



DEMOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

A peer-reviewed, open-access journal of population sciences

DEMOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

VOLUME 34, ARTICLE 16, PAGES 451–466

PUBLISHED 4 MARCH 2016

<http://www.demographic-research.org/Volumes/Vol34/16/>

DOI: 10.4054/DemRes.2016.34.16

Descriptive Finding

**Transition to adulthood in China in 1982–2005:
A structural view**

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Transition to adulthood in China in 1982–2005: A structural view

Felicia F. Tian¹

Abstract

BACKGROUND

The transition to adulthood has increasingly been postponed, shuffled, and individualized in the United States and Western Europe. Less is known about changes in the transition to adulthood in non-Western countries, especially whether they follow a similar pattern of change. Moreover, the existing literature uses diverse indicators to measure the transition to adulthood, which makes the cross-national comparison even more difficult.

OBJECTIVE

This article takes a structural view to examine changes in the transition to adulthood in China, which has the largest youth population in the world and which has experienced rapid social change since reform in the 1980s.

METHODS

The analysis uses data from 1982, 1990, and 2000 censuses and a 2005 mini-census. It treats participants aged 18–30 as synthetic cohorts and examines changes in three structural features of the transition to adulthood: timing, sequencing, and heterogeneity.

RESULTS

Though school completion and entry into the labor force have been notably delayed, only minor delays have occurred in marriage and parenthood. Some individualization occurs in urban residents, but the pathway remains relatively structured and follows a very ordered sequence.

CONCLUSION

These findings suggest stability in the transition to adulthood amidst rapid social change in China during these twenty years.

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1. Introduction

The transition to adulthood includes certain trajectories, such as leaving school, entering the labor force, getting married, and having children. These transitions have been increasingly postponed, shuffled, and individualized in the United States and Western Europe (for reviews, see Buchmann and Kriesi 2011; Settersten and Bay 2010; Shanahan 2000). Less is known about changes in the transition to adulthood in non-Western countries, especially whether they follow a similar pattern of change. Some research suggests that aspects of these changes mimic those of the West (Lesthaeghe 2010; Lloyd 2005). Others suggest that the changes are path-dependent (Furstenberg 2013; Fussell 2005; Grant and Furstenberg 2007; Yeung and Alipio 2013; Yeung and Hu 2013). Furthermore, the research in non-Western countries uses diverse indicators to measure the transition to adulthood that hinder comparisons with each other and to Western countries. Life course theory (Elder, Johnson, and Crosnoe 2003) suggests that the meaning of single transitions differs depending on when they occur in the life course, where they fit within a large sequence, and how they vary in a population. Thus it is useful to take a structural view, tracing changes in the timing and sequencing of transitions as well as the distribution of these transitions at the population level.

This article provides a structural view of the patterns of change in the transition to adulthood in China from 1982 to 2005. In these years, China experienced massive economic and social transformations with increases in economic uncertainty and individual autonomy (Bramall 2009; Tang and Parish 2000). To trace the changes we use a synthetic cohort approach by comparing the distribution of transitions among census participants aged 18–30 years in four population data sources: the 1982, 1990, and 2000 censuses and the 2005 mini-census. We organize the analyses by subgroups divided by gender and household registration status. In China, the rigid gender division of household labor attaches family transitions to distinct meanings and responsibilities for men and women (Parish and Farrer 2000). The recent and rising gender gap in earnings and promotion opportunities highlights these gender differences (Zhang, Hannum, and Wang 2008). Additionally, by categorizing Chinese populations into two broadly defined groups of urban and rural, household registration status constitutes a key dimension in the Chinese stratification system that is critical for individuals' life chances (Chan 2013; Wu and Treiman 2004; Xie and Zhou 2013).

2. Data and methods

2.1 Data and measures

This analysis uses samples from four population data sources: Chinese censuses collected in 1982, 1990, and 2000, and a 2005 mini-census that comprises a 1% sample of the Chinese population. The samples from the 1982 and 1990 censuses are 1% random samples, harmonized by the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series – International project. Our sample from the 2000 census is a .095% random sample and the 2005 mini-census is a 20% random sample. To make the sample sizes comparable, we draw a 10% random sample from the 1982 and 1990 samples. For all four samples, we limit young adults to those between the ages 18 and 30 (Rindfuss 1991).

The adulthood transitions are measured in four statuses: school attendance, employment status, marital status, and parental status. Because the parental status was collected exclusively for women, women in our analysis have four statuses and men have three. The four statuses are coded as dichotomous variables that equal 1 if the respondents occupy the status and 0 otherwise².

2.2 Methods

The analysis is organized by gender and residence (urban or rural). Residence is distinguished by permanent household registration status (*hukou*).³ Urban residents are measured as those with urban *hukou* who lived in the registered *hukou* place at the time of survey. Likewise, rural residents are measured as those with rural *hukou* who lived in the registered *hukou* place at the time of the survey.

We use three structural features to measure change: timing, sequencing, and heterogeneity. *Timing* measures any delay in the transition to adulthood and at which transition the delay occurs. The timing of each transition is measured as the percentage of respondents who occupy each status at every age between 18 and 30.

² The 2000 and 2005 censuses did not collect the parental status for never-married women; we thus code the parental status of never-married women as 0. Premarital childbearing is very rare in China (Yeung and Hu 2013), so this is a reasonable approximation.

³ We exclude migrants (i.e., those who left places in which their *hukou* were registered), because the four samples use two different definitions of migrants, resulting from a change in measurement from the 1990 to 2000 census. In 2000 and 2005, migrants are classified as those who have left places in which their *hukou* were registered and have lived in new destinations for more than six months (Liang 2001). In 1990, migrants are classified as those who have lived in new destinations for more than a year. This definition change makes it difficult to generate a consistent migrant group across samples.

Sequencing is used to examine whether the transition to adulthood has been shuffled. Because the survey did not ask respondents the ages at which each transition occurred, we examine sequencing indirectly by tracing changes in the distributions of status combinations. Respondents can occupy one status or multiple statuses at the same time. For example, a respondent can be working and married (not a student and not a parent) or a student and a parent (not working and not married) at the same time. As school-work-marriage-childbearing is often considered to be an ordered sequence during the transition to adulthood the work-marriage combination is viewed as an ordered status, whereas the school-parent combination is not. In the analysis, ordered status combinations include school (S), work (W), work-marriage (WM), work-marriage-parenthood (WMP), and marriage-parenthood (MP). Shuffled status combinations include none (N), parenthood (P), school-work (SW), school-marriage (SM), school-parenthood (SP), work-parenthood (WP), school-marriage-parenthood (SMP), school-work-parenthood (SWP), school-work-marriage (SWM), and school-work-marriage-parenthood (SWMP).

Heterogeneity is used to examine whether the transition to adulthood has been individualized. We use an entropy index (Fussell 2005) to trace population-level heterogeneity over time. Higher scores mean the transition to adulthood is more heterogeneous (individualized). The formula is as follows:

$$E = \sum_{s=1}^S p_s \log\left(\frac{1}{p_s}\right) \quad (1)$$

where S is the number of statuses (4 for women and 3 for men), and P_s is the proportion of population in status combination s . To make the index more intuitive we transform the entropy index into a percentage of the maximum index, which is defined as the status combination when the population is equally distributed in all possible combinations (Fussell 2005). It equals $2^4 * (1/2^4) * \log(1/2^4) = 1.24$ for women and $2^3 * (1/2^3) * \log(1/2^3) = .903$ for men.

3. Results

3.1 Timing of transitions

Figure 1A and Figure 1B show the age-specific distributions of school attendance, employment, marriage, and parenthood (women only) by *hukou* status for men and women, respectively. The trend is similar for men and women, but changes are much

more pronounced for urban residents than for rural residents. In general, a notable postponement occurs in the timing of education completion and employment, but minor change occurs in the timing of marriage and childbearing. For example, in 2005, more than 90% of urban women were married and more than 80% had had their first child by age 30. The very small proportion of single women older than 30 in urban China is in sharp contrast with other East Asian societies such as Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, where 30% or more women stay single beyond age 30 (Jones 2007; Jones and Yeung 2014).

Figure 1a: Age-specific distribution of statuses in 1982–2005 for urban and rural residents, men

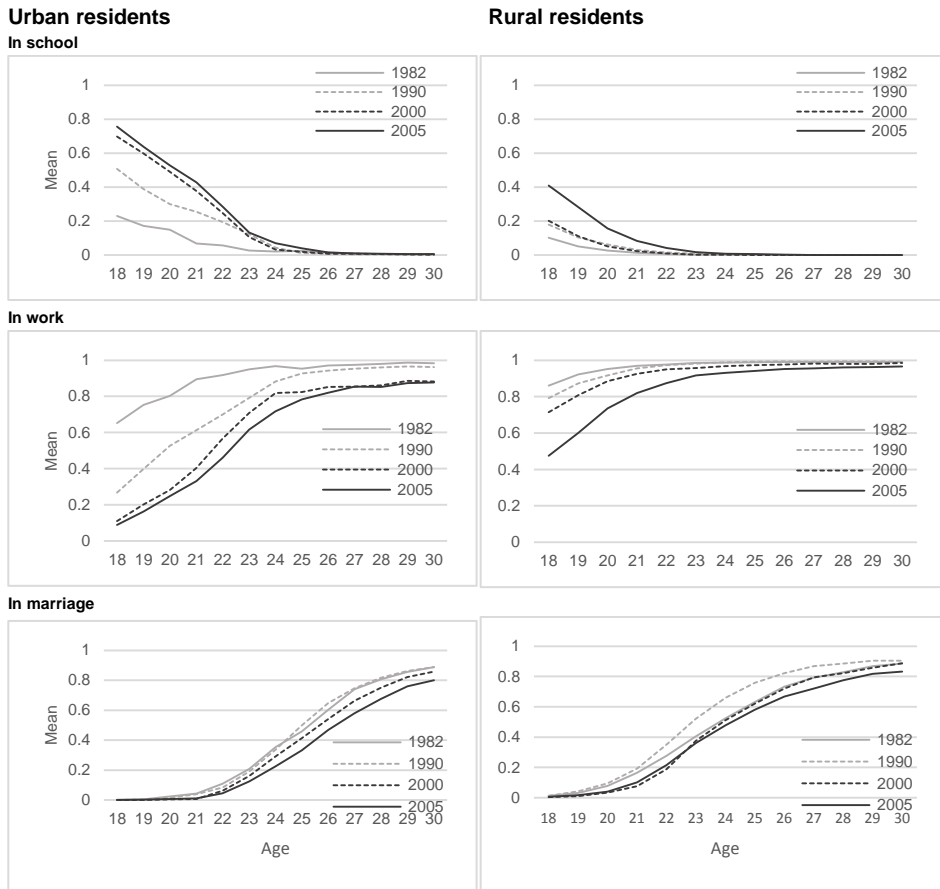
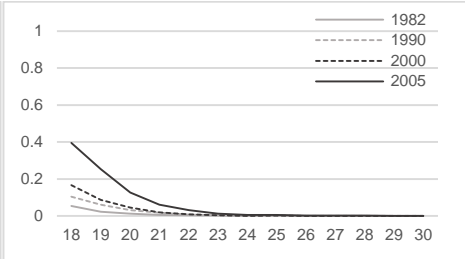
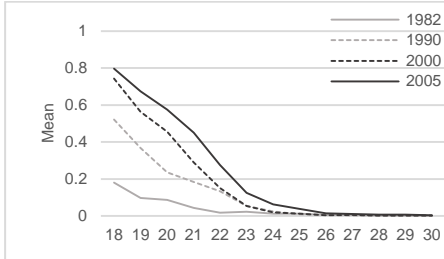


Figure 1b: Age-specific distribution of statuses in 1982–2005 for urban and rural residents, women

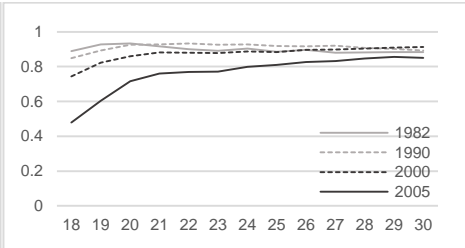
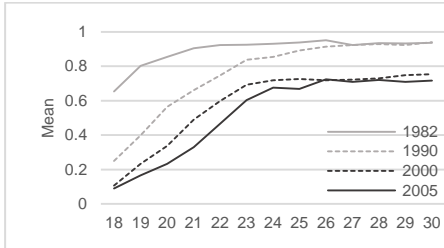
Urban residents

Rural residents

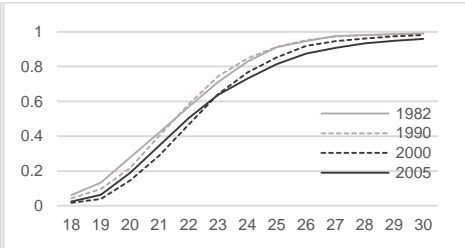
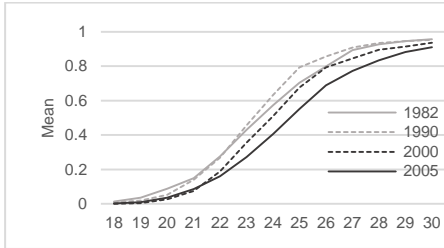
In school



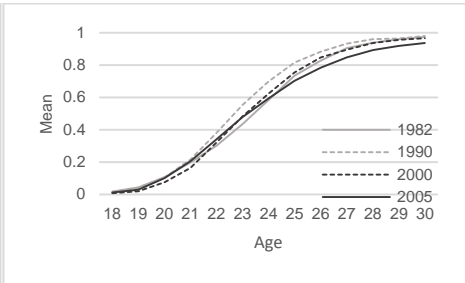
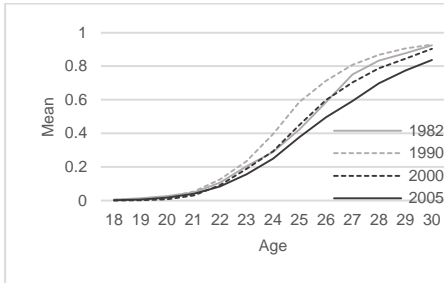
In work



In marriage



In parenthood

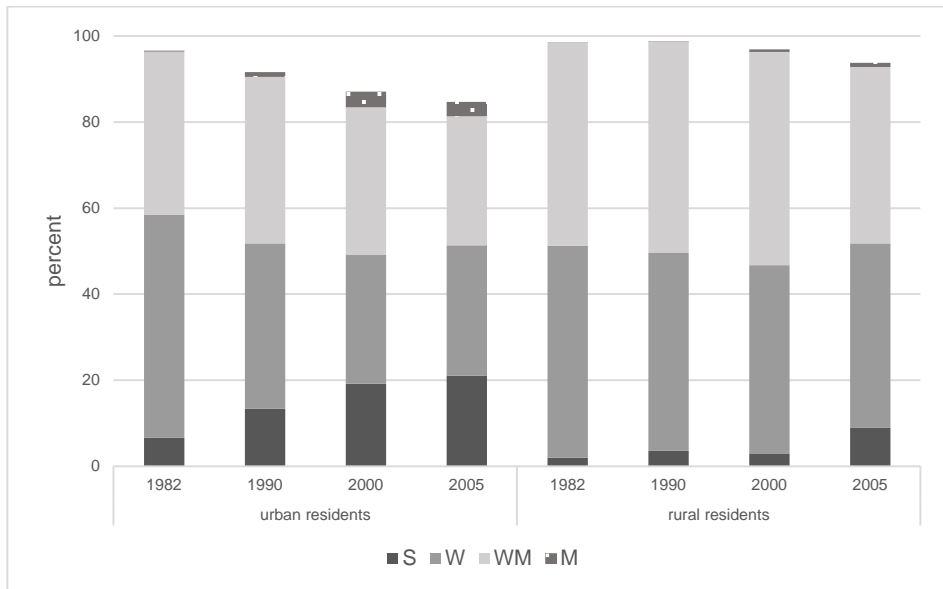


3.2 Sequencing of transitions

Figure 2 shows the percentage of these ordered and shuffled status combinations out of all possible status combinations for men and women, respectively. Again, the trend is similar for men and women but more pronounced for urban residents than for rural residents. For rural residents these three ordered status combinations comprise more than 90% of all possible status combinations in all years. For urban residents the percentage of ordered status combinations declines, from more than 95% in 1982 to slightly more than 80% in 2005.

Figure 2: Percentage of ordered status combinations by gender, hukou, and year

Panel A: Male

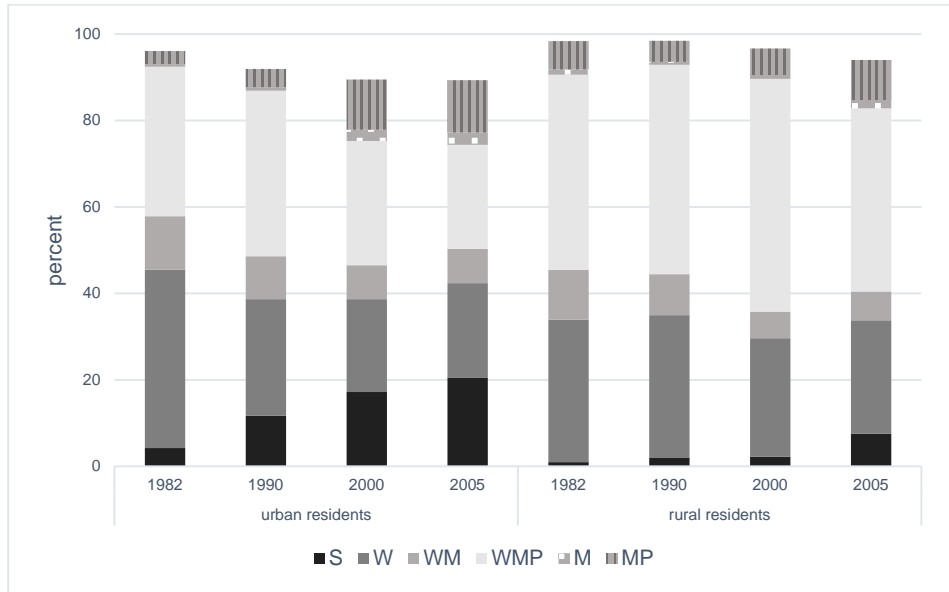


Note: S=school, W=work, WM=work-marriage, M=marriage. These status combinations are considered as ordered sequences for men.

The percentage is calculated as the percentage of S, W, WM, and M, against the total possible status combinations, which includes none (N), school-marriage (SM), school-work (SW), and school-work-marriage (SWM).

Figure 2: (Continued)

Panel B: Female



Note: S=school, W=work, WM=work-marriage, M=marriage, MP=marriage-parenthood, WMP=work-marriage-parenthood. These status combinations are considered as ordered sequences for women.

The percentage is calculated as the percentage of S, W, WM, WMP, M, and MP against the total possible status combinations, which also include none (N), parenthood (P), school-marriage (SM), school-work (SW), school-parenthood (SP), work-parenthood (WP), school-marriage-parenthood (SMP), school-work-parenthood (SWP), school-work-marriage (SWM), and school-work-marriage-parenthood (SWMP).

Among ordered status combinations, fast growth occurs among stay-at-home mothers. In 1982 and 1990 about 4% of urban women are in MP status; in 2005 the percentage triples to 12%. This trend is consistent with the “women return home” debate of the 1980s (Ochiai 1989). Since the reform, the famous phrase of the Mao era that “women hold up half the sky” (*fu nv neng ding ban bian tian*) has been replaced with the ideology of “good wives and wise mothers” (*xian qi liang mu*), which highlights women’s roles as housewives and caregivers (Ochiai and Aoyama 2014). This ideology shift is heightened by women’s deteriorating labor market conditions (Zhang, Hannum, and Wang 2008) and the stronger gendered division of household labor (Evans 2010) since the 1980s.

Urban men and women show some decline in ordered status combinations over time. Table 1 shows the percentage of shuffled status combinations out of the total possible combinations by year, for urban men and urban women. The majority of the

increase comes from an increase in the ‘None’ status (Table 1). For urban men, the ‘None’ status comprises about 3% of the young adult years in 1982 and rises to almost 15% in 2005. The rise of the ‘None’ status is slightly lower for urban women, from about 4% in 1982 to around 10% in 2005. This change is likely to be the result of an increasingly precarious labor market (Furlong et al. 2012; Inui 2005). The typical shuffled status combinations found in Western societies, such as non-marital childbearing (P, SP, WP, or SWP) or work-study (SW), remain very rare in China.

Table 1: Distributions of status combinations, urban men and urban women

Status combinations (shuffled)	1982	1990	2000	2005
<i>Urban Men^a</i>				
None (N)	3.36	9.29	12.75	14.92
School-work (SW)	0	0.01	0.1	0.2
School-marriage (SM)	0.11	0.12	0.02	0.04
School-work-marriage (SWM)	0	0	0.07	0.16
<i>Urban Women^b</i>				
None (N)	3.69	7.46	9.67	9.84
Parenthood (P)	0.02	0.08	0.21	0.19
School-work (SW)	0	0	0.1	0.17
School-marriage (SM)	0.02	0.01	0.03	0.05
School-parenthood (SP)	0	0	0	0
Work-parenthood (WP)	0.02	0.47	0.4	0.32
School-marriage-parenthood (SMP)	0.01	0.06	0	0.03
School-work-parenthood (SWP)	0	0	0	0
School-work-marriage (SWM)	0	0	0.03	0.04
School-work-marriage-parenthood (SWMP)	0	0	0.06	0.08

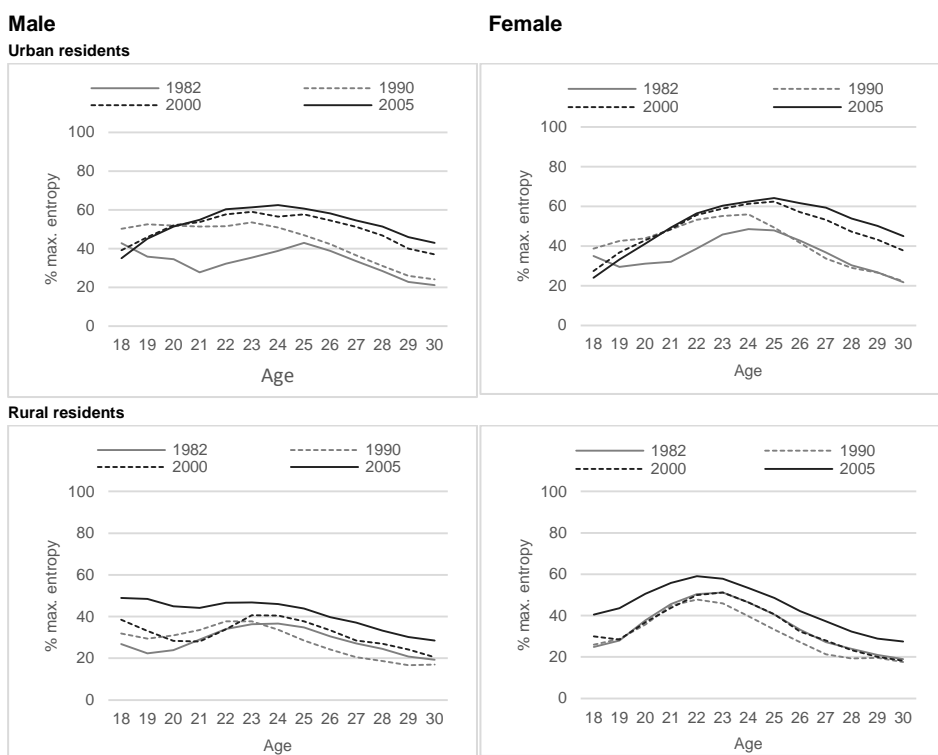
Note: a. The denominator is the total number of transition-to-adulthood-years in all possible status combinations, which includes school (S), work (W), work-marriage (WM), and marriage (M).

b. The denominator is the total number of transition-to-adulthood-years in all possible status combinations, which includes school (S), work (W), work-marriage (WM), marriage (M), marriage-parenthood (MP), and work-marriage-parenthood (WMP).

3.3 Heterogeneity of transitions

Figure 3 displays the age-specific entropy indices between 1982 and 2005. The majority of lines follow an inverted-U shape, indicating that the heterogeneity of the transition to adulthood first increases in the early twenties and then decreases in the late twenties. This inverted-U shape is also found Brazil, Mexico, and South Korea (Fussell 2005; Park, Ribeiro, and Fussell 2010).

Figure 3: Age-specific percentage of maximum entropy index by gender, hukou, and year



Again, the change is similar for men and women but more pronounced among urban residents than rural residents. For rural residents the entropy index remains almost stable between 1982 and 2000 and increases slightly in 2005 for all ages. For urban residents on the other hand, a slight drop in the entropy index occurs between

ages 18 and 20, which is likely related to extended school participation in the previous twenty years. From age 20, levels of heterogeneity increase from 1982 to 2005 at every age. Even among urban residents the level of heterogeneity is comparable to Mexico (Fussell 2005) and some South Eastern countries (Nahar, Xenos, and Abalos 2013) with a structured transition to adulthood.

4. Discussion

This article provides a structural view of changes in the transition to adulthood in China. Specifically, we trace changes in timing, sequencing, and level of heterogeneity among four synthetic cohorts between 1982 and 2005. The results suggest that, despite rapid social changes in this period, the transition to adulthood remains almost stable, especially in the realm of family formation. With regard to timing, the results suggest a postponement in education completion and employment, but a minor delay in marriage and parenthood. With regard to sequencing, the results show virtually no change. There is a modest increase in shuffled status combinations for urban residents but this change is largely driven by young adults staying in the ‘None’ status rather than in typically reshuffled status combinations, such as non-marital childbearing or work-study. With regard to heterogeneity, we see some evidence for individualization, but only for urban residents. In general, the transition to adulthood remains structured.

China has strong population policies that influence the transition to adulthood, but young adults who came of age between 1982 and 2005 experienced less political influence than previous or subsequent cohorts. The “late, longer, and fewer” policy of the 1970s that significantly postponed family formation (Coale et al. 1991) was abandoned in the 1980s. Marriage choices returned to individuals and their families⁴ (Cai and Wang 2011). Additionally, those who came of age during 1982–2005 were mostly born in the 1960s and 1970s, which had normal sex ratios at birth (Li 2007). The effects of unbalanced sex ratios resulting from the one-child policy on the transition to adulthood await further exploration with future data.

Some aspects of the changes in the transition to adulthood in China resemble those of the West, especially the prolonged education and delayed labor force participation. However, the changes are modest. Chinese young adults, despite coming of age in a rapidly changing society, still follow a timely, ordered, and structured transition to adulthood, especially in the realm of family formation. The ordered and structured transition to adulthood has historical roots. As Dribe et al. (2014) point out, the Chinese population in the 18th and 19th centuries also followed an ordered transition to adulthood

⁴ While the Chinese government requires the minimum age of marriage to be 22 for men and 20 for women, evidence show little signs of “wait until the minimal age” (Tian 2013).

that was characterized by early and universal marriage. These findings again suggest no convergence to a single trajectory of transitioning to adulthood (Furstenberg 2013). Some global forces, such as increased economic uncertainty and the ideational spread of individual autonomy, may create general conditions for young adults to forge adulthood pathways (Lesthaeghe 2010; McDonald 2006). Yet young adults' responses and actions depend on embedded institutional contexts and cultural traditions (Blossfeld et al. 2005; Buchmann 1989; Mayer 2004; Modell, Furstenberg, and Hershberg 1976).

Compared to its Eastern Asian neighbors, China is an outlier in the realm of delayed marriage and rising singlehood (Raymo et al. 2015). Almost all Chinese women are married by age 30, which contrasts sharply with Japan and South Korea and with the ethnic Chinese population in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Malaysia (Jones 2007). China's outlier status may result from its low economic development and female educational attainment (Ji and Yeung 2014). Future research should investigate whether economic development and college education expansion will postpone Chinese young adults' transitions into marriage and childbearing.

5. Acknowledgements

I thank S. Philip Morgan, Angela O'Rand, Nan Lin, Stephen Vaisey, Yong Cai, Zheng Mu, Yue Qian, Wen Fan, and two anonymous reviewers, who read and commented on this paper. A former version of this article was presented in the 2014 Annual Meetings of International Sociological Association, Yokohama, Japan. I gratefully acknowledge the general support from the research fund of the School of Social Development and Public Policy at Fudan University.

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