 percent of them started their careers in the 1980 or later (that is, after the reforms commenced).

**Sponsored Continuing Education before the Reform**

From the outset of the communist regime in 1949 to the Cultural Revolution, which ended in 1976, China’s communist government introduced strong policies to promote and improve educational opportunities for workers and peasants and their children at the expense of those from middle class backgrounds. The government expanded the formal education system, established an informal “mass education” alternative, and employed different enrollment criteria for people from different social backgrounds (Unger 1982; Deng and Treiman 1997). This set of reforms was specifically designed to reduce the effect of social class origins and to favor people with “working class” or “peasant class” background, on educational attainment.

At different times the Chinese Communist Party favored “redness” (political enthusiasm) or “expertise” (merit and ability) in its recruitment policies. Some scholars have pointed out that the first generation of communist leaders, recruited from illiterate and semi-illiterate peasants and workers before 1949, monopolized the center of power at both the central and local levels until the start of the Cultural Revolution in 1966 (Li & Walder 2001). Political loyalty and family class labeling was the key factor in elite recruitment until the end of Cultural Revolution (Unger 1982; Walder 1986; Lee 1991).

Therefore, the party recruited young members according to the pattern of “counterselection”—favoring those from politically designated family backgrounds at the expense of those with higher education—it then faced a pool of candidates for sponsorship
into elite positions who were insufficiently educated. A relatively straightforward solution to this problem was to send the younger recruits back to school for continuing education.

The interviewees who started their careers in the 1960s and 1970s were usually recruited into their workplaces when they were young. At the time they started work, most of them had just finished middle school, with any education after the 9th grade a rare distinction. Those recruited into big state-owned enterprises and institutions had a greater chance of the workplace sponsoring their education. The sponsorship usually included holding their jobs/positions while studying and payment of fees. Most of the time, the sponsored education programs were offered by the party schools. The study programs included both communist ideology and professional training. The length of the programs varied from six months to four years. The experiences of getting sponsored education are very common to interviewees who are in their 60s or older.

“I finished middle school when I was 17. Because our family was too poor to support further education, I had to find a job. At that time, the best workplaces were big factories, because they offered higher salaries and a better working environment. But my family class background was not very ‘red’, I couldn’t get into the factory. I ended up working in a bank. Now I feel so blessed that I wasn’t able to be a worker; just look how many lay-offs there have been. When I was working for the bank, they sent me to a local party school to study finance. I was studying part-time and my work-unit paid for the fees. How would I cope with my work with my middle school education, otherwise? According to the policy, my degree in finance is only valid within our province, but that was already enough for me. My family didn’t even have enough money to buy food, how could they have afforded for me to do this degree? So I feel very lucky that my work-unit offered this opportunity.” (Informant No.40, retired cadre, aged 63)
Age, academic records and a young person’s political performance were taken into consideration for the sponsorship. The sponsored programs were believed to help improve work performance and to help in promotions. Most interviewees were sponsored only once, but cadre positions could offer more opportunities for their favorite candidates.

“I am from the countryside. The only dream I had was to leave the countryside one day. I was the best student in my high school. After I finished high school, I started working in administration in the district government office. Because I was young and had a good academic record, they sent me to study party history; and then I returned to work, and then to study again. Coming back and forth, I finished my university degree. After I graduated from university, I was promoted to work in the provincial government office. I worked there until I retired.” (Informant No. 51, retired cadre, aged 60)

In this case, it would be inaccurate to assume a positive association between higher education achievement and higher administrative positions as a straightforward measure of a meritocratic process. If early recruitment into the public sector brings enhanced educational opportunities, then assuming education in China is conceptually equivalent to its counterpart in western societies becomes highly problematic. The reason is that educational attainment may itself be part of the process of sponsorship enjoyed by those who join the public sector or the party while young.

I propose a party/state-sponsored mobility model to explain this pattern of educational attainment. This model, based on ideas about elite mobility in England first offered by Turner (1960), posits that elite choose individuals according to some combination of ascriptive and behavioral characteristics, and that those chosen when young enjoy subsequent advantages in certain forms of educational attainment and career advancement. The party/state-sponsored mobility model assumes that the party/state recruits different kinds of people early in life
rather than later and that subsequent opportunities depend on the timing of their membership acquisition. The important feature of this model is that only early membership of the party or state sector brings these career advantages. In other words, one’s membership of the party or state sector acquired at a later stage does not operate as a credential that has the same advantage as that of its attainment at an early stage of one’s career. What makes sponsored mobility relevant to the case of party or state sector membership in a socialist state is the fact that particular groups exercise control over the allocation of elite status.

**Sponsored Higher Education in Post-reform Era**

The political agenda of post-1978 reform shifted to build a modern economy through a market system. The Party initially was overwhelmingly composed of peasants and workers, whose class compositions were “correct”. As well as the economic reforms that started in 1978, the Chinese government initiated a massive campaign during the 1980s to replace veteran Party members with younger and better educated communist cadres (Lee 1991) to administrative and managerial positions. As the market economy developed after 1992, a higher return to human capital has been documented as the market gradually replaced the state as the main mode of distribution (e.g. Nee 1989, 1991, and 1996). Meanwhile, the state has also driven a trend toward meritocracy in China, since it has developed a desire to foster a more efficient and dynamic bureaucracy. Merit-based hiring procedures have been extended from elite recruitment at the national level throughout the system down to local levels, especially with the introduction of positions that require formal credentials and tested expertise (Lee 1991; Walder 1995; Zang 2001). Employment is education-driven and employees in public administrative units “are recruited today on the basis of examinations and educational credentials” (Tomba 2004: 10-11).
Among those interviewees who entered the labor force after the start of the reforms, about 80 percent of the leading cadres and 50 percent of the professionals received workplace-sponsored higher or continuing education. The cadres usually received both education opportunities and fee sponsorship, while professionals usually paid the fees themselves, in particular if they were attaining professional certification, such as finance, economics, law or information technology. They studied at provincial-level higher education institutions or party schools. The subjects covered both political and non-political topics, with emphases on economic development related content. This experience later became important for their career advancement. A majority of them were promoted within the same workplace, and only a few (with professional certificates) left their old work-units and shifted into the private sectors.

Compared to their parents, the younger generations receive more subsidized on-the-job training rather than formal education. Because the workplaces provide less sponsorship for formal education, the younger generation informants, who were doing a part-time masters or PhD degree, were usually paying themselves. Also, many of them were studying for professional certification without any sponsorship as a result of a more competitive labor market.

“I got a very good job after I graduated from university in 1990. At that time, the market economy had started booming. It made me feel that the politics might change one day, and so too the relations with my supervisory leading cadres. The only thing that won’t change in the market economy is professional expertise. Therefore, I went to study for a professional certification in 1991.” (Informant No. 12, general manager of SOE, aged 36)

Different from their counterparts in the pre-reform era, the members of the younger generations who are recruited into the party or public sector today tend to go through a
pattern of “contest” or “tournament” mobility (Rosenbaum 1979). This pattern is in a system in which skill-competition is predominant at each step of the educational ladder. The biggest generational difference lies in the declining importance of political credentials and in favor of educational credentials at the early stage of one’s career advancement. Together with the expansion of university education, and a developing trend towards meritocracy, a university or higher education requirement is becoming universal for both public and private sectors. Those who entered the workforce after the reforms found education a more important credential than previously. A university degree has become essential for getting a good start in both state organizations and market-oriented industries. Moreover, in addition to a university degree, professional certificates and experience are becoming important too. Just as people used to actively participate in political activities to gain credits for promotion, nowadays people seek professional certificates and experience, especially those in skills- or expertise-oriented industries.

“When I finished my masters degree in physics, I heard that a local university was recruiting teachers. So I went to talk to them and they accepted me. I worked there for ten years, until eight years ago, when I saw an advertisement for a technician position in the local telecom industry and applied for it. I remember at that time, the position required at least a university education, relevant specialties, and relevant work experience. Because of my specialization, I got in with no problem.” (Informant No.27, senior technician, aged 43)

As higher education becomes universal for elite youngsters, they tend to achieve professional success before they advance their careers. For those who still receive a workplace sponsored education, that assistance may mean education in top national academic institutions, even overseas education.
“My first job was with a provincial government office. They sent me to study in a three-year masters program about the national economy with one of the country’s best universities. My studying was organized by the human resources department of the provincial government. We had two- or three-day classes every week. It was impossible for you to do this full-time, because first, the fees were so expensive that most of the people couldn’t afford it by themselves; second, not all the universities had this kind of qualification. You needed to be recommended by the government to get in.” (Informant No.6, private entrepreneur, aged 40)

“I have been working in this local university since I graduated. Now I am doing a PHD with the best university in our province. It is a four-year program. The first year is full-time study and the rest is part-time. My work-unit paid the four-year fees; it is about 36,000 Yuan (USD 5,000 dollars). So I don’t have any financial pressure.” (Informant No.8, university teacher, aged 38)

The generational differences in workplace-sponsored education show that when a certain level of education is not universal, the workplace-sponsored education offers opportunities for advanced education. When a certain level of education is becoming universal, the workplace sponsorship education offers a qualitatively better advanced education. One common factor in workplace-sponsored education over time is that opportunities are only offered to potential competent candidates in the state sector; and educational attainment is a part of the sponsorship for upward mobility of certain group members.

**Conclusion and Discussion: Party/State-sponsored Mobility**
The analyses above illustrate an upward mobility mechanism driven by party/state sponsorship. Firstly, the sponsored education in the PRC’s history shows that the effect of education on recruitment into the party and the state sector has two qualitatively different processes: early recruitment of those without a higher education who will be sponsored subsequently for education and career advancement, and later recruitment of those with a university education who have already attained professional success. Secondly, the sponsored educational opportunities vary according to the process of social and economic transformation. In the pre-reform era, sponsored education was offered to those recruited into the system at an early stage. In the post-reform era, recruitment favored those who had already obtained educational credentials. As a university education is becoming universal among elite candidates in the reform era, the workplace offers higher level or quantitatively equal but qualitatively better sponsored education.

Thirdly, the sponsored education offered individuals from certain social groups better chances for upward mobility. As modernization and market development proceeds, contest mobility gains more ground, in particular at the early stage of one’s career. However, sponsored mobility remains essential for people within the party/state system. The party/state-sponsored mobility helps us develop an understanding of the social mobility process in a society in which the state remains the main controller of valuable resources. Although these analyses are based on limited number of interviews, the party/state-sponsored mobility mechanism sheds lights on developing a more comprehensive social mobility model, when larger random sampling data is available.
Reference:


