

Young college students and the world of work: a comparative analysis of Brazil and China contexts[♦]

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Abstract

In the later decades, broad social and economic phenomena such as production restructuring brought about unpredictability for youths regarding entry into the labor market after graduating. Analyzes on youth in developed countries can hardly be applied to developing countries like Brazil or China. Such analyzes, derived generally from the European context, presuppose high enrollment rates, and are based on a general idea that the usual for youths is starting to work only after completing education. This article uses data from the *Comparative Study on Chinese and Brazilian college students*, conducted in 2012, through the application of questionnaires to students aged up to 24 years, in a total of twelve universities in Brazil and China, in order to analyse the relationship and expectations of young college students to work in the two countries.

Keywords: Brazil and China. Youth. College students and work.

[♦] This article is an abridged version of the chapter "Os jovens universitários e o trabalho: uma visão comparada entre Brasil e China" published in Portuguese in Dwyer et al. (2016) *Jovens universitários em um mundo em transformação: uma pesquisa sino-brasileira*.

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Introduction

Among factors traditionally associated to the transition from childhood to adulthood are: leaving parents' home, setting up one's own home, motherhood or paternity, marriage, entry into the world of work, economic independence, among others. In contemporary societies, insofar as these events are occurring later, becoming more complex, gaining relevance and being deemed social problems, it becomes evident that the age groups that correspond to this transition phase must be considered in terms of their particular features. Youth, therefore, turns into a privileged category of analysis, since it gains increasing relevance in such changing contexts and it is crucial to understand it in order to interpret the very dynamics of society.

Vocational integration or the entry into the world of work is traditionally one of the main transition paths to adulthood. The search for professional placement, either as an immediate need or a future project, is certainly one of the issues that most concern youth. Aspirations for independence of the family or conditions for starting a family, for the autonomy characteristic of adult life, which are common among young people, find in work one of the ways to be attained.

Literature on transition to adulthood has repeatedly suggested that until a few decades ago there was some predictability in certain events, a sequence more or less expected in the lives of most people, which characterized their passage through childhood, adolescence and youth to adulthood. However, at least since the 1980s, this supposed trajectory has been modified as a result of broad social and economic phenomena such as production restructuring, which brought about unpredictability, especially regarding young people entry into the labor market after graduating.

Analyzes on youth in developed countries can hardly be applied to developing countries like Brazil or China. They are best suited for countries where access to school have long been democratized, including massive access to high school. Such analyzes, derived from the European context, presuppose high enrollment rates, and are based

on a general idea that the usual for youths is starting to work as a subsequent factor after completing education, even in relation to the higher education.

In Brazil, however, youths historically begin to work very early. The transition to work after completing education, while being the focus of much of the research on youth, was not as relevant as the access of youngsters who already work to school, since the universalization of basic education is recent, and more recent is the consolidation of secondary education and expansion of higher education. There are, still today, contingents of young people who do not complete primary schooling. Even when they seek to raise their schooling, often do it by combining study with work.

For China, which is undergoing broad and rapid demographic transformations, with increasing and massive rural flight, the analytical models coming from central countries are also unsuitable to describe the transition to adulthood. Given this context, the data presented here is intended to improve the understanding about the relationship of youth, specifically college students, with work.

The article uses data from the *Comparative Study on Chinese and Brazilian college students*, conducted in 2012, through the application of questionnaires to students aged up to 24 years, in a total of twelve universities in both countries. The following section presents the work situation of young Chinese and Brazilian college students, through a gender approach, including the workload compared to the time in classroom for those who take on both activities. The next section presents the expectations of young college students for their future career and their aspirations regarding what to do after graduation.

Brazilian and Chinese young college students: work situation

Substantial differences emerge, when analyzing youth that attend universities in China and those in Brazil. Combining graduation and work is the predominant situation in Brazil, while, in China, more than half of the college students surveyed only study, as shown in Table 1.

In Brazil, in 2012, 52.5% of college students had a paid work at the time of the survey, while in China the proportion was only one-quarter.¹ Regarding the sex of the students, in China, the proportion of women among those who combine study with work is greater, while in Brazil there is no significant difference between sexes², with young university men being slightly prevalent in this situation.

Table 1 - Brazil and China: work situation of college students, by sex (2012) (%)

	China			Brazil		
	Women	Men	Total	Women	Men	Total
Work	27,6	18,6	24,2	50,9	54,6	52,5
Unpaid work	8,9	16,0	11,6	6,5	6,0	6,3
Is looking for job	13,3	11,4	12,6	14,8	12,2	13,7
Does not work	50,3	53,9	51,7	27,8	27,2	27,5
Total	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0

Source: Ipea, SBS, CYCRC and Cycra.

In Brazil, 58.8% of college students aged up to 24 years work, with or without remuneration, while in China this figure is 35.0%. Only about a quarter of Brazilian college students are completely out of the world of work, but in China over half of them do not work.

The most similar data between the two countries refers to young students who said to be searching for paid work in the week before the research. They accounted for 12.6% in China and 13.7% in Brazil. These are quite high figures that, even without equating to the unemployment rates, give clear indications that unemployment is significant among young Chinese and Brazilian college

¹ For every assertion in the text regarding the existence of differences when comparing groups, a statistical test χ^2 (chi-square) was performed and the resulting values were $p < 0.001$, with only one exception of $p = 0.001$. which means that the differences found between the analyzed groups are significant.

² $p = 0.197$

students. However, such similarity in the percentages of young college students who are seeking paid work must be relativized, since some data on those who are working shows different realities in China and in Brazil, which suggests that the search for paid work does not mean the same in the two countries.

Comparison between data related to the workload of Chinese and Brazilian college students reveals quite a few differences. Only 6.9% of working Chinese college students have a weekly workload of 21 hours or more; 53.0% claim to work at most five hours per week; 26.0% have a weekly workload between six and ten hours; and 14.0% of those who work have weekly workloads of 11 to 20 hours. In Brazil, as shown in Table 2, the scenario is quite different. More than half (58.5%) of working Brazilian college students work more than twenty hours a week; 15.1% have weekly workloads of 40 hours or more, which make it very difficult to reconcile work with an undergraduate course.

Table 2 - Brazil and China: distribution of college students who work by weekly workload (2012) (%)

Weekly workload	Brazil	China
Up to 20 hours	41,5	93,1
Between 21 and 30 hours	24,2	6,9
Between 31 and 40 hours	19,2	-
Between 41 and 50 hours	13,3	.
Over 50 hours	1,8	-
Total	100	100

Source: Ipea, SBS, CYCRC and Cycra.

The workloads variance, especially regarding those quite reduced in China, is a strong indication that work, for young college students, does not always mean regular work, one that allows for some stability and predictability of income or salary at the end of the month. That is, students who said to be working do not always have a job. The work may refer to certain services the young person does in return

payment. These sporadic jobs are mostly taken at the university or refer to the area of study of the youth. It is probable that for a good part of these students, the work carried out is supplemental, does not allow economic autonomy.

In the process of youth labor market entry it is common for young people to alternate between periods searching and not searching for work, passages through various occupations, mostly unstable and with precarious working conditions. The occupational trajectories of youth are usually marked by uncertainty, with little room for choice; employment, where available, is underpaid and has extensive or uncertain workload. Short-term or high turnover jobs are also characteristic of the job market for young people.

In addition to data related to workload, two further information are relevant to complement this initial picture on the relationship of young Chinese and Brazilian college students with the world of work. First, considering only those who work, 66.0% of young Brazilians declared to work in their respective undergraduate areas, while only 28.0% of young Chinese university students said to be in the same situation. Secondly, an information that is somewhat related to the type of work that young college students have accessed refers to their participation in unions. In the labor market, unionization generally indicates access to employment or to a regular job. In Brazil, despite the greater participation of college students in the labor market, with heavier workloads, only 7.2% of these youth participate or have once participated in any union. In China, where fewer young college students are in the labor market, with reduced workloads, the unionization rate is close to double the Brazilian one, 13.5%.

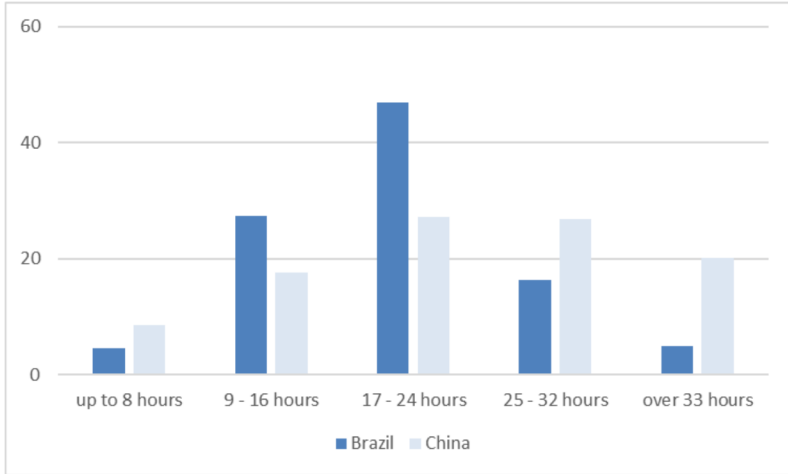
Nevertheless, the fact that, on the one hand, there is a high rate of Chinese young people who do not need to reconcile study and work when attending college, and when they do so, their workloads are quite reduced; and, on the other hand, there is a high proportion of young Brazilians studying and working, is certainly related to a wide range of aspects that are difficult to measure and that distinguish the realities of youth and higher education in the two countries. Both countries have recently undergone huge expansions in access to higher education, which meant the increase in participation of low income sectors in this level of education.

As for China, government measures for demographic control, especially the one-child policy implemented since the 1980s, had indeed a major impact on the current generation of young people. With only one child, parents are more likely to focus efforts to keep him or her in college, if he or she reached this level of education. This fact, coupled with a thriving economy such as China, in a structural scenario of lower social inequality when compared to Brazil, suggests being easier for families with children attending college to provide for a youth for a prolonged period.

China has experienced an accelerated economic growth in the last decades and an increasing and stronger integration with the global economy. In this context, even if this country is recognized as a major producer of low value-added manufactured goods or as dependent on technologies from central countries, a rapid growth can be expected in jobs that require higher qualification, higher education and abilities related to new technologies. In view of this and considering that the Chinese State strongly induces the country's economic expansion and development, possibly various measures have been taken to enable young people entering higher education to increase the so-called 'juvenile moratorium', to extend the time of study, in order to create conditions for more young people to be able to attend college without having to work. This would be also contributing to create in China, as it happens in most of the world, an expansion of the youth length in the human life cycle. In fact, findings suggest that government actions to expand access to higher education, and to provide support to college students so that these young people can be fully devoted to study, are more accessible to young Chinese university students than to Brazilians.

The higher education system in China seems to be far less suited to the reality of a young worker than the Brazilian one, since it is more demanding in terms of workload, thus reducing the possibilities for Chinese college students to study and work, at least with more extensive workloads. Considering all the surveyed students, about 92% of Chinese youths claim to study full-time, compared with only 23% of Brazilians. In Brazil, most young college students report studying in only one shift, especially at night (40%) and in the morning (35%).

Chart 1 - Brazil and China: distribution of young college students who work by weekly workload in the classroom (2012) (%)



Source: Ipea, SBS, CYCRC and Cycra.

As for the number of hours spent in classroom, Chart 1, which includes only young college students who work, shows that this time is considerably higher for Chinese than for Brazilian students. Almost half of the young Chinese college students who work (47.0%) spend twenty-five hours or more a week in the classroom, compared to only 21.2% of Brazilians. Almost half of the Brazilians (46.9%) and just over a quarter of the Chinese spend a time considered moderate, from seventeen to twenty-four hours a week. Fewer hours than this is the reality of 22.1% of Chinese and 31.9% of Brazilians working college students.

Another important aspect observed is the comparison by type of university. The research sample comprised college students from three different types of university in each country: those of excellence (type 1); intermediates (type 2); and lower ranked (type 3). In the case of Brazil, in type 1 (excellence) the sample included only public universities, and in the other two types only private universities. Table 3 shows the working status of Brazilian college students by type of university.

Table 3 - Brazil: occupation of young college students, by type of university (2012)

	Public universities	Private universities	
	(Type 1)	Type 2	Type 3
Work	41,3	60	56
Unpaid work	8,8	5,5	4,7
Looking for work	8,7	15,9	16,3
Does not work	41,2	18,6	23
Total	100	100	100

Source: Ipea, SBS, CYCRC and Cysra.

Most of the surveyed college students in private universities either work or are looking for work, while in public universities this proportion is lower. Among those who study in intermediate universities (type 2), 60.0% worked at the time of the research, and of those who study in lower ranked universities (type 3), 56.0% were working. The number of youths seeking paid work in the week prior to the survey is almost double in private universities (type 2 and 3) - about 16.0% - compared to public ones (type 1) - 8.7%. Unpaid work, which possibly includes work related to activities that complement education, is more common in public institutions, with 8.8% of young students, compared to private ones, with about 5.0%.

Another possible explanation for the difference between China and Brazil regarding working status of young college students is that, in Brazil, there is a high proportion of college students who have been in the labor market for some time, and who return to studies after interruptions. In the years previous to the survey, the significant decrease in unemployment rates and the increase in income of the poorest social classes, as well as the expansion of public higher education and the distribution of scholarships to private education, encouraged a greater number of young Brazilians to face the difficult enterprise of combining long working hours, with more hours in regular study.

This, however, explains only part of the differences between Brazil and China regarding the working status of young college students. A less attentive look could consider that the lack of similarity between the Brazilian and Chinese realities would lie in that, in China, there are more young people attending higher education at the right age bracket for this education level, while in Brazil, with the recent expansion of higher education, many older people who were already in the labor market have been pursuing undergraduate courses. In fact, the “regular” student, who graduates from high school and enters college, does so at around the age of 17 or 18 and completes undergraduate level at the age of 24 at the latest. This is a common situation in richer countries and also in China, but this is not the case in Brazil. In Brazil, higher education students show an average age greater than that of Chinese students. In 2010, 52% of Brazilian college students were aged 25 years or older, and this participation has increased rapidly, since in 2000 this age bracket represented 42% of the total number of students (IBGE, 2010; Corbucci, 2014).

Recent measures related to higher education, in Brazil, favored the entry of young people from low income sectors into universities. Besides the expansion of public higher education and the distribution of scholarships to private HEIs, other factors contributed, namely the expansion of student financing, the internalization of public universities, the opening of campuses in cities and regions far from major centers, the expansion of night courses at public universities, and the affirmative policies creating quotas based on race and for students coming from public schools.

Even before, Brazilian low-income sectors had already developed strategies to expand schooling. An example is the secondary education linked to technical education seen by the poorest families as a viable way for the youths to continue schooling and to access higher education, being able to a better job that allow to maintain oneself while attending college. It is not surprising that, in fact, once entering higher education, a good part of low-income youth combines work with study.

Prospects

Uncertainty about the future is common among youths, including college students, who have gone through an important process of choosing what to study. The doubts about the professional prospects, in turn, are crucial, especially in countries where the labor market is so unstable or subject to rapid transformations as in Brazil and China. Even so, many young college students feel confident in their chosen path, establish professional plans, some with reasonably clear goals, and begin their journey towards this. Others, however, complete graduation without knowing what exactly they intend to do.

Furthermore, it is not uncommon for some young people to be frustrated at their initial expectations. Sometimes, as graduation approaches, they realize that the aspiration to either entering or getting stability in the labor market after graduation will take time or be difficult. Faced with uncertainties, life projects are reformulated seeking other paths such as attending another undergraduate course or a postgraduate course, taking a job underpaid but that allows to gain professional experience, taking a job in another area than that of the higher education, or even seeking for work in other cities or countries. The relationship that the young person establishes or will establish with the world of work is also closely related to other transition processes that characterize this life cycle, as leaving the parents' home, marrying, or starting a family etc.

This section brings some data about future expectations of college students regarding their plans related to the world of work.

Table 5 draws attention to the fact that a major part of Brazilian and Chinese youngsters anticipates their near future after graduation without necessarily having work as a priority, since they intend to postpone work or to continue combining study and work.

Table 5 - Brazil and China: young college students by sex and plans after graduation (2012)

Aspiration following graduation	Brazil			China		
	Woman	Man	Total	Woman	Man	Total
To do postgraduate course	66,1	59,8	63,4	40,3	56,7	46,8
To work in the public sector	34,6	27,3	31,5	27,7	16,6	23,6
To work in the private sector	13,7	23,9	18	18,5	18	18,5
To start na own business	9,7	14,3	11,7	3,8	12,1	6,9
To live abroad for some time	14,8	12,6	13,9	4,9	9,2	6,9
To do another undergraduate course	9,9	10,6	10,2	8,3	3,3	6,5
To travel abroad	11,7	9	10,5	6,5	4,4	5,8
Other initiatives	4,2	5,9	4,9	15,2	7	12,1
Do not know	1,8	2,6	2,1	8,2	5,5	7,3

Source: Ipea, SBS, CYCRC and Cycra.

Note: Each respondent could point up to two answers, that is why the percentages do not sum 100%.

In both countries, many college students – more than half of the Brazilian (63.4%) and almost half of the Chinese (46.8%) surveyed youths – plan to pursue a postgraduate degree. What distinguishes the two countries is that, in Brazil, more young Brazilian women (66.1%) intend to continue their studies than young men (59.8%), while in China the relation is opposite, with an even greater difference between women (40.3%) and men (56.7%). To continue in college, doing another course, is the plan of 10.2% of the Brazilians and 6.5% of the Chinese youths.

However, this high rate of youths who intend to remain in the university – 73.6% of Brazilians and 53.3% of the Chinese –, especially doing a postgraduate course, may not come true. Nevertheless, the expectation does exist and can be the result of the persistence of ethical values and feelings held by these youths and their families in relation to the entrance to university. Achieving a university diploma is part of the strategy of families and young people themselves to enhance their chances of attaining good jobs, professional realization and upward social mobility.

Although some studies have shown that the capacity of diplomas and certificates to guarantee such attainments, especially when the number of those who hold it increases, as in the processes of expanding higher education, the strategy of enhancing qualification by extending higher education remains. In this context, the search for 'differentials', such as a graduate degree, becomes relevant. In China, this family strategy is particularly relevant, since the one-child policy and an underdeveloped social security system make parents highly dependent on this single child in their old age. In Brazil, the higher education structure has highly valued *stricto sensu* post-graduation, which can be reflected in the high proportion of undergraduates who wish to access this level of education.

Plans related to the permanence or immediate entry into the labor market after graduation – to work in the public/private sectors or to set up an own business - appear in second place as the most relevant in both countries, since 61.2% of Brazilian college students and 49.0% of the Chinese intend to follow this path shortly after graduation. That is, also at this stage, participation in the labor market is more relevant for Brazilian college students than for the Chinese. There are, however, greater similarities now, with a significant proportion, in the two countries, of young people who intend to seek work in the public sector, soon after graduation. They are 31.5% of Brazilians and 23.6% of Chinese. In both countries, the percentage of young women who intend to follow this path is higher than that of men. Working in the private sector is a path for about 18.0% of young people, both in Brazil and in China. The difference is that in Brazil, unlike those who intend to work in the public sector, it is now men who, in relative terms, have it as a priority, with 23.9%, while only 13.7% of young Brazilian women intend to achieve a private sector job as soon as they graduate.

Start a business or society is a desire of more young Brazilian college students (11.7%) than Chinese (6.9%). Living abroad for some time or taking a trip abroad after graduation, considered together, are more relevant in the plans of Brazilian college students (24.4%) than for the Chinese (12.7%). The opposite is true among youths who still have no idea of what they want to do after graduating, since only 2.1% of Brazilians are in this situation, while the among the Chinese students they represent 7.3%.

Regarding the future professional prospects, whether immediately after graduation or not, most of the college students, both Brazilian and Chinese, intend to continue or to seek a job in the professional area of their graduation. This proportion, however, is significantly higher among young Brazilians than among Chinese, as shown in table 6.

Table 6 - Brazil and China: future professional prospects of young college students

	Brasil	China
Wants to seek a job in her/his area of study	69,8	53,7
Already has work in her/his area of study, and intends to continue in it	19,2	8,9
Wants to get a job outside her/his area of study	5,3	14,0
Wants to search for a job in any area	3,6	12,6
Already works outside her/his area of study and intends to remain in it	2,0	4,6
Does not want to seek work	0,2	6,2
Total	100,0	100,0

Source: Ipea, SBS, CYCRC and Cycra.

In Brazil, 89.0% of college students bet on a job in their areas of study, considering those who want to pursue it (69.8%) and those who to continue in their current job (19.2%). In addition, 3.6% said that they intend to look for a job in any area, which means attributing a greater value to being employed, than to pursuing a career in the area of graduation. The high proportion of those who want to get a job in the area they graduated does not mean that they cannot change path, accept work in another area and even give up the career initially planned. But even so, this is an indication that the choice of graduation is in better harmony or ends up coming into harmony, during higher education, with the interests of Brazilian college students. This has positive implications for their entry into the labor market, for it is more likely that these young people have equated at least the personal factors that are part of the components for professional success. At the same

time, obtaining a higher education diploma, which means the culmination of a very important stage even for those who were already working during the undergraduate course, allows for a great recognition and social valuation. Reaching this level of education, even for young people who will continue to work in the same place, means greater possibilities for promotion, change of position, increase of salary or remuneration.

Also in China, most of the young college students want to pursue a job in his/her area of graduation (53.7%) or continue in the job he/she already has (8.9%), although with a total percentage (62.6%) lower than in Brazil. On the other hand, a significant proportion of Chinese young students does not intend to seek work (6.2%), this being the case for 9.6% of female students and for 5.0% of male students. In Brazil, this figure is irrelevant, only 0.2%. Working or continuing to work in an area different from that of one's undergraduate study is the expectation of 18.6% of young Chinese college students, while 12.6% intend to seek work in any area.

Certainly, expectations about the immediate future after graduation, as well as about professional life after graduation, are mediated by the opportunities available for those who hold a diploma and by the unpredictability of the events. Some of these conditions are related to political and economic development projects of each country, which may or may not be compatible with the aspirations of its youth.

Final remarks

Constant and complex changes in the historical process and in social phenomena are even more rapid when related to understanding youth, given the dynamism, newness, challenge to norms and rules, rebellion and social changes that characterize this life cycle. Comparing youths from such distant, both geographically and culturally, countries as Brazil and China adds complexity to this task.

In summary, the data presented here show that in Brazil, unlike China, individuals who have access to higher education enter much earlier in the labor market, so that for a significant part of them study and work overlap. The passage from youth to adult life can be observed through a series of factors, but the transition from student to worker in Brazil is not as clear as it usually is in developed countries. The transition from university to work seems to be much clearer in China than in Brazil.

There are also a significant number of young Chinese who work, but when they do this happens at very shorter working days as compared to young Brazilian college students. On the other hand, the young Chinese college students who work have a higher classroom workload than that of Brazilians in the same situation.

As regards to future prospects, surprisingly most young Chinese and Brazilian college students intend to continue in the university after graduation, most of them planning a graduate course and some to do another undergraduate. To enter or continue in the labor market soon after graduation, especially by attempting a job in the public sector, is the aspiration of more than half of Brazilian students and almost half of the Chinese. These latter are also those more uncertain about their immediate future following graduation. Regarding the future professional prospects, the vast majority of Brazilian college students intend to build a career in the area of their undergraduate course, while among the Chinese – despite most of them has the same aspiration – the number of college students who intends to pursue career outside the area of their undergraduate study or who say that does not plan to work is greater than in Brazil.

Given this scenario, a reflection that should be part of the concerns of policy makers in the areas of youth, education and labor in both China and Brazil is whether additional measures would be necessary to expand the social moratorium, that is, to enable young people to attend higher education without having to work, or at least working less; or to make higher education compatible with the reality of youth work. Even though they appear to be opposed to one another, such measures are not mutually exclusive. It is likely that in any scenario of state

action that seeks to expand access to higher education, public policies that consider youth in their complexity and combine measures in both directions are more appropriate.

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Received: Sep 30, 2017

Accepted: Nov 5, 2017