2017 DISSERTATION AWARD WINNER
CHANGING FATE

THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION’S RURAL YOUTH IN TRANSITION TO LATE-SOCIALIST CHINA

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AN OVERVIEW OF MY PRESENTATION
A NARRATIVE OF MY DISSERTATION JOURNEY

- What is the dissertation about?
- Why was I motivated to perform such a study?
- What did the study find out?
- Why was it important to us today?
THE
CHANGING
FATE
PROJECT
Posing for graduation: The Class of 1975 in Hope High School, Fort County, China
January, 1975
RESEARCH QUESTIONS

How did rural Chinese youth come of age during a period of radical social changes, namely, from the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) to the era of market reforms (1977-present)?
A CRITICAL ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY (2011-2017)

41 Life history interviews with this former high school cohort;
6 interviews with former teachers and administrators;
Participant observations;
Focus group discussions;
Archival research at county and municipal levels;
Policy & media analysis
THE CHANGING FATE PROJECT:
INTERVIEW DATA

Left: Life history interview with a rural participant, 2014

Right: Focus group interview conducted in a research participant’s home, 2014

All images shared with permission
THE CHANGING FATE PROJECT: OBSERVATION DATA

Left: Participant observation of a reunion, May 2012

Right: Visiting the bakery where a research participant worked, 2014

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THE CHANGING FATE PROJECT:
TEXTUAL DATA

Left: A letter that one of the participants wrote to her partner in the early 1980s

Right: Archival data from the local county archival department
THE CHANGING FATE PROJECT: VISUAL DATA

Poster: Listen to the wind and the rain; Don’t believe in fate but in revolution.  
Designer: Huang Zengli. (1973)  
Publisher: Tianjin Renmin Meishu Press

Poster: New Gunners (Xin paoshou)  
Designer: Jin Chen. (1974)  
Publisher: Jiangxi Renmin Press
MY MOTIVATION AND COMMITMENTS
WHY WAS I INTERESTED IN THIS STUDY?

A theoretical question derived from my reading of contemporary critical social theories

- Socialization as the reproduction of social inequality
- The presumption: the existence of a relatively stable and static social structure
- What if the social structure changes?
AN EMPIRICAL CASE TO STUDY YOUTH’S IDENTITY FORMATION IN AN ERA OF RADICAL SOCIAL CHANGES

China’s transition to the late-socialist era

1949: Establishment of People’s Republic China

1976: The death of Mao and the end of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), transitioning to late-socialism
WHY WAS I INTERESTED IN THIS STUDY?

• Bearing witness of the country’s difficult past

  1. A country’s difficult past (Wagner-Pacifici & Schwartz, 1991)

  2. Bearing witness (Tracy: from participant observation to participant witnessing, 2020)

  3. The difficult past is still haunting us today.

  4. It matters to me personally.
THE FINDINGS OF THE CHANGING FATE PROJECT
CHAPTER STRUCTURE

Ch. 1 State ideology on socialist new peasant

Ch. 2 School life

Ch. 3 Working in the socialist countryside

Ch. 4 Changing life through taking examinations

Ch. 5 Competing in a burgeoning market

Journal article on doing field work in an authoritarian state

Book manuscript

Appendix: Methodological Reflection
THE EDUCATIONAL REFORM IN THE LATE 1970S AS CRITICAL EVENTS IN THEN-RURAL YOUTH’S LIFE

• From the abolishment of all merit-based examinations during the Cultural Revolution to its resumption right after the end of the Cultural Revolution

• The socialist rural youths I worked with grew up in rural-oriented and collectivist schooling system

• After the re-introduction of competition, they had to adjust to a world of increasing urbanization and individualization.

Above: The first step toward a late-socialist China—The educational reform that resumed the College Entrance Examinations (*gaokao*) in 1977
“Studying in the college changed my fate (ming).”

“All my life I just had this fate of being a peasant. I will just admit it.”

“I believe in fate, but I do not rely on it”

— Quotes from the research participants of the Changing Fate Project
CHANGING FATE THROUGH MERIT-BASED EXAMINATIONS (GAOKAO)?

- The contemporary myths about changing fate through gaokao in China
- All the discourses revolving around “fate” or “命”
  1. Male research participants who succeeded in the exams: Their narratives focus on their adjustment to the individualistic value orientation and an emerging sense of uncertainty brought forward by a mechanism of competition.
  2. Women who succeeded in the exams: They were constantly marginalized in testing and re-entering schools as their patriarchal families and the educational system contested to assert control over their bodies. As a result, their fate-changing endeavors were very often compromised even through they stood out among their peers on academic performance.
  3. Those who failed or missed the exams: They tended to admit their fate as what it is, namely, being peasants in the countryside. Even though some of them were able to succeed in the later marketization process and cross the rural/urban divide, they still surprisingly constructed a narrative of a failure centering on not being able to change their fate.
The Changing Fate Project

(1) Problematized the contemporary myth of changing fate as both gender-blind and belonging to those who benefited from the educational reform launched in the 1977.

(2) Brought people’s attention to the experience and voices of those whose experiences were marginalized and forgotten in today’s China.

(3) Revealed the complexities in the origin and rise of meritocracy in post-Mao China.
NEXT STEP

Working on the book manuscript and methodological journal articles based on this project
THANKS FOR BEING HERE WITH ME VIRTUALLY!

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For archives of all IIQM webinar series, please visit:
https://www.ualberta.ca/international-institute-for-qualitative-methodology/webinars/index.html

Thinking Qualitatively Conference 2020 has been postponed to July 5-10, 2021, to be hosted by the University of British Columbia Okanagan in Kelowna, British Columbia, Canada. Please watch our website and social media for updates and calls for abstracts, and hopefully see you in Kelowna in July 2021!


For more information about University of British Columbia Okanagan and the Kelowna region, please visit:
https://ok.ubc.ca
https://www.tourismkelowna.com