How does Childhood Family Background Affect Trajectories to Adulthood? Evidence from China

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Abstract: Existing research has found that since the late 1960s, the pathway to adulthood in Western countries has undergone complex changes, but few studies have investigated such changes and the effect of childhood family background on the transition to adulthood within the Chinese context. This study aims to examine the role of childhood family background in the transition to adulthood among Chinese youth born between 1930 and 1979. We identified four clusters of trajectories to adulthood in both the family and occupational domain. In the occupational domain, more than a quarter of respondents fall into the cluster of high studies & non-agricultural employment and in the family domain, nearly one-third of the sample follows the clusters of marriage & one child and staying single longer, reflecting the increasing diversity and delay in transition to adulthood. Parents' occupations during childhood had a significant effect on both occupational trajectory and family trajectory. Higher occupational status of parents delayed the transition to adulthood, while lower occupational status of parents promoted the transition to adulthood. Family economic status during childhood had a greater effect on occupational trajectories. Young people with worse family financial situations in childhood were more likely to enter the labour market earlier, while those with better family financial situations were more likely to receive long-term education and delay entering the workforce. The mother's religious belief had a more significant effect on the family life course. Youths with non-religious mothers were more likely to fall into the unmarried or childless cluster. In the Chinese context, the political status of the father played an important role in adult transition. A father's Communist party membership in childhood was positively correlated with the likelihood that individuals would follow the pattern of trajectory to adulthood characterised by long-term education.

Keywords: Transition to adulthood · Life course · Childhood family background

1   Introduction

Regarding transition to adulthood, sociological research usually emphasises the markers of the transition to adulthood, such as completing education, starting employment, getting married and becoming a parent (*Goldscheider/Goldscheider* 1999; *Hogan/Astone* 1986; *Modell* 1989; *Arnett* 2001), focusing in particular on the historical changes in the timing of these transitions, as well as the interrelationships between the transitions of different roles and the resulting transition patterns (*Hogan* 1980; *Marini* 1984; *Arnett* 2001). These roles or events represent the transition from the typical role of youth to that of adulthood and are considered signs of adulthood. Since the late 1960s, scholars have found that the transition to adulthood of young people in Western countries has undergone significant changes, manifested in the delay of life events in the transition of young people to adulthood and more frequent transitions between life roles or states during adulthood (*Aassve et al.* 2002; *Salmela-Aro et al.* 2011; *Shanahan* 2000; *Sironi/Furstenberg* 2012; *Widmer/Ritschard* 2009). Within the shaping mechanism of delayed and diversified trajectories to adulthood, in addition to structural factors such as social changes, education systems reforms and labour market contexts (*Billari* 2004; *Blossfeld et al.* 2005; *Danziger/Ratner* 2010; *Mayer* 2004; *Modell et al.* 1976; *Iacovou* 2002), background of the family of origin in the timing and sequence of events in the transition to adulthood have also received extensive attention and have been shown to play an important role in adulthood (*Elzinga/Liefbroer* 2007; *Sironi et al.* 2015).

Since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, with the rapid modernisation of Chinese society, profound changes have also taken place in the transition to adulthood, which may be mainly reflected in different life-course fields, such as increased years of education, delays in starting a family and having children. These phenomena suggest that there may be a new pattern in the pathway to adulthood (*Wang/Zhao* 2021). According to the relevance of the social background, the changes in the transition to adulthood that occurred in the West, does the adult transition of Chinese youth also show such changes after experiencing the modernisation trend? This study also focuses on whether family factors that lead to the transition to adulthood in the West also play a role in the process of adult transition in China. Therefore, based on retrospective empirical data from China, the current study examines the pattern of trajectories to adulthood of Chinese youth and the influence of childhood family background.

2   Theoretical background

The various changes presented in the pathway to adulthood are often explained under the macro-structural framework. The concept of social norms is used to explain the regularities observed during the transition to adulthood and it is assumed that the degree of people's compliance with social norms has an impact on adulthood. When there is a major deviation from the prescribed social timetable, it will cause the loss of consistency in the adult transition, such as role transitions occurring too

early or too late (*Settersten* 2003; *Mortimer et al*. 2005). Another perspective used to explain changes in trajectories to adulthood is the individualisation theory. Scholars believe that since the middle of the twentieth century, the modern transformation of society has increased the individual's autonomy in their life arrangements while also increasing uncertainty (*Beck* 1992; *Beck/Beck-Gernsheim* 2002). Young people have greater personal freedom than ever, which gives them greater autonomy in the choice of pathways to adulthood (*Mills* 2007; *Strickland* 2012), thereby enabling young people to make the transition to adulthood more autonomously. Meanwhile, the increasing insecurity and uncertainty of modern society also impels young people to choose increasingly diverse and unstable life trajectories (*Beck* 1995; *Blossfeld/Hofmeister* 2006).

Institutions and policies also play an important role in accumulating advantages or disadvantages for individuals, influencing the likelihood of delaying or accelerating adulthood (*Iacovou* 2002; *Lee* 2014). Scholars describe the transition to adulthood as an aspect of the life course constructed by social institutions and emphasises that the inequality of later life-course consequences is the result of social construction processes and assumes that the formation of advantages and disadvantages is a long-term process of social structuring and institutionalisation (*Kohli/Meyer* 1986; *Dannefer* 2020). Since 1970s, the reform of the welfare system oriented to neoliberal policies and the changes in the labour market in Western countries have further increased the instability and insecurity of individual careers (*Billari* 2004), leading the transition to adulthood of young people in a more flexible way. For example, scholars found that changes in the labour market over past decades in United States, such as labour-saving technological changes, increased globalisation, reduced unionisation and the failure of the minimum wage to keep up with inflation, have made it more difficult for young people to achieve economic stability (*Danziger/Ratner* 2010). These changing economic conditions have led to a decline in the social status of young people, contributing to increasingly precarious trajectories (*Côté/Bynner* 2008). In addition, the adult transition of youth is obviously affected by historical events. For example, the division and reunification of East and West Germany had a significant effect on events that marked adulthood, such as leaving education and training, entering the labour market, leaving home and forming unions and families (*Hillmert* 2005).

The changes of entering adulthood are also regarded as part of the second demographic transition (SDT) theory (*Lesthaeghe* 1995; *Lesthaeghe/van de Kaa* 1986). This theory argues that as demographic phenomena such as cohabitation, divorce, celibacy and late marriage become more common, the distribution of demographic events has also become more complex and diverse (*Lesthaeghe* 1995; *Ferrari/Pailhé* 2017; *Billari/Liefbroer* 2010). The expansion of the education system and the changes in the labour market have also caused delays in the transition of young people. For example, the rise in youth unemployment, the prevalence of limited-term work contracts and unstable employment are regarded as the main reasons for the postponement of departure from the parental home and family formation (*Blossfeld et al.* 2005; *Ferrari/Pailhé* 2017). In addition, cultural factors

such as religion and customs may cause differences in the timing of adult transitions in different regions (*Iacovou* 2002; *Barry/Nelson* 2005).

In terms of micro factors, more scholars pay attention to the impact of the characteristics of individuals and families on the trajectories to adulthood. At the individual level, people's education level is considered to be the most important determinant of the sequence of role changes during adult transition (*Pallas* 2003; *Schoon* 2008). Military service also has a significant effect on economic independence from parents and family formation (including the time of marriage and childbirth and family structure); compared with civilians of the same age, the transition of soldiers to adulthood is more stable and orderly (*Kelty et al.* 2010).

At the family level, some scholars have observed that well-educated parents can provide sufficient economic, cultural and social resources to ensure that their children receive a good education (*Walsemann et al.* 2008). *Sirniö, Kauppinen* and *Martikainen* (2017) also observed that parental resources, especially parental income, provide useful support for young people's pathway to adulthood. Young people with higher social and cultural capital coped more easily with individual role transitions (*Stauber/Walther* 2006). Conversely, the disadvantaged status of the childhood family has an adverse effect on the specific outcome of the individual in adulthood. *Aquilino* (1996) found that the experience of single-parent families influenced the likelihood of high school completion and enrolment in postsecondary school, the timing of residential independence and entry into the labour force. In addition, the experience of poverty in childhood is a powerful predictor of various adverse health outcomes in middle and late adulthood. Children living in poverty are more likely to die earlier than their peers as adults (*Raphael* 2011; *Evans/Kim* 2007). For example, some scholars have found that lower socioeconomic status in childhood is significantly related to the relative mortality of Scottish men (*Smith et al*. 2000) and severe socioeconomic deprivation (SED) is also significantly associated with neurological diseases in adulthood (*Morris et al.* 2019). Meanwhile, the effect of parental social class on the transition to adulthood varies from country to country (*Sironi et al*. 2015). In North America, higher family status tends to reduce the complexity of the trajectory (*Hogan* 1981; *Rajulton/Burch* 2010; *Ravanera et al*. 2003), while the opposite effect was found in Southern Europe (*Galland* 1997; *Marini* 1984).

Since the founding of the People's Republic of China, the period of transition to adulthood has undergone significant changes, which are reflected in different domains of life. In the field of education, the structural transformation of the education system has improved the education level of the Chinese population. The population with junior college degrees and above per 100,000 rose from 416 in 1964 to 15,467 people in 2020 (*National Bureau of Statistics* 2021). From the family life course, the timing of first marriage and first childbirth continues to be delayed. The mean age at first marriage increased from 19.55 in 1960 to 26.3 in 2016 and the mean age at first birth increased from 22.20 in 1960 to 26.9 in 2016, (*Chen* 1991; *Zhuang/Zhang* 2003; *He et al.* 2018), which indicates the delay and suppression of population events during adulthood. In the field of employment, the labour market environment has undergone obvious changes, the mobility of labour has become more common and

the number of flexible employees has continued to increase. Some scholars estimate that China's urban informal employment accounts for 33.2 percent to 44.7 percent of total urban employment and the number of informal employments reaches 138 million to 155 million (*Chen et al*. 2021). In the past ten years, China has begun to experience the second demographic transition. Some demographic phenomena, such as cohabitation, late marriage and divorce, are becoming more pervasive and gradually accepted by society. For example, the divorce rate rose from 2.0 percent in 1978 to 31 percent in 2020 (*Yang/He* 2014; *Ministry of Civil Affairs* 2021). A national survey concerning childbearing history shows that more than 20 percent of Chinese women born since 1957 have had unmarried pregnancies (*Li* 2020). In the 1990s birth cohort, more than 30 percent had cohabited with their partners before their first marriage (*Zhang* 2020). In the domain of work, the social heterogeneity in work trajectories between urban and rural areas and between men and women is associated with wider economic and institutional contexts, such as changes in the labour market and public pension systems (*Xu et al*. 2021). Since the 1980s, when a large number of rural people moved into cities for work, groups of migrant children emerged and their number continued to increase. For example, from 2000 to 2010, the number of migrant children increased from 19.82 million to 35.81 million (*Lv et al.* 2018). Some scholars pointed out that childhood migration significantly affects the time and pattern of life events in early adulthood of Chinese youth, that is, the delay of marriage and parenting among young people who experienced migration in childhood (*Liu* 2013).

In the Chinese context, the transition to adulthood of adolescents is obviously affected by historical events and policy factors. Some scholars have found that historical events such as the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution delayed the transition of Chinese youth to adulthood (*Yeung/Hu* 2013; *Wang/Zhao* 2021). Among them, the family planning policy also has a particularly significant effect on the adulthood of Chinese youth. The family planning policy stipulates that eligible families can only have one child, which reduces the number of birth events in their life course and affects their pathway to adulthood. Meanwhile, as many families are only allowed to have one child, this further underscores the importance of children to the family. The family has always played a central role in the social and cultural life of China and is valued as the cornerstone of society (*Lin et al*. 1994; *Nelson et al.* 2004). The fact that the family has to devote all its resources to this one child, including emotional and financial intergenerational support, highlights the increasingly important role of the family in the development of the child. Families with good family backgrounds can provide more resources for the growth of their children, while families with poor family backgrounds cannot provide strong support for their children's growth (*Duan/Su* 2020). In other words, with the implementation of the family planning policy and the miniaturisation of family size, children have actually become a scarce resource for families and families have to devote all their resources to their children to provide better support for their growth. In China, this emphasis on the strong connectedness between individuals and family may be reflected in the construction of the pattern of trajectories to adulthood. In other words, in the process of postponement and de-standardisation of trajectories to adulthood, the

patterns and smoothness of transition to adulthood are strongly associated with family background. However, the correlation between family background and subsequent life course may begin before birth and continue through adolescence and can shape the trajectories to adulthood and psychological development of young adults in their later life. Analyses of the influence of family factors on the transition to adulthood should extend to individual childhoods, because childhood family background is not only an important condition for individual socialisation, but also determines the amount of resources or social capital that the individual could obtain during their growth.

Therefore, we assume that Chinese youths with advantaged childhood family conditions (such as family economic status, political status) have delayed and diversified trajectories to adulthood and investigate the changes in trajectories to adulthood of Chinese youth and the role of childhood family background in the observed changes. In order to achieve this purpose, we consider transition to adulthood as a multifaceted process marked by a series of events and that these events mutually influence each other in terms of timing, which may result in different trajectories to adulthood (*Gauthier/Furstenberg* 2002). Thus, focusing on single events makes it difficult to understand the interrelationships of different life events. We solve this problem by adopting sequence analysis approach, which provides a "holistic" perspective, allowing us to view transition to adulthood as a multi-dimensional and long-span trajectory sequence (*Billari* 2001; *Sironi et al.* 2015).

3   Method

3.1   Data

The data used in this research was derived from the third wave of the China Health and Retirement Longitudinal Study (CHARLS) conducted by National School of Development at Peking University in 2014. The survey used a multistage probability proportionate to size sampling (PPS) method to select samples and was conducted in 150 counties and 450 communities (villages) in 28 provinces, autonomous regions and municipalities. The subject of this survey is the life course of Chinese people and 20,948 people were interviewed. The main events of an individual's life course such as demographic backgrounds, marital history, childbearing history, education history, health history, wealth history and work history were collected.

This comprehensive life history retrospective survey provides a reliable data source for us to study the life course of transition to adulthood for Chinese people. Since the youngest cohort in the sample was also born in the late 1970s and there were few respondents born before 1930, this research did not include the sample born before 1930 and divided the remaining respondents into five cohorts: 1930-1939 (cohort 1), 1940-1949 (cohort 2), 1950-1959 (cohort 3), 1960-1969 (cohort 4) and 1970-1979 (cohort 5). For the treatment of missing data, this study deleted the

cases with information errors and missing values and only retained and analysed the complete cases. The final valid sample included 15,777 respondents.

3.2 Analytical plan

The method used in this study is multi-channel sequence analysis. Multi-channel sequence analysis can effectively describe the overall changes in life-course trajectories, measure the dissimilarity of life-course trajectories between different individuals and explore the structure and pattern of life-course trajectories. The results obtained can be used for further statistical analysis.

First, we operationalise the life course of transition to adulthood in a multi-dimensional life-course states trajectory of individuals from the age of 16 to 35, that is, a multi-dimensional state trajectory sequence based on life events and roles in the four domains of education, marriage, childbearing and employment.

Second, we construct a sequence of states during the transition to adulthood based on the age at which an individual has experienced events or roles that mark entry into adult life, with each year of age contributing one observation. The realisation of this aim mainly includes the following two steps. First of all, the life-course states of transition to adulthood are identified. This study selects the life-course state within the life domains of education, marriage, childbearing and employment during transition to adulthood. In the marriage field, there were four possible states: single (S), partnered (P), married (M) and divorced or widowed (D). In the childbearing field, there were also four states: no children (NC), one child (1C), two children (2C) and three or more children (3C+). We merged the state of marriage and childbearing (4 marital states × 4 childbearing states) to form a family life-course trajectory. We also merged education and employment into one field that had six states: education (ED), agricultural work (AG), non-agricultural work (NA), no paid work (NP), military service (MS)[1] and not employed (NU), to form the education and employment trajectory (see Table 1). Furthermore, according to the life-course states defined above and the respondent's education history, employment history, marriage history and childbearing history information, this study uses years as the unit of time to respectively construct the education and employment trajectories and family life-course trajectory sequences of Chinese people born between 1930 and 1979 from 16 to 35 years of age. These trajectory sequences are made up of the multi-dimensional states of individuals at different ages during the transition to adulthood.

Third, we use the optimal matching (OM) method to calculate the distance between the paired sequences and then perform cluster analysis based on the distance matrix to form the type of state sequence. Specifically, we performed a

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[1] In 1955, China began to implement a compulsory military service system, requiring all Chinese citizens to perform military service; by 1978, a system of combining compulsory military service and voluntary military service was implemented. The period of compulsory military service is two years.

Tab. 1: Life course states defined in this study

Education and employment trajectories	Family life course trajectories
(1) education (ED)	(1) single with no children (SNC)
(2) agricultural work (AG)	(2) single with one child (S1C)
(3) non-agricultural work (NA)	(3) single with two children (S2C)
(4) no paid work (NP)	(4) single with three[+] children (S3C)
(5) military service (MS)	(5) partner with no children (PNC)
(6) not employed (NU)	(6) partner with one child (P1C)
	(7) partner with two children (P2C)
	(8) partner with three[+] children (P3C)
	(9) married with no children (MNC)
	(10) married with one child (M1C)
	(11) married with two children (M2C)
	(12) married with three[+] children (M3C)
	(13) divorced/widow with no children (DNC)
	(14) divorced/widow with one child (D1C)
	(15) divorced/widow with two children (D2C)
	(16) divorced/widow with three[+] children (D3C)

Source: own design

sequence analysis by applying optimal matching, which calculates the matrix of dissimilarities between pairs of individual trajectories, setting a 1-unit of insertion and deletion costs and transition rate between states of substitution cost in order to match different multidimensional sequences. After completing the optimal matching, this study uses the Ward algorithm method to perform hierarchical clustering analysis to achieve the dimensionality reduction of the data to organise the sequence of life-course trajectories into groups so that the similarity of the sequences within the groups is maximised and minimised between the groups. The validity of clustering is tested through a series of indicators and the optimal number of clusters is found according to the test indicators of HG (Hubert's Gamma), PBC (Point Biserial Correlation), ASW (Average Silhouette Width), R2 (Share of the Discrepancy Explained by the Clustering Solution).

Finally, we use the clusters of trajectories to adulthood as dependent variable and estimate a multinomial logistic regression analysis to investigate the relationship between childhood family background and the probability of belonging to each of the selected clusters. All data processing is done using the R software package TraMineR and WeightedCluster.

3.3   Variables

The dependent variable in our study is the clusters of trajectories to transition formed by cluster analysis. The independent variable is childhood family background, mainly including parent's ethnicity, parent's religious belief in childhood, family financial situation in childhood, not having enough food to eat in childhood, parent's occupation and politics status in childhood. Parent's ethnicity includes the Han[2] ethnic group and minority ethnic groups; parent's religious belief in childhood has two options of "no" or "yes"; family financial status in childhood includes three categories of "worse," "much the same" and "better"; not having enough food to eat in childhood covers two options of "no" or "yes"; parents' occupations in childhood includes agricultural employment and non-agricultural employment; parent's politics status involves two categories of communist party members and non-communist party members.

The control variables include gender, urban-rural, birth cohorts, ethnicity and political status of respondents. Gender is a dummy variable with male as the reference category. Urban-rural is also a dummy variable, where 0 indicates rural and 1 indicates urban.[3] We also include five birth cohorts: 1930-1939, 1940-1949, 1950-1959, 1960-1969 and 1970-1979. Ethnicity includes two categories with the minorities as the reference category. The politics status includes non-party membership and party membership. The descriptive statistics of the variables are shown in Table 2.

4   Results

4.1   Four trajectories pattern of transition to adulthood

Sequence analysis identified four patterns of trajectories to adulthood in the fields of education-employment and family life course, respectively (see Figures 1 and 2).[4] The four clusters of education-employment trajectories include: (1) Low education & agricultural employment, which is characterised by the relatively low level of education of members and early entry into agricultural work (mainly at the age of 16). (2) High studies & agricultural employment, which is characterised by the fact that at different ages, agricultural employment occupies a dominant proportion of the sample and members undergo a transition from education to agricultural work.

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[2]   The Han ethnic group is the largest among the 56 ethnic groups in China. According to China's seventh census, the Han ethnic group accounts for 91.11 percent of the total population.

[3]   We divide urban and rural areas based on respondents' residence at the time of the survey.

[4]   The validity of cluster analysis results of education-employment trajectories: HG (Hubert's Gamma) = 0.890, PBC (Point Biserial Correlation) = 0.725. The validity of cluster analysis results of family life-course trajectories: HG (Hubert's Gamma) = 0.743, PBC (Point Biserial Correlation) = 0.595.

Tab. 2: Descriptive statistic of the sample (N=15777)

Variables	Frequency	Percent (%)
Gender		
Male (=1)	7541	47.80
Female (=2)	8236	52.20
Birth Cohorts		
1930-1939 (=1)	1035	6.56
1940-1949 (=2)	3063	19.41
1950-1959 (=3)	5163	32.72
1960-1969 (=4)	5384	34.13
1970-1979 (=5)	1132	7.18
Urban-rural		
Rural (=1)	12506	79.27
Urban (=2)	3271	20.73
Ethnicity		
Minorities (=1)	1240	7.86
Han (=2)	14537	92.14
Politics status		
Non-party member (=1)	14182	89.89
Party member (=2)	1595	10.11
Mother's Ethnicity		
Minorities (=1)	1203	7.63
Han (=2)	14574	92.37
Father's Ethnicity		
Minorities (=1)	1173	7.43
Han (=2)	14604	92.57
Mother's religious belief in childhood		
No (=1)	14468	91.70
Yes (=2)	1309	8.30
Father's religious belief in childhood		
No (=1)	14748	93.48
Yes (=2)	1029	6.52
Mother is Communist Party member in childhood		
No (=1)	15463	98.01
Yes (=2)	314	1.99
Father is Communist Party member in childhood		
No (=1)	13622	86.34
Yes (=2)	2155	13.66
Mother's occupation in childhood		
Agricultural (=1)	14653	92.88
Non-agricultural (=2)	1124	7.12
Father's occupation in childhood		
Agricultural (=1)	12902	81.78
Non-agricultural (=2)	2875	18.22

Tab. 2:   Continuation

Variables	Frequency	Percent (%)
Family financial situation in childhood		
Worse (=1)	5995	38.00
Much the same (=2)	8237	52.21
Better (=3)	1545	9.79
Not having enough food to eat in childhood		
No (=1)	5220	33.09
Yes (=2)	10557	66.91

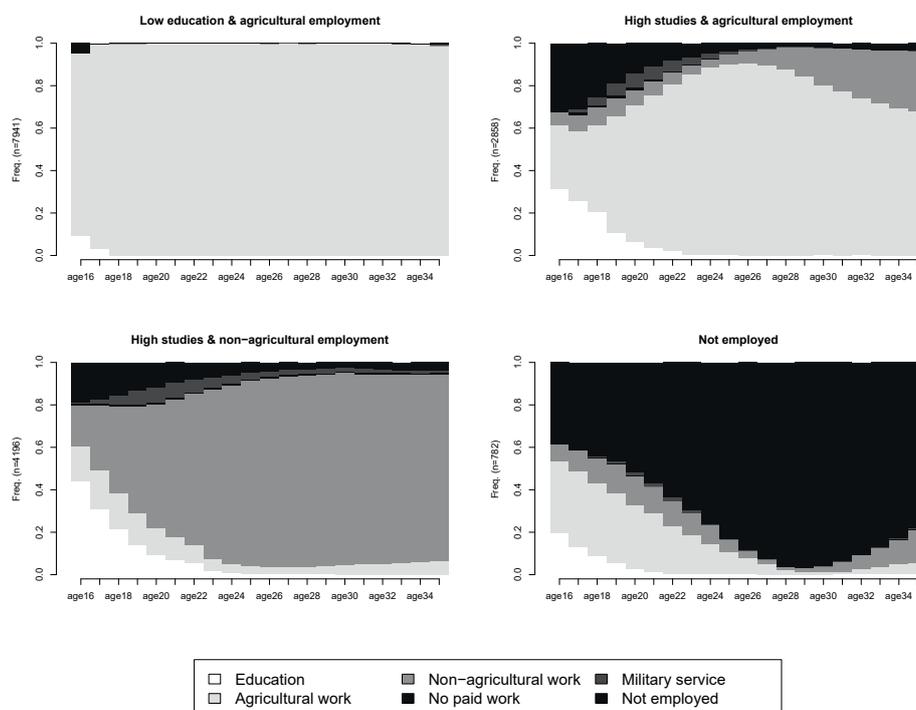Source: China Health and Retirement Longitudinal Study (CHARLS) in 2014

(3) High studies & non-agricultural employment, characterised by a relatively high level of education of members and a late entry into the labour market and most of members are in the state of stable non-agricultural work. In early adulthood, the proportion of the state of "education" in this cluster is relatively high. For example, at the age of 16, 44.02 percent of the cluster members are receiving education, indicating that compared with other clusters, members of this cluster have a longer period of education. (4) Not employed, wherein, at different ages, the proportion of "not employed" is relatively high and many members are in not engaging in work.

Four clusters of family life-course trajectories are also identified: (1) Marriage & one child, which is dominated by married individuals with one child. Individuals in this cluster experience a gradual change from being single without children, to being married without children, to being married with one child. Therefore, this cluster is characterised by fewer children, as most members had only one child and the family structure is dominated by nuclear families. (2) Marriage & two children, having the largest proportion of married people with two children. This cluster is characterised by early marriage, early childbirth, but the family size of members in this cluster has begun to shrink. (3) Marriage & large families, which has the largest proportion of married individuals with three or more children. It is characterised by early marriage, early childbirth, many births, large family sizes and early timing of transitions to adulthood. (4) Staying single longer, which is dominated by singles who have no children. A certain percentage of members in this cluster are still single and childless at the age of 35, so this group is characterised by late marriage, late childbirth and the delay of transition to adulthood.

4.2   Childhood family background and transition to adulthood

Table 3 shows the average probability of belonging to each cluster of education-employment trajectories. Males, urban residents and Han Chinese youth are more likely to fall into the cluster of high studies & non-agricultural work, showing that they have a higher likelihood of long-term education during adulthood, which in turn can delay individuals' transition to adulthood. The cohorts of 1940-1949 and 1950-1959 are more likely to belong to the cluster of low education & agricultural work and

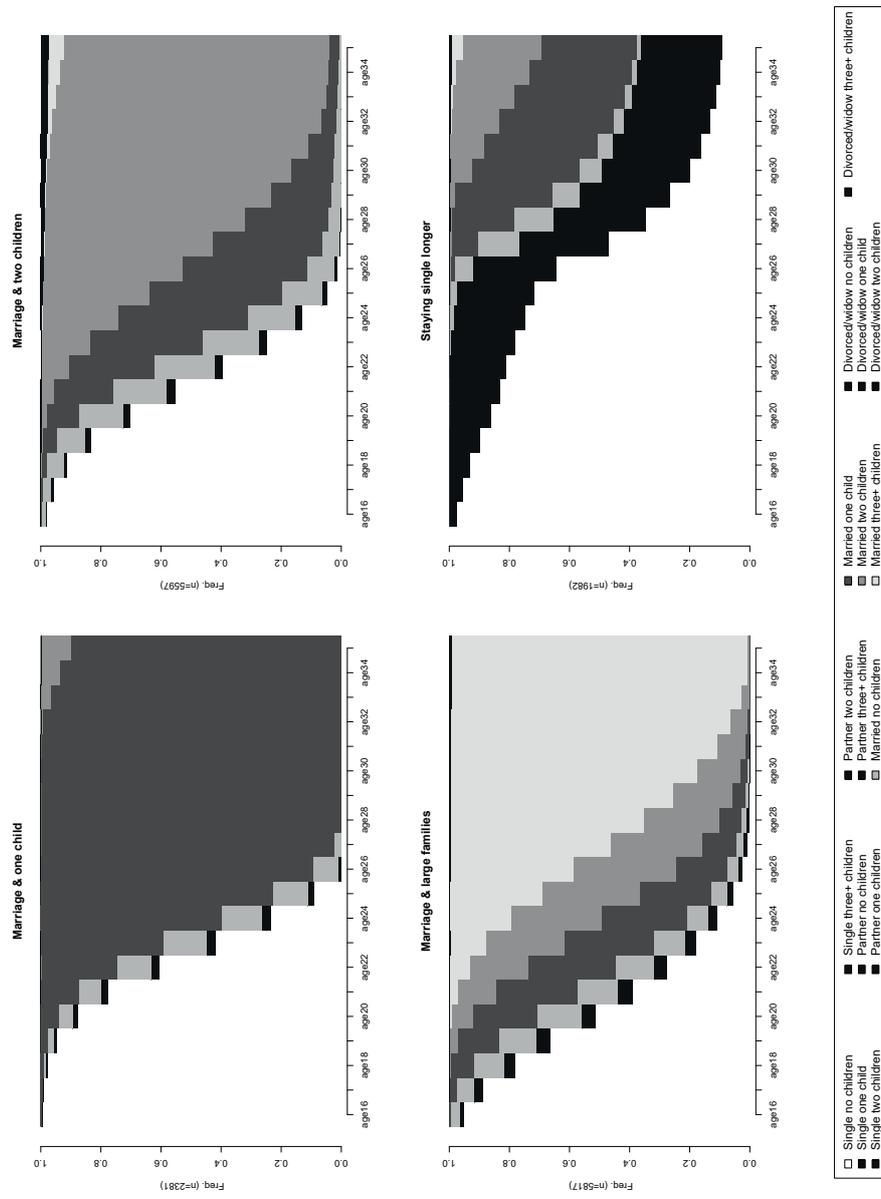**Fig. 1:** Distribution of states in each cluster of education-employment trajectories

Source: China Health and Retirement Longitudinal Study (CHARLS) in 2014

the cohorts of 1960-1969 and 1960-1979 are more likely to belong to the cluster of high studies & non-agricultural work.

Regarding the effect of childhood family background on the probability of belonging to the clusters of education-employment trajectories, we found that, in terms of the politics status of parents in childhood, father's Communist Party membership is negatively correlated with the probability of belonging to low education & agricultural employment and is positively associated with the possibility of belonging to high studies & non-agricultural employment; that is, young people whose fathers are not Communist Party members may complete the transition to adulthood earlier. With respect to parent's usual occupation during the interviewee's childhood, those having a parent who engage in agricultural work are more likely to enter the cluster of low education & agricultural employment and those who engage in non-agricultural work are more likely to enter high studies & non-agricultural employment as well, indicating that higher occupational status of parents may delay the transition to adulthood of young people. As far as the childhood family economic situation is concerned, young people with better family economic conditions in childhood are more likely to fall into the cluster of high studies & non-agricultural employment, those who have enough food to eat in childhood are also more likely

Fig. 2: Distribution of states in each cluster of family life-course trajectories

Source: China Health and Retirement Longitudinal Study (CHARLS) in 2014

Tab. 3: Multinomial logistic regressions on the probability of belonging to each cluster of education-employment trajectories. Average marginal effects

	Low education & agricultural employment		High studies & agricultural employment		High studies & non-agricultural employment		Not employed	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7	Model 8
Gender (Ref: Male)	0.198***	0.204***	-0.057***	-0.057***	-0.186***	-0.192***	0.045***	0.045***
Urban-rural (Ref: Rural)	-0.441***	-0.367***	-0.101***	-0.075***	0.516***	0.408***	0.026***	0.035***
Cohorts: (Ref:1930-1939)								
1940-1949	0.091***	0.085***	-0.040**	-0.038**	-0.018	-0.016	-0.034***	-0.031***
1950-1959	0.038*	0.043**	-0.016	-0.013	0.011	-0.001	-0.033***	-0.030***
1960-1969	-0.061***	-0.043**	-0.028*	-0.026†	0.112***	0.089***	-0.023**	-0.021*
1970-1979	-0.191***	-0.166***	-0.033†	-0.030†	0.217***	0.188***	0.007	0.008
Ethnicity (Ref: Minorities)	-0.052***	-0.015	-0.0002	-0.026	0.036***	0.029†	0.016**	0.013
Politics status (Ref: Non-party member)	0.066***	0.060***	0.015	0.016	-0.086***	-0.081***	0.004	0.004
Father's Ethnicity (Ref: Minorities)		0.034		-0.011		-0.032		0.009
Mother's Ethnicity (Ref: Minorities)		-0.078*		0.037		0.044†		-0.003
Father's religious belief in childhood (Ref: No)		0.003		-0.016		0.009		0.003
Mother's religious belief in childhood (Ref: No)		-0.035		0.008		0.024		0.003
Father is Communist Party member (Ref: No)		-0.050***		0.023*		0.022*		0.004
Mother is Communist Party member (Ref: No)		0.018		0.007		-0.013		-0.012
Father's usual occupation in childhood (Ref: Agricultural)		-0.082***		0.010		0.074***		-0.001
Mother's usual occupation in childhood (Ref: Agricultural)		-0.229***		-0.060***		0.276***		0.014
Not having enough food to eat in childhood (Ref: No)		0.025**		-0.002		-0.019**		-0.004
Family financial situation in childhood: (Ref: Worse)								
Much the same		-0.041***		0.006		0.034***		0.002
Better		-0.114***		0.030*		0.075***		0.009
Observations	15777	15777	15777	15777	15777	15777	15777	15777

Note: † p<0.10, * p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001.

Source: China Health and Retirement Longitudinal Study (CHARLS) in 2014

Tab. 4: Multinomial logistic regressions on the probability of belonging to each cluster of family life-course trajectories. Average marginal effects

	Marriage & one child		Marriage & two children		Marriage & large families		Staying single longer	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7	Model 8
Gender (Ref: Male)	0.001	-0.001	0.026***	0.027***	0.079***	0.080***	-0.105***	-0.107***
Urban-rural (Ref: Rural)	0.152***	0.104***	-0.066***	-0.030**	-0.163***	-0.119***	0.077***	0.045***
Cohorts: (Ref:1930-1939)								
1940-1949	-0.009†	-0.001†	0.044***	0.047***	-0.007	-0.012	-0.028*	-0.026*
1950-1959	0.089***	0.089***	0.192***	0.195***	-0.260***	-0.257***	-0.021†	-0.027*
1960-1969	0.223***	0.211***	0.274***	0.278***	-0.430***	-0.416***	-0.067***	-0.073***
1970-1979	0.336***	0.318***	0.250***	0.257***	-0.545***	-0.531***	-0.040**	-0.044**
Ethnicity (Ref: Minorities)	0.047***	0.027†	0.033*	0.008	-0.044***	-0.007	-0.036***	-0.028†
Politics status (Ref: Non-party member)	0.035***	0.029**	-0.0001	0.002	-0.032**	-0.030*	-0.003	-0.001
Father's Ethnicity (Ref: Minorities)		-0.003		0.032		-0.037		0.008
Mother's Ethnicity (Ref: Minorities)		0.039*		-0.014		-0.006		-0.018
Father's religious belief in childhood (Ref: No)		0.018		0.013		-0.021		-0.011
Mother's religious belief in childhood (Ref: No)		-0.001		-0.058*		0.026		-0.033†
Father is Communist Party member (Ref: No)		0.019*		0.014		-0.023*		-0.010
Mother is Communist Party member (Ref: No)		-0.007		-0.011		-0.031		0.049*
Father's usual occupation in childhood (Ref: Agricultural)		0.030***		0.010		-0.038***		-0.001
Mother's usual occupation in childhood (Ref: Agricultural)		0.088***		-0.093***		-0.137***		0.142***
Not having enough food to eat in childhood (Ref: No)		-0.026***		-0.005		0.036***		-0.005
Family financial situation in childhood: (Ref: Worse)								
Much the same		0.001		0.017*		0.021**		-0.038***
Better		-0.017		0.004		0.018		-0.002
Observations	15777	15777	15777	15777	15777	15777	15777	15777

Note: † p<0.10, * p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001
Source: China Health and Retirement Longitudinal Study (CHARLS) in 2014

to enter the category of high studies & non-agricultural employment. In other words, young people with higher family economic status in childhood are more likely to delay the transition to adulthood.

Table 4 presents the probability of belonging to each cluster of family life-course trajectories. Females, rural residents and non-party members are more likely to fall into the cluster of marriage & large family, indicating that they tend to accelerate their acceptance of adult social roles. The cohorts of 1940-1949 and 1950-1959 are more likely to belong to the cluster of marriage & two children; the cohorts of 1960-1969 and 1970-1979 are more likely to be classified into the clusters of marriage & two children and marriage & one child and less likely to be included to the cluster of marriage & large families.

With regard to the relationship between childhood family background and the likelihood of belonging to a certain cluster of family life-course trajectories, we found that youths whose mothers have religious beliefs are less likely to fall into the clusters of marriage & two children and staying single longer. The identity of fathers as Communist Party members is negatively associated with the possibility of belonging to the cluster of marriage & large family and is positively associated with the possibility of belonging to marriage & one child, thus their children may adopt adult social roles more slowly. The identity of mothers as Communist Party members is positively associated with the possibility of belonging to staying single longer. As far as parent's occupation is concerned, those having parents who engage in non-agricultural work are more likely to be classified under the cluster of marriage & one child and staying single longer, suggesting that those with high occupational status of parents may have a delayed transition to adulthood. Those who not have enough food to eat as a child are more likely to fall into the cluster of marriage & large families, while those who have enough food to eat are more likely to belong to the clusters of marriage & one child. In other words, youths who experience childhood malnutrition are more likely to accelerate their transition to adulthood.

5 Conclusion and discussion

In the context of China, based on retrospective life history data, this study constructs respondents' trajectories to adulthood involving four domains of education, marriage, childbearing and employment in order to investigate the patterns of pathways to adulthood of Chinese youth born from 1930 to 1979 and the role of childhood family background in these transitions.

First, we used multi-channel sequence analysis to identify four clusters of trajectories to adulthood. The education-employment trajectories can be divided into the following four clusters: low education & agricultural employment, high studies & agricultural employment, high studies & non-agricultural employment and not employed. More than a quarter of individuals belong to the pattern of high studies & non-agricultural employment, reflecting growing diversity and delay in patterns of transition to adulthood. The family life-course trajectories can also

be organised into four clusters: marriage & large family, marriage & two children, marriage & one child and staying single longer. More than 50 percent of individuals belong to the traditional and ordered types of marriage & large families and marriage & two children. Nearly one-third of individuals in the sample follow the types of marriage & one child and staying single longer and these two types represent the changes in transition to adulthood, namely the delay of life events in adulthood. This result shows that the new patterns in pathways to adulthood found by scholars in Western countries (*Billari/Liefbroer* 2010; *Robette* 2010) are also confirmed in the Chinese context, which contributes to the discovery of the delay of transition to adulthood in different contexts, such as revealing that the transition to adulthood has also changed in the Chinese context, thereby further illustrating that the changes in adult transitions seem to be an irreversible trend. Why would factors of social background leading to the change of transition to adulthood in the West also work in China? At least two factors may help illuminate these similar changes between Western countries and China in terms of the delay of transition to adulthood. First, the processes of demographic transition in China can provide some context. With the process of industrialisation, most Western countries already completed their first demographic transition in the nineteenth century and are now undergoing SDT, characterised by single, cohabiting and divorced adults (*Van de Kaa* 1987). China's first demographic transition began in the 1950s and was completed quickly within decades, but demographic phenomena represented by the SDT began to emerge (*Yu/Xie* 2019). Since demographic transition may have a considerable impact on the family life course by changing the timing and transitions of demographic events, the demographic transition process that China and Western countries experienced may explain the similarities in their adult transitions, especially in the familial domain. Furthermore, in Western countries, universal education ensures that each cohort moves through the early life course in lockstep and is fed into the labour market within a fairly narrow span of years (*Brückner/Mayer* 2005; *Shanahan* 2000). In other words, mass education in Western countries promotes a high degree of consistency from school to work and delays the transition to adulthood. The same story also happened in China, where with the introduction of nine-year compulsory education and the expansion of higher education since the 1980s, people have enjoyed longer years of education and then entered relatively stable career trajectories. Therefore, the popularisation and expansion of education may help to delay the adult transition of Chinese and Western youth.

Third, regarding the role of childhood family background in adulthood, we found that the political status of parents during respondents' childhood played an important role in the transition to adulthood of the Chinese youth. The fathers' Communist party membership is positively associated with the likelihood that individuals would follow the modern cluster of trajectories to adulthood, possibly delaying their adoption of adult social roles. Higher occupational status of parents delayed the transition to adulthood, while lower occupational status of parents promoted the transition to adulthood, perhaps due to the "protective" role of family, promoting individuals to stay longer in their family of origin. Family economic status in childhood has a significant impact on the transition to adulthood. Young people

with low family economic status in childhood are more likely to enter the labour market earlier, while those with higher family economic status are more likely to receive long-term education and delay entering work. In addition,, people with low family economic status during childhood (such as experiencing hunger in childhood) are more likely to have more children.

Existing studies found that the socio-economic status of the family affects the trajectories to adulthood (*Rijken/Liefbroer* 2009; *Blaauboer/Mulder* 2010). The social class of one's family and the resources or social capital it has may have intergenerational effects in the transition to adulthood of their children (*Sironi et al.* 2015; *Yuan/Ngai* 2016). Our findings further support that childhood family background has a significant effect on the transition to adulthood. The lower the socioeconomic status of the family in childhood, the higher the possibility of experiencing an early transition to adulthood. This result can be explained by two mechanisms. On the one hand, children with fewer family resources have more constraints that result in lower levels of education and earlier entry into the labour market; on the other hand, lower-class children are also more likely to leave their parents' homes and start a family earlier. As a Chinese proverb says, "the children of the poor are in charge of the house early." In other words, children with poor family financial conditions in childhood are more likely to start a family and assume family roles in early adulthood. The higher the socioeconomic status of the family in childhood, the higher the possibility of experiencing a delayed transition to adulthood. A more affluent family constitutes a "golden cage" (*Castiglioni/Dalla Zuanna* 1994), which provides a protective factor for the transition to adulthood of children, thereby delaying the formation of the family. The influence of family and patriarchal clan on the trajectories to adulthood is particularly obvious in China. As scholars have found, the Chinese family and clans have been so far resilient to societal transformation due to their deeply rooted traditions and current structural constraints. These have made intergenerational reciprocity attractive and prevented the Chinese family from decline (*Yang/He* 2014). Family and patriarchal clan not only provide intergenerational support for adulthood of children, but close ties with family also hinder the process leading to residential autonomy and promoting the standardisation of pathway of adulthood of children. In addition, the political status of parents is a unique dimension that supports the adult transition of Chinese youth and the parental Communist party membership, as a representative indicator of socio-economic status, can also provide a protective effect for transition to adulthood.

This study has several limitations. First of all, respondents' retrospective responses to childhood family background may have reminiscence bias and subjective evaluations of family financial status may also change over time, which may affect the accuracy of the results. In addition, this study analysed the impact of childhood family background on the trajectories to adulthood, but failed to examine the pattern of this effect with cohorts. Subsequent research can continue to examine this.

Abbreviations
CHARLS: China Health and Retirement Longitudinal Study; PPS: multistage probability proportionate to size sampling; OM: optimal matching.

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