

# The Relationship Between Education and Waithood: The Impact of Higher Education on Delayed Adulthood in China

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## Abstract:

This research project is an in-depth quantitative case study that explains how higher education affects the notion of 'waithood'. Waithood is defined as the state of waiting or the limbo that youth experience between adolescence and young adulthood, whereby they do not transition into young adults and are unable to attain usual markers of adulthood such as work, marriage, and financial independence. The study explores the impact of delayed employment and other aspects on young females in developing countries who join the workforce and other facets of adulthood immediately after acquiring their tertiary education. The survey is proposed to gather information on the subjects' experiences, the number of years it takes to reach some stages of adulthood, and the factors that can hinder or enhance this process. To establish the correlations and trends in the effect of tertiary education on females, statistical approaches will be employed. This research reveals that support systems and policy reforms are seen as imperatives in higher education. These reforms have assisted young women in transitioning from educational institutions to the workforce and other aspects of life with less pressure while acquiring essential knowledge and skills. Policy recommendations include increasing learning options in order to develop flexible learning models, enhancing career services, and eradicating cultural barriers that affect the learning process.

**Keywords:** Higher education; waithood; adulthood transition; policy reform.

## 1. Introduction

Higher education is often viewed as a means of enhancing individual and occupational development; however, this sector can sometimes hinder this process. According to Arnett (2023), the extended time spent in educational institutions can negatively affect young women's entry into the labor market, achievement of financial independence, and fulfilment of other expected adult roles [1]. This phenomenon is referred to as the 'waithood', where young people are in a limbo between adolescence and adulthood. In this period, youths, especially young women, may take longer to reach certain milestones such as securing permanent jobs, meeting cultural standards, and integrating into socio-economic systems, which further complicates the transition.

Over the last few decades in China, university education and postgraduate studies have been expanded by the government as a means of boosting the country's economic performance and improving the social standing of citizens. This expansion has led to observable changes in the understanding of adulthood and the way people experience it.

On the contrary, in Europe, North America, and South

Africa, entirely different dynamics are seen. For example, Europe has very elaborate social support networks that help to alleviate the financial burdens associated with long periods of study. On the other hand, in some areas of North America, considering the problem of student loans, the process of transition to the status of an adult may be further complicated. In South Africa, the combination of low literacy levels and high rates of youth unemployment pose specific problems that add to the difficulties of young people's transitions into adulthood. Laws and education systems do not factor in gender, hence indirectly making young women remain dependent and insecure for an extended period of time. In China, the competitive nature of the *gaokao* and the pressure on women to attend prestigious universities often lead women to pursue further education before joining the workforce. This protracted academic trajectory markedly delays the attainment of professional and personal development milestones, including stable employment and economic independence. The study examines the relationship between higher education and delayed adulthood among young women, focusing on identifying specific factors within higher education that contribute to this delay, using China as a case study. This study employs a quantitative research method-

ology with a sample of young women who are currently enrolled in or have recently graduated from higher education institutions. This methodology will help quantify the extent of the delay and identify key contributing factors, such as programmed structure, institutional policies and socio-cultural expectations. By investigating these factors, the study will provide insights into the socio-economic impact of prolonged studies due to access to higher education. The objective is to formulate policy recommendations that will facilitate a more conducive educational environment, facilitating a more seamless transition into the labor market and adulthood for young women. The study aims to contribute to the wider academic discourse on gender, education and economic participation by highlighting the need for gender-responsive policies in higher education.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Definitions and Dimensions of Waithood

The concept of “waithood” has been defined and explored in great detail in academic literature, which particular emphasis placed on its multifaceted dimensions, including economic, social, and psychological aspects. Honwana characterizes “waithood” as a protracted phase of adolescence during which young adults are situated in a state of limbo, unable to transition fully into adult roles such as employment, marriage, and financial independence [2]. In China, higher education makes young people enroll in more universities and delay their employment and other adult roles. Economically, individuals in waithood are likely to be unemployed or employed in low-paying jobs, exacerbated by the lack of correspondence between their competencies and the existing vacancies. Socially, the process of transition into adulthood is waiting until the specific age to form and sustain relationships. These include delayed marriage and the establishment of a stable income. In China, the high costs of living in the urban areas, especially in Beijing and Shanghai, and the cost of acquiring a house make young people delay marriage and childbearing. This delay is not just the individual’s choice; it is frequently social and economic imperatives.

In the psychological aspect, unemployment leads to frustration, anxiety, and low self-esteem. Individuals in the phase of entering adult life may suffer from an identity and vocational crisis when the norms and values of society clash with the individuals’ potential and prospects. In China, young graduates struggle with pressure to get well paid and respected jobs that would estimate their high level of education. The consequences of prolonged dependency and uncertainty are often psychological, which harm an individual’s mental health and well-being.

Honwana notes that waithood is further conditioned by gender, class, and ethnicity [2]. In the traditional Chinese

culture, there are numerous expectations with respect to adulthood milestones, making it even more challenging for women.

### 2.2 Higher Education and Its Broader Impacts

Higher education has a complex impact on the development of an individual. A substantial body of research indicates that individuals who pursue higher education are more likely to secure better employment opportunities and social mobility. However, it can also contribute “waithood” by delaying entry into the workforce and other adult roles. Scholars find that higher education, while providing essential skills, delays the transition to employment, marriage, and financial independence [3]. Roksa and Velez argue that delayed entry into higher education often results in extended periods of economic and social instability [4]. Such a delayed entry into the job market and the extended period of dependency can serve to exacerbate the phenomenon of ‘waiting’ (waithood).

Furthermore, the implications of higher education are also socio-culturally nuanced. In regions with robust social support systems, the impact of prolonged education on adulthood transitions is lessened. For instance, in Europe, people are protected by well-developed welfare systems that reduces the costs of education and training, while in North America and developing countries like China, the issue of student loans can aggravate other problems that are linked to delayed transitions into adulthood. The process of growing up is further prolonged by the expansion of higher education and other related social and economic processes. In China, the cultural emphasis on education as the only path to success intensifies pressure on young people, prolonging dependency on family support. In addition, the high cost of living and the scarce job vacancies, especially in the urban areas, hinder young graduates from gaining their financial independence within the desired time.

### 2.3 Theoretical Perspectives on Education and Social Transition

To understand the effects of extended learning on adulthood, this paper shall adopt different theoretical frameworks from the fields of sociology and education. Functionalist theory views education a key institution for socialization and control of society members. According to Perry and Tor, education is a vital element of social stratification since people acquire knowledge of social positions and norms [5]. But as the length of education advances, it may change all the terms set for adulthood and delay the transition to adult roles. Conflict suggests that education is used in an attempt to sustain social injustice. Collins argues that extended education is advantageous to those who can afford it, hence delaying adulthood for

low-income individuals [6]. This theory clearly suggests that educational expansion deepens inequality by providing more resources to the rich and delaying entrance into the workforce and other forms of independence for the poor.

Symbolic Interactionism explores how educational experience shape self-identity and perceptions of adulthood [7]. This theory sheds light on the manner in which routine educational processes influence one's perceptions of adulthood and readiness to take on adult roles. Acker highlights that extended education challenge traditional gender roles, especially for females [8]. A longer period in education may affect the timing of adulthood transition for women. They are able to attain professional and personal goals before assuming the role of an adult. Thus, while higher education has many positive effects, it often extends the period before individuals achieve independence and major life milestones.

### 3. Data Analysis

#### 3.1 The Impact of Educational Delay on Career Development

The postponement of initial employment due to extended periods of academic study is evident when examining the average age at which university graduates commence their professional careers. Recent data indicates that individuals with a bachelor's degree typically begin their careers around 22-23 years old [9]. In contrast, individuals with a master's degree typically enter the workforce at about 24-25 years old, while doctoral degree holders often begin their careers later, around 28-30 years old [9]. This trend shows that prolonged education delays entry into the workforce.

In addition, the employment rates at different levels of education show how educational lag affects people's employment. About 85% of the workforce has at some point acquired a bachelor's degree, with most finding their first job within six months after graduation. Master's degree holders, though employed at a rate of 90%, often experience an additional 8-12 months before securing a position. The employment rate of doctoral graduates is relatively high, around 92% [10]. But they may take more than one year to find a job. These statistics suggest that while high education help in getting a job, it also seems to lengthen the period of job search.

The findings of this study reveal how educational delays impact salary levels. The average starting salary for bachelor's degree holders is 5,102 RMB, which is moderate compared to early career salary increases. The graduates with a master's degree start with a significantly higher salary of 7,337 RMB. They are also entitled to substantial raises. Doctoral graduates enjoy the highest starting sala-

ries, around 10,000 RMB, with rapid salary growth. These results indicate that although women with higher education levels delay the commencement of work, they are likely to earn higher starting salaries and potentially better future earnings.

#### 3.2 Impact of Delayed Education on Marriage

The postponement of key educational stages affects the timing of marriage to a great extent. Extended years in education lead to a delayed entry into the workforce, which in turn postpones marriage. Educated individuals, especially women, are under more psychological and social stress regarding marriage. Conventional perceptions often consider educated women less attractive, resulting in a higher rate of single women among the educated. In addition, educated individuals tend to focus on self-improvement and career objectives and thus are likely to postpone marriage until they reach their career goals. Research shows women with higher education marry later; the age ranges from 25 for those with a bachelor's degree to 28 for those with a master's degree [11]. This trend is useful for understanding the connection between education and marital timing, as well as the sociodemographic consequences of delayed education.

#### 3.3 Impact of Delayed Education on Independent Living

Delayed education affects young people's ability to obtain independent living skills, especially in home ownership. Long years of learning cause a phase of late entry into the job market, hindering financial independence essential for the purchase of property. While higher education helps boost employment opportunities and income, it hampers the early savings and investments in real estate. Many young adults depend on their parents to buy their first home, especially the ones who have gone back to school for a longer time. This is especially the case in families that highly value the education of their children as a result of shifting paradigms in gender roles.

High rates of inflation in urban areas housing further exerts additional pressure to the mentioned challenges, making it extremely difficult for fresh graduates to acquire houses without a lot of support. It is also interesting to note that, more and more highly educated single women are buying homes to achieve financial independence and defy the conventional gender roles. Analysis of CFPS data from 2014 to 2018 reveals that more educated people are more likely to own property, but this usually involves parental help. Thus, it can be concluded that families with higher income and education levels are more capable of supporting their children in achieving independent living status, thereby narrowing the gender gap in housing purchasing. This trend shows the interconnectedness of education, economic independence, the changing gender

roles, and family support systems.

## 4. Findings, Implications, and Challenges

### 4.1 Findings

The findings of the study reveal that Chinese women's entry into the labor market is delayed, economic dependence is elongated, and social milestones are delayed. It showed that women are likely to spend more years acquiring their tertiary education and this translates to a late entry into the working world. Further data shows that female graduates have experienced higher unemployment rates in recent years compared to women entering the labor market directly from secondary school, which exacerbates the problem of delayed employment. The job search period for women with advanced degrees tends to be longer, reflecting the competitive and selective nature of the job market for highly educated individuals.

However, the employment rate generally increases with the level of education attained. Women with a bachelor's, master's, or doctoral degree have progressively higher employment rates, suggesting that while higher education delays women's entry into the labor market, it ultimately improves job prospects and stability. In the 2017 Education Statistics published by the Ministry of Education of China, women constituted 57.2% of undergraduates and junior college entrants, and about 54% of these graduates [12]. The rise in enrolment rates is indicative of Chinese women's growing dedication to extending their educational pursuits, which in turn contributes to the prolongation of the educational journey and the postponement of labor force participation.

Regarding further studies, the average rate of pursuing further education across the 122 "double first-class" universities is 42.87%, with 62 universities having a further study rate above this average. Tsinghua University is at the vanguard of higher education institutions with an 80.40% further study rate, signifying that four out of every five undergraduate students have elected to pursue further studies [13]. The top ten universities with the highest further study rates all have rates exceeding 60%. The majority of these institutions are situated in Beijing and Shanghai, which are endowed with a plethora of educational resources [14]. Consequently, further education has become the natural preference for the majority of graduates.

Furthermore, the interplay between economic independence and family support sheds light on the pivotal influence of prolonged education on women's lives. It is also evident that many female graduates live with their families to depend on financial support from their families even after completing their studies, especially those who

undertake graduate-level education. Depending on the level of study, the period that elapses before women attain financial independence after schooling is quite long and may span several years, especially for those in Master's and Doctorate programs. The living standard of young women also reflects this dependency as many of them remain with their parents or other close relatives even after completing their studies to reduce the costs. This is evidence of extended education, delayed youth employment, and financial dependency among the youth on their parents and other relatives. Since education prolongs the period of education and training, it enhances the prospects of long-term employment and higher wages in the future, but at the same time, it also defers the attainment of economic self-sufficiency and other rights of adulthood.

### 4.2 Implications

The consequences of the described findings for educational policy, people's working lives, and cultural paradigms are vast and profound. Therefore, the educational policy needs to embrace the current situation where young women spend more years in tertiary institutions and then delay joining the workplace. In order to prevent the negative effects of long years in school, it is recommended that authorities work towards the improvement of the career counselling and employment assistance available in schools and universities. For example, universities may decide to develop career services that may include one-on-one career counselling, CV writing, interview skills training, and career fairs. It is thus possible for such services to help students in their search for employment and in securing decent jobs within a short time frame.

Moreover, reducing the rigidity in the study programs through part-time classes, online courses, and cooperative education where learners can work and study at the same time can enable the students to gain practical experience and seek employment at an early age. It is through these improved career services such as internships and collaboration with industries that students are placed in a position to gain work experience and relevant contacts. Also, policy reforms should aim at eradicating cultural barriers that harm women's education and their career progression. Some of the measures that could be adopted are; ensuring that teachers undergo gender sensitivity training and that there are policies that support gender balance in academic institutions. Thus, one of the ways to address this issue could be the implementation of mentorship programs for female learners in the STEM disciplines.

In the context of these transitions, it is necessary to consider the following recommendations on the basis of individual career planning: strategies for the management of longer periods of studying and goal setting with the help of higher education to achieve long-term career op-



portunities. This may encompass the development of both the immediate goals such as seeking internships during the periods of study, and the strategic goals which may include identifying the industries or companies that are likely to offer employment for candidates with advanced qualifications. It is therefore important that career advisors help students and graduates in planning and staying on course with these strategies for their careers.

Also, the findings have implications for social and cultural norms that govern society. Delay of key adulthood events like marriage and financial self-reliance can be said to be one of the impacts of pro-longed learning. This change calls for a reconsideration of the culture's expectations with regard to the attainment of these markers. For instance, in most cultures, there are high expectations for women to get married and start giving birth by the age of twenty-eight. However, due to the increased enrolment of women in higher education and the increased participation of women in the workforce in the later stages of their lives, it may be relevant to modify these expectations to correspond to the contemporary reality.

Furthermore, the prolonged economic dependency of young people on their families also points to the need for social and familial frameworks to change to accommodate those who are in long-term education. This may include increasing the monetary support given to the students in the form of grants, scholarships, and low-cost loans to help the burden on families. It is necessary to acknowledge and treat the psychological effects of this long-term dependence, like anxiety, and low self-esteem so that the whole society can be safe. Mental health services, peer support groups, and counselling are some of the ways through which young people can deal with stress and pressure resulting from extended learning and delayed adaption into adulthood.

## 5. Conclusion

The results of this study suggest that in China, young women spend a longer time in higher education, which can be described as a phase of 'waithood' and impacts their transition into adulthood. Despite these delays, higher education positively influences employment opportunities and job security.

The paper offers implications for educational policy and gender equality. To facilitate a smoother transition from education to adulthood, improvements are needed in career counselling, non-traditional learning models, and policies that deal with cultural issues. Future research should involve larger sample sizes, longitudinal studies, diverse populations, and an exploration of the psychological effects of long-term education. This approach would offer

a more comprehensive understanding of 'waithood' and its implication for educational policies at the international level.

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