

The Possibility of "Decoupled" the Chinese Life Course from the Perspective of Individualization—A Rethinking of "The Interlocking Structure and Generational Overlap of the Chinese Life Course"

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ABSTRACT

This paper consists of two parts: the first part introduces the main theoretical results of the paper "The Interlocking Structure and Generational Overlap of the Chinese Life Course"; the second part discusses the possibility of "Decoupled" the Chinese life course from the transition nodes of each stage of the life course.

KEYWORDS

Individualization; Life course; Interlocking structure

1 The Interlocking Structure of the Chinese Life Course

In the article "The Interlocking Structure and Generational Overlap of the Chinese Life Course", the author, on the basis of the absorption and continuation of the theory of the life course, discusses in depth the special form of the Chinese life course and puts forward two important theoretical points: firstly, there is a special interlocking structure of the Chinese life course; secondly, this interlocking structure will lead to a generational superposition of the composition of the Chinese life course. This paper mainly focuses on the first theoretical viewpoint, and other contents are not within the scope of this paper.

The theorization and systematization of the life course theory is marked by the American scholar Elder's book "The Children of the Great Depression", by which time the life course theory was formally formed and widely used by various disciplines. The life course theory understands the individual's life course as a sequence composed of multiple life events. The same set of life events, if ordered differently, will have a very different impact on the individual's life. The institutionalization of the life course develops a set of standardized life scheduling patterns and structurally categorizes them into different life stages. This means the subject of the life course will experience specific roles, events, and enjoy corresponding entitlements, generally unfolding in a similar order and at similar age intervals. Martin Kohli, a representative of the continental paradigm of the life course, pointed out that the life course in modern society revolves around the wage-labor system, forming a structural whole with the three-part chronological structure of childhood and adolescence, adulthood, and old age as the ideal type. Building on life course theory and analyzing national policies, Hu Shan and Zheng Zuoyu examined the three-part sequential structure of childhood and adolescence–adulthood–old age in the Chinese life course. They further subdivided its content into a four-stage progressive model: education–work–marriage and childbearing–retirement and eldercare.

Existing comparative studies across nations reveal both commonalities and specificities in life course structures. While different countries exhibit adherence to the four-stage progressive structure in content, some also show transcendence over specific stages. However, overall, Chinese individuals almost strictly follow the sequential progressive model of education–work–marriage and childbearing–retirement and eldercare. Hu Shan and Zheng Zuoyu argue that the Chinese life course exhibits significant institutional-structural characteristics: life events at each stage are often assigned clear deadlines. Upon reaching these deadlines, individuals are expected to transition seamlessly into the next life stage. This creates a characteristic of "seamless transition and interlocking progression" between life stages. This is what the article terms the "interlocking structure of the life course."

2 The Possibility of Decoupled the Chinese Life Course

As mentioned earlier, the stages of the Chinese life course are characterized by a "seamless, interlocking" process. However, the current social environment has changed. Against the background of rapid economic development and frequent social mobility, individuals are constantly withdrawing from inherited social relationships, and the power of traditional codes of practice and moral beliefs has been weakened, all of which provide the basis for individualized personal life, and the decoupled of the individual's life course has also become possible.

Therefore, this paper will discuss specific groups of phenomena to illustrate the tendency of decoupled the individual

life course today, which includes both delayed entry into a certain part of the life course and transcendence of a certain part of the life course, and the transcendence stage includes ignoring and reverse participation in a certain part of the life course, this paper focuses on the "ignoring" condition.

2.1 Tendency to Decouple Education-Work

The tendency to decouple education-work manifests itself first and foremost in the delayed entry into the workforce of groups of young people who should have entered the workforce after completing their highest level of education, for various reasons, most notably in the case of the slow employment group. In July 2023, data from the National Bureau of Statistics showed that the youth unemployment rate reached 21.3%, a record high since the beginning of statistical records. According to the "Research Report on the Employability of College Students in 2023", the proportion of slow employment has also risen from 15.9% in 2022 to 18.9%.

Under the planned economy, ordinary people were unable to receive an education, but the need to survive and to subsidize their families often prompted them to join society without hesitation; while college graduates were assigned by the government to enter the workplace as soon as they graduated, and were given a job that would stay with them for the rest of their lives. Individuals in society at that time strictly followed the education-work structure, with no gaps allowed. However, with the development of society, the concept of individual career choice has become more and more diversified, and the current concept of career choice shows a trend of self-orientation over income-orientation. Some scholars believe that salary is no longer the main criterion for college students to choose a career, and that job suitability, job satisfaction and career aspiration play a more important role in college students' career choice. Some scholars also found that the employment concept of slow employment is mainly manifested in the decline of economic dependence on work based on the given economic compensation, more attention to personal feelings, and emphasis on autonomy, job content and personal development in the choice of work.

Although, in the long run, the slow-employed group will eventually enter the workforce, it still largely conforms to the education-work structure. However, unlike in the past, the education-work transition period seems to be longer. Some scholars calculate that the average time spent by the youth labor force from the completion of the highest level of education to the first job is 2.63 years, which to a certain extent reflects the status quo of today's young people's employment and job search slow. And the transition period will bring a series of problems, some scholars empirically found that slow employment significantly reduced the graduates of the wage income and job. What is more noteworthy is that the infinite extension of the transition period may lead to the emergence of Neet who have been out of employment for a long period of time, resulting in the real decoupling of the education-work stage in the individual's life course.

2.2 Tendency to Decouple Work-Marriage

The tendency to decouple work-marriage is reflected, on the one hand, in people's delayed entry into marriage, that is, the phenomenon of late marriage. According to data from the Seventh National Population Census, the average age of first marriage in China in 2020 was 28.67 years, an increase of 3.78 years over the 2010 figure of 24.89 years. This phenomenon is related to the increase in the length of education in the previous period and the delay in the entry into the work stage. It has been shown that education acquisition has a significant positive correlation with the age at first marriage, and that for every year of education, the age at first marriage rises by 0.11 years; young people with higher education are more likely to be unmarried, and to marry at a later age at first marriage. In Marx's words, the mode of production of material life governs the whole process of social, political and spiritual life. The delayed entry of individuals into the workforce is obviously not conducive to the accumulation of private property, and in the context of the increasing cost of marriage, it inevitably leads to the delayed marriage of young people. At the same time, the individualization of late marriage also has a tendency to not married. Some studies show that if urban women do not choose a spouse and get married within the marriageable age between 23 and 27 years old, they will live a single life in the future to a large extent.

The tendency to decouple work-marriage is also reflected in the increase in the single population. According to the China Statistical Yearbook (2022), the number of singles over the age of 15 in China will be 239 million by 2021. Although some scholars believe that China will maintain the characteristics of the universal marriage model for at least the next 20 years, it should not be overlooked that forces shaking the universal marriage model are forming. Scholars have already found that the tradition of universal marriage for Chinese women may change, and the proportion of lifelong unmarried people in the cohort born after 1970 will increase and intensify. In terms of reasons, the non-marriage group can be divided into active non-marriage and passive non-marriage. Diversification of social values and individualization of social life can explain the phenomenon of active non-marriage to a certain extent. At the same time, the group of passive non-marriage has the potential to expand. The prolongation of the education-work stage not only delays people's entry into

marriage, but also indirectly contributes to the emergence of non-marriage. Modern society's emphasis on education has led individuals to prolong their education, and considerations of marriage can only be put on hold again and again. Some scholars have found that over-education affects the cognition and behavior of young people through the three aspects of emotional control, will control, and judgment control, resulting in the phenomenon of over degree of singleness; at the same time, the concept of marriage of young people under the individualization of both rationality and sensibility, embodying the co-existence of the characteristics of tradition and modernity: on the one hand, it is important to pay attention to the right family and to take the dowry as a prerequisite, but on the other hand, it also emphasizes the factors of character, personality, individuality, and temperament, which makes it more difficult for young people to choose their spouses, and in the end, they can only be passive not to get married.

2.3 Tendency to Decoupled Marriage and Parenthood

It is worth mentioning that even among married people, the internal chain of marriage-childbearing is facing a tendency to decouple. Fei Xiaotong once used the term fertility system to describe the interlocking structure between marriage and childbearing in China: a set of activities in which a man and a woman unite to become a couple, give birth to a child, and raise the child together. Nowadays this system seems to be facing a certain disintegration, which is reflected in the decline of fertility rates.

In an era when productivity was relatively backward, the urgent need for labor made people not exclude childbearing. At the same time, influenced by traditional values such as "raising children for old age support" and "no offspring is the worst one of the three unfilial ways", the moral condemnation of not having children was often unbearable. With the progress of social productivity, changes in the mode of production, and changing criteria for the social division of labor, the quantity of labor no longer plays a decisive role, and the quality of labor has become a new social requirement. However, the cost of childbearing in the current society is very high. The Report on the Cost of Childbearing in China estimates that the average cost for a Chinese family to raise a child up to the age of 18 is 485,000 yuan, or 6.9 times the per capita GDP. Scholars have already argued that economic factors have an important impact on fertility intentions, such as GDP per capita is significantly negatively correlated with the ideal number of children, and the improvement of the economic status of the family will cause an increase in the number of children that urban families are willing to have, and the probability of not wanting to have children will be reduced. In this way, the high cost of childbearing discourages young people of childbearing age from having children. In addition to this, another relevant aspect is the gradual failure of the means of the fertility system in the context of individualization. As a cultural institution, the most effective instrument of the fertility system is the traditional ethical and moral norms. However, as the population is increasingly moving out of familiar territories, and as individuals are influenced by pluralistic values, traditional ethical concepts and values are gradually being eroded. Therefore, some scholars have argued that the concept of fertility in China is undergoing a process of change from a family fertility culture to a national fertility culture to an individual fertility culture.

At the same time, a group of Dinks(Double Income No Kids) is quietly emerging in society. According to the Report on Chinese Young People's Fertility Intention, there are more than 600,000 Dinks in China. Scholars have argued that Chinese-style Dink families are influenced by the individualistic concept of living for oneself. The trend of individualization makes individuals detached from the traditional system and norms, and Dink has gradually become a rational choice to satisfy individual needs, and the Decoupled between marriage and childbearing has taken place.

3 Conclusion

To sum up, this article selects the phenomenon of uncoupling and typical groups under the individualized society, and argues for the possibility of uncoupling the life course of Chinese people from both practical and theoretical perspectives. In short, whether it is a delay in entering or passing a certain stage of the life course, the current phenomenon of uncoupling of the Chinese life course can be summarized in one point: the individual's subversion of the social clock, and the blurring of the clear time nodes of the various stages of the life course.

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