

Social Networks and Academic Failure: A Case Study of Rural Students in China

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study aims to explain how local contextual factors shape network influences on students' schooling. Many studies demonstrate how network members support students to achieve academic success by providing different kinds of resources. However, literature also shows that sometimes network members refuse to provide the assistance students need. Why are there these variations in network effects? This thesis argues that social structural factors within local communities may influence the effects that social networks have on the academic performance of students.

This study employs a case study method to explore how the social structure of a local community influences network effects on students' educational pathways. The research is focused on a group of youth who dropped out of school before completing their junior high school education in a coastal rural community in Fujian, China. Data are drawn from interviews with eight former students and two teachers in the community, as well as documents and other contextual information from the study site.

Participants' stories demonstrate how social structural factors in the local community shape the impact of social networks on students' schooling. Due to globalisation, an increasing number of manufacturers are moving their production lines or assembly lines to China, creating extensive employment opportunities in factories and service industries, especially in the Coastal region. This labour market structure shapes the network influences on students in two ways. Firstly, the lack of a middle class in the community constrains local residents from aspiring to middle class life. Secondly, because the community has few highly skilled jobs that require advanced educational credentials, local people devalue education and have no motivation to mobilise resources to support students' schooling. Since education is perceived to have limited

value in this community, members of the networks with which these eight students associate discourage them from studying hard and do not offer resources they need to sustain their schooling; instead, they encourage respondents to get a job before completing their compulsory education. In this case, the labour market structure in the local community has a powerful impact on the ways in which network members influence academic performance of students.

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## **Chapter 1. Introduction**

### **1.1 Background**

Governments around the world promote the idea that education is an important feature on the ladder to success. For example, the former UK Prime Minister David Cameron describes the importance of education as a ladder giving “the bright kid from a poor family the best chance to get on” (GOV.UK 2013). Barak Obama, the former president of the United States, comments that “the idea that no matter who you are, what you like, where you come from, who you love, you can make it here in America if you have tried hard. That’s what a college education can be all about”(The White House 2013). Similarly, the president of China also expresses that education not only is a tool for youth to have a bright future, but also to contribute to the development of the country (Ministry of Education 2014).

Influenced by this belief, it is understandable why a majority of youth endeavour to have a good education and work very hard in school. They strive after school as well. For example, it is very popular for students to enrol in tutorial programs or hire private tutors, especially in East Asia (OECD 2014). In Japan, about 60% of high school students attend private tutorials after school (Ono 2007). The annual revenue of private tutorial schools reached 14 billion Yen in the mid-90s in Japan. There are nine private tutorial schools listed on the Japanese stock exchange (Dang and Rogers 2008). In South Korea, people spent \$17.9 billion US dollars on private tutors in 2010 (OECD 2014).

But, despite the importance of education, some students give up on their schooling. The question of why some students leave school before graduating has been a longstanding focus of sociological research. For instance, in his study “Learning to Labour”, Willis (1977) focused on a group of students who took up working class jobs as they came to see little value in education. MacLeod’s study of a group of lower class youth (2009) also highlighted youth who dropped out

of school because did not believe that education could help them go further. Even some working class youth able to attend elite universities do not feel that they fit in, eventually leaving before finishing their university programmes (Lehmann 2007). More recently, an increasing number of high school students have forsaken the national college entrance examination in China. Consequently, the rate of those not taking this exam has risen from 8% in 2009 to 10% in 2013. Over 80% of these students have entered the labour market directly after graduating from senior high school (Takungpao 2013).

## 1.2 Research Question

This study explores factors related to students' decisions to drop out of school in China. I investigate this issue by means of an integrated approach that explores students' social networks in relation to structural factors. This integrated approach makes it possible to address gaps that often appear in studies that focus on either of these two approaches and helps us gain a better understanding about why some students give up schooling. Studies which adopt a social network approach have ignored the negative impacts of network members on students' educational achievement. Existing network studies (Coleman 1988, Kim 2005, Kim and Schneider 2005) mainly focus on network members who support students' schooling (typically family members, teachers, peers, and neighbours) by providing resources that help students do well in class. This research tends to create an impression that there is a relatively linear relationship between connections with these network members, resources to support education, and school success. However, this is not always the case. It is possible for some students with strong ties to family members, teachers, peers, or neighbours to experience academic failure. Are their relationships not closed enough? Can they receive useful resources from network members? Do network

members exert negative effects on students' schooling? Existing literature tends to highlight only one (positive) side of the influences that network members have on education.

Research oriented to a structural approach, by contrast, ignores the agency that people have in the schooling process. This line of studies (Weis 1990, Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn 2000, Demie and Lewis 2011, Stahl 2012) emphasizes the impact of local labour market structures on the academic performance of students living in the community. They mainly study working class communities which are suffering from deindustrialisation and conclude that when education is disconnected from available jobs, the value of education decreases. Thus, the quality of education in local schools along with the willingness of community members to support students' education, are negatively affected. In these circumstances, there is a strong likelihood that students will have little inclination to continue their education beyond basic levels. What is the role of network members and students in this educational attainment process? Do they simply devalue education, or do they try to motivate students to achieve higher academic performance in order to succeed in a society that emphasizes higher educational attainment?

Moreover, studies that adopt a structural approach have focused mostly on communities strongly affected by processes of deindustrialisation, especially in the United States and the United Kingdom. As jobs disappear in these communities, education may come to be more important as a means to find other options, or else education and good jobs may be delinked. However, in rapidly developing regions, including many communities in East Asia and South-East Asia, a different process is occurring as jobs are created through processes of industrialisation. Greater attention is needed to explore the relationships between jobs and education and the ways in which local labour markets can shape the schooling of youth in these community contexts.

This study explores how such local labour markets may shape the network effects on students' educational attainment. My analysis adopts a structural constraints focus in which social networks are understood in terms of how they come to be embedded within local social structures as influenced by these wider structural changes. The thesis argues that both the social structure of local communities and local social networks matter. This is because social, economic, and other resources within community contexts affect not only the chances that students have to do well in school or give up schooling and the opportunities available beyond schools, but also the willingness of people around these students to support educational or alternative pathways. Linking the social network to local context can help us understand more fully how students and people around them think about education, what educational and post-educational pathways are followed by these students, and what factors influenced these pathways.

This study answers this question in the context of China with a particular focus on a group of rural youth who dropped out of school in a Coastal province, Fujian, by the time that the economic reform has been underway for more than 30 years. The background to this study is the rapid industrialisation that is occurring in China, especially in coastal provinces where there has been significant growth in jobs for both well-educated employees and low-educated employees. In these circumstances, youth in rural areas, where the living standard is lower than in urban areas, have opportunities to leave villages by means of academic success which enables them to get a professional job in the urban area. But attending university may be a risk for these rural youth because of high tuition fees as well as high unemployment rates among university graduates. In exploring this dilemma, this thesis tries to find out how these, and other factors, may be associated with the decisions by some rural youth to give up schooling rather than study hard in order improve their prospects to get a better paying or higher quality job.

Within the framework outlined so far, this study explores the reasons why students drop out of school in Coastal China. Existing studies on the low educational attainment of rural students mainly attribute poor academic results to rural poverty. These relationships are definitely strong, especially in Western China which is poorer than Coastal China. In Coastal China, living standards, social facilities, infrastructures, educational levels, and incomes of both urban and rural residents are much better than in Western China. In these conditions, then, is rural poverty still the main factor that accounts for why students drop out of school? The purpose of the research on which this thesis is based is to understand what accounts for decisions by students to drop out of school in the context of a rural community in Coastal China, addressing two main questions:

- 1). What is the impact of network members on the educational performance and attainment of students who drop out of school?
- 2). What conditions may inhibit network members from orienting students to higher levels of academic success and educational attainment?

### 1.3 Contributions

This study tries to bridge important gaps between studies that focus on social networks and those that emphasise the impact of social structure on education. Firstly, my research is sensitised to the ways in which network members can influence negatively, as well as positively, the educational attainment of students. Existing studies on social networks and education mainly focus on what kinds of resources students may be able to receive from particular network members in order to increase their educational attainment or performance. But the influences that network members can exert may not always be positive. To fully understand the impact of

network members on education, this study tries to find out what influences particular network members may have on youth in the process of dropping out of school. What they have done in this process? Have they tried hard to avoid the likelihood that students will give up on schooling? If yes, why did these efforts fail? If no, why they did not help students to do better in school? This study explores how network members can influence our educational attainment process negatively as well as in more positive ways.

Secondly, this study tries to bring the local context back to the literature on social networks and schooling. This is because social networks are strongly influenced by the social structures in which they are embedded. Many studies demonstrate that network size, status of network members or strength of ties matter in the processes that people undertake to seek jobs within specific social contexts (Chua 2014, 2011, Lin, Lee, and Ao 2014, Volker and Flap 1999). This variation in network effects is associated with differences in local context. For example, in Singapore where the labour market relies highly on educational qualifications, there is limited room for the use of social networks during the job attainment process (Chua 2012). By contrast, in a labour market which does not emphasise academic qualifications to the same extent, like China, the use of a social network can increase one's chances of getting a high paying job (Bian and Ang 1999). In other words, network effects are influenced by the social structure in which they operate. Therefore, in some contexts, social networks may not exert positive influences while in other contexts they are more likely to do so. Employing this social network orientation allows us to find out how industrialisation in China, which is connected through processes of globalisation to deindustrialisation in many parts of the West, shapes the schooling of youth in rural China. Thus, this study offers insights into how global economic development and individual educational achievement may be linked through social networks.

Thirdly, this study explores how rural youth value education in the context of coastal China. Studies on social reproduction have already investigated why some lower class youth do not value education in western contexts (MacLeod 2009; Willis 1977). However, the value of education is much higher for rural youth in China than for the Lads or Hallway Hangers depicted in the studies by Willis and MacLeod, respectively. This is because education is not only a ladder for rural youth to have higher social status, but also a tool for them to leave villages and work in urban areas legally. Despite the importance of education, some rural youth give up this chance for upward mobility. By finding out why these youth give up on such an important ladder for success, we can see whether or not education is a ladder for success for all students.

Lastly, this study tries to demonstrate the situation in societies which are being transformed by the process of industrialization. Literature on community and education largely focuses on societies which are suffering from deindustrialisation, emphasising especially conditions in which many jobs are disappearing in traditional working class communities. However, it is also important to know more about what is happening in other circumstances in which communities are being reshaped by processes of industrialization. To what extent are jobs related to education and what value do students and their network members place on the kinds of jobs and education they have access to? What impact does this local labour market structure have on students' aspirations and school performance?

#### 1.4 Limitations of this study

Because of its focus on a specific community context and the small number of research participants, this study does not address all circumstances in which rural youth are likely to drop out of school in different parts of China. The aim of the study is not to provide a comprehensive

account of the factors related to dropping out of school, but it is intended to explore some of the dynamics by which network members may influence these decisions to drop out of school in relation to specific local contexts. To achieve this aim, instead of using pre-set questions by way of a questionnaire distributed to large numbers of these youth that may not reveal the true explanation of their decision to drop out, it is more suitable to use qualitative methods with fewer respondents who are able to reveal a more detailed understanding of their circumstances. Given the factors that prevailed in the study site, once I had interviewed six school non-completers, I was not able to find any new information. This data saturation means that data were able to reflect representative features of their stories.

Another limitation of this study is the absence of perspectives of parents of school non-completers. It would be useful to include parents in a study of this nature in order to enrich our understanding of the ways in which social structures and social networks shape school non-completers' schooling. However, this was not possible due to limited time and resources and because some parents live in remote villages, some live outside Orange County, and some even live outside the province

### 1.5 Organisation of the thesis

The organisation of this thesis is as follows: chapter 2 provides a review of literature on educational resources and social networks. In chapter 3, I review relationships between social networks and education within particular community contexts. Chapter 4 is about the context of China, with an overview of the educational system, the educational attainment of rural youth, and the importance of education for rural youth. Data and methods, as well as a description of the background of respondents, are presented in Chapter 5. In Chapter 6, I analyse in what way



family members affect respondents' schooling. Chapter 7 is about how teachers and peers influence respondents' academic performance. Chapter 8 discusses what factors cause students to drop out of school. The last chapter provides discussion and conclusions, focusing on the ways industrialisation can negatively shape network influences on the schooling of rural youth in China and some of the implications of these processes.

## **Chapter 2. Resources for achieving academic success**

In this chapter, I review studies about social network and educational achievement. Firstly, I summarise what kinds of resources are most strongly associated with education attainment. Then, I present how network members' influences students' possession of these educational resources.

### **2.1 The importance of education on status attainment**

Literature on social mobility stresses the importance of education. This is because education has very significant positive influences on our future career. It is also true for disadvantageous groups as well. According to the Blau-Duncan model (1967), education is the most influential factor on our first job and current job. It means that even you are born in a poor family, and your father has low educational level, you still can get a prestigious job if you have a high level of educational attainment. Therefore, education is described as the ladder for success.

Due to the importance of education on one's status attainment, scholars are very concerned with how to attain good educational level. One line of study is the social network perspective. Scholars in this line argue that schooling is more than an individual action; it is a collective process. In other words, your intelligence matters, of course, but people around you also matter in the schooling process. Therefore, scholars investigate how network members affect students' educational attainment (Teachman et. al. 1997, Stanton-Salzar 1997, Zhou and Bankston 1998, Ono 2004, Yair et. al. 2004). They have demonstrated how parents, neighbours, teachers, and peers support students' academic performance in different ways, including listening to their educational aspirations and passing along college entrance information and skills for examination preparation.

## 2.2 Educational resources

Scholars try to find out what kinds of resources are most likely to influence students' educational performance and attainment. With the rise of mass education systems that have created educational opportunities for almost all children and youth in many societies, one may question why educational resources matter. It is true that educational opportunities may have already been evenly distributed, but very often, this equal educational opportunity does not necessarily lead to equal educational attainment among students. One decisive factor producing different academic performance is the possession of educational resources. Based on existing studies, there are seven types of educational resources. These resources are intelligence, material resources, cultural capital, information, social connections, educational aspirations, and perseverance (Brown and Park 2002; Coleman 1988; DeGraaf, DeGraaf and Kraaykam 2000; DiMaggio 1982; Espenohande, Chung, and Walling 2004; Kim and Schnedier 2005; Massey et. al. 2003; Nicholas, Stepick, and Stepick 2008).

The first type of resource is intelligence. It means the “possession of knowledge, the ability to use information processing to reason out the world, and the ability to employ that reasoning adaptively in different environment” (Bernstein et. al. 1994: 368). Our learning in schools is positively related to our intelligence (Herrnstein and Murry 1994; Marger 2005). Therefore, students who have higher intelligence will have a better educational attainment. Empirical studies have provided ample evidence for this argument (Herrnstein and Marry 1994; Sewell and Hauser 1975).

However, intelligence in itself cannot explain fully the variations in people's educational attainment. Our education is also affected by social structures, social institutions, and other people – in other words, by societal factors (Fischer et. al. 1996). Therefore, it is essential to

include factors beyond intelligence if we want to study fully the differences in educational attainment among people. Below are other key factors influencing one's educational attainment.

The second type of resource is material resources. Material resources mean money or other material goods. When there is no free education, only students whose parents can afford tuition can attend school, and even when education is provided without cost, it does not mean that material resources do not matter. For example, when students have learning problems, rich parents can seek help from specialists to help students fix their problems (Massey et. al. 2003; Wu 2007), as more affluent parents are able to provide additional resources to children to improve their performance at school, like hiring private tutors (Coleman 1990; Harris, Jamison, and Trujillo 2008).

The third type of resource is cultural capital. Cultural capital refers to "the knowledge and understandings about social expectations, dominant values, and other pertinent information that institutions use in their on-going operations"(Wotherspoon 2013: 57). Possessing the appropriate values, cultural skills or knowledge helps students to excel in class. For instance, students who are familiar with presentation, classical music, or Shakespeare's literature are likely to find it easier to get used to school environments as these forms of knowledge are demanded and rewarded at school. Compared to those who have difficulties in getting used to school environments, students who possess these kinds of cultural capital are more likely to do well at school (MacLeod 2009).

The fourth type of resource is information for making the right decision. In the student's schooling process, parents and students themselves have to make lots of decisions, such as choosing colleges or how to prepare for admissions interviews. Therefore, choosing the right choice can help students to have better academic results or increase their chances of success.

However, in order to make the right decision it is necessary for a student to have information related to schooling. Without proper information, it is difficult for students and their parents make a correct choice (Harris, Jamison, and Trujillo 2008; Kim 2005; Kim and Schneider 2005; Zhou and Bankston 1998).

The fifth type of resource is social connection. Social connection means the close relationships that can enable people to acquire resources (Bian 1994). For example, in the US, some students can attend Ivy League universities through legacy admission which is only open for students who are connected by familial alumni ties (Gomstyn 2008). In the Soviet Union, parents who are Communist Party members can send their unqualified children to good schools or universities by contacting school headmasters through the party network (Gerber 2000; Hanley 2001; Wong 2004).

The sixth type of resource that influences school outcomes is educational aspiration. Educational aspiration is an intangible resource. It refers to one's ambition to get a good education. If students have high educational aspirations, they may be more willing to spend time on studying and be less likely to give up. Thus, they are more likely to do well at school (Bourdieu 1986; MacLeod 2009; Sewell and Hauser 1975; Willis 1977).

The last one is perseverance, which refers to the will to work hard, and the will not to give up when facing difficulties. When students have difficulties in studying, perseverance is a key factor determining their chances of achieving academic success. Those who have high perseverance may be able to study hard in very adverse environments, such as being homeless, or attending the worst school in the district. Those who have low perseverance tend to give up in the face of this bad environment (Portes and Fernandez-Kelly 2008).

### 2.3 Sources of educational resources

One of the main interests of many network scholars lies with the kinds of educational resources students can receive from particular members of their social networks. Many students, particularly those in the primary school and junior high school stages, do not possess essential educational resources by themselves, so they rely on others to gain access to these resources. Scholars describe these resources as being embedded in social ties (Coleman 1988). They also find that network members who support students are usually family members, teachers, peers, and neighbours. However, not all students are likely to have relationships with others who themselves have the means to equip them for educational success.

Coleman is one of the pioneer scholars to study how network members shape students' school performance. In his article "Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital", Coleman (1988) employs network closure theory to explain network effects on education. Network closure refers to a social network in which all network members are connected with each other. Coleman argues that this network closure can shape students' behaviours. For example, if students have close relationships with parents, school, and others in a neighbourhood, and these members are connected with each other, expectations of parents and teachers for students, and social norms within the neighbourhood can be transmitted to students. When parents and teachers have high educational expectations and education is highly valued in the neighbourhood, students tend to have high educational aspirations.

Using data from the High School and Beyond project, Coleman (1990) demonstrates how network closure shapes students' dropout rate in the United States. Comparing students who live with two parents who have one sibling and whose mother expects them to attend college, with students who live with one parent, have more than one sibling and whose mother does not expect

them to attend college, the chances of dropping out of high school for the former group are almost three times lower than for the latter group. In comparing the dropout rate of students who live in a close Catholic neighbourhood and those who do not, he finds that the former group has a lower dropout rate than the latter one.

Coleman (1990) explains that students can understand norms of the community and parents' expectations through the close relationship with the community and family. Using a Catholic neighbourhood as an example, he explains that if students know that the norm in the Catholic neighbourhood is working hard in school, students who are deeply connected with neighbours will follow this norm. Inside the family, if parents have a close relationship with students, it is easier for parents to supervise students and support them, and students are more likely to understand parents' educational expectations for them and try to fulfil them. In other words, students in these circumstances are likely to have higher educational aspirations. These high educational aspirations make students more willing to work hard, such as spending more time on studying.

Since Coleman's pioneer study, other scholars have begun to use the social network perspective to study the impact of network members on students' educational attainment. Students can access educational resources that help them to do better in school from network members, and all students from the advantaged group or disadvantaged group, local or migrant students can also benefit from these resources (Ono 2004; Dika and Singh 2002).

Students can access the aforementioned resources from parents. Firstly, we mainly inherit cultural capital from parents. We learn language, attitudes, tastes, or cultural skills and preferences through daily interactions with parents. Some of these types of knowledge favour

students' learning as it can enhance students' background knowledge (Massey et. al. 2003, Wu 2007).

Secondly, families provide students with material resources. When students have learning problems, parents can use their material resources, such as money, to solve these difficulties, like by seeking help from educational psychologists or medical doctors. Furthermore, parents can create an environment that favours students' learning when they have material resources. For instance, rich families in Japan would move to another place if relocation can help their children to get into elite universities (Ono 2004).

Thirdly, information provided by parents can shape students' educational attainment. Students always have to make important decisions at different stages in their educational attainment process, such as choosing college. Kim and Schneider (2005) observe that in America, if parents of students from disadvantaged groups can actively collect information for university selection from teachers or school councillors in school, their children will have more chances to attend four year colleges than those who don't.

The fourth resource is social connection. Researchers have shown that students in the former Soviet Russia had more opportunities to get into selective high schools or universities when their parents were Communist Party members because parents could acquire information or direct help from the deeply entrenched party network (Gerber 2000; Hanley 2001; Wong 2004).

Lastly, parents and teachers can enhance students' educational aspirations and perseverance. As Coleman (1988) describes, students will understand parents' educational expectations for them if they have close relationships with their parents and will try hard to fulfil this expectation. For example, some migrant students in United States think that it is their responsibility to help



their diligent parents to have a good life in the future and to make them happy by doing well in school, so they need to achieve academic success to get a good job in the future (Nicholas, Stepick and Stepick 2008).

If students have good relationships with teachers and classmates, they also can access helpful educational resources from teachers and classmates which may result in better academic performance. Firstly, the information from teachers can increase students' chances of attending a good university. In their study of American high school students, Kim and Schneider (2005) find that if students have close ties with teachers, teachers will pass on information about admissions interview skills or suitable times for taking the SAT. This information can facilitate students' journey to college.

Secondly, teachers can influence students' educational aspirations. If students understand that their teachers or mentors have high educational expectations for them, these students will believe that their teachers care for them and think that they are able to do well. Thus, they may develop high educational aspirations and work harder. Goyette and Conchas's (2002) study of Vietnamese migrant students and Mexican migrant students in the United States is a good example. They find that the Vietnamese students outperform the Mexican students. The reason is that Vietnamese students have more interactions with teachers than the Mexican students. This close relation makes Vietnamese students more aware of teachers' high expectations for them. As teachers have higher expectations for the Vietnamese students, these students would want to fulfil them. Thus, they have higher educational aspirations. Mexican students, by contrast, do not know whether or not teachers have high educational expectations for them, and are not likely to have as much motivation as the Vietnamese students to work hard in their studies.

Thirdly, influences from peers also matter. Studies of Asian migrant students in America show that if migrant students' culture highly values education, students are more likely to aspire to academic success. This is because students who do not have high aspirations are considered as deviant and other high-striving youth will not make friends with these deviants. Therefore, to avoid being isolated, students need to have high educational aspirations (Steinberg 1996; Zhou and Bankston 2002). By the same token, if peers devalue education, students also tend to have low educational aspirations as well (Willis 1977).

Community can also influence students' schooling by providing resources to students. Firstly, the community can shape students' educational aspirations. Yair and associates (2004: 218) find that in an Israeli Arab community, everyone believes that education is the best way for the community to improve its overall circumstances. This belief helped to increase the educational aspirations of students who live in that community. Bankston and Zhou (1996) observe a similar finding in a Vietnamese community in the United States.

Students can get useful educational information from the community. In their study of a Vietnamese community in the United States, Bankston and Zhou (1996) find that students who regularly participate in religious activities tend to have better academic performance at school. This is because they are more likely to gain access to information, such as how to prepare for SAT or admission interviews, which cannot be gotten from other sources. This information helps students understand more about colleges in the United States, and how to succeed at school.

In this chapter, I have reviewed studies about social network and educational attainment. There are seven kinds of resources that can help students to do better in school and these resources are embedded in social networks. We can access these resources from our social ties with parents, teachers, peers, and communities. But, one may question why some students still

fall into academic failure, even if they have ties with network members. In the next chapter, we are going to review why sometimes students cannot achieve academic success even though they are connected with parents, peers, teachers, and neighbours.

### **Chapter 3 Social structure, social network, and education**

In this chapter, literature on how network effects on students are influenced by the macro social structure is reviewed. The previous chapter has reviewed in what ways network members support students' schooling. One may think that if we have ties with others, then, it is no problem to get support from them for our schooling. However, a social network sometimes does not work because it is embraced by the social structure. In other words, social structure can influence how social networks exert impact on students' educational attainment.

#### **3.1 Social structure in local context, social network, and education**

To demonstrate the above argument, we can take the labour market structure in local communities as an example. Even though lower class individuals are located in the bottom social stratum, their positions in the labour market may vary from one community to another community. This is because labour market structures in each community can be very different. This labour market in the community can also shape the network influences on students' academic performance.

A classic study in this line is Paul Willis's *Learning to Labour* (1977). Willis highlights how job opportunities in the community affect the network influences on students' schooling, and the value of education in the community. In the working class community, Hammer Town, in England where he conducted his study, he focused on a group of youth who reject schooling, known as the "lads." They do not obey school rules, do not respect teachers and school staff members, dislike classmates who conform to school, and devalue education.

This counter school attitude is caused by the availability of manual jobs in the community. Most male family members of the lads are manual labours, such as miners. These family

members demonstrate to the lads how they maintain the living of the whole family by manual labour jobs. Thus, the lads celebrate manual labour jobs. Since manual jobs do not require a high educational level, the lads of course do not value education and think that white collar jobs, which require a high educational level, are female jobs. As they do not value education, they do not study hard and ask for help when they have academic problems. Network members were also not very likely to actively support the lads' schooling, instead in many cases opening connections for them to get jobs. Consequently, the lads saw little value in continuing school.

In a new context marked by deindustrialisation since the 1980s, some of the pathways to working class jobs explored by Willis no longer applied. Factory work, mining, ship-building, and many other manufacturing jobs have vanished in the UK, USA, and other highly industrialised countries and these jobs have been exported to Asia, especially China, where production costs are much lower than in the West (Demie and Lewis 2011, Weis 1990). Labour economists (Weis 1990) comment on the impact of deindustrialisation as “when the employment lost as a direct result of plant, store, and office shutdowns during the 1970s is added to the job loss associated with runaway shops, it appears that more than 32 million jobs were destroyed. Together, runaways, shutdowns, and permanent physical cutbacks short of complete closure may have cost the country as many as 38 million jobs.”

As jobs disappear, working class communities in these countries are in decline; many of these communities have become the most deprived communities within their nations. For example, the community which Nayak (2006) studies is a former industrial community in Newcastle, UK. People there mainly worked in dock-yards, mining, or other heavy industries. Nayak describes that in the 1970s in North-Eastern England, around 40% of the local labour force participated in manufacturing and primary industries. In 1996, however, 40% of young

men aged 16-24 years old were unemployed. In the 2000s, when almost all local manufacturing, mining, and ship-building industries had been lost, 50% of the labour force are in service industries, such as catering or call centres, and many of these workers are female. The unemployment rates for men are still very high. Another working class community 'East Kelby' is also a former industrial community in Middlesbrough in England (MacDonald et. al. 2005). In the late 1980s, East Kelby had the highest concentration of the most deprived wards in the UK and had the lowest educational attainment level among youth in UK in 2000. In 2003, around 53% residents in East Kelby were unemployed, with high unemployment rates and low educational levels mainly caused by deindustrialisation. As manufacturing jobs are exported, there are no jobs for local residents. Similarly, in her study of Freeway, a city located in the rust belt in the North-Eastern part of the United States, Weis (1990) shows that compared to the 1960s, the number of primary industry and manufacturing job positions decreased by 50% in the 1980s. Many local residents, especially men, were suffering from unemployment or underemployment as there were very few manufacturing jobs for them and they did not have the skills and educational levels required for work in the service industries which replaced the manufacturing industries.

Youth in these communities can no longer expect to have the same life and living standard as their parents. The service industry has replaced the manufacturing industry. High proportions of jobs in the service sector offer lower salaries and fewer benefits to employees, are contract-based or part-time type, require low and no skill and are often relocated (MacDonald and Marsh 2005). Even in high tech industries which are growing rapidly and may demand large numbers of workers, companies often export their assembly line jobs to Asia where production costs are lower instead of having their factories in the West (Weis 1990). Unlike the situation for

the working class in the 1960s and 70s when manufacturing jobs allowed workers to have a stable and respectable standard of living, now, service jobs are less secure and workers may have only a very low living standard. Therefore, unlike the working class youth in Willis's study, youth in declining working class communities face a very different world where only very limited numbers of stable jobs are available.

Students in these communities tend to have low educational levels. Willis explains that the lads in his study did not aspire to high educational levels because there are jobs ready for them. However, what happens when there are no more jobs available to all working class youth in the community? Do youth study harder in order to step up on the rungs of the ladder for success? Some scholars use national statistics to understand changing patterns of educational attainment of working class youth since the late twentieth century, while others undertake case studies, visiting different working class communities in the United States or England to investigate how the youth there view education and how the local context has affected their educational aspirations (MacDonald et. al. 2005; Weis 1990). These studies demonstrate that even though life has become more uncertain in this era of deindustrialisation, many of these working class youth still do not value education and they are very likely to have poor educational performance or drop out before completing high school.

This job loss also affects the value of education in the community and consequently, network members' willingness to support students' schooling. Firstly, the delinking of education from good jobs may triggers community members to devalue education and result in refusal to seek assistance from network members when students have problems and network members do not care very much about students' academic performance. Wilson (1987) explains that if working class youth see their older peers working very hard in school in order to get a good job

and failing to achieve this goal, they will question the link between educational attainment and good jobs, which may then negatively affect their willingness to work hard in school. Further, if these youth find that there is no difference between the jobs of those peers who have low educational attainment and those who are well-educated, they will not find any reason to do well in school. In fact, many studies have already demonstrated what Wilson has explained. For example, the unemployed working class youth in a declining working class community in the study conducted by MacDonald and Marsh (2005) laugh at the former academic star in their school because this star who got 3A in the GCSE eventually became a worker packing fruit in Morrison's. Thus, students see little incentive in valuing education as a means for them to get a good job.

Secondly, the resistance to an achievement ideology can undermine positive network influences on students' educational attainment. The achievement ideology can be referred to as the belief that if you work hard in school, you will get a good job in the future because schools give every child the knowledge, skills, and aspirations they need to fulfil their potential (Ainsworth 2002; MacLeod 2009; Stahl 2014; Wilson 1996). This ideology also describes how underachieving youth may be unable or unwilling to fit themselves into the school system in a way that prepares them for future economic success. Therefore, a belief is cultivated that if you cannot succeed, then it is your fault. Wilson (1996) points out that if most adults in the community succeed in school and work, youth are very likely to value this ideology. But, the fact is that many adults are unemployed in many working class communities. For example, MacDonald and Marsh (2005) describe many parents of interviewees in their study who now were economically marginalised, with short-term contracts or under-skilled jobs, or retired or underemployed. The situation of these adults in the neighbourhood discouraged the youth from



believing in the ideology of educational success. If they admit the achievement ideology and feel that they themselves can succeed by hard work, it means that the failures of their parents, relatives or neighbours might be attributed to their inability to work hard or to laziness. To maintain the esteem of the youth and their family members and friends, these youth are very likely to reject the achievement ideology. Instead of aspiring to middle class jobs and a good life in the future, they would rather aspire to working class positions and not value school success.

Thirdly, the poor quality of schools in many working class communities can block students' chances to get support from teachers and peers. School quality is largely influenced by the local context. If the working class community is in decline, it means that the local governments may not have enough financial ability to maintain good quality schools and hire and retain good teachers. Thus, the quality or dedication of teachers teaching in these schools may be weak. For example, in her study Weis (1990) shows that teachers in working-class schools do not really teach. They just order students to write down what they said. If students ask questions, teachers do not answer them and think that they are trouble makers. As a result, students do not know what they are learning and are unable to link school knowledge to their real life. They feel it is meaningless to attend class. Worse still, the teachers did not help students to prepare for the college entrance examination and give them essential information to continue their schooling. Without help from teachers, students were very likely to fail examinations and so have limited chances to be promoted to college even if they have the motivation to study. As their peers have little opportunities to achieve a higher educational level, students gradually lower their aspirations, even if they aspired to college at the beginning.

Lastly, the informal labour market discourages community members to value education. As we can see, due to deindustrialisation, many formal jobs that require skills or professional

knowledge have vanished. What remains in the community are jobs that are temporary, unskilled, and low-paid. These jobs do not require skills and experience and allow personal recommendations. Therefore, each time that youth need to get a job, they can ask their friends and family members for recommendations. As the jobs they get do not require particular educational credentials, it is understandable that they will not value education (MacDonald and Marsh 2005).

### 3.2 Theoretical framework

From the above literature, we can see two factors that can influence students' performance in school. Figure 3.1 is about the main argument of the studies on social network and education. As we can see, network members usually include family members, teachers, peers, and neighbours, and they can exert positive influence on our educational attainment by providing different educational resources.

Figure 3.1 The main argument of studies on social network and education

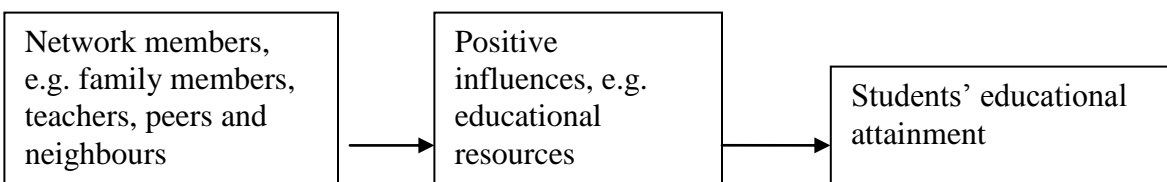
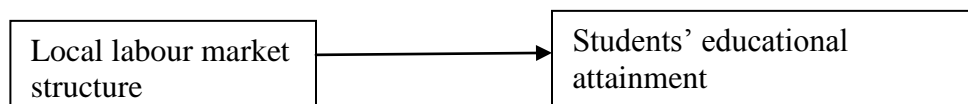


Figure 3.2 illustrates the argument presented within studies on community and education. Due to deindustrialization, many stable manufacturing jobs are no longer available in the working class community, often replaced by low paid and unstable service jobs, if at all. Local people thus suffer from underemployment or unemployment. These poor working conditions can influence education in different ways. In some cases, students may look to education as an avenue by which they can escape the community and seek opportunities in other

regions. For example, in the case of Digby Nick in Nova Scotia, Corbett (2007) found that students there believe that good education helps them leave this poor rural community and get a middle class job in other regions, while only those failed in school would stay there with a working class job. Thus, most highly-educated youth leave this community. In other cases, the relationship between education and career may be delinked if students feel they have no viable future options. They cannot see how increased educational attainment will help them get a good job, especially if they have observed other community members without jobs. Further, the underemployment and unemployment of community members also causes youth to lose faith in the achievement ideology which encourages students to work hard in school. They do not believe that they can succeed through working hard in school because they do not want to admit that their family members and friends are too lazy. Thirdly, as formal and stable jobs are lost from communities, local people may be able to get whatever jobs they can – many of these unstable and low paid jobs with low formal skill requirements - by means of personal recommendations. Lastly, job loss in the community can undermine the educational quality of local schools, making it difficult for students to succeed. In other words, for many people in these circumstances, education is useless. The more everyone in the community devalues education, students themselves may be less likely to ask for help when they have difficulties in school and network members in some circumstances will not offer assistance when students have problems (Ainswoth 2002; Sampson and Groves 1989; Wilson 1986).

Figure 3.2 The main argument of studies on the community and education



However, these two lines of study have limitations. The social network approach tends to ignore the negative impacts that network members may have on students' educational achievement. Existing network studies mainly focus on network members, including family members, teachers, peers, and neighbours, who support students' schooling by emphasising the kinds of resources they provide to enhance student success. This creates an impression that once connections with the appropriate network members are established, useful resources for education are likely to improve educational performance or attainment. But this is not always the case. Some students who have strong connections with family members, teachers, peers and neighbours may still not succeed academically. Are their relationships not closed enough? Can they receive useful resources from other network members? Do network members exert negative effects on students' schooling? Existing literature tends to highlight only one side of the influences that network members may have on education.

Structural approaches, by contrast, tend to ignore the agency that people have in the schooling process. This line of study focuses on the influence that local labour market structures have on the academic performance of students living in the community. Much of this research is conducted within working class communities which are suffering from deindustrialisation, emphasizing the devaluation of education by students for whom it comes to be delinked from jobs. In the process, the quality of education in local schools and the willingness of community members to support students' education are negatively affected as well, increasing the likelihood that students will not succeed academically. It is important to know more about the role of network members and students in this educational attainment process. Do they simply reinforce a community belief that education has little value, or do they attempt to support students in order to improve their opportunities through enhanced academic performance?

Studies that adopt these structural approaches mainly focus on communities which are experiencing processes of deindustrialisation. If deindustrialisation can devalue education, then is industrialisation likely to enhance the value of education in a society, as suggested in literature on modernization? This relationship between industrialisation and education is at least as important as the issue of deindustrialisation and education, especially in a globally connected context where deindustrialisation has advanced in many Western societies, but industrialisation is happening in other places, notably including China where the export of jobs from the West has created numerous job opportunities for both well-educated and low educated labourers. Since 1978, China has carried out industrialisation policies that have resulted in significant changes in employment structures. From 1978 to 2005, labourers employed in the agricultural industry decreased from 71% to 45% of employment in China, those in secondary industries increased from 17.3% to 23.8%, and those in the tertiary sector increased from 12.2% to 31.3% (Cai et. al. 2008). The rapid increase in industrial and service sector jobs means that, on the one hand, a substantial numbers of jobs in manufacturing industries have emerged. These jobs do not require high levels of education. On the other hand, due to economic growth, professional services, like accounting or law (Gillis 2014), and many other highly skilled jobs are in high demand.

To bridge these analytical gaps, this study integrates the structural approach with the social network perspective. My approach is informed in part by Blau and Schwartz (1984), who recognize the importance of structural constraints through a macrostructural theory of intergroup relationships which argues that our choice of developing social ties is not purely the result of individual preference; rather, it is socially constrained (Blau and Schwartz 1984). Blau and Schwartz examine how structure of social networks is affected by the social structure of a community which determines options we have to establish social ties. This social structure can

be referred to the occupational structure of the local labour market, educational level of the local population, population distribution or ethnical diversity in the community, and so forth.

Our choice of developing ties is provided by the social structure. Therefore, features of a community's structure will be reflected within people's social network patterns. In a homogeneous community, people have limited opportunities to meet others who have very different social backgrounds. Thus, the structural constraints the chances we have influence the development of intergroup relationships. In contrast, people have greater chances to build intergroup relationships in a diverse community. In this case, the structure gives people chances to meet and know others from different groups well enough for developing ties.

This integrated approach is more suitable than class approaches to explain the variations in students' schooling performance in some communities, such as villages in rural China. While Blau and Schwartz (1984) focus on the pattern of social networks, many other scholars directly study why the uses of network are different between different groups of students and what factors account for this difference. Horvat and associates (2003) attribute this difference to class differences. In their study of parental network influences and educational attainment in a mixed-race and class primary school in a Mid-Western university community in the United States, they concluded that "both the architecture of parental networks and their use vis-à-vis the school vary dramatically by class." Stanton-Salazar (1997) also focuses on how the structure and the function of social networks are stratified by class. Stanton-Salazar (1997:4) emphasises that "working class community and networks are organised on the basis of scarcity and conservation, the cosmopolitan network constructed by middle class members are oriented toward maximising individual (and group) access to the mainstream marketplace."

While this class approach may explain the variation in the use and the impacts of social networks, it may not be able to explain the difference within each class. For example, why are some students able to get support from network members while others do not receive such support, even if they are in the same social class? Portes and Fernandez (2008) observe in the community that they studied that although all students come from lower class families, it is important to explore why their network members exert very different influences on them and contribute to very diverse academic results.

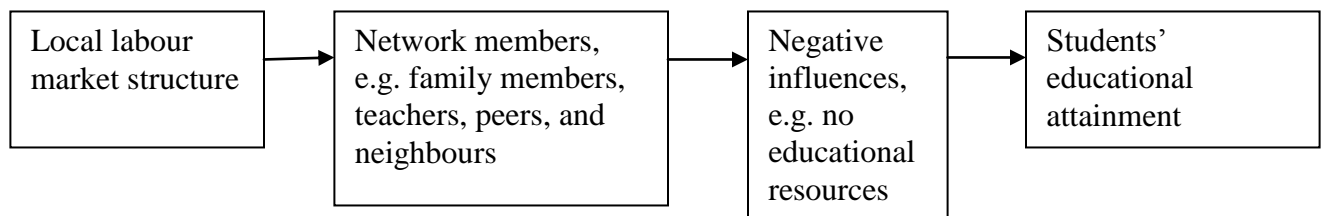
This is because even if students are in the same social class; the impact of the local context can be very different. For example, local labour markets in communities experiencing deindustrialisation can be very different from those that are becoming more highly industrialised, even though both communities are working class communities. Due to differences in structural conditions, the structural constraints on social network are different. Therefore, the influences of social network on students are very likely not the same. It is essential to include the local context in the study of network effects.

Based on this structural constraints argument, this paper asks how the local context shapes network effects on the students' decisions about dropping out of school before completing their compulsory education. This study answers this question by focusing on a specific context, a rural area in Coastal China. Rural youth can get jobs easily because there are many manufacturing and low skill service job opportunities, but professional jobs are also available. Compared to jobs in manufacturing and service industries, professional jobs can enjoy higher salaries and social status for those with higher education. In other words, education is the ladder for success. In this context, which factors influence the decisions made by those rural youth who refuse to climb the rungs of this ladder by dropping out of school before they graduate from junior high school?

Figure 3.3 illustrates the conceptual framework of this study. This study argues that network members, like family members, teachers, peers and neighbours, can negatively, as well as positively, affect students' educational performance aspirations, sometimes resulting in a decision to drop out of school. This negative impact is in part the result of constraints from local labour market structures. Within this framework, the study focuses on two key issues: 1). What is the impact of network members on the performance and attainment of students who drop out of school? 2). What conditions may inhibit network members from orienting students to higher levels of academic success and educational attainment?

By focusing on these two issues, this study aims at investigating the impact of the local labour market on the influences of social network on students' educational attainment in the process of industrialisation.

Figure 3.3 the conceptual framework of this study



### 3.3 Contributions

This study tries to fill in the following gaps that often stand between social network and social structural approaches to educational attainment. Firstly, this study explores negative as well as positive impacts of network members on the schooling process. Existing studies on social network and education mainly focus on what kinds of resources students can receive from particular network members. With these resources, students are very likely to have better performance in school. But it is important to question whether network members exert only



positive influences. If yes, we need to find out why these supports cannot help students go further in their educational attainment process. To fully understand the impact of network members on education, this study tries to find out the influences of network members on the process of dropping out of school. What they have done in this process? Have they tried hard to avoid students to give up schooling? If yes, why have they still failed? If no, why they did not help students to do better in school? This study tries to find out whether or not network members can influence our educational attainment process negatively.

Secondly, this study tries to bring the local context back to the literature on social network and schooling. This is because social networks are actually embraced by the social structure. Many studies demonstrate that network size, status of network members or strength of ties matter in people's job seeking process in one society but not in another one (Chua 2014, 2011, Lin, Lee, and Ao 2014, Volker and Flap 1999). This variation in network effects is associated with differences in local context. For example, in Singapore where the labour market relies highly on educational qualifications, there is limited room for the use of social networks during the job attainment process (Chua 2012). By contrast, in a labour market which does not emphasise academic qualifications to the same extent, like China, the use of a social network can increase one's chance of getting a high paid job (Bian and Ang 1999). Obviously, network effects actually are under the influence of the social structure. Therefore, in some contexts, a social network cannot exert positive influences while in other contexts it can. Employing this social network orientation allows us to find out how the industrialisation in China and deindustrialisation in the West shape the schooling of youth in rural China. Thus, this study can demonstrate how global economic development and individual educational achievement are being linked through social network.

Thirdly, this study explores how rural youth value education in the context of coastal China. Studies of social reproduction have already investigated why some lower class youth do not value education in western contexts (MacLeod 2009; Willis 1977). However, the value of education may be much more significant for rural youth in China than for the Lads or Hallway Hangers in Willis's and MacLeod's studies, respectively. This is because education is not only a ladder for rural youth to attain higher social status, but also a tool for them to leave villages and work in urban areas legally. Despite the importance of education, some rural youth give up this chance for upward mobility. By finding out why these youth give up such an important ladder for success, we can see whether or not education is a ladder for success for all students.

Lastly, this study is concerned with the educational decisions of youth in societies which are experiencing processes of industrialization. Literature on community and education largely focus on societies which are suffering from deindustrialisation, in which traditional working class jobs are disappearing. On the one hand, education now may not bring you a good job in these communities. On the other hand, some youth there refuse to believe the discourse that you need to work harder in school to get a good job. If they admit this course, it means that the poor economic status of their families is the result of the laziness of their family members. As a result, youth there refuse to study hard in school and many of them are very likely to fall into academic failure. However, some societies are experiencing processes of industrialization with many related jobs being created. Education becomes a means to get a good job. Will students there value education very much? How does this local labour market structure shape students' school performance?

## **Chapter 4. The Context of China**

In this chapter, I introduce education and labour market conditions within the Chinese context. Firstly, I shall briefly present an overview of the education system in China. Then, I focus on the relationship between the value of education and the labour market. Thirdly, I shall report the educational attainment of rural youth in China.

### 4.1 The education system in China

In China, the law of nine years of compulsory education was enacted in 1986. Students are required to receive six years of primary school education and three years of junior high school education. Once students finish primary education, they take an entrance examination. A tracking system is used in junior high school recruitment and beyond. Students who score high on this exam are assigned to key-point junior high schools which key point schools or key point universities have more resources, teachers there have more experience and better qualifications, and students have the best performance in the entrance examination. The rest are promoted to non-key point junior high schools (China Education and Research Network 2014).

When students finish their junior high school education, they are required to take the senior high school entrance examination. As with the old junior high school entrance examination, only students who get high marks can attend a key point senior high school. Others will attend non key point senior high school or vocational training school (China Education and Research Network 2014). As senior high school education is not compulsory, no school will admit students who get very low marks in the entrance exam. Therefore, some junior high school graduates will enter the labour market without any further formal education.

Senior high school graduates are required to take the national college entrance examination in order to receive higher education, except those who are champions in the National Olympic Science Competition. Again, only students who score high marks can attend key point universities. There are 112 key point universities (also called 211 universities) in China (Ministry of Education 2012), the most selective of which are Peking University and Tsinghua University. The admission requirements and admission quota for each university for each province are very different. For example, the admission requirement of the Peking University for arts students registered in Beijing is 654 marks, but the admission requirement for students registered in Canton is 668 marks (Sina News 2013). In 2012, Peking University recruited 600 students from 73 thousand candidates who registered in Beijing while only 72 students were admitted to Peking University from Shangdong province where there were 500 thousand candidates (Tencent News 2012). Those who do not score high enough are assigned to non-key point universities or vocational training institutions. For those who fail to get any offer, the majority will enter the labour market or take the exam one more time.

## 4.2 The value of education and the labour market

### 4.2.1 Value of education before the Economic Reform

Achieving academic success is a way to secure opportunities for upward mobility in China. The idea of measuring one's individual merit by educational attainment is deeply rooted in the Confucian culture. From the Tang dynasty to the Ching dynasty, the central government implemented the national competitive civic service examination system to select government officials, regardless of a candidate's familial background; this gave persons from the lower class a channel of upward mobility. For instance, in his study of the familial background of the exam

candidates during the late Ming and early Ching period, Ho (1976) finds that candidates from ordinary families accounted for 30-40% of candidates who were selected to be government officials.

Besides the traditional culture, the value of education is tightly tied to the labour market. When education cannot equip students with the knowledge and skills demanded by the labour market, this kind of education is devalued. In contrast, when education can enhance students with the knowledge and skills required in the labour market, the value of this education credential is enhanced (Wotherspoon 2016). Due to this linkage between education and the labour market, below I shall introduce briefly the market structure in urban China and its impacts on the importance of education. I shall begin with the labour market structure before the economic reform in 1979.

Prior to the economic reform in 1979, education played a very limited role in shaping one's occupational attainment. At that time, the type of economy in China was a planned economy, which means the economic development strategies and goals were planned by the central government. There was no free labour market. Almost every urban resident was assigned to a workplace, also called a "work-unit". All work-units were controlled by the government. The selection of employees was decided by the central personnel department, the number of employees hired each year was regulated by the government's budget, and decisions related to price, production cost, development plan, and profits were made by the government as well (Guthrie 2000; Wu 2002). After the central government carried out wage reform in 1956, wages of employees in all work units were strictly controlled by the government. The rank in the wage ladder of each employee was based on the political status, seniority, and administrative position.

Due to this “One China, One payroll” policy and the job assignment system, it was difficult for people to earn more based on their education level (Wu 2002).

This work-unit system reinforced the urban-rural gap. As mentioned earlier, all urban residents were assigned to a work unit, and received wages and benefits such as housing and medical care from it. But, the government could not provide the same to the rural population. The rural population thus could only rely on their annually fluctuating harvests for their living and the amount and type of social services they could have were less than those for urban residents. Consequently, the living standard between urban and rural areas was continually widening. For example, the estimated urban-rural income gap ranged between 2.1 to 6.1 by the late 1970s (Wang 2008).

To prevent the rural population from flooding to the urban areas, the government implemented a household registration policy. According to this policy, everyone is assigned a household registration from the government. A person born in a peasant family will be assigned a rural household registration, and a person born in a family of urban residents will have an urban household registration. If a peasant leaves the village without changing the household registration, this person will not have the right to receive medical insurance, social welfare, schooling, or even the right to work in urban government (Chan 2009).

Under the work-unit system and household registration policies, education was a main way for peasants to take up residence in an urban area with entitlement to social welfare and other rights. Before the economic reform, there were three ways for them to officially change their household registration, namely, being appointed government officials, enlisting in the People’s Liberation Army, and getting into colleges (Chan and Li 1999; Lee and Selden 2007; Wang 2008). But, the government did not always recruit officials, many male youth were not

physically able to join the army, and the army recruited very few females. Consequently, the predominant way for peasants to change their household registration officially was to secure higher education.

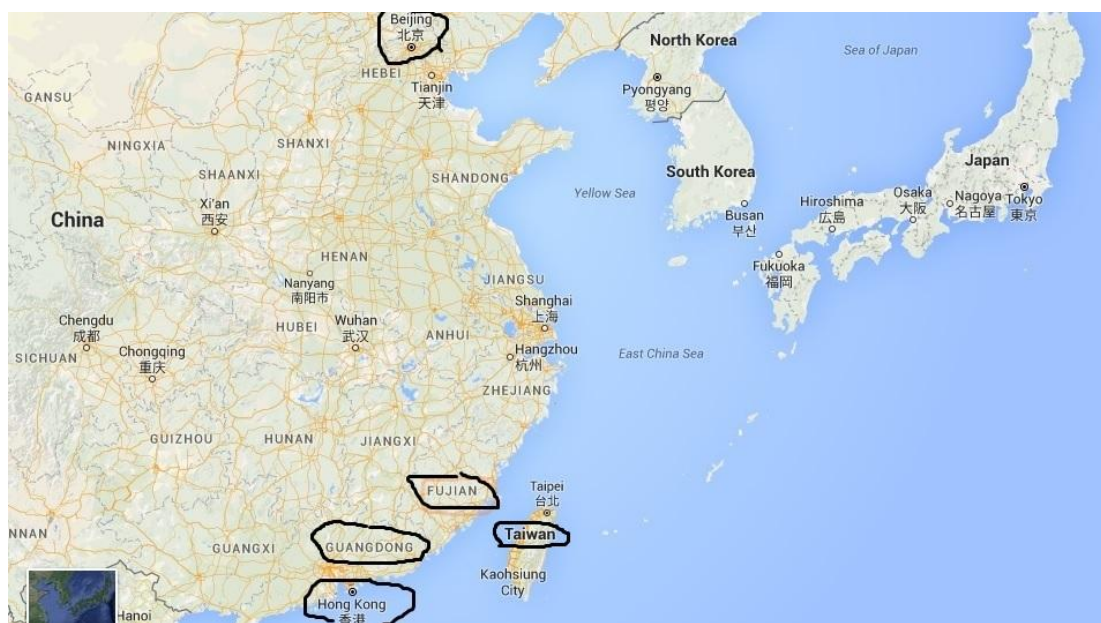
#### 4.2.2 Value of education since the Economic Reform

Since 1978, the government has carried out a series of economic reforms. Put simply, the aim of the reform for the central government is to retreat from the labour market. Under the reform, the free market has been established. Jobs are no longer assigned by the government, while wage, price, development plan, production goals, and the number of employees hired each year are no longer decided by the government but by enterprises themselves. People now have the freedom to seek the job they want and to change jobs (Wu 2002). Furthermore, private enterprises, including foreign enterprises, are allowed to be established and the central government has implemented a state-owned enterprises privatisation policy (Lin and Wu 2009). The number of state-owned enterprises among all enterprises registered in China decreased sharply from 57.1% in 1996 to 2.9% in 2008, revealing the extent to which the influence of government on the market has been decreased (Wu 2013).

Aside from the deregulation of agricultural products and decentralisation of the fiscal system, the most important and influential policy associated with economic reform is the open-door policy. The aim of the open-door policy is to attract foreign direct investment and to promote international trade. From 1978-1979, four special economic zones (SEZs) were established in Shenzhen, Zhuhai, and Shantou in Guangdong province and Xiamen in Fujian province. Two reasons account for choosing these two provinces as the starting points. Firstly, as we can see Map 1, these coastal provinces are near Hong Kong and Taiwan, and share the same language with Hong Kong and Taiwan. The distance between Xiamen and Taipei is around

300KM (Google Map 2016), or a flight time of only about one and half hours. Guangdong province is located right next to Hong Kong, to which people can travel by train. The location favours the transportation of people, products, and materials. Besides, people in both Guangdong and Hong Kong speak in Cantonese while people in Fujian and Taipei speak in Mandarin Chinese and Hokkien dialects. Secondly, these two provinces are located at the southeaster part of China, which are very far away from the capital, Beijing. As this is the first time for the Chinese Communist government to open its doors in this way, the central government was very much worried that negative impacts of SEZs would affect the whole country and challenge the authority of the central government if SEZs failed to stimulate the economy (People's net 2016). It is essential to choose test venues far away from Beijing in order to minimise the risks.

Map 4.1 Location of Fujian and Guangdong Province (Google Map 2016)



Special conditions are given to SEZs in order to boost economic development. For example, tax rates for enterprises which invest 5 billion or more in SEZs, are involved in High Tech industries or have long period of capital turnover, are 15%, while for other enterprises outside the SEZs the rates are 25%. These enterprises also enjoy preferential prices to use



products and materials produced in China; investors who reinvest its share of profits in the SEZs for at least 5 years can apply for tax reduction or exemption, foreign investors, and overseas Chinese can enjoy a simplified entry and exit procedure.

The development of SEZs in China can be divided into four stages. As these four SEZs showed that they were successful, the central government gradually established more SEZs.

Table 4.1 shows the development of SEZs from 1972 to 2002. The first stage was from the late 1970s to early 1980s. Four SEZs were established in Guangdong and Fujian. The second stage was from the mid-1980s to late 1980s. At this time, the central government enforced the coastal preferential strategy. Many coastal areas were transformed into economic and technological development zones, coastal open economic zones or open coastal belts. The third stage was the early 1990s. The open door policy has been extended to the inland area. New economic zones have been set up along the Yangtze River. The fourth stage is post 2000. The open door policy has been further extended to the western part of China together with the Western Development Campaign (Sun 2013).

Table 4.1 Development of Special Economic Zones in China from 1979 to 2002

Year of approval	Type of open zones	Location
1979	3 Special Economic Zones	Guangdong
1980	1 Special Economic Zone	Fujian
1984	14 Coastal Open Cities	Guangdong, Hebei, Jiangsu, Liaoning, Shandong, Tianjin, Fujian, Shanghai, Zhejiang, Gaungxi
	10 Economic and Technological Development Zones	Gaungdong, Hebei, Jiangsu, Liaoning, Shandong, Tianjin
1985	3 Coastal Open Economic Zones	Pearl River Delta, Yangtze River Delta, and Fujian
1986	2 Economic Technological Development Zones	Shanghai
1988	Open Coastal Belt	Liaoning, Shandong, Guangxi, and Hebei
	1 Special Economic Zone	Hainan

1990	Pudong New Area	Shanghai
1992	13 Bonded areas in major coastal port cities	Tianjin, Guangdong, Liaoning, Shandong, Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Fujian, and Hainan
	10 major cities along Yangtze River	Jiangsu, Anhui, Jiangxi, Hunan, Hubei, and Sichuan
	13 Border Economic Cooperation Zones	Jilin, Heilongjiang, Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang, Yunnan and Guangxi
	All capital cities of inland provinces and autonomous regions	
	7 Economic Technological Development Zones	Fujian, Liaoning, Jiangsu, Shandong, Zhejiang and Hainan
1993	9 Economic Technological Development Zones	Anhui, Chongqing, Fujian, Guangdong, Heilongjiang, Hubei, Jilin, Liaoning, and Zhejiang
1994	2 Economic Technological Development Zones	Beijing and Xinjiang
2000	11 Economic Technological Development Zones	Anhui, Guizhou, Henan, Hunan, Jiangxi, Inner Monogolia, Qinghai, Shaanxi, Sichuan, Xinjiang, and Yunnan
2001	4 Economic Technological Development Zones	Gaungxi, Ningxia, Shanxi, and Tibet
2002	2 Economic Technological Development Zones	Gansu and Jiangsu

Adapted from Sun, Zhengyun. 2013. *Explaining Regional Disparities of China's Economic Growth: Geography, Policy and Infrastructure*. P.11. Thesis: University of California, Berkeley.

This economic reform, on the one hand, has contributed to increased labour market demand for well-educated employees, in part due to foreign investment and technological change (Qin et. al. 2013). For example, foreign companies need educated employees to work with foreigners, commercial sectors demand employees who are familiar with accountancy, auditing, or other professional business knowledge and industrial sectors require skilled workers and engineers to develop, maintain, and repair machines. Some commentators even warn that there will be a shortage of 23 million well-educated workers in the market by 2020 in China (Wotherspoon 2016).

Due to the demand for well-educated workers, returns to education have increased (Zhang et. al. 2002). For instance, in 1988, the rate of return to education was 4%, and it increased to 10.2% by 2001 in China (Zhang et. al. 2005). Another study shows that in 1992-1996, a peasant who has one more year of education would have 6%-10% more chances to get an off-farm job than those who have lesser education. Another study shows that the daily off-farm earnings increased 30% from 2003-2007 for people with senior high school level compared to 57% for people with university education (Qin et. al. 2013).

But, not every type of education can enhance youth's occupational attainment. As aforementioned, if the knowledge and skills students learn in universities are not matched to areas of labour market demand, their credentials, to a large extent, are not very useful in the job attainment process. For example, only graduates from selected prestigious programmes in elite universities have no risk to seek a good job. For those who do not graduate from these elite programmes, an increasing number are likely to be unemployed in China. In 2008, the unemployment rate for university graduates was 9.1%, and the rate reached 12% in 2010 and rose still further to 17.5% in 2011 (Sina News 2012). Mass media condemn these unemployed graduates for having unrealistic expectations, and some humanities and arts departments in universities are replaced by vocational or professional training programmes.

On the other hand, this economic reform also creates job opportunities for low educated peasants, especially in the coastal region. In response to tax allowance, low land rent or government subsidies offered to investors in SEZs under the open-door policies, many new factories have been built in the coastal area, especially the Pearl River Delta and the Fujian province. Manufacturing industries represent the main economic activity in this region. For example, the GDP created by secondary industry in the Pearl River Delta was \$52 billion USD in

1978, rising to \$238 billion USD in 1995 and \$349 billion USD in 2012. While the Pearl River Delta only occupies 0.5% of the land in China, the GDP created by the secondary industry accounts for 10.4% of the national GDP in 2012. This rapid development of industry requires a huge number of workers (Chan et. al. 2014). Furthermore, as the economy has developed, the service industry has also been stimulated. Thus, both the manufacturing industry and the service industry demands very large supplies of workers.

Due to the high demand for workers in manufacturing and service industries, many peasants leave the rural area and get a job in the urban area. Although peasants can earn a living by farming in the village, the low income earned through farming forces them to give up staying in the village as the income is not enough for them to maintain their living. Taking inflation into account, the actual increase in peasant income was 4.3% in 1998, 3.8% in 1999 and 2.1% in 2001 (Wang 2008). Table 4.2 provides information about the income per capita for urban residents and peasants. As we can see, the increase in peasants' income is much lower than that of urban residents. Due to the income gap between urban residents and peasants, many peasants desire jobs in the urban areas. Now that there are many job opportunities in factories or the service industry in the urban areas, large numbers of peasants thus give up farming and take these jobs. This group of peasants is described as migrant workers. In 2013, a survey conducted by the central government shows that there were 268 million migrant workers, 2.4% higher than the number in 2012. Due to labour shortages, the income of migrant workers has increased every year in order to keep these workers. In 2010, the average monthly income of migrant workers increased 19.3% compared to 2009. The rates of increase for 2011 and 2012 were 11.8% and 13.9%, respectively (GOV China 2015).

Table 4.2 Income per capita of urban residents and rural peasants

	Income per capita of urban residents (RMB)	Income per capital of rural peasants (RMB)
1978	\$343.4	\$133.6
1990	\$1510.2	\$686.3
1995	\$4283	\$1577
2000	\$6280	\$2253
2005	\$10493	\$3254
2010	\$19109.4	\$5919
2013	\$26955.1	\$8895.9

Source: National statistics (2014)

#### 4.3 The impact of economic development on rural areas

While this rapid economic development has attracted peasants to the urban areas, it creates problems for those left-behind in the villages. As mentioned in above, there were 268 million peasants who left their villages in 2013 (GOV China 2015). Most of them are between 20 and 60 years old. Those who are most likely to remain in the village are elderly and children. For instance, there were 60 million children left behind in the village in 2014 and 50 million elderly left behind in 2012. These left behind children and elderly are facing problems of lack of supervision or care, as well as poverty, lack of health and emotional support (Oxfam 2015).

The rapid increase of migrant workers has forced the central government to focus on the problem of rural poverty. Peasants leave the village because they cannot earn a living by farming. To improve the living conditions for peasants, the central government has abolished the agricultural tax since 2006, which cost \$100 billion RMB each year. The central government has also provided a series of financial subsidies to peasants, raised the price of agricultural products, and improved the rural transport systems so that agricultural products can be transported to the

market faster and easier than before. From Table 4.2 we can see that compared to 2005, the income per capita in 2010 has increased by 81%. With the effect of these policies, the income of peasants has increased faster than before.

#### 4.4 The education attainment of rural youth in China

Although educational achievement is becoming more significant for life in contemporary China, rural students tend to have poor educational attainment, as illustrated in rates of illiteracy, dropouts from primary school, senior high school promotion, and university admission. The rural illiteracy rate in 2010 was 7.26% while the rate for urban areas was 1.9% (National Population Census 2010). In terms of primary school dropouts, about 1 million rural youths dropped out of primary school and entered the labour market before completing primary school in 2000 (Hannum, Park, and Cheng 2007). In terms of promotion from junior high school to senior high school, the rates for rural youth and urban youth were 7.7% and 24.3% respectively in 2010 (National Population Census 2010). Finally, in 2010, only 0.5% of the rural population had higher educational credentials (finished an undergraduate programme in a 4 year university) compared to 6.9% of the urban population (National Population Census 2010).

In particular, the high drop-out rate of rural students becomes a big issue among the public. Government, mass media, NGOs and even bloggers are concerned with this high drop-out rate very much. For example, this issue has been discussed in National People's Congress in 2003. The congress leader presented that the drop-out rate of rural students in many provinces was higher than 5% and the rate reached 15% in some area. University Vice-Chancellor stress this issue again in the same congress in 2009 and urge the public to concern more the educational inequality and its impacts on the performance of rural students. The ministry of education also

mention this drop-out rate issue in Jilan provinces, and some ethnic minority region. Mass media, bloggers, and NGOs also discussed the drop-out rate problem in different part of China, and request the government and the society work together to solve this problem.

The above information shows that rural students tend to have lower educational attainment than urban students. Scholars even suggest that living in rural areas may disincentives students' education (Hannum et. al. 2008). The following section reviews existing literature on why rural students tend to experience relatively low levels of educational success. Factors that contribute to low attainment will be reviewed first. These factors include financial reforms in education, poor school quality, and familial influences.

In the past, the central government was the source of funding for education. All public primary schools and secondary schools were funded by the central government, and the central government sent teaching teams to remote rural areas to educate people there. Tuitions for primary school and secondary school were waived and subsidies would be provided to students in poor area by the central government. At the university level, all students did not need to pay tuition and could receive subsidies offered by the central government (Deng and Trieman 1997; Zhou and associates 1998).

Since Mao's era, the funding burden of the centralised educational system increased for the central government, and as it became too heavy, the funding system has been greatly reformed. A decentralised system has replaced the centralized funding system. Under this new system, primary educational and secondary education is funded by the local government (Tsang and Ding 2005).

As education below tertiary levels now is funded by the local government, economic conditions can affect education quality in specific regions. Secondary and primary schools in rich

areas can receive more funding than those in poor areas, which is the case for many rural areas. In poor areas, without the support from the central government, local governments have difficulties in maintaining the basic quality of the local education (Adams and Hannum 2005; Connelly and Zhang 2003; Hannum and Park 2007; Li, Park, and Wang 2006; Tsang and Ding 2005).

Taking per-student spending of local government as an example, in 1999, the per-student spending on primary school in urban and rural areas was \$1062 RMB and \$576 RMB respectively. The per-student spending on secondary schools in urban and rural areas was \$1439 RMB and \$851 RMB respectively (Tsang and Ding 2005). In some rural areas, the cost of running a school was too heavy for the local government, with the result that not enough schools operate in rural areas relative to the numbers of students. Many students have to walk a very long distance to go to school (Brown and Park 2002).

Since many rural governments cannot provide enough educational funding, schools in these areas lack basic teaching resources and qualified teachers. Tsang and Ding (2005) record that some schools in rural areas do not have chalk, rainproof classrooms, safe facilities, and cannot pay teachers' salaries on time. Sargent and Hannum (2005) comment that the low salaries for rural teachers mean rural schools have difficulties in recruiting qualified teachers. For example, in 2001, the number of primary school teachers who have a junior college degree or above and the number of junior high school teachers who have a university degree or above in the urban areas were two times and two and half times higher, respectively, than in the rural areas (Wang 2003).

The lack of teaching resources and qualified teachers increases the likelihood that rural students may fail or not advance academically. Comparative studies show that students in a



school with more qualified teachers and facilities have better performance in Mathematics tests and have lower drop-out rates than those in schools which do not have enough resources and qualified teachers (Brown and Park 2002; Hannum and Park 2007). Many scholars (Boyd et. al. 2009; Cherng and Hannum 2013; Goldnaber et. al. 2013; Perry and McConney 2010) explain that qualified teachers are well-trained to teach effectively and basic teaching materials are essential for effective teaching. Thus, it can be said that students in rural schools are less likely to do well.

The low educated parents in rural families may also have limited knowledge to support students' learning. Members of rural families tend to have lower educational levels than those in urban families overall. The 2010 census shows, for example, that among the rural population (30 years old or above), only 0.9% of the population have completed tertiary education compared to a rate of 19.2% among the urban population. Studies (Hannum and Xie 2015; Hannum et. al 2011) have documented that students whose parents have low levels of formal education are more likely to have poor academic performance because low educated parents are not able to teach students, collect information for their schooling or help them develop high educational aspirations.

Many rural families are facing financial problems that limit the capacity to enable their children go to school beyond minimal levels. As many rural schools cannot get enough funding from local governments, these schools have to impose miscellaneous fees in order to maintain their operation. It is a great burden for many rural families to pay these fees (Hannum and Park 2007). For example, educational expenditures cost 50% of the cash income of some rural families, and some parents have to borrow money from others to finance their children's schooling (Brown and Park 2002; Ross and Lin 2006). Brown and Park (2002) find that the

dropout rate of rural students from poor families was 3 times higher than that of rich families in 1997.

Another problem is that many rural families lack the kinds of cultural capital that are important to help their children succeed in school. Due to the low educational level, many rural parents are not able to teach their children and prepare them the cultural skills demanded at school (Andreas 2004). This makes rural students face more barriers to achieve academic success.

Besides, government officials and mass media also point out that the poor teaching quality in rural area creates the belief “education is useless” and result in very high drop-out rate of rural students. As the educational quality in the rural area is not as good as urban area, many rural students fail to promote to good senior high school. If they cannot attend good senior high school, they are less likely to get into good university. As the unemployment rate of university graduates is not low, rural students are very likely to suffer from unemployment if they do not have good university degree. In other words, the university degree probably cannot help rural students to go further, unless the degree is from elite college. Thus, education is useless for them. So many rural students drop-out from school.

One may question how network members shape students’ schooling in China. The Western studies have demonstrated that with supports from family members, teachers, peers and neighbours, students can have access to different educational resources which can help boost their performance in the classroom. It is particularly true for students in disadvantaged groups. In the context of China, it has been more common in both academic studies and mass media in China to explore what kinds of problems students, especially rural students, have, how these problems lead to academic failure, and differences in academic performance between urban students and rural students. Based on these sources, we still can find that rural students in China

sometimes can access educational resources from their family members, and neighbours. For example, a study recorded that if there is a student admitted to high school, some fellow villagers may give this students gift money in order to reduce their financial burden (Liu et. al 2009). In some extreme cases, parents have to sell their blood to illegal medical groups for \$13 US dollars each time in order to support children's schooling (Gittings 2001).

#### 4.5 Chapter summary

High demands for educated employees, risk of unemployment and difficulties in getting into universities put rural youth into a dilemma. On the one hand, these rural youth need educational credentials to improve their life chances in the future. On the other hand, they are confronted with difficulties in attaining entrance to universities and risks of unemployment. If they achieve academic success, say, entering elite programmes in selected universities, they are pretty sure that they can have a bright future. But, if they cannot make it, and they are very likely not to make it, they would have the risk of unemployment and even worse debt.

In this dilemma, rural youth make very different decisions. Some of them truly believe that education is the ladder for success and have successfully stepped on the rank of this ladder. For instance, according to the 2010 census, around 0.5% of the rural population graduated from an undergraduate programme in 4 year universities, and around 20% of students at the two most elite universities were rural students from 1991 to 1999 (Wei 2004). However, some of them do not make it. A number of rural youth possess very low educational levels.

## **Chapter 5. Data and Method**

This study asks why some rural youth give up schooling before finishing their junior high school education in order to enter the labour market directly at a time which education is increasingly valued for social mobility and economic opportunity. This study answers this question in the context of Fujian, China. In this chapter, firstly, I shall report on the research method. Secondly, I shall briefly introduce Fujian province and the case study site—Orange County. Next I shall present some information about respondents and lastly is about the interview guide.

### **5.1 Data collection methods, research site and respondents' information**

This study investigates the schooling process of rural youth who have not completed junior high school. In the context of China, youth who do not have junior high school level of schooling can be described as having low education because more than 60% of rural youth complete junior high school (National Bureau of Statistics 2010). In this study, these youth are named as school non-completers. This study uses the case study method to study the story of respondents. Case study is a research method which focuses attention on a programme, an event, or a group of people that are bounded by time and place. The purposes of case studies are to be descriptive, develop an in-depth analysis, and yield explanatory insights (Babbie 2001; Creswell 1998). As this study seeks to understand the educational attainment process of the school non-completers, and in what way the social network and the social structure of the local community affect their academic performance in China, this study seeks to describe their schooling process, analyse in depth the influences of social network and social structure on their schooling, and yield an explanation of their failure. Therefore, it is suitable to use the case study method.

By interviewing the rural youth who have not finished their junior high school education, this study tries to find out reasons accounting for their dropping out, including how network members affect their schooling and in what way the local context influences local people's views on education, and how this view of education exerts influence on both action of network members and youth in mobilising resources for schooling during youth's educational attainment process.

The research site of this study is a junior high school in Orange Town (here we call this school Orange High) which is located in the Orange County in Fujing province, China, which is shown in Picture 1 and 2. Below, I shall introduce the context of Fujian province and the Orange County briefly.

[Picture 5.1 is about here]

[Picture 5.2 is about here]

#### 5.1.1 An overview of Fujian Province

As one of the first provinces to open the door to the world, Fujian has an economy that is more well-developed than that in many other provinces in China. In 2013, the GDP per capita of Fujian was \$58058 (RMB) while Guangdong was \$58678 (RMB), ranked number 8 and 7 respectively (Sina News 2014). In 2014, the GDP per capita of Fujian was \$63472 which ranked number eight and Guangdong was \$63452 which ranked number 9 (People's Net). Unlike other provinces, around 57% of the employed population are working in private enterprises in Fujian, which is higher than other provinces. The provincial government and investors mainly invest in IT industry, petrochemical manufacturing, and heavy machinery. In 2011, Fujian has attracted \$12.1 billion (RMB) in foreign direct investment inflow, which ranks number 8 out of 27 provinces.

As a special economic zone where government seeks to stimulate foreign investment, enterprises in the province are granted several incentives by the central and provincial governments. Besides the favours mentioned earlier, the provincial government has also established many industrial parks for different kinds of industry. For example, QuanHui Park serves as an industrial park for oil refining, petrochemical, textiles, chemical and synthetic materials. The Longyan Economic Development Zone focuses on machinery manufacturing, pharmaceuticals, and transportation while the Xiamen Torch Hi-tech Industrial Development Zone is built for Optoelectronic, electronic information, and electric power industry. Foreign investors include Boeing, Hitachi, ExxonMobil, Daimler and so forth. The Fujian Refining and Petrochemical Company Limited, which is a joint venture between SinoPec, ExxonMobil and Saudi Aramco, is a leading refining and petrochemical company in China. Table 5.1 shows the main preferential policies.

Table 5.1 Main Preferential Policies in Fujian

<b>Type of Business</b>	<b>Preferential Policies</b>
<b>High-Tech Enterprises</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Preferential business income tax of 15% for targeted industries</li> <li>- High-tech enterprises in Xiamen Special Economic Zone can enjoy a two year tax exemption, and another three years of a corporate income tax rate discounted by 50%</li> <li>-Special import and export duties policies for the High-tech enterprises</li> <li>- Fujian government has spent %15.9 million special funds every year to support the software companies</li> </ul>
<b>Preferential Policies for Emerging Industries</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Offers no less than \$79.3 million of industrial development funds</li> <li>- No less than \$159 million strategic investment fund in emerging industries (including \$39.7 million for the new energy industry)</li> </ul>
<b>Re-location of Corporate Headquarters</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Newly entered corporate headquarters will receive a 60%-80% bonus in the first 2 years. After the third year, bonus is 30%-40%. After the 5th year, they can continue to have the same incentive policy as the local headquarters do.</li> <li>- Payable administrative fees within the scope of local</li> </ul>

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<b>R&amp;D</b>	government will be fully waived or refunded within the first two years and halved or refunded during years 3-5. After the 5th year, the company can enjoy the local preferential policy for HQ enterprise.
<b>Taiwan-funded Enterprises</b>	-R&D centres of large domestic and foreign enterprises in Fuzhou will receive a one-time bonus of up to \$0.8 million according to the amount of VAT, business tax, and enterprise income tax paid in that year. - Administrative fee and tax exemptions for Taiwan enterprises investing in select industrial zones. - Reduced prices for production inputs such as water and electricity
<b>Small-and-Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs)</b>	- Facilitate the access to funding and loans for SMEs

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Adapted from: KPMG China and Fujian Provincial Department of Foreign Trade and Economic Cooperation. 2012. *Invest Fujian: Coastal China's Emerging High Growth Province*. P.53.

-Education in the Orange County

Because providing the detailed average income of people in the town and GDP of town may expose the identity of the school, here, we only focus on the county level. The economy of the Orange County has grown rapidly in recent years. While the national average incomes per capita of peasant and urban residents in 2008 were \$4760.0 (RMB) and \$15780.8 (RMB), the income per capita of peasant and urban dwellers in the Orange County in 2008 were \$5238 (RMB) and \$11600 (RMB) respectively, which increased about 15% compared to 2007. The GDP in 2009 was about \$481.4 million dollars and rose to \$910.4 million dollars in 2013, ranked number 5 in the city. The main economic activity is industry which accounted for 69% GDP in 2013 (National Bureau of Statistics 2009).

The Orange town is located along a provincial highway and many other main roads. Thus, the Orange town is connected with two provinces, four counties, and eight desakotas which means the urban, agricultural land use, and settlement coexist in the area (McGee 1991). Therefore, it is a hub for logistics. People describe Orange Town as the Northern door of Orange

County. In this town, there are 19 villages, with a population around thirty-eight thousand in 2014. The main economic activity is farming. Also, manufacturing and logistic services have been rapidly developed recently (Orange County Government Homepage 2015).

Below are some pictures illustrating the market, primary schools, and villages in Orange Town. Picture 3 is a market in the town. As we can see, the market is very crowded. People mainly buy foods, daily necessities, and some fashions from this market. Besides hawkers and small stores, chain-shops and supermarkets are also available in the market. Picture 4 and 5 show two villages in the town. In these villages, many new buildings have been built, and farmland still can be found. Unlike some remote villages in western regions, these two villages are connected by a road. Some villagers ride motorcycles. Picture 6 portrays a rural primary school. We can see that the school building school is not dilapidated, and electricity, water, and TV signal are provided. On weekends, when no security and staff are in school, some chickens, ducks, and pigs loiter around the basketball court of this school. Picture 7 shows the best urban primary school in the town. Compared with the above rural primary school, this urban primary school has a larger campus with more modernised buildings. Moreover, the teaching materials and quality of teachers are better than in the rural primary school.

[Picture 5.3 is about here]

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[Picture 5.5 is about here]

[Picture 5.6 is about here]

[Picture 5.7 is about here]

Since the 1990s, the Orange County government has worked very hard to improve education quality and raise local people's educational level. In 1998, only 85.1% of youth



attended school. Among them, 96.8% had primary school education level, and 80% graduated from junior high school. There are 12 junior high schools in the Orange County, half of which are in the rural area. Orange High is the only junior high school in Orange town. There were around one thousand students and fewer than one hundred staff members in this school in 2014 (Orange County Statistic Yearbook 2008, 2009).

One feature of education in the Orange County is a very high dropout rate. The provincial and county government have invested lots of financial resources and carried out policies seeking to reduce the dropout rate. For example, according to the Orange County Education Report in 2014 and 2015, the county government has invested four hundred million dollars (RMB) to improve school infrastructure and hire teachers. The provincial government provides \$231 (RMB) subsidies to each teacher in rural schools. For junior high schools which have high dropout rates, like the Orange High, the county government also warns leaders of these schools that punishment will be meted out if no improvement is shown in reducing the dropout rate. In these schools, the leadership exerts pressure on teachers to urge them work harder to reduce the dropout rate. For example, the dropout rate of each class accounts for 45% of the score in the annual assessment of each teacher. Schools also encourage students to come back to school by home visits, telephone calls, a mobile phone app and financial subsidies, and promote the importance of obeying the law of 9-year compulsory education to the public (Orange County Education Report 2014, 2015).

Orange High has the highest dropout rate among 12 junior high schools in Orange County. Table 5.2 shows the dropout rate of Orange High and the rate of the county level. As we can see, since 2008, the drop out rate of Orange High has been higher than the county level. One teacher, Miss Chan, observes that: “in 2008...2009?...ah 2008, there were around 40 students in my class

in September. At the end of the academic year, there were only around 20 students remained. The rest dropped-out of school.”

Table 5.2 Drop-out rate of Orange County and Orange High

	<b>Orange County</b>	<b>Orange High</b>
<b>2011</b>	Missing	>8%
<b>2013</b>	0.86%	missing
<b>2014</b>	0.65%	>1%
<b>2015</b>	0.49% (rural area), 0.24% (urban area)	>1%

Source: Orange County Education Department. 2013. *Orange County Education Report*. 2013: 1 (280), Orange County Education Department. 2014. *Orange County Education Report*. 2014: 1 (290), Orange County Education Department. 2015. *Orange County Education Report*. 2015: 1 (300), Orange County Education Department. 2015. *Orange County Education Report*. 2015: 3 (302), Orange County Education Web. 2013. "Orange County XX 中學舉行"一個也不惑少"宣誓活動."

Despite the trend showing there has been a decrease in the dropout rate, the rate for Orange High still remains the highest. For example, in 2014, 50% of students who dropped out of school in the county were from Orange High. According to teachers of Orange High, this is mainly because of the poor quality of available students. Theoretically, all students in Orange country can apply to Orange High. However, as a rural non key-point junior high school which is very far away from the city centre, no student chooses Orange High as their preference. Thus, only students who have the poorest examination results in primary school are allocated to Orange High. As students’ basic knowledge is not good, it is understandable that they cannot catch up with the junior high school level. Since the majority of students are the “left-behind children” living in villages, which are not near the school, many of them live in the dormitory of Orange High.

Due to the high drop-out rate, an Orange High teacher said that Orange High has carried out a special policy. Each teacher is required to monitor 15-20 students. Their duty is to ensure these students do not drop-out of school. If students do not show up in the classroom, the teacher is required to talk to the students and visit their home to see if there are any problems. At the end of

the academic year, if there is one student drop-out, the teacher's salary will be deducted one hundred dollars, two hundred dollars for two drop out students and so forth.

### 5.1.2 Data collection

This study is based on semi-structured, in-depth interviews I conducted with 10 respondents, including 10 formal interviews and more than 20 informal interviews in September and October, 2015. All respondents come from Orange High School. Respondents can be divided into two categories, namely, teachers and school non-completers. Two teachers from Orange High School have been interviewed. They are Miss Chan and Miss Lee<sup>1</sup>. Miss Chan teaches History and Miss Lee is a computer teacher. They have already worked at Orange High for six years. All school non-completers are former students of Miss Chan and Miss Lee who did not graduate from Orange High. They all possess a rural household registration and grew up in villages in Orange County.

Since both Miss Chan and Miss Lee are my classmate's friends, my classmate introduced me to them. Then, I asked these two teachers to introduce to me some of their former students who had not completed their junior high school education, as they mentioned that they still keep contact with some of these students. Considering the limited time and resources, I was not able to interview all these former students because some of them are not in Orange County. In total, I interviewed eight school non-completers. They all share very similar experiences.

All respondents participated in this study on a voluntary basis. They were informed that information that may reveal their identity would not be shown in this dissertation. All interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese; each was around 45 minutes to 2 hours and taped. Interviews were conducted in Miss Chan's Home, Miss Lee's home, and other places respondents chose. For the follow up interview, I contacted respondents via internet. The two

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<sup>1</sup> To stay completely anonymous, all respondents' names have been changed.

teachers were very eager to share their opinions and experiences. Besides the issue of dropping out, they also spent much time complaining about the administration of the school and the low salaries of rural teachers. The reason why they participated in this study is that they want more people to know about the real situation of rural education. Existing studies, including documentaries and news reports, focus on the poverty of students. But these two teachers think that the rural teachers also matter. If they cannot teach well, prospects for improvement in rural education are limited. They want to let people know how hard the teaching environment for rural teachers is and their low salaries.

The school-non completers who were interviewed, as mentioned above, were introduced to me by the two teachers. Both Miss Lee and Miss Chan explained to them the aim of the study, including what kind of information I need and how I will use the data. If the school non-completers agreed to participate in this study, they gave me their contact information. As these school non-completers were aware of my research aims, they were willing to share their experiences. Two to three school non-completers were not talkative at first, but after they found that we have the same hobby, playing video games, once we were able to discuss some games for around five minutes, they became more talkative and willing to share their stories. Because these school non-completers have to work, some interviews were conducted during their lunch break and, due to limited time, follow-up interviews were needed.

Before the start of each interview, respondents were asked to sign a consent form and transcription release form (See appendix C for two forms). The interviewer explained the details of the two forms, and informed them of their right to withdraw from the research at any time, their right to withhold, if requested, release of the transcript, and they were given information about how they could direct any questions they had about the research. The research was

conducted following approval by the Behavioural Research Ethics Board of the University of Saskatchewan. A small gift was given to each respondent after the interview was completed.

### 5.1.3 Information about school non-completers

Table 5.3 shows some basic information about the school non-completers. Among eight school non-completers, two of them are female. The age when they dropped out of school ranged from 12 to 16 years old. They were all employed after they left Orange High. All of them got a manual labour job, except Hugo, who worked in his parents' store. In terms of their parents, parents' educational level range from primary four to junior high school. A considerable number of these parents are peasants and migrant workers. Alan's father has small store in the town. Chris grew up in a single-parent family.

Table 5.3 Basic information for school non-completers

	Name	Gender	Class when drop out	Age when drop out	Current age	First job/ Current job	Parent's occupation
1.	Alan	Male	Secondary 2	14	25	Fake monk/Real estate agent	Father: migrant worker Mother: housewife
2.	Betty	Female	Secondary 1	12	24	Maid/ Housewife	Father: peasant Mother: peasant
3.	Chris	Male	Secondary 2	15	26	Self-employed Plasterer/ Self-employed Plasterer	Father: migrant worker Mother: divorce
4.	Dorothy	Female	Secondary 3	16	21	Factory worker/ Factory worker	Father: driver Mother: housewife

5.	Eric	Male	Secondary 2	14	19	Construction site worker and salon staff/ Factory worker	Refuse to answer
6.	Frank	Male	Secondary 2	14	19	Factory worker/ Factory worker	Father: peasant Mother: peasant
7.	George	Male	Secondary 1	12	18	Factory worker/ Factory worker	Father: migrant worker Mother: migrant worker
8.	Hugo	Male	Secondary 3	15	20	Store staff/ Store staff	Father: migrant worker Mother: migrant worker

A major limitation of the sample in this study is that it was not able to include all rural youth who have dropped out of school in different parts of China. One may comment that due to the small number of respondents in this study, the data cannot represent all rural youth who have dropped out. However, the aim of this study is not to prove what factors account for the drop-out, but to find out how network members influence their decision to drop out of school and how the local context shapes the network effects on the educational achievement of the school non-completers. To achieve this aim, instead of using pre-set questions that may not reveal the true reason that explains their decision to drop out by way of a questionnaire distributed to large numbers of these youth, it is more suitable to use qualitative methods to ask fewer respondents in order to dig out some important points from their views. Besides, once I had interviewed 6 school non-completers, I was not able to find any new information. This data saturation means that data were able to reflect representative features of their stories.

Another limitation of this study is the absent of parents of school non-completers. Including parents in this study can enrich our understanding on how the macro social structure and social network shape school non-completers' schooling from parents' view. However, some parents live in remote villages, some live outside Orange County, some even live outside the province; Due to limited time and resources, this study cannot cover these parents. This absence may affect the result of this research. For example, opinions on how to improve the performance of rural youth may just be based on view of teachers and students. Parents' difficulties in supporting students' schooling may not be able to reflect fully from views of teachers and school non-completers.

This study tries to fill in this lacuna by asking the two teachers how parents view education and their attitudes on school non-completers. Since Orange High requested all teachers to visit the homes of students who have dropped out and talk to their parents in order to get the students back to school, both Miss Chan and Miss Lee have asked school non-completers' parents why they let their children give up schooling. This experience can partly help us to understand how parents affect the academic performance of school non-completers.

## 5.2 Interview guide

The aim of the interview is to explore influences of social networks in rural students' educational attainment process. There are six themes in the interview. The first one is demographic information about respondents and their educational history. In this part, respondents were asked to introduce themselves, their schooling history and their views on education.

The second part of the interview was about problems respondents faced during the educational attainment process and the influences of social network on their schooling. Respondents were asked what problems they have at school, how they solve them, and who were the most important network members during their schooling and why. Hence, we can depict problems they have and whether or not social network matters in solving these problems. The influences of state policies were included in this part.

Based on the literature reviewed before, the next parts focused on the family, school, and community. The third part is about familial influence on respondents' education. Respondents were asked to describe how their families positively and negatively affected their schooling, such as what kinds of support do they receive from family members respondents and what kinds of burdens this may have created regarding parents' educational expectations for them, and respondents' relationships with family members.

The fourth part is about school effects. Respondents were asked to comment on schools they attended, school resources, students' academic performance in the past, how school members positively and negatively affected their schooling, such as what kinds of support do they give respondents and what kinds of burdens they create, teachers' educational expectation on them, peers' educational aspirations, and respondents' relationship with school members.

The fifth part is about the community. Respondents were asked to talk about the village they grew up in, villagers' academic performance in the past, the development level of the village, the resources provided by the village to support children's schooling, and how the village positively and negatively affected their schooling. Lastly, respondents were asked to comment on what factors they felt led to their level of educational attainment, what they thought about their



educational level, and whether there were any other important issues that they thought were important.

The last part of the interview was about occupation. It was mainly concerned with how respondents got their jobs and why they chose these jobs. For example, respondents were asked who may have offered them assistance during their job seeking process or who influenced them most when they decided to enter the labour market.

Respondents' stories allow us to understand basic demographic information about them, and see what kinds of educational resources family members, school members, and the community provide to respondents and if these resources are useful or what kinds of burdens they created and how these resources and burdens affect respondents' schooling. Thus, we can examine the quality and quantity of social capital respondents have, investigate, in what way network members affect their schooling, and more importantly, how the local context, say local labour market, value of education in the community, class structure in the community, shape network members' willingness to support the schooling of school non-completers. Then, we can see how the local context affects network effects on students' academic performances.

## **Chapter 6. Influences from in the family**

In this chapter, I shall explore in what ways family members influence the schooling of school non-completers through providing educational resources. As schooling is a collective action, one may say that parents can help students to improve their performance in the classroom. Parents can do a lot. It is true but what they did on students may also lead them to drop out of school instead of encouraging and help students to excel in the class. Below, I shall show what parents of school non-completers did.

### **6.1 Support from family members**

Existing studies on successful students demonstrate that help from parent is a key factor accounting for their extra-ordinary academic results. Parents provide various kinds of educational resources to support students' schooling. However, the stories of school non-completers in Orange High show that this is not the case for some students. Parents are not always supportive.

Put simply, the school non-completers cannot access most of the educational resources they need to continue their schooling from family members. According to the existing literature, family members usually provide financial support, and information to students, help them to develop high educational aspirations, encourage them to work hard, and transmit cultural capital to students. However, in the case of Orange High, teachers and the school non-completers report that the only support from parents is financial support. Parents pay the tuition, residential fees, book fees, and living costs for the school non-completers, but may not otherwise teach respondents to aspire high, to encourage them to work hard, seek information for them or pass the cultural capital to the school non-completers.

This financial support, to a certain extent, reflects parents' hope on the school non-completers to achieve academic success at the beginning. Although there is the nine year compulsory and free education policy in China, parents still have to pay many different kinds of fees, such as book fees, catering fees, or residential fees. To many people in Orange County, these fees still matter. Miss Chan explains that parents of the school non-completers are willing to accept this cost because they still want their children to have chance to step on the rungs of the ladder to success. At the beginning of the junior high school, parents have a little hope that their children can do well in school, get into a good university, have a good job and be a rich person in the future. It is worth to use this money to buy this chance. However, the poor academic results of the school non-completers show that they are not able to achieve academic success. This makes their parents give up their hopes on the education of their children. But, as their children have already been in school, they are still willing to support their children to finish their junior high school education if their children want. Of course, there are some other minor reasons. For example, for parents who are not at home, it is better to let their children live in a boarding school rather than leave them alone at home. Some parents think that their children do not need to be an academic star, but it is essential to be able to read, write, and do some sample calculations. Otherwise, their children will be cheated by others easily.

Why do family members only give limited material support to respondents? It is understandable that the lack of cultural capital and not seeking information may be due to parents' low educational level, but, how about developing high educational aspirations and encouraging them to work hard? It does not require lots of money or high educational level to do it.

Miss Chan's description may give us a hint of why family members do not support the schooling of the school non-completers.

Interviewer: "why their parents do not care [about] their children's schooling?"

Miss Chan: "I have been a class teacher for many years. I have one discovery. Every problematic student comes from a problematic family."

She suggests that because of family problems, school non-completers may be unable to get support from parents. Based on the interviews, the familial problems can be summarised into four types: namely, parents do not value education, they may offer improper supervision, marriage, or no supervision. I shall start with the absence of belief in education as the ladder to success.

## 6.2 Education is useless

Due to a prevailing belief that "education is useless" in Orange County, parents do not believe that education can help their children go further. Why don't these parents trust that education is the ladder for success? Two reasons account for this. Firstly, it is very easy to get a job in Orange County or nearby. On the one hand, because of the industrialisation in coastal China, many factories are established in this area, including Orange County. As discussed earlier, this industrialisation also stimulates the development of service industry since the large amount of workers living in the industrial region requires different kinds of service. However, in this decade, the industry in the Coastal region is facing the problem of a shortage of labour. Because of the industrial development in Western China and the development of service industry in

industrial zones and big cities, many workers are attracted to working in service industries or factories in western China. In order to have enough workers, employers have to raise labourers' salaries every year. Also, the central government has implemented a new labour law which requires all employers to follow strictly the rule and enhance the protection of labourers (People's News 2012, Sina News 2010). As there are many assembly line or service job opportunities which do not require high educational levels, local people have no difficulties in getting jobs that pay well enough for them to have an average living standard in Orange County. Therefore, why do they need to have high education if they only want to live in Orange County for their whole lives?

On the other hand, the government has abolished the agricultural tax and increased financial subsidies to peasants since 2003; the cost of farming is lower than before. Furthermore, as an increasing proportion of land use has been shifted from agricultural to industrial or residential, the amount of agricultural production decreases every year. As a result, the price of agricultural product increases. Due to these two factors, the income of farming has improved. Now, many peasants' income is as high as those working in factories. Therefore, more and more peasants are willing to farm (People's News 2012). Since farming does not require a high educational level, local people cannot see why their children need to do well in school.

The second reason is that they have limited opportunities to meet persons who are university graduates. The only university graduates the school non-completers and their parents can frequently contact is teachers at Orange High. But, the salary of teachers in rural high schools is very low, just around \$2000 RMB per month. Many people in Orange County, who have only primary school or junior high school educational levels, can earn more than these rural teachers. For instance, Frank said that after he dropped out from Orange High, he got a job in a

shoe factory and the salary was \$2800 RMB. Because of the low salary of the rural teachers, people there do not think that education is the ladder for success and look down on the teachers in Orange High. Both Miss Lee and Miss Chan express how embarrassed they are when asked about their salary.

Interviewer: “Why their parents think that education is useless?”

Miss Lee: “Because...they can see that...like...our salaries are lower than their income. The best example is our salary. Our salary is posted on the notice board in school every month. All students can read it. Therefore, they know how much we earn. Even it is not shown, parents must have some friends or fellow villagers or relatives working in school or even teachers in rural school, they still can know our salary. Right? They can earn more than us by just establishing a very small business. They even directly ask me how much I earn each month and said I (the parent) have not graduated from the primary school, but, I have higher income than you.”

Miss Chan: “One day I went to a salon to have haircut. The girl who washed my hair suddenly asked me [if] ‘Am I Miss Chan’ and I said yes. She was very happy and said ‘I am your student. You just taught me for a few months then I have dropped out. I am working in this salon. Although it is very tiring, the salary is not bad. Oh how much [do] you earn now? Still around two thousand dollars now? Haha, my salary is a little bit higher than you.”

Miss Lee: “I also have this experience! One of my former students is a rickshaw puller. I forget when he dropped-out. He did drop-out. Last week, I got on a rickshaw. The puller was him. He asked me how much I earn now...I do not want to answer him. Then, he asked did I have a pay raise. I said no. He laughed and said happily that I earn more than you.”

One may argue that education can help you broaden your horizon and get a job in big cities. It is true that some rural students are smart enough to attend elite universities and get a good job in urban areas and it is always better to have a white-collar job than a blue collar job. Miss Chan and Miss Lee explain that school non-completers’ parents are short-sighted as they do not think about this. What they think about is money only. They do not know the life of city dwellers, so they will not think that the life they have right now is not good. Here, we can see how teachers describe parents’ view.

Interviewer: “their parents think that it is no problem to work in the factories nearby? Do they think that their children should get a job in big cities like Beijing or Shanghai? Education can help people to get a good job, why they give up this chance? The school non-completers probably can get a lower class job, though their salary is not very bad...”

Miss Lee: “We need to remember that the educational level of their parents is junior high school. They do not know and experience how higher education level benefits their career. For them, getting a job means earning money. They would not think about status, promotion, or

other things. If their children are earning money, it is definitely no problem to get a lower class job. They just care about money.”

The cost of attending university and the high unemployment rate of university graduates discourage parents to support their children’s schooling. As mentioned in previous chapters, about 17.5% of university graduates could not get a job in 2011 and the number is increasing. This unemployment reinforces respondents’ impression that education is useless, as illustrated in comments by George.

Interviewer: “When we were young, our parents taught us that you need to study hard in order to get a job. Do you believe it now?”

George: “No. It is meaningless.”

Interviewer: “Why?”

George: “There are many university graduates, and many of them are unemployed or just have a lower class job like me. It is useless.”

Worse still, while education cannot help students to go further, the cost of schooling would place most many families in debt. Alan points out that, “We are rural people. The cost of senior high school and university is almost one hundred thousand dollars. To many rural families, it is a very heavy burden. Not every family can afford it. You need to borrow money from others and spend all the savings of the family for your schooling. It is not worth [it].”

Due to the limited prospects many people in the region see for benefitting from education and the cost of schooling, parents did not support students’ schooling by teaching the school non-completers to aspire high or work hard on their studies. When students do not do well in school,



their parents see that dropping out of school is a viable option, rather than considering how to help them. For instance, Miss Chan said:

“In the parents’ day, I do not dare to tell parents the examination result of all students. They only have 20 or 30 marks, all of them fail. When parents ask me their examination result, I just say not bad or okay. You cannot tell them their children have very poor result. Otherwise, their parents think that if their children cannot promote to the senior high school, then it is waste of time to study the junior high school. It is meaningless. Why don’t [they] let them enter the labour market earlier instead of spending 3 years in school?”

Growing up in this environment, the school non-completers are very likely to have low educational aspirations with little support from their families. Thus, they have high chances of dropping out of school.

### 6.3. Gender inequality

Female students in Orange County are more likely to drop out than boys. As girls will leave home and live with husbands in the future, many parents think that it is not worth it to treat their daughters well as they will not bring money back to the family in future. Eric even said that “if you teach them a lot now, they may able to help her future husband do very well later. This may hurt our interest. So, you cannot teach daughter too many things.” Thus, education is a kind of expenditure that parents would not spend on their daughters. Compare to daughters, sons

typically enjoy more support. For example, Betty is studying in Orange High but her younger brother is studying in the best junior high school in Orange County. His result is not high enough to enter that school but his father is willing to pay higher tuition to let his son study in that school. But, their father thinks that Betty does not need to have the best education simply because she is a girl.

#### 6.4. Supervision problems

Besides the devaluation of education and marriage, family members' improper supervision method also cannot support students' schooling. In his study, Coleman (1988) has already emphasized the importance of close supervision on students' schooling. The closer the supervision is, the lower the drop-out rate. It is true only if the supervision is proper. If the supervision is wrong, no matter how close the supervision is, it cannot help students.

I shall begin with cases where there is improper supervision. The majority of students in Orange High are looked after by their grandparents because their parents have gone to other places to work. These grandparents usually spoil their grandchildren. When they have bad behaviour and manners, their grandparents do not correct them. In some cases, these grandparents would find excuses to defend their grandchildren, even when their grandchildren really do something wrong. This spoiling results in students losing the chance to improve. Miss Lee has described how these grandparents defend their grandchildren: "This is not my grandson's fault. It is his classmates' faults. My grandson does not do anything wrong at home. This is not his problem."

Even if parents are at home, it does not mean that they can supervise their children properly. Both teachers and the school non-completers complain that some parents do not know how to teach children. For example, Eric has described how his father punishes him.

Interviewer: “Did your teacher tell your parents that you do not attend the class and go to the internet bar to play?”

Eric: “Yes.”

Interviewer: “What did they do?”

Eric: “Beat me up seriously. They beat me up every time.”

In fact, this physical punishment hurt students very much. Frank also expresses a similar experience. He says angrily that he hates his parents very much because they only know biting him. Every time teachers complain to his parents about his bad behaviour, his parents would bite him. He feels very angry, and he decides that he will not do anything his parents want him to do anymore, such as studying hard or not fighting with classmates in school.

Even worse, no one is willing to supervise students in the case of Orange High. As mentioned earlier, many students in the Orange High are looked after by grandparents. They are the lucky ones because some students are not looked after by anyone. Two factors account for this lack of supervision. The first one is situations in which there is no adult at home. As parents go to urban areas to get a job, parents have to find other relatives to take care of their children. But, sometimes, relatives are not always available. In these cases, students themselves will be left-behind and no one will take care of them. As a result, when these students have delinquent behaviour, no one will correct them at home and no one will supervise their school performance at home.

Worse still, another factor is that their parents do not want to take care of their children. When students have problems, teachers will call their parents to come to the school and request them to pay more attention to their children. But, school non-completers' parents think that it is wasting their time and makes them embarrassed. They would rather go to work or go out to gamble instead of spending time on their children. So, even though teachers have told them, they will not take any action. Miss Lee recalls that:

“You know that students all live in the dormitory. One night, a female student is very sick, [and] we have to send her to the hospital. I call her parents to inform them. You know what her father says? He says is she dying? If no, don't call me.”

Miss Chan even gives an even worse example:

“One night, a female student suddenly gives birth. But the baby was dead. Of course, we call the police to investigate what has happened. She told the police that her parents are divorced. Her mother takes care of her and she has married another man. Her step-father, her mother and her sleep together on the same bed. When her mother is not in the bed room, this step-father rapes her. Her mother knows that but does not take any action.”

## 6.5 Chapter summary

In this chapter, I have discussed why the school non-completers cannot get support from parents. Many parents who do not think that education offers a ladder to success would not teach

students to aspire high. Female students face an extra barrier to get educational resources from family members. This additional barrier is marriage. As girls will be married to other people in the future, parents think that it is not worth investing resources on girls' schooling as it cannot bring any benefit to them after their daughter is married to others. So, parents are disinclined to support their daughter's schooling. Lastly, both improper supervision and no supervision can limit school non-completers' chances of getting educational resources from family members. These problematic cases of supervision not only fail to encourage students to have high educational aspirations, to work hard on their studies, to avoid learning delinquent behaviour and correct their bad behaviours, but also can directly hurt school non-completers physically and mentally and in turn lead some students to give up their schooling.

## **Chapter 7. Influences from the school**

In this chapter, I shall explain why the school non-completers cannot get the necessary educational resources from teachers and peers. I shall start with teachers first. Based on interviews, we can find that the conduct problem and poor basic knowledge of students are the significant factors discouraging teachers provide support to students in Orange High. Therefore, I shall first report how serious are these two problems and then explain how these two problems influence teachers' willingness in giving assistances to student.

### **7.1 Poor knowledge**

A major problem the school non-completers have is that they have very poor basic knowledge. As mentioned earlier, students promoted to Orange High are those who did badly in the primary school. The majority of them do not learn what they should know in the primary school. For example, Miss Chan has described how bad students in the Orange High are:

“Last year in my class, I found that a student did not write anything in the class. Since I required all students to take notes, I told the student to copy what I wrote on the blackboard. He said that my handwriting was too ugly, he could not read it. I admitted that my handwriting is not very good, [but] at least it still can be read. I helped him to borrow the note from other classmates and again he said that the handwriting was too ugly. I borrowed another one, and he still said that the handwriting was too ugly. Then, I found that it was not the handwriting problem, it was his problem. He does not how to write! The only words he can write are his name!”

Without learning properly in the primary school, the school non-completers were not able to catch up with the progress in the junior high school. As they cannot catch up with the progress at the beginning, it is much more difficult for them to follow later. Consequently, their academic results get worse and worse.

## 7.2 Behavioural problem

Another characteristic of many school non-completers is behavioural problems. Miss Lee described how students there are very emotional and not obedient to teachers. They always have conflicts with other classmates and teachers. Like George expresses:

“I think my academic result is okay. But I almost fight with other classmates and teachers every day. I am very good at fighting. Not only me, there are almost fifty classmates [to] fight with each other every day.”

Miss Lee also gives similar comments. She said that it is very common to see student fighting in Orange High. Besides fighting, sleeping during the class, not attending the class and cheating are very common there. Sometimes, students would play tricks on teachers.

“Two years ago, there was a student [who] has very bad relationship with one teacher. Um...the facilities of the staff room are poor. We do not have any water dispenser. We use a bucket to carry water. When we want to drink, we get some water from the bucket and boil it. That student...used the water in that bucket to wash his hair, sometimes, he peed in that bucket. He did not tell anyone. A few weeks later, one of

my colleagues said that the smell of water was weird and there was some hair in the water. We then investigated what had happened and caught that student. The student said he hated one teacher very much so he did it.”

Growing up in this environment, it is very easy to learn these behaviours, resulting in more serious behavioural problems among students.

From the descriptions of Miss Chan and Miss Lee and the school non-completers, we find that many students have behavioural problems. Fighting between students happens during classes every day. Due to the disorder, what teachers can do is ordering students to behave themselves by shouting or even physical punishment. As a result, teachers may not have enough time to find out what learning problems students have and what kinds of help they can offer to students.

### 7.3 Low ambition

The low ambition of teachers also discourages teachers to provide extra support to students. Due to poor basic knowledge and serious behavioural problems among students, teachers' main duty in the class is not teaching but keeping the class in order. However, no matter what teachers do, there is no improvement. Gradually, teachers would think that no matter how much effort is paid, it is useless. Many students will not listen to them and make improvements. It is wasting time to teach them. Thus, teachers have lost their ambition to help students to make improvement. What they just want is to finish all duties and then go home. They will not spend extra time and effort on students. Miss Chan describes how ambitious she was when she was a new teacher and how her attitude changes.



Miss Chan: “When I was a new teacher, I do not understand why teachers here scold students and use physical punishment. I think they are not good teachers, they do not teach with their heart. But after you have taught in Orange High for a few years, you understand you cannot change anything.”

Interviewer: “so you think that teachers can help students here before. Now you find that it is impossible?”

Miss Chan: “Yes. There is a quote “All students are good students. The only reason for students becoming bad students is that their teachers fail to do a good job.” I hate the people who said it. They should come to Orange High to teach for at least one year. Then, you will find that there are students who cannot improve themselves. Students do not respect you, their parents do not respect you, your salary is very low, low social status, plus, students in Orange High are the worst in Orange County. We celebrate when Orange High is not ranked at the bottom among 12 junior high schools in the county. No matter how hard you work, you still cannot teach them to be a good student. This is not your problem. Some ex-Orange High teachers do extremely well in other schools. After teaching here for a few years, I decided that I will not devote all of my time and effort on students and I have my life, I have my family. I do not want to give all of my time and energy to these students. Of course, I must finish all my duties as a

teacher. But, I will not give any extra time and energy on students. You cannot change them.”

#### 7.4 Temptations by Peers

Peers’ temptation is also a barrier for the school non-completers to do better in school. Unlike what Teachman and associates (1997) find that peers can motivate classmates to work hard in the classroom. However, peers of school non-completers, like the Hallway Hangers in MacLeod’s study, can also discourage their classmates from working hard in school. Instead of boosting classmates’ educational aspirations, encouraging classmates to work hard or even giving classmates some material support, peers of the school non-completers teach or tempt the school non-completers to not work hard in school. The school non-completers said because they cannot catch up with what teachers taught, they feel very sleepy and bored. Therefore, sometimes, they will hang out on the street with peers instead of attending class. If they have money, they will visit the internet bar. For example, Frank said:

Interviewer: “What did you do when you did not attend the class?”

Frank: “Go to the internet bar.”

Interviewer: “Do what?”

Frank: “Play League of Legend.”

Interviewer: “Ah LoL. I have played it before.”

Frank: “Good. We can play together. My team enrol in the League at that time. So, we frequently go to the internet bar.”

Miss Lee adds that some former students even come to the class during the break or lunch to disturb students in Orange High. When teachers discovered former students in the school, they would ask them to leave immediately. However, these former students usually would not leave immediately. Some of them would chat with teachers for almost an hour while some of them would insist to enter the classroom. Each time, teachers have to call security to stop former students entering the classroom. But when these former students argue with teachers and security in the classroom, they have already disturbed students there. Besides, some former students would wait outside the school and teachers have no right to order them to leave. What teachers can do is remind students not to talk with these former students. But, it is not useful. Many students would join these former students to roam about the streets and parks or play in the internet bar. From the above, we can see that peers not only will not provide educational resources to the school non-completers, but also tempt them to not focus on schooling.

The poor relationship between peers means that sometimes students have restricted school non-completers to excel in the class, thereby increasing their chance of dropping out of school. Students spend most of their time with peers in school. It is very important for students to maintain good relationships with peers; otherwise, they cannot have normal social activities. The feeling of loneliness can hurt students. These students are more likely to drop out of school (Alkan 2014).

Miss Lee said that this is also a factor accounting for the high drop-out rate among students at Orange High. She remembered that the student who does not know how to write dropped out when he was in grade 8. Although his academic performance was very poor, he looked very handsome. Many female classmates were his girlfriends. This made other male classmates very jealous and they decided to bully him. They threatened other classmates not to

talk to him and play with him. As he did not have friends anymore, he felt very lonely and finally decided to drop out of school.

#### 7.5 Chapter summary

In sum, I have identified several ways in which school non-completers cannot get sufficient educational resources from teachers and peers. Teachers' low ambitions, poor basic knowledge among students, and disorder in the class also frustrate teachers to greatly support students. Thus, teachers fail to help students to aspire high, encourage them to work hard, give them information, consistent with what many existing studies in western societies show. Lastly, peers can actually influence other students negatively. Due to low poor basic knowledge and disorder in the class, the school non-completers think that it is wasting time to stay in the classroom. Very often, they will hang out with peers on the street or in the internet bar. So, while Teachman and associates (1997) find the importance of peers in boosting students' academic performance, peers in Orange High show us the importance of peers in tempting students to give up their schooling and hurting students' feeling and result in dropping out of school.

## **Chapter 8. Network Members and Getting a Job**

In this chapter, I shall present how parents and peers directly or indirectly encourage students to drop out of school. In the previous chapters, I have shown how family members, teachers, and peers may not support respondents' schooling and consequently make them do badly in school. But poor academic performance, no motivation to study, and no support from network members do not necessarily lead to drop-out of school. There must be other factors causing students make the decision to leave school before graduation. To find out these factors, firstly, I shall report the students' attitude on staying in school, and secondly, I shall explain how parents and peers influence students' decision on dropping out of school.

### **8.1 Decisions to stay in school or not**

When we investigate whether or not students want to drop out of school, it is essential to understand the situation in villages. As introduced in chapter 4, a major problem in villages recently is the segment of populations left behind. According to 2013 national statistics, among 200 million of 600 million rural people have left the village to work in rural areas and all of them are between 20 years old to 60 years old. Youth who are studying in secondary school are living in the school. As a result, those remaining in the village are children and elderly. In other words, there are very few youth in the village.

As there are very few peers in the village, many students do not want to go back to the village. Even they have no interest in studying, these youth still want to stay in school because in the village, they can only meet children or elderly people. Both Miss Lee and Miss Chan express that many student felt bored and want to go back to school where their friends are. For example,

Miss Lee: “if students do not well behave themselves, sometimes, we require them to stay at home (the village) for one or two weeks as a punishment because we do not want them to disturb other classmates. Usually, these students come back after three to four days without our permission. They explain that it is too boring to stay in the village; they have no one to talk to and no one to play with.”

We can see that even students who do not like to study do not necessarily drop out of school.

Students drop out only if they get a job. Two teachers both emphasized the significance that getting a job has in students’ drop-out of school process. They explain that even though peers are in school, they will drop out immediately once they get a job. This is because they can earn money, make new friends, and feel that working life is less boring than staying in Orange High or at home. Most of them get an assembly line job in factories nearby as their first job. Plus, their salaries allow them to start their new life with no parents or teachers to supervise them. Therefore, all school-non completers admitted that they drop out when they get a job.

## 8.2 Job seeking support from family members

Network members play an extremely important role in helping the school non-completers to get a job. The two teachers and all school non-completers describe that it is very easy to get a job. This is because the jobs they get are usually manual jobs that do not require high educational levels, professional knowledge or experiences. For example,

Miss Chan describes that “it is easy. There are many villagers working outside. You just tell them that you want to get a job. They will arrange one for

you, including the place to live. It is easy to get a job now if you are willing to choose a lower class job. I have a former student. She has worked in a garment factory for a month. The job she does is sewing the buttons. It does not require any skills.

Alan further explains that “we are not university graduates. They will choose jobs, and they will not choose lower class job. But we will. There are many lower class jobs, and the society needs people to choose these jobs. What is the problem?”

Since network members provide lots of support in the job seeking process, below I shall report in what way and what kind of support network members provide to school non-completers.

If parents have their own business, these parents will arrange for their children to work in their business. Both Miss Lee and Miss Chan said that since Orange County is a transport hub for the province, many construction materials, timber or other goods are transported to other places from here. Therefore, many peasants in the area establish small transport businesses. If their children do not want to study, they will ask children to manage the business. So, parents think that it is no problem to let their children drop out of school.

If parents do not have their own business, they will help students to get a job by asking their network members. As mentioned earlier, drop-out students usually get a lower class job. It is not difficult to get this kind of job as there are many factories in the province and the provinces nearby. Parents will ask their friends for job information. For example, Betty recalled that “I told my mother that I do not want to study, I want to work. Then, she helped me to get a job as a maid. But, my cooking was not good, so I wanted to get another job. My mother asked

other relatives for information. An auntie told me that a food factory in another county was hiring employees. Then, I apply to that job and am admitted.” Alan also said that “I did not want to study. I just asked my relatives to get job information or recommendations. One of them knew many people working as fake monks. Fake monks are not real monk. They are just a group of people dressing up like monks. They do not belong to any religious organisation and have no religious knowledge. When people need to hire monks to provide chanting services in different activities, such as funerals, these fake monks pretend they are real monks and fully understand all the procedures of the activities. Being a fake monk does not require high educational level or skills, and the salary was not bad. He helped me to join this group. Then, I did not go to school anymore.”

Besides, some family members would give career advice to school non-completers. They usually seek advice from relatives or parents who are working in bigger cities because the school non-completers think that they know the labour market better and have more knowledge. These family members would help the school non-completers to analyse their strength and weakness, and suggest what kinds of jobs they should get. Chris’s experience is a good example.

He said that: “My family was poor. So, I want to earn money. I asked my uncle for advice. He was working in the provincial capital. He knows much more than my father. So, I asked him. He said that I am a shy person. If I graduated from university, the job I will get will require me to contact different kind of people. It requires social ability. My social ability is weak. This kind of job is not suitable for me and it is difficult for me to get a job. Instead, I should learn a professional skill,



so that I can earn a living by this professional skill. My uncle is a plasterer. He said that he can teach me. Thus, I became his apprentice.”

### 8.3 Job-seeking support from peers

Though peers do not support school non-completers’ schooling, they do help them to get a job. A kind of help is passing the recruitment information to school non-completers. When school non-completers want to get a job, they would also ask their peers who are working. Miss Chan explains that even the former students are no longer in school, they still keep close contact with other classmates via internet. So, it is easy to seek information from these former students. Below, Eric has described how his peers pass recruitment information to him.

Interviewer: “Your friend gives you the job information when you are in school?”

Eric: “Yes. I want to drop out. I need a job to earn a living. So, I ask my friends for information.”

Interviewer: “what kind of job information they give you?”

Eric: “Construction site workers and salon apprentice. Both jobs are in Orange County. Therefore, I can go there and apply for the job. Once I get these two jobs, I leave the school.”

Another kind of support contributes for getting jobs for the school non-completers is recommendation. As peers are also working, some of them will directly ask their employees if

they need new staff or not. If yes, these peers would recommend the school non-completers to their employees. For example,

Interviewer: “Your first job is?”

Frank: “Worker in a shoe factory.”

Interviewer: “How did you get this job?”

Frank: “My friend directly asks his boss. And the boss agrees to hire me to work in this shoe factory.”

Interviewer: “But, you are under 16 year old.”

Frank: “My friend changes my age. It is easy and common. This is China.”

In some cases, the job recommended to the school non-completers are illegal jobs. Alan said that, “it is easy to get an illegal job. You just need to ask your friends. They probably can get one for you. This kind of job is risky but you can earn a lot. One of my classmates is an illegal loan shark. He tells me that I can work with him. But, you know being a fake monk is okay for me, so I chose the fake monk.”

Dorothy also gives an example to exemplify how peers arrange illegal jobs for them. She said that,

“I have a friend who has dropped out of school one year earlier than me. She is a prostitute. As we still keep in touch with her, she always told us how rich she is, what expensive clothes she bought or which new phone she is using now. She shows off because she wants

us to join her. Finally, two classmates join her and become a compensated-dating girl. This classmate arranges customers to these two new girls. Our school teachers know that and go to the hotel to bring the two girls back. But, it is useless. They have decided to leave school. Two days later, they leave home again, and I have not seen them anymore.”

One may comment that because the job they get is a lower-class job, these respondents may regret it in the future. This may be true in the future, but at the time of interview, interestingly, respondents indicate that they are either satisfied with their current life or confident about their future. Betty is a maid, but she does not aspire to get a good job in the cities. What she wants is to marry her boyfriend, have a baby and live in the village with family members. Therefore, even if she remains a maid working in Orange Town, as long as she can live close to her family members and with her boyfriend, she is satisfied with it.

Chris is a self-employed plasterer. Again, he has a blue collar job. However, as he is a self-employed plasterer and knows indoor decoration, he rents a small shop in the Orange County to start his business. Many villagers and neighbours ask him to repair or decorate their houses. As Chris has a very stable life and business, he has gotten married and established his family in the town.

Both Eric and Frank are very confident about their future. They know that education matters in one’s life course. But, they also know that working experiences matter as well. As they have been in the labour market for some years, they truly believe that these experiences can equip them to outperform university graduates in the future. Also, Frank does not think that all university graduates are stronger than him because some of them are unemployed. He believes

that he will be a supervisor supervising university graduates in the future. Eric wants to be a car body repair technician and has his own garage in the county. He thinks that knowledge learnt in Orange High is useless. He would rather drop out, get a job, and save money for attending technical school to learn professional car repairing skills. For others, even if they do not have future plans right now, their salaries are higher than teachers in Orange High, so this already makes them feel good.

#### 8.4 Chapter summary

From the above, we can see how network members help school non-completers to get a job and the importance of getting a job in the process of dropping-out of school. Due to the decay of the village, even students who do not like to study do not want to go back to the village where there are only elderly people and children. However, when they get a job, they will drop out immediately. Network members play a very significant role in the job seeking process. Family members will let their children work with them if these parents have their own business, otherwise, they would help children to seek job information or give them some career advice to find other jobs. Peers would also pass recruitment information to the school non-completers or directly arrange a job for them.

## **Chapter 9. Discussion and Conclusion**

### 9.1 Summary

The academic success of students in disadvantaged groups has largely been attributed to social support from network members. This study shows the missing of positive influence of network members, an issue that has not yet been fully considered in much of the literature. Relationships with family members, teachers, peers, communities, and institutions represent a major conduit of educational information and assistances to students from disadvantaged groups both in China and western societies, matching many of them with high school, universities, and even elite colleges in which they will advance their education. These findings create an illusion that once you have close relationships with family members, teachers, peers and other people, they will offer you assistance in order to support your schooling. However, the findings of this study suggest that positive influences of social networks may explain only one of the puzzles of the role of social network in students' educational attainment process. Even when students have a strong relationship with network members, these members may not exert positive influences on students. Their influences can hurt students' academic performance.

The story of Orange High demonstrates how network members sometimes will not provide students resources to support their schooling. By interviewing teachers and the school non-completers, this study finds that many parents of students in Orange High do not teach children to cultivate high educational aspirations, give them useful educational information, encourage them to work hard and provide them with suitable supervision even when teachers require them to do so. Network members beyond family also matter in the schooling process. This study finds that due to poor basic knowledge and problems of serious misconduct in the class, teachers have very low ambition and have no time to take care of each student. As a result,

they do not have any desire to teach students to aspire to university and give them extra information or learning materials. Lastly, instead of encouraging classmates to work hard and aspire high or offering classmates some material support, peers in Orange High may tempt respondents to hang out on the street or bully other classmates. All these factors reflect ways in which network members may not provide supportive educational resources to students.

However, the absence of supports from network members does not necessarily lead to dropping out of school. Other factors tempt the school non-completers to leave school. Due to rural decay, the school non-completers do not want to stay in the villages as it is too boring to live in a place where only children and the elderly live. Therefore, they will not leave school even if they have no motivation to study, as otherwise they have no place to go. However, things change when they get a job. Once they are employed, these students drop-out immediately because now they can start a new life.

In the job seeking process, network members exert significant influences in helping the school non-completers to get a job. It is not easy for the school non-completers to get a job by themselves as most of their time is in the school. Thus, support from network members is very crucial. To help the school non-completers, family members would arrange their children to work in their business, seek job information for the school non-completers from their own network members or give career advice to them. Peers also provide the same kinds of assistance to the school non-completers by passing along recruitment information or directly arranging a job for them.

In the process that results for some students in dropping out of school, we can see that teachers play a very influential, but unintended, role. Put simply, they are a reference group by which community members are able to assess the importance of education. Teachers' low

salaries create a perception among local people that education may lead to poor wages rather than good jobs. Consequently, community members come to devalue education, which in turn can affect actions of students' network members, reducing their inclination to encourage students to work harder in school or provide resources that would otherwise support students to achieve educational success. In the case of Orange County, parental and family influences are also limited in part because Orange High is a residential school in which students spend more time in school than at home. Moreover, some parents leave home and work in other cities. Students in these families are looked after by their grandparents while parents spend limited time with their children.

## 9.2 Job opportunity, value of education, and social network

Why, unlike what existing studies show, do network members of the school non-completers in Orange High not support students' schooling, which is generally accepted as a path to the middle class? Some scholars attribute this difference to class culture. The class culture decides how class members value education and in turn how they support students' schooling. As reviewed in the earlier chapters, each class has distinct social expectations, values, cultural practises and so forth (Wotherspoon 2013). Take education as an example. While people value education very much, Willis (1977) and MacLeod (2009) show that youth from the working class are very likely to have counter school attitudes, like the Hallway Hangers or Lads in their studies. Michel Apple and MacLeod explain this counter school attitude from the view of the mobility chances. Apple (MacLeod 2009) points out that their rejection of school is mainly due to the "realisation that schooling will not enable them to go much further than they already are."

Because of the negative attitude on schooling, both the students and other class members do not care for education, such as providing resources to support students' schooling.

Following this line of studies, some scholars particularly focus on the working class community in order to find out how network influences on education are being affected by the local context. For example, MacLeod (2009) investigated two groups of lower class students' aspirations, attitude to school, and career expectations in a lower class housing project. He comments (2009: 242) that "the levelled aspirations and behaviours of the Hallway Hangers cannot be understood apart from structural constraints on opportunities that in their cumulative effect are all too forbidding," He further elaborates that the structural constraints on opportunities are embedded in both schools and job markets. Living in this lower class community, schools there will not teach you to aspire to middle class jobs in a context in which job markets are unstable and full of lower class jobs. In other words, school and job opportunities affect one's aspirations and behaviours, including the use of social networks (Smith 2005).

Smith has demonstrated how the job opportunities in the community influence the effectiveness of social networks in helping people to get a job. In her study of a poor Black community in the United States, Smith (2005) discovers that even when job seekers have close ties with their friends, their friends would not pass job information they might have to the job seekers. This is because it is not easy to get a job in this community. The network members are afraid that if they recommend the job seeker to a position, and the job seeker "brings the street to the job which means abuse drug or alcohol in the workplace, acting raucously and boisterously, stealing and intimidating authority figures and co-workers (Smith 2005: 45)," then employers could have a bad impression about network members. This will hurt their own chances of getting



a job once they are unemployed. Therefore, to protect their own reputation in the job market in this community, these network members refuse to help their friends to get a job.

Wilson's study points out that job opportunities in the community not only affect the function of social networks but also views about education. In his study of an urban black poor community in Chicago, Wilson finds that poverty is partly caused by the loss of jobs in the community. When more and more people are unemployed, this rise of unemployment will exert significant negative impacts on the community. Wilson (1987: 57) explains that, "the net effect is that joblessness, as a way of life, takes on a different social meaning, the relationship between schooling and post-school employment takes on a different meaning. The development of cognitive, linguistics, and other educational and job-related skills necessary for the world of work in the mainstream economy is thereby adversely affected." As there is no job, education cannot help you to get a job. Also, as there is no job, it is useless to learn different kinds of skills for the job. Thus, the importance of education decreases.

Based on the above studies, we can see that job opportunities in the community affect the use of social networks and the ways in which members come to value education. We can assume that due to the nature of job opportunities, people do not value education. In cases where employment prospects are limited, network members are not so likely to provide resources to support children's schooling. But, this is not the case in Orange High, where a different story is revealed.

In Orange High, it is the nature of the jobs that are open which devalues the importance of education and disinclines network members to support their children's schooling. As discussed above, Orange County is a transport hub which has many factories in the country and nearby. Job opportunities are very high. People can establish their own business, especially in

transport services, or get a job in factories or in service industries. Since these kinds of jobs do not require a high educational level, the importance of education is devalued. Local people do not need to be well-educated to get a job, so they do not consider it essential to go to school. What they need is the ability to read, write, and do simple mathematics to avoid being cheated by others. Influenced by this belief, network members will not support students' schooling and students there will not ask for support as they do not think that lack of education is a problem. Gradually, like what Wilson (1987: 57) describes "teachers do not teach and children do not learn. A vicious cycle is perpetuated through family, through the community and through school." The consequence is that increasing numbers of students give up their schooling and remain school non-completers.

Of course, people may ask why school non-completers can be satisfied with these lower class jobs. This is because there is no "social buffer" (Wilson 1987). According to Wilson (1987), the social buffer refers to the middle and working class family. The existence of middle class and working class families is important within particular community contexts. He explains that "the very presence of these families during the job lost period provides mainstream role models that help keep alive the perception that education is meaningful, that steady employment is a viable alternative to welfare, and that family stability is the norm, not the exception. Thus a perceptive ghetto youngster in a neighbourhood that includes a good number of working and professional families may observe increasing joblessness and idleness but he will also witness many individuals regularly going to and from work; he may sense an increase in school dropouts but he can also see a connection between education and meaningful employment (Wilson 1987: 56)." Put simply, the existence of middle class and working class families who usually have a stable job can show youngsters in the community how education contributes to getting a stable and

high-salary job. Their presence avoids a situation in which the link between education and meaningful jobs is broken. Once this link is broken, youth cannot see that education can bring them a meaningful job which would link them to the middle class world.

This social buffer argument can also be applied to Orange High. Based on the interviews, we can see that there are very few middle class families in Orange County. The only visible jobs for those with high educational levels are typically for teachers in the rural schools whose salaries are even lower than those of local people. The absence of rich and well-educated people in the county means that youth there are unable to observe a link between education and meaningful employment. It means that they have few opportunities to see positive aspects of the relationship between education and a middle class life. As a result, in accordance what MacLeod (2009: 4) describes, “If individual do not even aspire to middle class jobs, then they are unlikely to achieve them.” Moreover, ironically, the presence of the rural school teachers shows another link: education and lower salary jobs. Referencing the rural school teachers and other adults in the county, the school non-completers can only see that the low-educated local people can do better than the well-educated teachers in their school by just getting a lower class job. Therefore, it is understandable that they may be satisfied with lower class jobs.

Interestingly, the link between university education and low salary job makes the school non-completers very confident about their futures. They know that they have low educational levels but what they can also see in the county is that even those who high educational levels are still only able to get a low salary job. It means that education cannot help them go further. As education does not matter, other qualifications may matter more, such as work experience. They believe that their working experiences can equip them to compete with the university graduates

in the future. Eric even confidently said that “may be university graduates will work under me one day.”

Due to the importance of the social buffer, Orange High shows that it is essential for the government to improve rural education. As discussed earlier, the low status of rural teachers is a key factor in the prevailing belief that of “education is useless” in Orange County. Even the central government has invested lots of effort and money on subsidising poor students. But, this is not enough. Attention must also be given to teachers’ salary, working environment, workload, and status all of which affect teaching quality. On the one hand, the low salary, poor working environment and heavy workload will negatively affect teachers’ ambition and decrease the time spent on each student. If there are more teachers and each of them can spend more time on students to help them catch up with the progress, the school non-completers may not think that it is very boring to stay in school and gradually lose their childhood dream of attending university. On the other hand, teachers can be a reference for rural students to understand the importance of university education, and it is particularly true for communities like Orange County where people have very limited chances of being in contact with successful university graduates. Therefore, to improve the drop-out rate of rural students, the government has to reconstruct the social buffer by helping rural teachers to win the respect from the local community.

### 9.3 Structural constraints and social network

In fact, the above findings demonstrate what Blau and Schwartz (1977) describe “structural constraints.” As discussed earlier, they (Blau and Schwartz 1977) argue that the social structure can constrain the development of ties. Many empirical studies have already reported the effects of structure on people’s social networks. For example, Moore’s study has reported how

social structure affects men's and women's personal network. Using 1985 General Social Survey data Moore (1990) discovers that men's personal networks, compared to women's, have fewer kinship ties and more non-kin ties, and consist of fewer neighbours but more colleagues, supervisors, and friends. This difference can be attributed by structural variables, such as work, family or age. Network size and diversity are heavily influenced by labour market structure. Having full time paid employment or high occupational status job will have more chances to meet people outside family or neighbourhood. Men tend to occupy senior positions while women are more likely to have a low-paid part-time job or simply stay at home as a housewife. This labour market structure creates opportunities for men to establish intergroup relationship while constraining women's ability to do so.

The same argument can be applied in China. Using data about respondents' work and core discussion network collected from Tianjin in 1986, Ruan (1993) finds that compared to Americans, respondents in Tianjin and their core discussion network members share very similar ages, educational levels, and occupations. Also, the co-worker occupies an important position in the core discussion network. About 76% mention at least one co-worker as their network member while only 40% of Americans include co-workers in their core discussion network. The high percentage of these workplace ties is caused by the social structure. At that time, the work-unit system had been carried out in urban China. Almost every urban Chinese belonged to a work-unit. This work-unit not only offered job opportunity and salaries but also the only provider for house, meal hall, school for children of employees, medical service and so forth. As all services employees needed were covered by the work-unit and were not available outside the work-unit, this full-coverage constrains workers' chances to establish ties beyond their work-unit.

This structural constraints argument can be applied to the case of Orange High as well. Firstly, the case of Orange High demonstrates how the globalization of economies constraints the network structure of school non-completers. As discussed earlier, the absence of a middle class in Orange County delinks education to good job. Consequently, local people devalue education and do not greatly support children's schooling. Why is the middle class absent? We need to remember that jobs shifted to China are mainly lower class blue collar jobs. Many design, research development or professional jobs remain in the West. Even some of these middle class jobs are beginning available in China, they are only available in big cities where infrastructure, flow of information, and the pool of well-educated employees are better than that of Orange County. Therefore, even though many SEZs have been established in Fujian province, these zones specify in heavy industry and are mainly responsible for production, especially on the assembly line. As a result, what the economy there requires are assembly line workers who do not need to be well-educated. As there is no room for the middle class, of course, a very limited number of middle class people live in Orange County and nearby. In other words, the labour market structure constrains local peoples' chances to meet middle class people and establish ties with them.

Even scholars (Blau and Schwartz 1977; Moore 1990; Ruan 1993) mainly study how the structural factors shape the pattern of a social network, but, the case of Orange High reflects that global industrial development can also influence the use of social networks. As discussed earlier, local people can get a blue collar job easily without a high educational level of education or professional skills and there is very limited job opportunity for the middle class. It means that even if you are very well-educated; it is still difficult for you to get a middle class job in Orange County or nearby – not because you are not qualified, but because there is no job for you. So, it

is useless to provide resources to support youth to excel in class. In other words, the labour market structure not only constrains local people's opportunities to meet middle class people, but also constrains their willingness to provide resources to support students' schooling.

#### 9.4 Victims of poverty and rational choice

##### a. Not a victim of poverty now

Most existing studies identify poverty as the main factor contributing to high school dropout rates among rural students. The most prevalent factor cited by researchers who have studied this issue in rural China is rural poverty (Hannum 1999; Hannum and Adams 2009), and rural-urban gaps (Hannum and Wang 2008). These two explanations are definitely correct for explaining the dropout issue in particular parts of western China where these studies were undertaken. As students in these regions have very limited financial resources, they cannot afford the risk of being in debt and unemployed after graduating from university. Considering their resources and risks, it is better to drop out and enter the labour market as soon as possible, which for them carries minimum risk. In other words, their choice under these conditions is the most rational.

However, this may not be the case in Orange High. As a coastal region, people's living standard in Orange County is higher than that of the Western region. Because it is easy to get a job, people there are able to afford the cost of attending primary school and junior high school. Still many rural youth do not value education because they can get a job easily with a low educational level. This shows that the local economic situation can heavily affect students' chances of dropping out of school. Therefore, we cannot simply attribute the high drop-out rate

among rural students to rural poverty and the rural and urban gap; we also need to explore the impact of specific local contexts.

The case of Orange High reflects that dropping out of school is the result of calculation of the effectiveness of education and future career goal and family planning. Their dropping out of school is not entirely due to poverty. When we study why students drop out of school in coastal provinces, in which the living standard is higher than the western provinces, we need to include students' future plan. For example, as discussed earlier, Eric drops out of school because he wants to get some working experience and save money to attend the technical school in the future. He wants to be a car body repairing technician and studying in Orange High, in which the teaching quality is poor, cannot help him to achieve this goal. Similarly, Betty, and Chris also thought about their future plans before dropping out of school. The making of the decision to drop out of school is mainly based on their considerations of their future plans, their chances of success and the usefulness of studying in Orange High for achieving their goals. In other words, dropping out of school is the most rational choice. Can we simply describe them as victims of poverty?

Also, the case of Orange High led us to rethink the concept of what is success. Education is important because it can help us to get a good job or have high social status in the future. If you can get a high salary job, you are successful. But, if respondents just want to live in the village or town with family members or have a small business in their hometown, can we describe them as unsuccessful because they do not try hard to get a good job? Due to the rapid economic development in the coastal area, the living standard in Orange County is not very low. Some respondents are satisfied with this stable life in Orange County and want to live there in future. Like Betty and Chris, they just want to live in Orange County together with their family



members. Education for them is not that important because they can earn a living by getting a job easily. Of course, one may say that they are not ambitious enough. Compared to those who graduated from elite colleges and work in Transnational Cooperation, their achievements are very low. But, compared with their teachers, in terms of salary, they are doing well. In these cases, is it questionable to describe respondents as unsuccessful?

b. Being a victim of poverty in the future

School non-completers are satisfied with their living because they are satisfied with the job they can get now. As the middle class is still growing and mainly concentrated in metropolitan areas, youth in Orange High do not have any role models from which to learn what the good life is and how education can help them to have the good life.

The satisfaction of school non-completers is similar to the lads in Hammer Town in Willis's study. Both lads and youth in Orange High give up schooling because there are jobs for them. For the lads, they followed the path of their fathers. Just like what MacDonald describes: If your grandfather worked in mine, your father would work there and you would become be a miner as well. Your father and relatives would get a job for you. Although industrialisation has just begun about 20 years ago in China, much shorter than the Western societies, family tradition may not be a key factor deciding youth's career, still familial influences matter. Parents, relatives, and neighbours can get a job for youth. It is very common to ask parents, relatives, or other elder siblings to get a job from their workplace for youth. We can see that family members exert significant influences on helping youth to get a job.

However, youth in Orange High and Lads the Hammer Town face very different futures. Lads in Hammer Town were very likely to have a stable life even they have to work very hard. But, this is not the case for the school non-completers here. As discussed earlier, the

manufacturing jobs in the 60s and 70s offered acceptable salaries and benefits to workers and the employment is very stable. Thus, workers can have stable living standard by their manual labouring. However, things change rapidly. Now, youth in Orange High are in a labour market that is very different from the one where the Lads existed. The labour market the youth in Orange High have entered is a very flexible labour market which means that what were life-long jobs have now become unstable. Instead of giving a long-term contract to employees, employers now are very likely to hire part-time workers or casual workers, offer short-term contract, use sub-contracting or require employees to be self-employed so that employers do not need to give benefits to workers and there are no trade union to protect these temporary workers.

Worse still, jobs can vanish easily today. Industrialisation began in China because many companies moved their plants, factories or manufacturing procedures to China where production costs are lower than the West. Jobs being exported to China actually are low-skilled jobs, such as assembly line jobs. Jobs require professional skills, knowledge or production environment remain in the West. For example, the Nintendo WiiU, a video game home console, is assembled in China but the CPU is manufactured in New York by IBM (IBM 2011; Iwata 2012). What workers in China do is putting the CPU into the console. Since assembly line jobs can be exported easily, when companies find another place where the production cost is lower than China, they are very likely move to the new place. And this is happening right now. Compared to other South-Eastern Asian countries, wages of Chinese workers are very high. For instances, Chinese workers earn \$27.5 USD per day, but the workers in Indonesia and Vietnam earn \$8.6USD and \$6.7USD per day respectively. In addition, due to inflation of RMB and frequent strikes, many companies are moving their production lines to SE Asia or simply going back to the West (Economist 2015). For example, Uniqlo, a Japanese garment industry giant, expanded

its production line in Vietnam and Bangladesh instead of in China. Ford and Caterpillar moved back their production line from China to the United States (the White House 2012). But, the opportunity of getting flexible jobs hides this risk and results in causing many youth to devalue the importance of education.

In an era in which jobs can disappear easily, the experiences of other newly developed countries suggest that school non-completers are very likely to suffer from poverty and remain in the bottom of the social strata in the future. Some observers might suggest that although jobs are temporary in nature, workers may be motivated to move from temporary to permanent jobs by virtue of hard work, ability, or educational upgrading. However, this is not always possible for working class youth who have low educational levels. A study of Mediterranean Europe finds that less well-educated youth are 17-24% less likely than highly educated youth to move to permanent jobs (Barbieri and Scherer 2009). Other studies (Chalmers and Kalb 2000; Vries and Wolbers 2005) also find this similar result that well-educated youth who have no unemployment history or experience in have flexible employment have the highest chances to get a permanent job. Therefore, even though youth in Orange High can get a job easily, it is difficult for them to be promoted to a stable job position if they continue to devalue education. It means that they are very likely to be unemployed and underemployed in the future.

#### 9.5 Policy suggestion

As education can be a pathway for upward mobility, local governments in regions like Orange County should be encouraged to carry out policies to decrease the drop-out rate of students. First, the local government should raise the salary of rural high school teachers. My study reveals that local people may devalue education. In the case for rural high school teachers,

they may see that even those who work hard and get into university may end up with a poorly paid job. In other words, education is not a guarantee to help you go further. Therefore, it is essential to improve the image of rural high school teachers, to attract higher quality teachers, and provide as role models university graduates who local residents can meet in everyday life. Once local residents notice that the salaries of rural high school teachers are higher than the wages that a majority of them are likely to achieve, they may be more inclined to encourage to students to work hard in school as they come to value education and link it with good job opportunities.

Secondly, the government needs to explore ways to diversify the local economy in regions like Orange County. Local people take the rural high school teachers as the reference group and conclude that education cannot help them go further. Teachers represent a primary reference group mainly because they are often the only university graduates local people can meet in their everyday lives. Moreover, the local economic structure leaves open few other choices for local residents. As mentioned earlier, the main economic activities in Orange County and nearby are agriculture, manufacturing, and transportation. Jobs in these industries do not require high educational qualifications and are non-professional, but they are also often transitory or precarious in nature. In order to ensure that local populations are well-educated and able to thrive in a dynamic global economy, local governments need to pay attention to the importance of diverse local economic structures to ensure new opportunities for well-educated employees in field related to research and development or other professional services.

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## Appendix A: Interview guide

### A. Personal information

1. Please briefly introduce yourself.
2. In which year you were born?
3. Do you have any siblings?
4. What is your educational level?
5. Are you working? If so, what is your job? If not, what kinds of jobs are you looking for? (Possible reasons for not working?)

### B. Education

1. Please tell me about your primary school and junior high school - where are they, the quality, the facilities?
2. Would you describe your academic results in school as average, above average or below average?
3. Did you have any learning problems or other factors that influenced your schooling?
4. When you had difficulties, who would you seek help from?
5. Did you think about attending university when you were a child? How about now?
5. Who influenced you most in school? In what ways?
6. Do tuition fees pose any financial burden for your family?
7. Do you think your educational level has influenced your occupation? (How did you get your current job? Do you plan to continue this work, or are you looking at other options? If so, which ones?)
8. What do you think about education? Is it important for your future life?
9. Do you think education can help you to have a higher social status in the future? Why?
10. If it is not important, what other factors might influence your ladder for success?

### C. Family

1. How old are your parents?
2. What is their educational level?
3. Are they working now?
4. What are their jobs?
4. Do you live with your grandparents?
5. What educational expectations did your parents have for you (and siblings, if any)?
6. Did they encourage you to attend university or did they want you enter the labour market as soon as possible? (Then, what did they do?)
7. How did they support your schooling? (e.g., buying books)
8. Were they concerned with your academic performance? (e.g., checking your homework everyday?)
9. What did they think when you planned to get a job?
10. Have they helped you to get a job?
11. How about your siblings? Are they studying or working?
12. What are their jobs?/ their educational level
13. Did they offer any help during your job seeking process?
14. How about your relatives? What are their jobs?
15. How do you think your family influenced your schooling?

16. How do you think your family influences your job?

#### D. School

1. Was it popular among students in your junior high school to seek promotion to senior high school?
2. What are your classmates doing? Working? Studying?
3. Do you have close relationships with any of them?
4. When you had problems in school, did you ask them for help?
5. What was the climate of your class in junior high school? Everyone plans to get a job after graduate?
6. Did you discuss job seeking with your classmates? How did you talk about work and possible jobs?
7. Did your classmates provide assistance when you were seeking a job?
8. What is the quality of your teachers in your junior high school?
9. What educational expectations did your teachers have for you?
10. Did they encourage you to attend university?
11. When you had difficulties, did you ask them for help?
12. Did they help you to get a job?
13. Did you have good relationships with teachers?
14. What did you usually do after school?
15. How do you think your schools have influenced your education and career overall?

#### E. Community

1. How many people live in your village?
2. How far is it from a major urban area?
3. What is the economic level of your village compared to other villages?
4. What is the typical educational level for people in your village?
5. What are their opinions on your schooling?
6. What do other villagers usually do?
7. How do they typically get their jobs?
8. Did they help you to get your job?
9. What are villagers' influences on your schooling and career?

#### F. Occupation

1. Why did you choose and get your current job?
2. Do you have friends or relatives who have the same occupation?
3. Who offered assistance when you were seeking the job?
4. Is this your first job? If not → what are the previous jobs?
5. When do you decide to enter the labour market?
6. Are you satisfied with your current job?
7. What is your future plan?

G. Is there anything else you would like to comment on or ask me about?

Thank you for your participation.

**Appendix B:** List of picture  
Picture 5.1 Orange High 1



Source: Orange High homepage. 2016.



Picture 5.2 Orange High 2



Source: Orange High homepage. 2016.

Picture 5.3. Local market in the county



Picture 5.4. A village in the Orange County 1



Picture 5.5. A village in the Orange County 2



Picture 5.6. A rural primary school in the town



Picture 5.7. The best urban primary school in the town



**Appendix C: Consent Form and Transcription Release Form**  
Consent Form

**參加者同意書**

**研究項目名稱:** 社會網絡與教育:以中國農村青年為例子

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**研究目的:**

本研究探討在中國當社會越來越希望青年能獲得專上教育程度的時候, 有些青年(包括天資聰穎的青年)卻只有很低的學歷。因為 Fischer 教授和同事(1997)指出智商不能全面解個人的學業表現, 所以我們需要找出什麼因素導致一些農民青年學歷較低。

**研究程序:**

- 本研究將會在村內進行深入訪談。目標人數約為 20-30 人。首先會詢問村民是否願意參加訪談並請他們簽署本同意書。訪談時間大約為 1-2 小時。在得到參加者同意後訪談將會錄音並整理為錄音謄本。謄本完成後, 將會請參加者查閱及簽署使用同意書。
- 如有關於本研究及你在研究扮演的角色的其他問題, 歡迎提出。

**潛在風險:**

沒有

**福利:**

- 參加者沒有直接的福利。
- 本研究探討社會網絡如何影響教育程度, 結果將會對社會網絡分析及教育社會學兩方面作出貢獻。
- 本研究的結果還能協助制定政策改善中國的教育不平等情況。

**補償:**

- 每位參加者將獲得一份價值\$5 加元的小禮物。

**保密:**

- 雖然本研究的資料將會作出版還在會議發表, 但你的身份將會被保密。另外, 在引用你的說話時, 你的名字將會以假名代替而其他個人資料將會從報告上刪除。
- 本研究的結果及相關資料將會被大學研究員妥善保存在大學至少 5 年。之後, 資料將會被適當地銷毀。
- **資料儲存:**
- 訪談錄音將儲存於有密碼保護的筆記本型電腦, 而錄音謄本則存放在已上鎖的書櫃。
- 當資料再沒有需要時, 將會被適當地銷毀。

**退出權利:**

- 參加本研究完全是自願的，你可以只回答你覺得合適的問題。你可以在任何情況任何時間以任何原因退出本研究。
- 當你退出研究時，如果你希望，你在本研究的資料將會被銷毀。

**跟進:**

- 參加者將被要求提供電郵以便日後把研究結果寄給他們。

**問題或考慮:**

- 請參考上頁提供的聯絡資料聯絡研究員
- 本研究已得到薩大研究倫理委員會的批准。所以關於你作為參加者的權利的問題可以電郵到研究倫理辦公室，電郵: [ethics.office@usask.ca](mailto:ethics.office@usask.ca) 或致電查詢，電話(306) 966-2975。如非本市居住的參加者可致電以下免收費號碼(888) 966-2975。

**同意**

我在下面的簽署表示我已閱讀並明白以上的資料。我已有機會就本研究詢問所有問題並得到回答。我同意參加本研究而我已收到一份已簽名並寫下日期的同意書副本以作為我的記錄。

\_\_\_\_\_  
參加者姓名

\_\_\_\_\_  
參加者簽署

\_\_\_\_\_  
研究員簽署

\_\_\_\_\_  
日期

*本同意書其中一份副本將會留給參加者，研究員將取走另一副本。*

Transcription Release Form

Title:

I, \_\_\_\_\_, have reviewed the complete transcript of my personal interview in this study, and have been provided with the opportunity to add, alter, and delete information from the transcript as appropriate. I acknowledge that the transcript accurately reflects what I said in my personal interview with Ka Yi Fung. I hereby authorize the release of this transcript to Ka Yi Fung to be used in the manner described in the Consent Form. I have received a copy of this Data/Transcript Release Form for my own records.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of researcher

訪問錄音謄本發佈同意書

我\_\_\_\_\_已經查閱了在此研究本人所參加的訪問錄音謄本而且可以從謄本中對資料進行增加、修改及刪除。我同意本錄音謄本正確地顯示了我和馮家宜進行的訪問中的內容。在此，我正式授權馮家宜按照同意書提及的步驟使用本錄音謄本。我已收取一份本同意書副本以作為我的紀錄。

\_\_\_\_\_  
參加者姓名

\_\_\_\_\_  
日期

\_\_\_\_\_  
參加者簽署

\_\_\_\_\_  
研究員簽署