



Off to a good start: A comparative study of changes in men's first job prospects in East Asia



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ABSTRACT

Research on young adults' transition to the labor market rarely investigates how nation-level institutional arrangements shape changes over time. In particular, a systematic comparison of shifts in young adults' job opportunities in East Asia is virtually absent. Using comparable data from Japan, Korea, and Taiwan, we examine cohort differences in the timing, quality, and stability of men's first jobs. The results indicate overall declines in first occupational attainment for men in all three countries, but the main driving force for the decrease in Japan differs from that in Korea and Taiwan. Whereas macroeconomic pressure fully explains the decline in Japanese men's first occupational attainment, educational expansion accounts for a considerable part of the declines for men in Korea and Taiwan. Moreover, educational expansion has eroded better-educated men's advantages in speedily transitioning from school to work in Taiwan, but it has not had a similar effect on Japanese men. We argue that Japan's employment system, coupled with a fair amount of institutional ties between schools and firms, has shielded young men from the pressure of educational expansion, making the trends about their early-career outcomes different from those of their counterparts in Korea and Taiwan. The different degrees to which firm internal labor markets have been adopted in Japan, Korea, and Taiwan also explain how increasing macroeconomic pressure has different impacts on men's first job stability in East Asia.

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Scholars of social stratification have long identified first job attainment as a critical part of individuals' status attainment processes. Since [Blau and Duncan \(1967\)](#) developed their classic model, many researchers have shown that first occupational status has a direct and substantial impact on later socioeconomic standing (e.g., [Alexander & Eckland, 1975](#); [Sewell, Hauser, and Wolf 1980](#)). From a life-course perspective, the first job is also important because

it signifies young adults' relative success or failure while transitioning from school to work. Individuals failing to obtain a promising and stable first job are found to be at risk for long-term unemployment and wage penalties, as well as psychological distress ([Ryan, 2001](#)). With rising global economic pressure in recent years, however, obtaining a "good" first job appears to be increasingly difficult. In Japan and Germany, for example, young adults of more recent cohorts are more likely to obtain contingent jobs, instead of regular full-time jobs, than those of earlier cohorts upon school departure ([Brinton, 2010](#); [Gebel, 2009](#); [Yu, 2012](#)). In many other industrialized countries, the time youth spend between leaving school and starting the first job has also

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increased over time (Reeskens & van Oorschot, 2012; Ryan, 2001).

In this paper, we examine changes in the timing, quality, and stability of men's first jobs in Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan. We focus on men because women's rates of ever participating in the labor force, as well as their intention to develop long-term careers, have changed considerably over time, and the paces of change differ substantially among the three East Asian countries (Brinton, 2001; Yu, 2009). Restricting the analysis to alterations in men's first job attainment enables us to concentrate on how the different institutional contexts in East Asia shape early career opportunities, while avoiding confounding the comparative analysis with the differential rate of change in women's labor market attachment.

Most research comparing patterns of young adults' labor market entry relies on cross-sectional data from European countries (e.g., Breen, 2005; Brzinsky-Fay, 2007; Scherer, 2005; Wolbers, 2007). In East Asia, although a few single-country studies about school-to-work transition exist (Brinton, 2010; Ishida, 1998; Sandefur & Park, 2007; Tsai, 1998), a systematic comparison of long-term shifts in youth labor market opportunities is absent. Yet, the East Asian cases are potentially different from European ones and arguably better for discerning the influences of labor market institutions from those of other confounding factors on first job attainment. Specifically, European countries differ considerably in how well their educational systems cultivate occupation-specific skills, and this difference is thought to affect youth unemployment rates (Breen, 2005). By contrast, educational systems in Japan, Korea, and Taiwan are similar in that they place little value on labor market skills. Even though all three systems include vocational programs, the status of general schools is much higher, and vocational education per se does little to ease new graduates' transition to work (Ishida, 1998; Ishida, 2007; Sandefur & Park, 2007).¹ Moreover, the generally low welfare expenditure in East Asia, compared with that of many European countries, leads to limited welfare provisions for unemployed youth, making it possible to exclude such provisions as an explanation for cross-national differences in first job quality and stability.

The three East Asian countries also share two additional features that make men's first jobs particularly indicative of their lifetime well-being and, therefore, of great importance to our understanding of social stratification in that region. First, because of strong life-course norms, young adults in East Asia are highly likely to complete schooling before starting their first jobs (Brinton, 1993; Yu, 2009). The relatively low rate of returning to school makes men's first job experiences more directly linked to their eventual occupational attainment. Second, a relatively large proportion of young adults in East Asian societies live with their parents before marriage (Raymo, 2003; Yu, Su, and Chiu

2012). This living arrangement is likely to increase young men's ability to afford being jobless. They can hence wait until the optimal job comes along to initiate their careers. As such, men's first jobs are likely to better reflect what they can ultimately reach in East Asia than elsewhere.

Despite the similarities just described among Japan, Korea, and Taiwan, prior research shows considerable differences in organizational structures, employment practices, and patterns of inequality among them (e.g., Brinton, Lee, and Parish 1995; Chang & England, 2011; Hamilton & Biggart, 1988; Sato & Shin, 2004). Such differences make these East Asian societies especially useful settings for comparing alterations in young men's experiences at market entry amid shifts in macroeconomic conditions and educational opportunities. Although Japan, Korea, and Taiwan all underwent miraculous rates of economic growth during the first few decades after World War II, they have witnessed similar economic turmoil and slowdown since the 1990s. All three societies also have experienced rapid educational expansion during the past several decades (Ishida, 2007; Park, 2007; Tsai & Xie, 2008). Neither Korean nor Taiwanese firms, however, have relied on ties with schools for recruitment or used the permanent employment practice and internal labor markets as much as Japanese firms have (Brinton, 2001; Lee & Brinton, 1996; Tsai, 1998; Yu, 2009). Thus, investigating whether macroeconomic shifts and educational expansion affect youth labor markets in different ways in the three countries enables us to illuminate the important roles that preexisting social institutions play in shaping the paths of labor market changes.

1. Sources of changes in first job prospects

Much research on school-to-work transition notes a decline in young adults' job opportunities across the industrialized world in recent decades (Brinton, 2010; Ryan, 2001; Scherer, 2005). Although relatively few studies explicitly examine their effects (Breen, 2005; Gangl, 2002), macrolevel economic conditions are often thought to be the main culprit for this decline. As global economic pressures decrease labor demand and lead to job shortages, new entrants to the labor market are likely to face greater difficulty locating promising jobs, or any job at all, than other potential workers. Without prior work experience, not only do new job seekers seem comparably unprepared for a given occupation, but they are also unable to provide any evidence of their credibility as workers, making them especially vulnerable to economic fluctuations.

While macroeconomic conditions serve as an important driving force for changes in youth's labor market opportunities, countries with different institutional arrangements are thought to fare increasing economic pressure differently. Specifically, economic downturns are argued to be more harmful for new labor market entrants in countries with stronger employment protection (Scherer, 2005; Wolbers, 2007). The more difficult it is for employers to dismiss existing workers, the less likely they are to have vacancies for new entrants to the labor market. Moreover, job matching in highly regulated labor markets may be more challenging and time-consuming in the first place, as both employers and job seekers tend to be more cautious

¹ For example, in Taiwan, the country with the largest proportion of students in vocational programs among the three (Bennell & Segerstrom, 1998), students from general and vocational high schools have virtually the same labor market outcomes upon leaving school (Tsai, 1998). Ishida (1998) also finds a similar result for Japan.

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