International Collaboration on Life Course Studies

This collaboration began after the publication of Children of the Great Depression in 1974 through Elder’s involvement in the U. S. Social Science Research Council’s research group on mid-life and then a Committee on the Life Course and Human Development, chaired initially by Matilda White Riley. The membership included both Americans and Europeans over a span of ten years with projects on both continents. Elder continued this scientific network through the MacArthur Committee on Youth in High-Risk Settings in the 90s.

He was asked to conduct Workshops on the Life Course in Tokyo by a Japanese sociologist in the summer of 1986 and by the Japanese Society of Developmental Psychology in August 1997. This session was followed in September by a presentation on the life course at the Chinese Academy of Social Science in Beijing. Elder’s host at the Academy was Professor Huang Ping who later translated Children of the Great Depression into Chinese with his wife. This translation became an important step for the diffusion of life course thinking in China.

In 2002 Elder’s graduate seminar on the life course at the University of North Carolina was attended by a population student from Beijing, Xiaochun Qiao, who found the life course framework very promising for studies of Chinese cohorts. In due time, he eventually became a Professor of Population Studies at Peking University and acquired the resources for what he called a University Forum on the Chinese Life Course in the summer of 2017. This event was followed by classes on life course theory and methods. The Forum proved to be highly successful with a great many advanced graduate students and junior faculty in attendance from universities in the region, along with an unknown number who watched the Forum on the internet. Reports indicate that Professor Qiao has the resources to schedule another Forum in the summer of 2018.
Life Course Research Begins a New Life Stage in Beijing

Peking University Institute of Population Research (PKUIPR), under the auspices of the university’s graduate school, organized “The Life Course of the Chinese People” Forum on July 2, 2017 on campus of Peking University. The keynote session was chaired by Professor Xiaochun Qiao, PKUIPR, who introduced the five keynote speakers (Figure 1).

The first keynote speech was given by Professor Glen Elder, Jr., UNC-Chapel Hill and founder of the life course perspective, who introduced via Skype his life course research in terms of his own life course (Figure 2). The second speaker, Charles Hirschman (University of Washington), described the life course perspective in good detail and its various main contents. Professor James Lee, of Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, gave an introduction to the applicability of the life course perspective to the Chinese Qing Dynasty Government Employee Database. Professor Tim Liao, University of Illinois, discussed the recent developments in life course research on the global stage, its influences in various disciplines, and life course research centers and institutes focused around the world. The final speaker, Professor Han Buxin, of the Institute of Psychology, the Chinese Academy of Sciences, talked about the life course and one’s psychological wellbeing. The keynote speeches were followed by a panel discussion by the speakers on site, focusing on the possible applications of the life course perspective to studying the Chinese population (Figure 3). There are about 120 participants in the forum (Figure 4). The two afternoon sessions contained three papers each by Chinese researchers, all applying the life course perspective in their research.

The PKUIPR summer school started in earnest on July 3, the day after the forum. Two of the short courses were directly related to the life course. The course on life course research, co-taught by Professors Xiaochun Qiao and Charlie Hirschman, had around 50 participants, and the one on sequence analysis (and its applications on life course research), had about 40 participants. The participants were junior academic professionals and graduate students. They really appreciated the coupling of the forum with these two courses, and, at the completion of the courses, many of the participants were already looking forward to using what they have learned in their own research.

Tim Liao, University of Illinois

(See photos on next page.)
A photo of speaker at Forum on the Chinese Life Course and of Elder at UNC-Chapel Hill beginning his opening presentation in the Forum.