

The Age of Uncertainty: Gender, Employment, and Economic Insecurity among Youths in the U. S. and China

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Background and Introduction

Over the last several decades, social, political, and cultural changes have redefined the roles of gender, both within and outside the realm of the family. At the same time, technological changes and globalization have ushered in a new era of economic opportunities and uncertainties. In no other places than the two largest economies are these changes more prominent than in the United States, a well-established economic superpower, and in China, a country that has been undergoing rapid economic and social transformations.

During the last half century, women have made great stride in the labor force. Female labor force participation in China, though experiencing some recent downturns, has remained among the highest in the world since its socialist days. In the U.S., it has also risen considerably in the last half century, from less than 50% among women aged 18 to 64 in the 1950s to over 70% by 2010, with the largest increase in professional and managerial occupations. In contrast to increased female labor force participation, the share of men in the labor force dropped from over 90 to below 80% (Ruggles 2015).

Changing employment and gender roles have created unprecedented economic uncertainties and social anxieties among young people in the world, and such changes are felt differently for women and men. In the U.S., the share of wage labor is likely to drop to below 50% in the next few decades (Ruggles 2015), in China, college education no longer guarantees a

job (Yeung and Hu 2013), and most new entrants to the labor market land in the service sector where both employment and pay are unstable. Along with these sweeping changes, abundant evidences have documented the culture devaluation of women's work and the structural barriers within the work place have led to unequal pay and unequal access to various resources and opportunities (England 1992, 2010; Cohen and Huffman 2003, 2007; Bauer et al. 1992).

In this paper, we examine and compare employment and sense of economic security/insecurity among young adults in the United States and in China. We consider employment as only an entry point that is embedded in a gradual process of becoming economically independent in contemporary societies (Arnett 1997). We examine in particular how employment outcomes and perceived economic security or insecurity vary by gender across two countries. In contrast to traditional studies of employment and economic security, which employ generally only socio-demographic characteristics, we incorporate in this research also self-reported measures of personality traits and sense of responsibility. Such additional measures can help explain the observed differences in employment and economic security between young women and men.

Data and Methods

Our study will use two recently collected datasets, in the U.S. and China, and examine the economic conditions of young adults who were born between 1985 to 1989. The U.S. data are the 2013 Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID), which contained a Transition to Adulthood Supplement (TAS). PSID is the world's longest running household panel survey, which started from interviewing more than 4000 American families in 1968. The TAS supplement collected information on when these young Americans came of age, and it provides a unique opportunity to examine individual life course development, as well as intergenerational

dynamics and influences. We use the Family Identification Mapping System that provided by the PSID data center to obtain family and parental information from the core database, and we assess the family impact and intergenerational influences on young adults' economic independence, as well as their attitudes towards the future.

For the Chinese comparison, we use the 2014 Fudan Yangtze River Delta Social Transformation Survey (FYRST), which follows people who were born during the 1980s. By following a sample from the Yangtze River Delta region on a biennial basis, FYRST aims to understand the drastic economic transformation and its impact on Chinese individuals' life outcomes. In 2014, the FYRST research team implemented the same TAS modules of questions on "Responsibilities" and "Self" as those in the PSID survey. The modules include questions on employment, economic independence, and self-assessment of independence, etc. These comparable questions offer a rare opportunity to understand global changes in jobs, economic independence, and young people's perceptions of future.

In the analysis, we include the US young adults who were born during the 1980s (sample size N=737) to match the Chinese sample group (N=1480). To analyze transition to economic independence, we use both objective and subjective measures, which include variables that assess their abilities to pay daily expenses and their self-perception of being independent from others (Arnett 1997). After showing descriptive results and trends by gender and country, in our analytical model, we control for personal and family background to assess their influence on young adults' transition to economic independence. Finally, using the economic independence measures, we analyze how they affect young adults' attitudes towards the future by gender.

Preliminary Results

The young survey respondents in our samples, who were above the age of mid-20s in

both countries at the time when data were collected, had all entered the labor market. A higher share of the Chinese youths (around 80%) than their American counterparts (around 70%) were employed with a regular job, and a smaller share of the American youths than their Chinese counterparts had formed a marital union. In both countries, females outnumber males in completing college education and, by a small margin, in employment.

More interestingly, while American young respondents ranked themselves higher in “responsibility” and “self-confidence,” they also report a higher level of economic anxiety, as shown by their responses to questions about “worry about job” and “worry about money.” Whereas the majority respondents in both countries do not feel “discouraged about the future,” a significant share, over 20% in the U.S. and close to 15% in China, reported that they did feel discouraged about the future, and nearly a third in the U.S. and a quarter in China often worry about their future job prospect. Moreover, though reporting more confidence about future job and money, more young Chinese (11%) than young Americans (about 5%) expressed “somewhat unsatisfied” or “very unsatisfied” about life.

Interesting differences also exist between countries and between gender. In both the U.S. and China, female respondents ranked themselves higher in “responsibility” and in being economically “independent” than men. Yet, while in China it is young men who sense a greater economic pressure than women as shown by their concerns about job and money, in the U.S. sample, it is the opposite: a larger share of young women than men who reported a great concern about their economic future.

These preliminary and descriptive results serve as starting points for our in-depth analyses of the roles of gender and other factors in affecting employment, economic security, and self-reported economic and social anxieties. Based on the results of such analyses, we aim to

gain some insights (similarities as well differences) into the forces that have resulted in recent changes in employment and economic insecurity in the world's two largest economies.

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