

# Book Review

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## **The Time Inheritors: How Time Inequalities Shape Higher Education Mobility in China**

By Cora Lingling Xu

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### **Reviewed by**

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In traditional Chinese colloquial wisdom, the saying “It’s better to be famous while young” (*chengming xujinzhao*) reflects how time is often used to measure one’s success. Whether or not one agrees with this sentiment, time undeniably serves as a powerful evaluative lens through which we interpret life trajectories and construct personal identities. Yet, few have asked the provocative question posed by Cora Lingling Xu: Can time be inherited? Even fewer have connected time to broader structures of educational and social inequality. In her groundbreaking book, *The Time Inheritors: How Time Inequalities Shape Higher Education Mobility in China*, Xu offers a compelling analysis of how inter-generational transfers of privilege and deprivation are mediated and materialized through temporal dynamics.

The book is structured into three parts. Part I (Chapters 1–3) lays the theoretical groundwork for understanding time inheritance and educational mobility. Chapter 1 introduces two key concepts—banked time and borrowed time—which correspond to the temporal capital of advantaged and disadvantaged individuals, respectively. Chapter 2 reframes education through a temporal and class-based lens, contrasting a sense of entitlement among the privileged with feelings of indebtedness among the less advantaged. Chapter 3

conceptualizes educational mobility as a mechanism for changing one's fate, highlighting how temporal resources shape one's capacity to move through the educational system.

Part II (Chapters 4–8) demonstrates how differential time inheritance reproduces social inequalities, offering five empirically rich manifestations. Chapter 4 explores participants' decision-making patterns, ranging from short-sighted, self-defeating choices to long-term, strategic planning. Chapter 5 examines embodied dispositions, contrasting debt-paying mindsets with those shaped by entitlement. Chapter 6 investigates how unequal time inheritance influences labor time allocation—some participants overwork at the expense of family life, while others achieve work-life balance. Chapter 7 compares the outcomes of time use: the disadvantaged often experience “wasted time,” whereas the privileged convert time into a resource, gaining further advantage (p. 69). Chapter 8 analyzes career trajectories, with some participants stuck in precarious employment while others freely explore career options, buffered by familial security. Though each chapter offers a distinct analytical focus, together they articulate a coherent picture of how unequal time inheritance structurally constrains individuals' educational and life opportunities.

Importantly, Xu resists a deterministic reading of inequality. Part III (Chapters 9–11) complicates the narrative by emphasizing individual agency and presenting counterexamples. Chapter 9 shows that time inheritance is neither linear nor guaranteed—some advantaged individuals are “unqualified inheritors” who experience downward mobility, while some disadvantaged individuals are “zealous parvenus” who manage to move up (p. 95). Chapter 10 deepens the analysis by emphasizing the field-specific nature of time inheritance, shaped by China's hierarchical city-tier system and global urban imaginaries. Chapter 11 foregrounds the political dimensions of time inheritance, particularly in the context of cross-border student mobility between mainland China and Hong Kong, where state power can override class-based privilege.

Xu's book distinguishes itself in three key aspects. First, on a theoretical level, it introduces a distinctive temporal lens to the study of class-based educational and social inequalities through the concept of time inheritance. Drawing on Sefarin's “time of action” and Bourdieu's “time in action” (p. 3), Xu's framework integrates both macro-level temporal structures shaped by national and global forces, and micro-level temporal practices that emphasize individual agency. As Xu notes, echoing Bourdieu, practices are “*not in time but make time*” (Bourdieu, 2000, as cited in Xu, 2025, p. 15). In this way, her work moves beyond the traditional dichotomy of structure versus agency, offering a more layered understanding of how educational mobility is shaped by multiple temporal forces.

Unlike much existing Bourdieusian scholarship that centers on the canonical triad of capital, habitus, and field, Xu foregrounds an often-overlooked yet conceptually rich dimension of Bourdieu's theory: *time*. Informed by Bourdieu, she challenges the conventional view of time as a neutral, external entity, instead framing it as something produced through social practices. Subjective emotions such as impatience, regret, and boredom are deeply tied to how time is felt and experienced. In this view, capital is not merely accumulated labor—it takes time to accumulate; habitus is not solely a product of field conditions but also of time-shaped dispositions. Advantage and disadvantage, then, can be reconceptualized in terms of labor time (as a proxy for economic wealth) and freed-up or leisure time (as an indicator of social privilege) (pp. 25–26).

Furthermore, Xu's book is exceptionally well-written and remarkably accessible. Readers are immediately drawn into the lives of the participants, moving with them through their struggles, choices, resilience, and strategies as they navigate educational pathways from rural to urban areas, and across regional and national borders. The book is grounded in rich empirical data, based on interviews with more than 100 students drawn from four distinct datasets collected over a decade of fieldwork in Mainland China, Hong Kong, and the United Kingdom.

Despite its eleven chapters, the book never feels overwhelming. Each chapter is concise, clearly structured, and centered on compelling individual cases. Xu's vivid storytelling and carefully selected narratives reflect a rare scholarly communication skill—readers do not feel they are wading through dense, abstract academic prose, but rather engaging with a collection of powerful, human-centered stories. This narrative approach invites readers to draw their own conclusions, make comparisons, and reflect deeply on their own past, present, and future educational and career trajectories. Through these stories, Xu not only animates the theory of time inheritance but also offers a profoundly moving and intellectually stimulating lens for understanding educational and social inequalities across generations.

Finally, the integration of Chinese characters throughout the book adds a nuanced cultural dimension to readers' understanding of the participants' thoughts. Expressions such as “蝇营狗苟 (yingying gougou)”, striving excessively for worldly rewards in academia or work (p. 65); “坐冷板凳 (zuo lengbandeng)”, to sit on the cold bench, symbolizing marginalization or waiting in obscurity (p. 98); “生活不止眼前的苟且，还有诗和远方 (shenghuobuzhiyanqiandegouqie, haiyoushiheyuanfang)”, life is more than the

drudgery before our eyes, it also contains poetry and distant dreams (p. 100); and “体面 (timian)”, to live with dignity (p. 128), do far more than illustrate concepts. They evoke a Chinese habitus, a set of culturally embedded dispositions grounded in traditional values, everyday language, and contemporary popular discourse.

These terms resonate deeply. They do not merely translate meaning; they evoke emotion, conjure shared cultural memory, and foster an immediate, affective connection between readers and participants. Most significantly, Xu’s use of indigenous language contributes to the decolonization of academic writing by challenging Western linguistic dominance and asserting the legitimacy of non-Western epistemologies. In doing so, the book advances a more inclusive and culturally grounded form of scholarly expression.

I highly recommend *The Time Inheritors: How Time Inequalities Shape Higher Education Mobility in China* by Cora Lingling Xu to scholars and students interested in the sociology of education, comparative and international education, China studies, migration studies, social mobility, and social inequality. This book offers not only a compelling theoretical contribution but also a deeply nuanced portrayal of how time shapes educational trajectories and life chances across generations and borders. While Xu’s study is grounded in the contexts of China, Hong Kong, and the United Kingdom, the life struggles it explores, such as university choices, unequal access to educational resources, and uncertain career trajectories—resonate broadly with racialized and marginalized groups across national boundaries. Grounded in rich empirical data and theoretical depth, the book invites Canadian readers to develop a comparative perspective on the structural forces that shape time-induced inequalities across generations. *The Time Inheritors* is also an essential resource for those working in Canadian higher education, especially in understanding the educational mobility of international and migrant students, including, but not limited to those from China.

## References

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