polish sociological review 4(232)'25
ISSN 1231 – 1413
DOI:10.26412/psr232.04

PAULINA DAGMARA TRĘBACZEWSKA
Beijing Normal University

Between Autonomy and Obligation: Family Influence on Career Choices Among University Students in Poland and China

Abstract: This comparative study explores how university students in Poland and China negotiate familial expectations regarding career choices. Drawing on 65 in-depth interviews and a narrative prompt method, the research identifies four strategies: negotiated compliance, filial acquiescence, assertive self-actualization, and contextual adaptation. While Chinese students tend to emphasize duty, stability, and parental authority, Polish students highlight emotional autonomy and dialogical compromise. These patterns are mediated by geography, gender, and parental education, with urban youth and those from highly educated families demonstrating greater agency. The study expands Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital by showing how intergenerational influence is negotiated within distinct national moral economies. It also contributes to youth sociology by illustrating how macro-level transformations—post-socialist transitions, labor market insecurity, and educational diversification—are refracted in micro-level family dynamics. The findings provide a cross-cultural account of how young people balance personal aspirations and familial obligations under changing socio-economic conditions.

Keywords: youth transitions, cultural capital, family influence, career decisions, Chinese society, Polish society

Introduction

Youth career transitions are increasingly complex in the context of labor market precarity, credential inflation, and shifting welfare regimes (ILO 2023; Furlong & Cartmel 2007). Scholars have sometimes contrasted "Western" models of individualized career choice with "East Asian" models of familial obligation (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Yan 2003). Yet, such binaries risk oversimplification. Research on European societies has shown that individualization is always embedded in class, gender, and family resources (Lareau 2003; Szafraniec 2010). Similarly, ethnographic work on China highlights the coexistence of filial duty and rising individual aspirations, suggesting that obligations are not simply reproduced but are continually reinterpreted in practice (Fong 2004; Yan 2003). Moving beyond broad typologies, this article investigates how young people in Poland and China actively narratives they use to articulate this balance.

Poland and China offer particularly instructive cases for examining these dynamics. Both countries have undergone far-reaching social transformations since the late twentieth century, albeit through diffxerent institutional trajectories. In Poland, state socialism gave way to rapid liberalization, European Union integration, and welfare restructuring, which

reshaped the forms of intergenerational resource transfers and altered patterns of family support for young people entering the labor market (Szafraniec 2011). In China, economic reforms combined state planning with grassroots entrepreneurship, while institutions such as the *hukou* system and unequal access to higher education continue to shape families' capacities to invest in children's education and to support their prospects for social mobility (Whyte 2010; Tian, Jing 2021). In both contexts, it is the family—through its social position, available resources, and developed strategies—that constitutes the key site where broader structural transformations are filtered and acquire meaning for the educational and career choices of young people.

Existing research has documented culturally specific modalities of family influence. Scholarship on China has pointed to strategies of obligation, often framed in terms of intergenerational reciprocity and values associated with *xiao* (filial piety). Importantly, xiao is not a static tradition but a dynamic cultural logic: it combines a sense of moral duty with practical strategies of supporting parents, shaping educational and career choices in profound ways (Bedford, Yeh 2022). Recent studies show that Chinese youth actively reinterpret xiao, negotiating between parental obligations and their own aspirations for autonomy and self-realization (Liu et al. 2000). Moreover, research with transnational Chinese students demonstrates that xiao remains salient even in diaspora contexts, where obligations toward future parental care continue to structure students' imagined life courses (Huang, Gove 2015). Polish scholarship, by contrast, describes forms of "supportive constraint," in which parents combine encouragement with implicit moral obligation and expectations of reciprocity (Szafraniec 2010). Building on these insights, this study foregrounds the agency of students. It explores the strategies through which they narrate their navigation of parental expectations, asking how their class position and familial resources shape these narratives of negotiation.

Drawing on 65 in-depth interviews conducted with university students in Warsaw and Beijing in 2024, the study identifies four negotiation strategies: negotiated compliance, filial acquiescence, assertive self-actualization, and contextual adaptation. These strategies are presented not as exhaustive or universally representative, but as heuristic patterns that illuminate how agency is exercised under varying structural conditions. The analysis explores how students' narratives of their future lives—their ideas of success, authenticity, and ownership—are shaped by their specific familial and class contexts. Rather than making broad claims about "Polish" or "Chinese" youth, the article emphasizes the nuanced patterns that emerge from how students themselves describe their lived experience.

The study contributes to three areas of debate. First, it extends cultural capital theory (Bourdieu 1986) by showing how intergenerational influence operates within the moral economies of family life in transforming societies. Second, it advances youth sociology by highlighting how macro-structural shifts are refracted through kinship logics and narrated by young people—a process conceptualized here as "familial refraction." Third, it adds to comparative research by moving beyond East–West binaries to examine how young people's narrated strategies of self-actualization and obligation are shaped by class and familial micro-dynamics in Poland and China. Taken together, the study offers a dynamic, micro-level framework for understanding youth career transitions amid socioeconomic change.

Literature Review

The relationship between family influence and youth career decision-making remains underexplored in comparative contexts, especially where neoliberal labor-market pressures intersect with legacies of collectivism and post-socialist transformations. To address this gap, this review synthesizes Bourdieu's capital theory (1986) and moral economy approaches (Sayer 2005), while also engaging scholarship on family socialization (Lareau 2003), meritocracy (Howlett 2021), and youth agency (Honwana 2019). It does so to construct a framework for analyzing how young people narrate their negotiation of familial expectations within Poland's post-socialist neoliberal landscape and China's socialist market order. Three strands of literature are particularly relevant: (1) families as sites of capital conversion, (2) cultural models of autonomy and obligation, and (3) youth tactical agency and narrative strategies in negotiating these forces.

Families serve as primary fields of intergenerational capital transfer (Bourdieu 1986). Prior studies demonstrate how classed resources such as institutional knowledge (Lareau 2003), networks (Lin 2001), and symbolic legitimacy shape educational and career opportunities. Yet, the existing literature is uneven: while extensive research has been conducted in Euro-American settings, less is known about how these processes unfold under the institutional conditions of post-socialist Europe or within China's socialist market. For example, Chinese middle-class families, particularly in urban areas, strategically mobilize education and employment opportunities in both the private sector and the state sector to secure stability in uncertain markets (Tian & Jing 2021). At the same time, research shows diversification of aspirations: many young Chinese pursue careers in technology, private enterprise, and global labor markets, not solely the civil service or state-owned enterprises (Sier 2019; Zhang 2013). In Poland, professional families emphasize flexible upskilling and mobility within the EU, reflecting labor-market conditions that reward entrepreneurial self-reliance and transnational adaptability (Szafraniec 2011). Yet for youth from working-class families and smaller towns, migration to Western Europe or taking up stable, often manual employment remains an important and legitimate pathway into adulthood, demonstrating that "success" is not solely equated with careers in knowledge or creative industries. These strategies embody divergent contexts for the formation of habitus: Polish youth tend to internalize discourses of self-branding for precarious gig and knowledge economies, while Chinese youth balance stability-seeking strategies with aspirations for upward mobility in competitive and privatized sectors. This study examines how these differing contexts shape the stories young people tell about their choices and constraints.

Spatial capital (Bourdieu 2000) is a critical, though sometimes underemphasized, dimension of these dynamics. Recent research clearly documents the urban–rural divide in both China and Poland. In China, studies show how rural graduates experience structural discrimination and limited opportunities compared to their urban peers, despite achieving comparable educational credentials (Sier 2019). Sier highlights that education migrants from rural backgrounds often face stigmatization and constrained mobility, as family resources and institutional prestige continue to mediate their chances on the urban job market. Similarly, critiques of meritocracy highlight how structural barriers—such as hukou registration, resource distribution, and uneven institutional access—continue to

shape rural youths' career trajectories (Howlett 2021). In Poland, young people from rural backgrounds often lack access to cultural capital and international mobility opportunities, constraining their ability to compete with metropolitan peers. Thus, spatial stratification remains a powerful mediator of how families can deploy and convert resources, a factor that will be explored through respondents' narratives of origin and opportunity.

Comparative sociology highlights that both Polish and Chinese youth navigate labor markets marked by neoliberal dynamics and declining welfare safeguards, though the institutional pathways differ. In Poland, the erosion of welfare protections following EU integration has been accompanied by policy discourses valorizing individual responsibility (Standing 2011). Career choices are framed as self-actualization, even when precarity limits autonomy (Szafraniec 2011). In China, despite socialist legacies, youth confront equally competitive job markets, where welfare guarantees are limited, and family obligations often intensify the pressure to secure "respectable" and stable employment. Sier (2019) shows that for rural families especially, investing in children's education is framed as both an economic strategy and a moral obligation, embedding career choices within intergenerational projects of mobility and reciprocity. These obligations are often articulated through the cultural logic of xiao (filial piety), which combines moral duty with practical strategies of care and advancement. Contemporary research highlights that xiao is continually reinterpreted: young people both acknowledge obligations to parents and pursue autonomy, blending reciprocity with self-realization (Bedford, Yeh 2022; Liu et al. 2000). Moreover, transnational studies demonstrate that xiao remains salient even among Chinese students abroad, structuring their imagined futures of parental care (Huang, Gove 2015). Families, particularly in rural contexts, play a central role in shaping which paths are considered legitimate, often tying career choice to the fulfillment of intergenerational care obligations. This paper investigates how these macro pressures are experienced and articulated at the micro-level of family conversation and individual aspiration.

Youth, however, are not passive recipients of these pressures. Building on Honwana's (2019) work on tactical agency, studies show that young people actively negotiate expectations through discursive and emotional strategies. Polish students often mobilize idioms of "passion" and EU mobility narratives to legitimize deviation from parental preferences, while Chinese students invoke discourses of filial reciprocity to reconcile individual aspirations with family expectations. Sier (2019) emphasizes that such negotiations among Chinese education migrants often involve balancing gratitude for parental sacrifices with pragmatic concerns about economic survival and urban belonging. Middle-class youth in both contexts are more likely to reframe obligations as "choices"—for example, interpreting law or business degrees as flexible skills—whereas working-class and rural youth face tighter constraints. It is precisely these discursive strategies—the narratives of passion, obligation, and choice—that form the core empirical material of this analysis.

Illouz's (2007) concept of emotional capitalism further illuminates how affective ties structure these negotiations. Youth often perform gratitude to secure parental resources or suppress dissent to preserve harmony, but the meanings of these performances differ across contexts. For Polish students, emotional labor is linked to individualism and self-expression, whereas Chinese students often articulate it through reciprocal obligation, reinforcing family solidarity even when pursuing divergent careers. This study traces how

these emotional performances are described by the respondents themselves, providing a window into the moral economies of their families.

Despite growing interest, the literature still exhibits three limitations. First, it relies heavily on East–West cultural binaries, obscuring the hybrid and overlapping pressures youth face in both contexts. Second, family influence is too often treated as static rather than as a field of narrative negotiation. Third, much existing work privileges middle-class experiences, overlooking how rural and working-class youth develop distinctive narrative strategies in constrained settings.

This study advances the debate by (1) theorizing familial refraction, the process through which macro-structural shifts are filtered through kinship logics to produce youth subjectivities as revealed in their personal narratives; (2) identifying four narrative negotiation strategies—negotiated compliance, filial acquiescence, assertive self-actualization, and contextual adaptation—shaped by class and spatial capital; and (3) employing projective and narrative methods to surface implicit moral economies that structured interviews often miss.

Methodology

This comparative qualitative study examines how familial expectations shape career decision-making among university students in Poland and China. The research design combines in-depth interviews with a narrative prompt technique to uncover tacit cultural logics and negotiation strategies. Grounded in Bourdieu's theory of capital (1986) and Sayer's (2005) moral economy framework, the methodology prioritizes contextual understanding over generalization.

Fieldwork was conducted in 2024 through sixty-five semi-structured interviews—thirty-three at Beijing Normal University and thirty-two at the University of Warsaw. These institutions were purposively selected as leading national universities where processes of intergenerational capital conversion are especially salient. The interviews were structured into four thematic sections: participants' backgrounds and family capital inventory, perceptions of the labor market, geography of opportunity, and career decision-making narratives. This study focuses specifically on the analysis of data derived from the family capital inventory and career decision-making narratives.

The study's analytical focus centers on responses to a narrative prompt designed to circumvent social desirability bias while eliciting normative assumptions about autonomy and obligation. Participants were asked to advise a hypothetical peer facing parental pressure to abandon artistic aspirations for law or economics, with the threat of withdrawn financial support. This indirect approach proved especially productive for studying sensitive intergenerational dynamics, as respondents projected their own values and coping strategies onto third-party narratives.

The sample reflected the gender composition of the student populations at both universities, with female participants comprising approximately two-thirds of respondents in each national context. This imbalance aligns with broader gender patterns in higher education enrollment across Poland and China. Participants were drawn from both capital

Table 1

Characteristics of Chinese and Polish respondents participating in in-depth interviews

code	gender	Parents' education	origin	code	gender	Parents' education	origin
Chinese respondents				**Polish respondents**			
CH-W01	F	A1B1	outside	PL-W01	F	A0B1	capital
CH-W02	F	A0B0	outside	PL-W02	F	A0B0	outside
CH-W03	F	A0B1	outside	PL-W03	M	A0B1	capital
CH-W04	F	A0B1	outside	PL-W04	M	A0B0	outside
CH-W05	F	A1B1	outside	PL-W05	M	A1B0	capital
CH-W06	F	A1B1	outside	PL-W06	F	A1B1	outside
CH-W07	F	A0B0	outside	PL-W07	F	A1B0	outside
CH-W08	M	A0B0	outside	PL-W08	F	A1B0	outside
CH-W09	M	A0B1	outside	PL-W09	F	A1B1	capital
CH-W10	M	A0B1	outside	PL-W10	F	A1B1	capital
CH-W11	F	A1B1	outside	PL-W11	F	A1B1	capital
CH-W12	F	A0B0	capital	PL-W12	F	A1B1	outside
CH-W13	M	A0B0	capital	PL-W13	F	A1B1	capital
CH-W14	M	A0B1	capital	PL-W14	F	A1B1	outside
CH-W15	M	A0B1	outside	PL-W15	F	A0B0	outside
CH-W16	M	A1B1	outside	PL-W16	F	A0B0	capital
CH-W17	M	A1B1	outside	PL-W17	M	A1B1	capital
CH-W18	F	A0B0	outside	PL-W18	F	A1B1	outside
CH-W19	F	A0B1	outside	PL-W19	F	A1B1	outside
CH-W20	F	A0B0	outside	PL-W20	F	A1B1	outside
CH-W21	F	A1B1	capital	PL-W21	F	A1B1	capital
CH-W22	M	A1B1	capital	PL-W22	M	A1B1	outside
CH-W23	M	A1B1	capital	PL-W23	M	A1B1	capital
CH-W24	M	A1B1	outside	PL-W24	F	A1B0	outside
CH-W25	F	A1B1	capital	PL-W25	F	A0B0	outside
CH-W26	F	A0B1	outside	PL-W26	F	A1B1	outside
CH-W27	F	A0B1	outside	PL-W27	F	A1B1	capital
CH-W28	F	A1B1	outside	PL-W28	F	A1B1	capital
CH-W29	M	A1B1	outside	PL-W29	M	A1B1	capital
CH-W30	M	A1B1	outside	PL-W30	M	A1B1	outside
CH-W31	F	A1B1	capital	PL-W31	M	A0B0	outside
CH-W32	M	A1B1	outside	PL-W32	M	A1B1	capital
CH-W33	F	A1B1	capital				

Note: The variable *code* refers to the respondent's identifier (e.g. CH-W01 denotes the first Chinese participant; PL-W01 the first Polish participant). *Gender* is marked as *F* (female) or *M* (male). *Parents' education* indicates the level of parental higher education: *A* for mother, *B* for father, where *1* denotes completion of higher education and *0* indicates its absence (e.g. A1B0 refers to a mother with and a father without higher education). *Origin* is categorised as *capital* (Beijing/Warsaw) or *outside* (other cities and non-metropolitan areas).

cities (Beijing and Warsaw) and other urban or non-metropolitan areas, allowing for variation in spatial background. Parental education levels were used as a proxy for familial cultural capital, with respondents categorized as having low cultural capital if neither parent had completed higher education, medium cultural capital if one parent had completed higher education, and high cultural capital if both parents had completed higher

education. This classification captures the diversity of familial resources and socialization environments across the sample.

Parental educational attainment served as the primary indicator of cultural capital. In both samples, a majority of participants came from families where at least one parent held a tertiary degree, with slightly over half having two university-educated parents. A smaller but significant proportion were first-generation university students.

Spatial capital was operationalized through place of upbringing. Most participants originated from the respective capital cities—Beijing or Warsaw—with a minority hailing from provincial areas. This urban concentration reflects Bourdieu's (2000) observation that geographic proximity to institutional power centers facilitates capital accumulation.

As a native Polish speaker with advanced Chinese proficiency, the author conducted all interviews in the participants' preferred language. The multilingual approach enabled detection of nuanced code-switching, particularly among Chinese respondents who alternated between collectivist rhetoric and individualistic discourse.

Transcripts were analyzed through a three-stage process:

I. Thematic coding identified recurrent patterns in negotiation strategies,
II. Comparative analysis contrasted Polish and Chinese response frameworks,
III. Intersectional examination explored how gender, cultural capital, and spatial capital shaped narratives.

The narrative prompt proved particularly effective at revealing class-mediated differences. Participants from high-cultural-capital families frequently reframed parental expectations as "investment advice," while those with less educated parents more often described explicit obligation. Urban respondents demonstrated greater familiarity with institutional gatekeeping mechanisms than their provincial counterparts.

The study's elite university sampling reflects intentional theoretical sampling rather than demographic representativeness. While this approach limits generalizability to non-elite contexts, it provides strategic insight into how privileged groups navigate intergenerational expectations—a underexplored dimension in studies of post-socialist transitions.

The urban concentration of participants, while methodologically consequential, aligns with Bourdieu's spatial capital theory. Future research should extend this inquiry to peripheral regions where capital conversion processes may differ substantially.

Results

This section presents key patterns emerging from the narrative prompt analysis, hich identified four recurrent strategies young adults describe employing when egotiating parental expectations about career choices. The focus is not merely on behavioral outcomes but on the moral and cultural logics that inform these strategies, as expressed through respondents' own narratives and their advice to a hypothetical peer.

The research design's sequential structure—beginning with capital inventory interviews before introducing the narrative prompt—enabled a nuanced analysis of how respondents' social positions appeared to shape their normative evaluations of intergenerational

Table 2

Typology of Coping Strategies Against Parental Pressure in Occupational Decision-Making

Strategy	Description	Respondents (codes)
Compromise and Dialogue (CH:20 PL: 5)	Seeking intermediate solutions through open communication, negotiation, and attempts to reconcile personal aspirations with parental expectations.	CH-W01; CH-W02; CH-W03; CH-W05; CH-W06; CH-W10; CH-W11; CH-W12; CH-W13; CH-W14; CH-W15; CH-W17; CH-W21; CH-W22; CH-W23; CH-W24; CH-W25; CH-W26; CH-W27; CH-W30; PL-W05; PL-W06; PL-W07; PL-W08; PL-24
Filial acquiescence (CH: 5 PL: 6)	Relinquishing personal passions in favor of stability, respect, gratitude, or economic security.	CH-W07; CH-W16; CH-W18; CH-W19; CH-W20; PL-W03; PL-W12; PL-W22; PL-W23; PL-W26; PL-W30
Self-actualization (CH: 2 PL: 15)	Firm commitment to one's own path regardless of familial pressure, often with an idealistic belief in success despite challenges.	CH-W04; CH-W28; PL-W01; PL-W02; PL-W04; PL-W09; PL-W10; PL-W11; PL-W14; PL-W15; PL-W16; PL-W17; PL-W19; PL-W25; PL-W27; PL-W28; PL-W32
Contextual pragmatism (CH: 6 PL: 1)	No fixed strategy—decisions vary based on circumstances: parental relationships, economic situation, life stage, place of residence, etc.	CH-W08; CH-W09; CH-W29; CH-W31; CH-W32; CH-W33; PL-W29

conflict. This approach aligns with Bourdieu's (1986) conceptualization of habitus as both structured by social position and structuring perceptions of legitimate action.

Three analytical principles guided my interpretation. First, the analysis examines how respondents legitimate their advice through moral frameworks. In line with Sayer's (2005) concept of moral economy, the data suggests that Chinese respondents more frequently invoked discourses of familial reciprocity, while Polish respondents more often appealed to concepts of individual autonomy. I treat these as salient tendencies in the data rather than absolute differences.

Second, the interpretation considers how structural position—particularly cultural capital (parental education) and spatial capital (urban vs. rural origin)—seemed to shape the repertoire of strategies respondents described and viewed as legitimate. For instance, respondents from high cultural capital backgrounds often demonstrated a wider discursive repertoire for strategic negotiation. Third, the analysis traces how these micro-level narratives reflect the opportunities and constraints present in different labor markets, showing how families act as crucial micro-environments that provide resources and shape how young people articulate their paths.

The following subsections examine each strategic pattern in detail, analyzing the substance of respondents' advice and the underlying cultural logics they narrated. Throughout, the analysis maintains focus on how these strategies represent distinct modes of navigating what might be termed the "double contingency" of late modern career decision-making—the need to reconcile personal aspirations with both familial expectations and structural constraints.

Negotiated Compliance: Compromise and Dialogue

The strategy of negotiated compliance represents a dialogic approach to reconciling personal aspirations with familial expectations, as narrated through accounts of reciprocal

communication and hybrid solutions. This finding engages with Lareau's (2003) concept of concerted cultivation while revealing its culturally specific manifestations. The analysis suggests that negotiation tactics described by respondents appear to be shaped by distinct moral economies—culturally embedded systems for evaluating legitimate action (Sayer 2005).

Among the Chinese respondents in this sample, negotiated compliance was often described through pragmatic legitimation, where career preferences gained parental acceptance once respondents demonstrated economic or performance-based viability. For instance, CH-W03 (female, from outside Beijing, medium cultural capital) remarked: "If you insist on pursuing your passion, you must prove you can sustain yourself financially." Such narratives indicate that independence was not automatically presumed but rather framed as something that needed to be earned. CH-W05 (female, from outside Beijing, high cultural capital) emphasized the role of timing, noting that pursuing one's own path seemed more legitimate in later educational stages. Similarly, CH-W12 (female, from Beijing, low cultural capital) stressed that repeated "open and honest" conversations were necessary before compromise was reached. These examples suggest that, in this dataset, negotiated autonomy was portrayed as contingent on both emotional effort and material calculations.

In the Polish interviews, accounts of negotiated compliance more frequently emphasized affective reasoning and symbolic reconciliation. PL-W20 (female, from outside Warsaw, high cultural capital) proposed: "study one subject for yourself, another for your parents," illustrating how dual educational trajectories could function as a compromise. PL-W05 (male, from Warsaw, medium cultural capital) described a strategy of persistence by repeatedly explaining his choice, while PL-W24 (female, from outside Warsaw, medium cultural capital) focused on moral persuasion by articulating the personal meaning of her decision: "You have to show why your path matters to you." In contrast to the pragmatic framing in the Chinese sample, Polish narratives often legitimized career decisions through appeals to emotional authenticity.

The intergenerational dimension was apparent in both contexts. PL-W06 (female, from outside Warsaw, high cultural capital) reflected on differences in work values between generations: "Parents were educated and socialized in a different system… where work meant sacrifice, even servitude. People born after 2000 do not necessarily want to live like that." Similar dynamics emerged in China, where respondents noted that greater material security among younger cohorts created more room for self-fulfillment, though negotiation with parents still required reconciling traditional expectations with new aspirations.

Variation within each context was also visible. Among Chinese respondents, some women described gradual persuasion tactics emphasizing competence, while in the Polish data, women more often narrated compromise through pursuing parallel educational paths. Across both countries, respondents from families with higher parental education tended to describe more deliberative negotiations, which may resonate with Bourdieu's (1986) argument about the class-based transmission of communicative competencies. Importantly, these patterns are based on a small qualitative sample and should be interpreted as tendencies rather than generalizable claims.

Filial Acquiescence: Obedience as Moral Economy

Filial acquiescence emerged from the interviews as a strategic orientation in which respondents described varying degrees of submission to parental expectations, framed through intertwined logics of moral obligation, relational reciprocity, and socioeconomic pragmatism. While the practice appeared across both contexts, its articulation differed according to the narratives that participants used to make sense of family authority. In all cases, these accounts highlighted that compliance was neither passive nor uniform but situated within contextually grounded moral economies.

In the Chinese interviews, respondents frequently framed filial acquiescence through the lens of xiao (filial piety), yet contemporary interpretations were nuanced and contingent. For example, CH-W07 (female, from outside Beijing, low cultural capital) explained: "They may have economic or social reasons… I personally lean toward obeying my parents." CH-W20 (female, from outside Beijing, high cultural capital) further described the emotional dimension: "I've always received support from my parents and I can't imagine not listening to them in such important decisions… I looked up to them and wanted to be like them." Financial dependence often reinforced these moral obligations, particularly for female respondents: CH-W07 noted, "In China, especially for girls, most parents provide financial support regardless of the quality of the relationship. Still, when serious disagreement arises, I personally try to listen to my parents." These accounts illustrate that filial acquiescence combines affective, practical, and aspirational logics, creating overlapping rationales for compliance that extend beyond mere obedience.

Polish respondents also described compliance as a mix of pragmatism and affective trust, but the emphasis tended toward reflexive and conditional obedience. PL-W22 (male, from outside Warsaw, high cultural capital) articulated this approach: "To obey partially but not completely. It depends on what the person wants to do." PL-W26 (female, from outside Warsaw, high cultural capital) reflected on the role of intergenerational trust: "Looking at how my parents guided me from childhood and that it worked out, I would listen to them—not 100%, but I'd try to combine my passions with their ideas for my life." Economic considerations intersected with moral reasoning, as PL-W30 (male, from outside Warsaw, high cultural capital) explained: "If my parents want to support me in such an investment like medical or law school, I'd give it a try." These narratives reveal a conditional, relational approach to compliance, in which obedience is interpreted as a negotiated, trust-based strategy rather than a strict duty.

Gendered patterns were evident in both contexts. Some female respondents emphasized longer-term compliance or gradual persuasion strategies, reflecting socially mediated expectations regarding emotional labor and relational management. Class and parental education also appeared to shape these patterns. In both Chinese and Polish samples, higher parental education correlated with accounts of more deliberative and communicatively nuanced negotiations, aligning with Bourdieu's (1986) argument about class-based transmission of interactional competencies. Across all narratives, filial acquiescence was thus portrayed as a dynamic interplay of obligation, prudence, and emotional attunement, rather than a simple submission to authority.

Assertive Self-Actualization: The Autonomy Imperative

Assertive self-actualization describes the prioritization of personal fulfillment over familial expectations. In both national contexts, narratives of autonomy were mediated by institutional, economic, and relational frameworks, producing culturally and contextually distinct forms of self-assertion.

Polish respondents frequently framed self-actualization as a biographical and existential imperative, resonating with Giddens' (1991) concept of the "reflexive project of the self." PL-W14 (female, from outside Warsaw, high cultural capital) explained: "Consider who will live longer with this choice—certainly not your parents," while PL-W10 (female, from outside Warsaw, high cultural capital) articulated career as a central component of life-long personal identity: "Do what you want—your profession is something you'll do for most of your life." Several participants emphasized resilience and strategic planning, balancing emotional authenticity with pragmatic considerations. PL-W9 (female, from outside Warsaw, medium cultural capital) reflected: "Follow your heart. Even if your parents get mad, they'll likely calm down in a few weeks once they see you thriving." PL-W28 (female, from outside Warsaw, high cultural capital) stressed material independence as a precondition for autonomy: "Do what you want—step by step. Don't worry. You can manage on your own. You don't have to depend on your parents." These narratives demonstrate that, for Polish youth, self-actualization was both an ethical and pragmatic project, oriented toward long-term life satisfaction and biographical coherence.

Chinese respondents described autonomy in ways that might be called embedded or relational. CH-W04 (male, from outside Beijing, low cultural capital) observed: "If they have the means to earn money, [they should pursue their passion], but if not, they might have to listen to their parents." CH-W28 (female, from outside Beijing, high cultural capital) highlighted potential long-term regret from suppressing aspirations: "If you don't do what you want, you'll regret it in the end. You won't achieve your goals." Yet such self-expression was often tempered by practical support systems, such as part-time work or loans, revealing that autonomy was exercised through relational networks and economic strategies, rather than as a purely individualistic pursuit. In this sense, Chinese youth articulated what could be termed conditional autonomy—recognizing personal goals while remaining sensitive to parental expectations and structural constraints.

Gender and class influenced how assertive self-actualization was narrated. Some Chinese women leveraged social and family networks to secure flexibility, whereas Polish women more frequently employed psychological framing and narrative reasoning. Across both contexts, these strategies illustrate that autonomy is not simply a cultural trait but is negotiated in response to structural, familial, and economic realities.

Contextual Adaptation: Pragmatic Flexibility in Uncertain Landscapes

The final strategy, contextual adaptation, emerged as a pattern in which young adults described employing pragmatic flexibility when negotiating career decisions within structurally complex environments. This strategy was evident in both national contexts, though manifested differently, and resonates with Beck's (1992) concept of "risk biographies" and

Bourdieu's (1986) principle of regulated improvisation, highlighting how actors creatively navigate constraints while considering relational and institutional expectations.

In the Chinese interviews, contextual adaptation was frequently described as a highly calculated and staged process, reflecting awareness of both economic and social structures. Respondents demonstrated a nuanced understanding of regional and institutional disparities. For instance, CH-W08 (male, from outside Beijing, low cultural capital) compared local living costs: "¥10k/month isn't livable in Beijing… ¥8k in Changsha buys a home [in relatively short time]," revealing how spatial inequalities were central to decision-making. This economic realism often shaped a form of tactical compliance, in which young adults temporarily adhered to parental expectations while preparing for eventual independent action. CH-W09 (male, from outside Beijing, low cultural capital) described this staged approach: "Fulfill your parents' expectations first. Save money. When you're stronger and more independent, you can pivot to your own career." Such narratives indicate that Chinese youth navigate constraints while seeking opportunities to assert agency, reflecting both structural limitations and creative adaptation.

These accounts also highlighted the relational dimension of decision-making. CH-W32 (male, from Beijing, high cultural capital) acknowledged a prevailing social norm: "Most people still follow their parents in China," but simultaneously described pragmatic alternatives: "If parents don't offer emotional or financial support, you can work part-time and choose a lifestyle that suits you." CH-W29 (male, from outside Beijing, high cultural capital) emphasized maintaining family harmony while pursuing autonomy: "You must explain everything clearly to your parents… Don't let choices break your relationship with them." In these narratives, contextual adaptation entailed balancing individual aspirations with filial obligations, demonstrating how personal agency is negotiated within intergenerational moral and emotional economies.

In Poland, respondents articulated contextual adaptation with a different emphasis. Here, flexibility often foregrounded psychological and affective considerations, alongside practical constraints. PL-W29 (male, from Warsaw, high cultural capital) described a situational, trial-and-error approach: "If he's passionate about both academics and money, I'd follow what the parents say… but if it's not that deep, then just do your thing—YOLO." The use of globalized youth cultural scripts illustrates how Polish participants negotiated career decisions within a framework that blends affective reasoning, relational trust, and opportunity awareness. Unlike the staged, economically oriented strategies observed in China, Polish youth frequently described fluid, context-sensitive negotiation, adjusting their decisions in response to both immediate circumstances and family feedback.

Despite these contextual differences, a common thread emerged: respondents in both countries demonstrated strategic flexibility, negotiating personal aspirations while accounting for parental expectations, family resources, and structural constraints. Chinese youth often framed adaptation as economically and institutionally calculated, while Polish youth emphasized situational judgment and affective reasoning. In both cases, family dynamics were central, shaping not only the boundaries of acceptable choices but also the strategies used to preserve intergenerational relationships.

Variations in adaptation strategies were also linked to available resources. In China, respondents from major urban centers described leveraging housing security and parental

networks to expand career options (e.g., CH-W32, male, Beijing, high cultural capital), whereas in Poland, youth described broader freedom to combine multiple strategies simultaneously, which they associated with mobility and access to educational and professional opportunities across the EU (e.g., PL-W29, male, Warsaw, high cultural capital). Across both samples, higher parental education was associated with greater openness to hybrid or negotiated pathways, though this openness was interpreted differently: Chinese parents were often described as investing in long-term economic stability, while Polish parents tended to provide psychological and emotional support for flexible experimentation.

Overall, these narratives contribute to sociological understanding by showing how pragmatic flexibility is culturally and structurally mediated. In both contexts, adaptation strategies were intertwined with family influence, revealing that career decision-making cannot be understood solely as an individual choice. Rather, young adults' actions are embedded in a network of intergenerational obligations, moral economies, and structural constraints, highlighting how agency and relational duties co-produce career trajectories.

Discussion: Narratives of Negotiation in Moral Economies

This study advances understanding of youth transitions by moving beyond macro-level determinism to examine how university students in this sample actively narrate the negotiation of familial influence. The four identified strategies—negotiated compliance, filial acquiescence, assertive self-actualization, and contextual adaptation—emerged as narrative repertoires, through which participants justify their choices within moral economies of inequality (Sayer 2005). These repertoires are not uniform; rather, they are shaped by the interplay of familial expectations, available resources, and institutional contexts.

The concept of familial refraction proves useful in explaining how macro-level transformations are filtered through micro-level kinship logics to produce distinctive narrative strategies. In this sample, Polish participants often framed negotiation through a language of psychological authenticity and existential ownership, as seen in expressions like "follow your heart" or "YOLO" (4.4). Chinese participants, in contrast, frequently articulated negotiation through a lens of economic viability and relational preservation, as illustrated in statements such as "prove you can sustain yourself" or "don't break the relationship" (4.1, 4.4).

This divergence reflects the different institutional and familial configurations in which respondents are embedded. For example, Polish narratives emphasize emotional reasoning and situational flexibility, which aligns with the post-socialist liberalization context, yet these are expressed within family-mediated decision-making processes, not in isolation from parental influence. Similarly, Chinese respondents' narratives, emphasizing staged autonomy and relational embeddedness, correspond to a context in which familial resources, educational trajectories, and social expectations are tightly intertwined, though these narratives also display considerable variation across participants, gender, urban–rural background, and parental education (4.2–4.4).

Intersectional patterns in the data lend support to Bourdieu's (1986) theory of capital conversion, while also highlighting its narrative dimension. In both national samples,

higher parental education levels were associated with more deliberative negotiation strategies, but the form of capital leveraged differed: some Chinese participants employed what could be termed "performance capital" (demonstrating competence and financial viability), whereas some Polish participants drew on "emotional capital" (appealing to affective reasoning and authenticity) (4.1–4.4). These findings underscore that capital is not only possessed but mobilized narratively to achieve legitimacy within the family field.

The projective and narrative methodology was particularly valuable for surfacing these repertoires. For instance, narratives of negotiated compliance showed how participants balanced personal preferences with parental expectations through repeated dialogue (4.1). Accounts of filial acquiescence revealed the coexistence of moral obligation and economic pragmatism, without implying uniform obedience across contexts (4.2). Assertive self-actualization illustrated that autonomy was pursued differently depending on resources and relational support, highlighting the embedded nature of independence in both samples (4.3). Finally, contextual adaptation reflected participants' strategic flexibility in navigating structural constraints, with Chinese respondents emphasizing economically calculated pathways and Polish respondents prioritizing affective-situational judgment (4.4).

Overall, the findings indicate that youth narratives of career negotiation are deeply relational and contextually contingent. Strategies are not simply expressions of individualism or collectivism; they are dynamic responses to intersecting pressures of family, institution, and social capital. By framing the four strategies as narrative repertoires, this study emphasizes the importance of examining how young adults articulate legitimacy, negotiate obligations, and navigate constraints within family-mediated moral economies.

These results have implications for comparative sociology. They suggest that understanding youth transitions requires attention to micro-level narratives and family interactions, rather than relying solely on macroeconomic or cultural generalizations. The study also highlights the value of exploring heterogeneity within national samples, including differences by gender, urban–rural background, and parental resources, to avoid overstating cultural dichotomies.

Conclusion: Micro-Narratives and the Double Contingency of Youth

This research challenges broad East–West binaries by focusing on micro-sociological narratives through which the young adults in this study appear to navigate their educational and career trajectories. Its contributions can be summarized in three main areas.

First, it offers a narrative-focused framework for understanding youth transitions. By foregrounding the four strategies identified in the interviews—negotiated compliance, filial acquiescence, assertive self-actualization, and contextual adaptation—the study suggests how participants may make sense of familial influence and structural constraints. These narratives appear to reveal forms of creative agency embedded within moral economies of obligation and support. They also indicate that negotiation, compliance, and autonomy are contextually contingent, shaped by family dynamics, parental resources, and institutional opportunities, rather than by culturally deterministic patterns.

Second, the study illustrates how capital may be enacted through narrative in specific comparative contexts. Participants' stories suggest that cultural, social, and economic resources are not only possessed but also mobilized narratively to legitimize career decisions within the family field. For instance, Polish respondents tended to draw on emotional capital, appealing to affective reasoning and authenticity (4.2–4.4), whereas Chinese respondents often appeared to leverage performance capital, demonstrating competence and financial viability to secure parental support (4.1–4.4). These narratives imply that the transmission and negotiation of capital are deeply relational processes unfolding within intergenerational interactions.

Third, the study complicates linear narratives of individualization by suggesting that the pursuit of autonomy is multifaceted and relationally embedded. In this sample, self-actualization was narrated either as an existential right to be claimed, more prevalent in the Polish interviews, or as a privilege to be earned through demonstrated competence and material viability, more common in the Chinese interviews (4.3, 4.4). Importantly, these patterns are not presented as universal or deterministic; they reflect tendencies specific to this sample and are conditioned by familial, spatial, and institutional factors rather than essential cultural traits.

The study's qualitative design and elite university sample represent both a limitation and an opportunity. The findings provide insights into nuanced narrative patterns within this group, offering tentative understandings of the interplay among family, capital, and institutional context. Future research could investigate how these strategies might manifest in broader, more diverse populations, using quantitative measures to examine prevalence and longitudinal approaches to track narrative evolution over time.

Ultimately, this research underscores that understanding contemporary youth transitions may require attending to how young people narrate their navigation of the "double contingency" of late modernity—balancing personal aspirations with familial expectations within structurally constrained environments. The four identified strategies can be interpreted not merely as behaviors but as interpretive tools through which respondents make sense of their options, highlighting both the creative agency of young adults and the inequalities that appear to shape the language and opportunities available to them. By centering micro-narratives, the study emphasizes the relational and context-specific processes through which autonomy, obligation, and adaptation are negotiated in everyday life.

References

Beck, U. 1992. *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*. London: SAGE Publications.

Beck, U., Beck-Gernsheim, E. 2002. *Individualization: Institutionalized Individualism and its Social and Political Consequences*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446218693

Bourdieu, P. 1986. The forms of capital, in: J. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, pp. 241–258. Westport, CT: Greenwood.

Bourdieu, P. 2000. *The Weight of the World: Social Suffering in Contemporary Society*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Bourdieu, P., & Passeron, J.-C. 1977. *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture* (R. Nice, Trans.). London: SAGE Publications.

Espin-Andersen, G. 1990. *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Espinoza, C., Ukleja, M., & Rusch, D. 2010. *Managing the Millennials: Discover the Core Competencies for Managing Today's Workforce*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.
Fong, V. 2004. *Only Hope: Coming of Age in China's One-Child Policy*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
Furlong, A., Cartmel, F. 2007. *Young People and Social Change. New Perspectives* (2). Buckingham: Open Univeristy Press.
Giddens, A. 1991. *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
Honwana, A. 2019. Waithood: Youth transitions and social change, *Africa Development 44*(4): 28–40. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004269729_004
Howlett, Z.M. 2021. *Meritocracy and Its Discontents: Anxiety and the National College Entrance Exam in China*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press.
Huang, G. H. C., and Gove, M. 2015. Confucianism, Chinese families, and academic achievement: exploring how Confucianism and Asian descendant parenting practices influence children's academic achievement, in: M. S. Khine (ed.), *Science Education in East Asia*. Cham: Springer, pp. 41–66.
Illouz, E. 2007. *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
International Labour Organization (ILO). 2023. World Employment and Social Outlook: Trends 2023. https://www.ilo.org/global/research/global-reports/weso/trends2023
Lareau, A. 2003. *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
Lin, N. 2001. *Social Capital: A Theory of Social Structure and Action*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Liu, J. H., Ng, S. H., Weatherall, A., & Loong, C. (2000). Filial piety, acculturation and intergenerational communication among New Zealand Chinese, *Basic and Applied Social Psychology 22*(3): 213–223. https://doi.org/10.1207/15324830051036108
Ponzini, A. 2020. Educating the new Chinese middle-class youth: the role of quality education on ideas of class and status, *The Journal of Chinese Sociology 7*(1), https://doi.org/10.1186/s40711-019-0113-1
Sayer, A. 2005. *The Moral Significance of Class*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Sier, W. 2019. Everybody Educated? Education Migrants and Rural-Urban Relations in Hubei Province, China. PhD dissertation, University of Amsterdam. https://pure.uva.nl/ws/files/44665150/Thesis_complete_.pdf
Standing, G. 2011. *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*. London: Bloomsbury Academic. DOI: 10.5040/9781849664554
Szafraniec, K. 2010. Młodzi 2011. Raport o Stanie Młodego Pokolenia w Polsce. Warszawa: Kancelaria Prezesa Rady Ministrów.
Szafraniec, K. (Ed.). 2011. *Zmiana Warty: Młode Pokolenie a Transformacje w Polsce*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar.
Szelényi, I. 2019. *Varieties of Post-Communist Capitalism: A Comparative Analysis of Russia, Eastern Europe and China*. Brill.
Tian, F.F., Jing, Y. 2021.The Reproduction of working class? Social mobility and the stratification of parenting practice in urban Chinese families,*The Journal of Chinese Sociology 8*(12). https://doi.org/10.1186/s40711-021-00147-w
Whyte, M.K. 2010. *One country, Two societies: Rural-Urban Inequality in Contemporary China*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, pp. 1–25.
Yan, Yunxiang. 2003. *Private Life Under Socialism: Love, Intimacy, and Family Change in a Chinese Village, 1949–1999*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
Yeh, K. H., & Bedford, O. 2022. Filial piety in contemporary Chinese societies: Meaning, structure, and implications for family relations, *Frontiers in Psychology 13*: 747296. DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2022.980060
Zhang, X. 2013. China's "Ant Tribe" Present Social Survival Situation and Personal Financial Advice, *Asian Social Science 9*(2): 24–33. http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/ass.v9n2p24

Biographical Note:

Paulina Dagmara Trębaczewska is a PhD candidate at the Institute of Sociology, Beijing Normal University, China. Her research focuses on contemporary Chinese society, with a specific emphasis on the dynamics of intergenerational conflicts and the position of young people in the labor market. Her work analyzes how cultural transformations, family expectations, and economic pressures shape the life trajectories and identity of the younger generation in China.

ORCID iD: 0009-0006-8448-0110

pdtrebaczewska@gmail.com