

# A Study on the Mechanism of Macao Youth's Employment and Entrepreneurship in Mainland China from the Perspective of Civil Society Empowerment — An Analysis Based on Grounded Theory

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**Abstract:** This study investigates the mechanism of Macao youth's employment and entrepreneurship in Mainland China through the lens of civil society empowerment. Utilizing Strauss and Corbin's grounded theory approach, we conducted 15 in-depth interviews with Macao youth who have settled in various sectors across the Greater Bay Area. The analysis reveals a dynamic interplay of policy opportunity, social capital mobilization, and civic motivation. A theoretical model of youth transregional mobility and civic engagement is developed, emphasizing institutional mediation and nonprofit pathways. The findings contribute to understanding youth participation in Chinese-style civil society construction and provide implications for policymaking in cross-border youth development.

**Keywords:** Macao Youth; Employment And Entrepreneurship; Civil Society Theory; Non-Profit Motivation; Social Capital; Guangdong–Hong Kong–Macao Greater Bay Area

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## 1.Introduction

### 1.1 Research Background and Importance

In February 2019, the Outline Development Plan for the Guangdong–Hong Kong–Macao Greater Bay Area, issued by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council, explicitly proposed to “support Hong Kong and Macao youth in employment and entrepreneurship in the Greater Bay Area and provide more opportunities and better conditions for innovation and entrepreneurship.” At the same time, Macao's limited geographical space, small population base, and reliance on the gaming and entertainment industry—where gambling contributes over 70% of the region's GDP (Wei, 2019)—have long restricted youth employment choices (Zeng, 2021; Han et al., 2024; Mao et al., 2024). The practices of Macao youth working and starting businesses in mainland China exemplify an emerging form of civil society within the process of regional integration (Zhengkun et al., 2025; Wang & Pan, 2022).

Existing scholarship has explored the policy frameworks, developmental pathways, and practical challenges facing Macao

youth in mainland employment and entrepreneurship (Fang, 2019; Ge, Bai & Wu, 2021; Xie & Hu, 2019). Scholars generally agree that under the “One Country, Two Systems” framework, Macao youth benefit from broader developmental space and stronger policy support. A multi-tiered and diversified policy system for youth entrepreneurship has already emerged in the Greater Bay Area (Yao et al., 2020; Yin & Liu, 2022). There is limited sociological research on Macao youth’s employment and entrepreneurship in the mainland, especially from the perspective of civil society theory. Existing studies have insufficiently addressed the factors influencing youth’s intentions, and rarely explore their public-mindedness, sense of social responsibility, or nonprofit motivations in depth (Dai et al., 2023; Feng et al., 2024; Gu & Liang, 2023). There is a lack of integrated analysis combining macro-structural and micro-action perspectives to reveal the processual mechanisms of civil society participation among Macao youth (Jiang et al., 2024; Zhu et al., 2023; Liu et al., 2023). These gaps not only hinder theoretical advancement in regional integration and youth-driven social innovation but also limit our understanding of youth agency in the nonprofit sector (Zhao et al., 2024; Wang & Liang, 2022).

## 1.2 Research Objectives

In response to these shortcomings, this study selects 15 Macao youth who have engaged in employment or entrepreneurship in mainland China as research participants. Employing Strauss and Corbin’s grounded theory, the study conducts open coding, axial coding, and selective coding to explore the behavioral mechanisms of these youth as civil society actors. The research aims are threefold: (1) To identify sociological and civil society factors influencing the intentions and behaviors of Macao youth in seeking employment or entrepreneurship in the mainland; (2) To examine their nonprofit motivations and paths of public participation during their professional engagement; (3) To construct a behavior mechanism model grounded in civil society theory and analyze the role of youth agency in regional integration and social innovation. Accordingly, the study addresses the following research questions: (1) What civil society factors influence the intentions and actions of Macao youth in pursuing employment and entrepreneurship in mainland China? (2) How do these youth express nonprofit motivation and civil society participation in practice? (3) What structural challenges do they face, and how do they convert intentions into actions? By generating theory from the bottom up, this study contributes both conceptually and empirically to the application of civil society theory in nonprofit research and the integration of youth within regional development.

## 2. Method

### 2.1 Grounded Theory

This study adopts civil society theory as the core analytical framework, emphasizing the agency and social participation paths of Macao youth as “civil society actors” in their employment and entrepreneurship activities in mainland China.

In terms of research methodology, this study applies Strauss and Corbin’s systematic grounded theory. Civil society theory serves as the guiding perspective for data analysis and theory generation, providing a theoretical foundation for systematically revealing the social mechanisms behind the cross-border mobility of Macao youth (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Wu & Li, 2020; Wu, 2013; Jia & Heng, 2016). The main procedures of grounded theory include phenomenon definition, data collection, open coding, axial coding, selective coding, and saturation testing (see Figure 1).

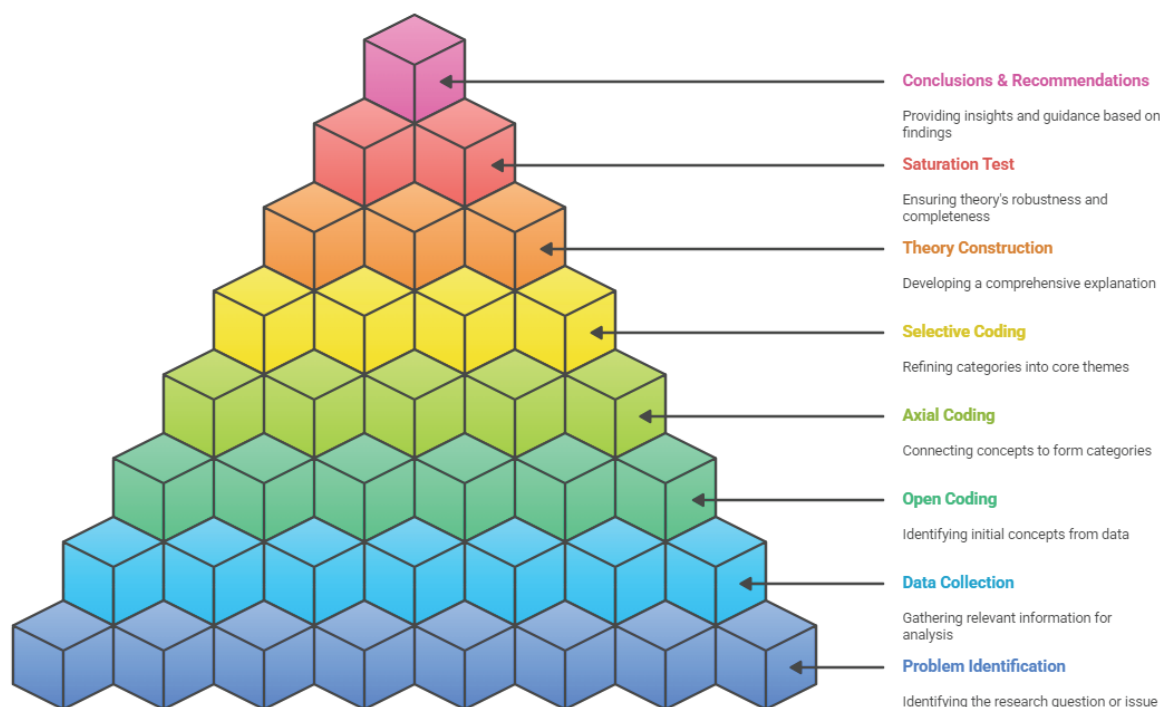
This study adopts the systematic grounded theory approach proposed by Strauss and Corbin (Strauss & Corbin, 1997). The main reason for this choice is that systematic grounded theory allows researchers to conduct data analysis and theoretical refinement step by step. It offers important guidance for qualitative research (Kenny & Fourie, 2015).

This highly inductive methodology offers both a conceptual framework and practical method for analyzing the behavioral mechanisms of Macao youth entering employment and entrepreneurship in mainland China. Therefore, this study starts from the textual data collected from interviews, using grounded theory to systematically refine the theoretical mechanisms and behavioral logic of Macao youth’s entrepreneurship in the mainland, aiming to contribute to their integration into national development and the Greater Bay Area.

Therefore, in the open coding phase, all first-hand interview data must be analyzed and categorized one by one (Yu & Yi et al., 2022). This includes classifying the motivations, contents, and changes of Macao youth’s employment and entrepreneurship in the mainland to clarify similarities and differences in the interviews, and to derive coding dimensions and categories. In the axial coding stage, the researcher further elevates these categories and dimensions to a higher level

of theoretical abstraction. Finally, in the selective coding stage, the entire process is compared in depth to identify the core categories and supporting attributes.

Figure 1. Research Procedures of Grounded Theory



## 2.2 Data Sources

The sample selection in this study followed several criteria. First, to ensure richness and diversity, the selected interviewees were Macao youth aged 18 to 35, working in various fields such as education, healthcare, technology, real estate, catering, and the internet. Second, to reflect the typical characteristics of Macao youth's entrepreneurship in the mainland, preference was given to participants who had worked or started a business in the mainland for a longer period, whose industries were well-known, and who had high personal reputations. Third, this study also included a few cases of failed entrepreneurship in the mainland for comparative analysis. In total, 15 Macao youth were selected as the main sample (see Figure 2). Their interview data were used for coding analysis and model construction, with one additional interview used for theoretical saturation testing.

## 3. Data Analysis

### 3.1 Open Coding

Open coding was conducted line-by-line to identify key motivations and behavioral patterns. The aim is to extract primary concepts directly from the original data, classify and integrate similar concepts, and thereby form more abstract conceptual categories (often called "categories" in grounded theory). First, sentences and phrases that best reflect the reasons, motivations, and processes of Macao youth seeking employment or entrepreneurship in mainland China were identified and marked. Second, the extracted phrases were further

Figure 2: Sample Information Tables

Macao Entrepreneurs in Mainland China				
Name	Year	Industry	Field Employment	Entrepreneurship Content
Mr. Li	2019	Internet	No specific employment mentioned	Built startup platform
Mr. Chen	2016	Education	No specific employment mentioned	K-12 education/training
Mr. Lü	2018	Research	Worked at research institute	No specific content mentioned
Mr. Qi	2020	Incubator	No specific employment mentioned	Tech incubation project
Mr. Shi	2018	Catering	No specific employment mentioned	Opened Macau-style restaurant
Mr. Jiang	2021	Internet	No specific employment mentioned	Developed Macau internet industry
Mr. Wang	2016	Social Welfare	Employed people with disabilities	Internet-related work
Ms. Chen	2017	Medical	Worked at equipment company	No specific content mentioned
Mr. Yang	2013	Real Estate	Worked in development company	No specific content mentioned
Mr. Liu	2018	Technology	No specific employment mentioned	Started business in incubator
Ms. Liang	2019	International Trade	Co-founded trade company	No specific content mentioned
Mr. Wu	2011	Business Management	Worked at trading company	No specific content mentioned
Mr. Long	2019	Internet	No specific employment mentioned	Started internet tech company
Mr. Huang	2013	Catering	Ran catering business	Created Macau-style brands
Mr. Cui	2021	Internet	No specific employment mentioned	Developed e-commerce platform

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summarized and categorized with an open mind, seeking to identify conceptual categories wherever possible (Shown in Table 1).

*Table 1. Example of the Open Coding Process*

Conceptual Category	Code (From opening coding)
Civic Identity Experience	Influence of Past History on Migration to Mainland
Human Capital	Educational/Social Capital
Motivation for Action	Reasons for Moving to Mainland
Social Network Support	Influence of Relatives' Networks
Resource Mobilization	Source of Funds
Institutional Convenience	Source of Information
Policy Dividend	Rare Policy Incentives
Social Environment	Better Mainland Development, Greater Attraction
Action Obstruction	Encountering Setbacks
Future Outlook	Enhanced Social Mobility
Sustained Action	Business Expansion / Industry Upgrade / Success
Entrepreneurial Spirit	Innovation and Risk-taking
Individual Traits	Social Personality
Contingent Events	Sudden Events Affecting Employment/Entrepreneurship
Technology Flow	Mutual Filling of Technology Gaps between Mainland and Macau
Structural Safeguards	Drawbacks of Employment/Entrepreneurship
External Social Capital	Help from Personal Networks

The advantage of open coding is that it maintains openness to various possible theories emerging from the original data. This allows for higher-level theoretical extraction from the identified open concepts (categories), providing a solid foundation for the subsequent axial coding.

### 3.2 Axial Coding

Axial coding further enhances the connections between these concepts and supports theoretical refinement. Based on open coding, axial coding for the topic of Macao youth's employment and entrepreneurship in mainland China led to the development of a condition-action-outcome model. In this process, civil society theory serves as the main analytical thread. It emphasizes the logic of social capital, social participation, and public responsibility at different stages, revealing the social mechanisms and collective attributes underlying youth action (Shown in Table 2).

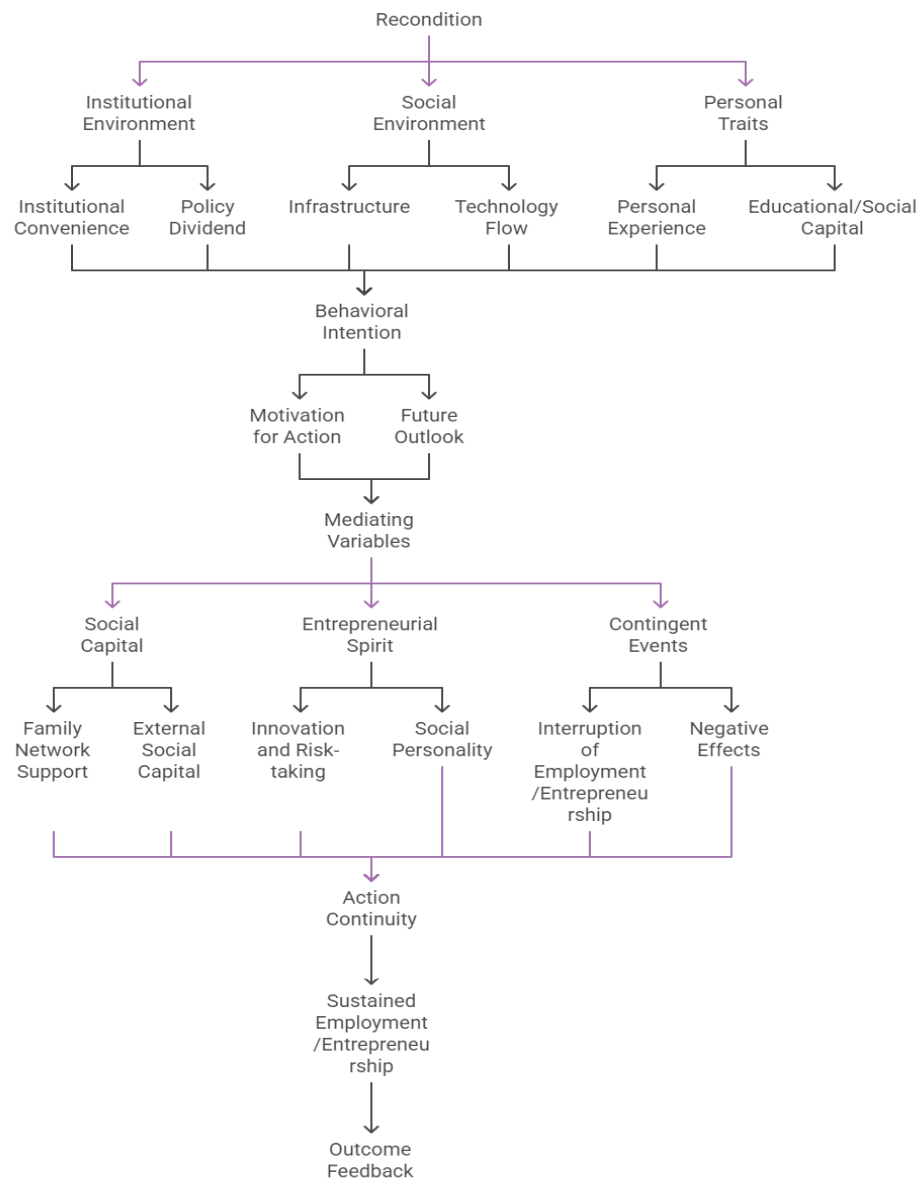
*Table 2 Theoretical categories formed by the main axis coding*

Main Category	Supporting Subcategory	Logical Relationship/Explanation
Institutional Environment	Institutional Convenience Policy Dividend	Talent flow, policy coordination, and people-to-people connectivity in the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macau Greater Bay Area
Social Environment	Infrastructure Technology Flow	Convenient transportation and connected networks between the mainland and Macau, mutual strengths and complementarities
Behavioral Intention	Motivation for Action Future Outlook	Desire to earn more money in the mainland, perception of huge future profits, rapid development in the mainland

Main Category	Supporting Subcategory	Logical Relationship/Explanation
Personal Traits	Personal ExperienceEduca- tional Background	Personal growth is closely tied to the mainland; individual development is closely linked to the country's future and destiny
Social Capital	Family Network Support External Support	Introductions and assistance from relatives and friends play an important role in Macau youth's employment and entrepreneurship in the mainland
Action Continuity	Sustained Employment/En- trepreneurship	Economic profit returns, improvement of social status, motivating Macau youth to make further efforts
Entrepreneurial Spir- it	Risk-takingPersonality Traits	Using property as collateral, being pioneering and unyielding in the face of chal- lenges
Contingent Events	Interruption of Employ- ment/EntrepreneurshipNeg- ative Effects	Disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, separation from family and friends

### 3.3 Selective Coding

Figure 3: Storyline diagram of young people from Macao seeking employment and starting businesses in mainland China



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At this stage, the behavioral chain is mapped and interpreted through the lens of civil society theory. This further reveals how Macao youth, through social participation and non-profit practice, achieve a dual embedding of the individual and society, as well as the self and the public sphere. The main storyline follows the logic from intention to action. Along this storyline, four core categories with logical connections are derived: preconditions, behavioral intention, mediating variables, and outcome feedback (Shown in Figure 3). There are also many mediating variables between behavioral intention and entrepreneurial outcomes, which can either facilitate or hinder their employment and entrepreneurship. At this stage, by analyzing the behavioral chain and drawing on civil society theory, the study further uncovers how Macao youth achieve mutual embedding between individuals and society, as well as between the self and the public sphere, through social participation and non-profit practices.

A supplementary interview confirmed theoretical saturation. Through repeated comparison, no new categories were found, and the data fit well with the storyline established in Figure 2. This indicates that the selective coding reached strong theoretical explanatory power, achieving theoretical saturation in grounded theory.

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1 Civil Society Factors and Employment and Entrepreneurial Intention

This study finds that the employment and entrepreneurship of Macao youth in mainland China are influenced by institutional environment, personal characteristics, and social networks.

First, the institutional environment is one of the main factors affecting Macao youth's employment and entrepreneurship in the mainland. In recent years, both the central government and Guangdong local authorities have issued policies to attract Hong Kong and Macao youth to work and start businesses in mainland China. The interview data also show that policy advantages and a favorable policy environment in the mainland are important factors attracting Macao youth to seek employment and entrepreneurship. For example, Mr. Huang, who began operating a restaurant in Guangzhou in 2013, felt that policies for Hong Kong and Macao youth in the mainland were improving, which enabled him to obtain a bank loan quickly in 2018 and open branches in Zhuhai and Shenzhen. The institutional environment not only provides policy support and legal guarantees, but also reflects the institutional embeddedness of civil society and the state's guidance of youth mobility. Civil society theory emphasizes that, with institutional facilitation and policy benefits, youth can participate more actively in public affairs and social innovation.

Second, the personal characteristics of Macao youth are also key factors influencing their willingness to work or start businesses in the mainland. Prior experience with the mainland has a positive effect on their willingness to work or start a business there. For example, some respondents' parents are originally from mainland China, so they visited frequently in childhood. This allowed them to witness the pace of development firsthand, generating a sense of identification with the mainland and leading them to seek opportunities there as soon as possible. Many respondents also stated that limited education restricted their upward mobility in Macao, while the mainland offered greater prospects. However, the study finds that Macao youth with very limited educational backgrounds (high school or below) have difficulty developing in the mainland. Thus, appropriate educational background is also a condition influencing their consideration of employment and entrepreneurship in the mainland. Their rich social experience and educational capital not only enhance their agency, but also represent a typical path of self-development as members of civil society.

Third, social networks also play an important role in promoting Macao youth's employment and entrepreneurship in mainland China. This study finds that Macao youth who have relatives or friends living and working in the mainland are more inclined to seek opportunities there. Information about employment and entrepreneurship obtained through social networks is of high quality, making them more willing to move. As noted, many Macao youth interviewed benefited from recommendations by relatives. The act of obtaining resources through social networks is referred to as individual social capital in the literature (Portes & Sensenbrenner, 1993). Thus, Macao youth with sufficient social capital are more likely to pursue employment and entrepreneurship in mainland China.

Civil society theory stresses that social networks and external social capital are the basis for aligning individual and collective interests and help youth shift from individual actions to collective social participation.



## 4.2 Non-Profit Motivation and Civil Society Participation Mechanism

As shown in Figure 3, the behavioral process of Macao youth pursuing employment and entrepreneurship in mainland China is influenced by several mediating variables. These mediators mainly include social capital, spiritual qualities, and contingent events.

First, the social capital of Macao youth plays a facilitating role in their employment and entrepreneurship in mainland China. Under favorable policy incentives, Macao youth can quickly gain institutional legitimacy, helping them overcome the initial difficulties of working or starting a business. Those with denser and more connected social networks in the mainland are more likely to succeed and to overcome challenges. Conversely, youth with weaker social networks are more likely to face setbacks or failure. For example, although government policy offers many conveniences for Macao youth, those who lack access to this information may miss out on opportunities, while information shared through social networks helps eligible youth to benefit. Thus, accessing employment and entrepreneurship resources through social networks enables Macao youth to obtain critical information, financial support, and credit more efficiently, which is crucial for integrating into national development and improving outcomes. Interview data show that many respondents actively help others and participate in voluntary work, reflecting the practical role of non-profit motivation in employment and entrepreneurship.

Second, spiritual qualities also play a positive role in the sustained employment and entrepreneurship of Macao youth in the mainland (Huang, 2003). Interview data reveal that Macao youth's aspirations and perseverance are crucial factors in their decision to work or start businesses in cities like Zhuhai and Guangzhou. Many interviewees showed a strong sense of adventure when launching or expanding businesses, sometimes even mortgaging family property or moving to the mainland against family wishes. Most Macao youth also display a willingness to endure hardship, living in less favorable conditions compared to Macao and working in remote areas or innovation parks, yet persisting toward their goals. Many respondents emphasize not only economic benefits but also social value and public good, such as supporting disadvantaged groups and leading social initiatives, indicating a strong non-profit motivation.

Third, contingent events also present challenges for Macao youth working and starting businesses in mainland China. Such events are characterized by unpredictability and structural impact. For instance, the outbreak of COVID-19 posed significant obstacles for Macao youth moving between Macao and the mainland. Although epidemic prevention policies are increasingly aligned between Macao and the mainland, as a special administrative region under "One Country, Two Systems," there are still barriers to mobility. Some respondents noted difficulties in quickly integrating into local networks due to their Macao identity, despite making friends nationwide. Other contingent events—such as personal relationship issues, family separation, or sudden financial crises—can disrupt or even terminate employment and entrepreneurial activities, which poses a challenge to national development strategies in the Greater Bay Area.

Faced with such events and uncertainties, Macao youth display strong social resilience and self-regulation. Civil society theory posits that crisis and uncertainty are opportunities for spontaneous mutual aid and enhanced public participation. In addressing structural shocks, individuals use social capital and collective support to achieve psychological and behavioral adjustment, which embodies the essence of non-profit motivation and civil society spirit.

## 4.3 Structural Dilemmas and the Intention-Action Transformation

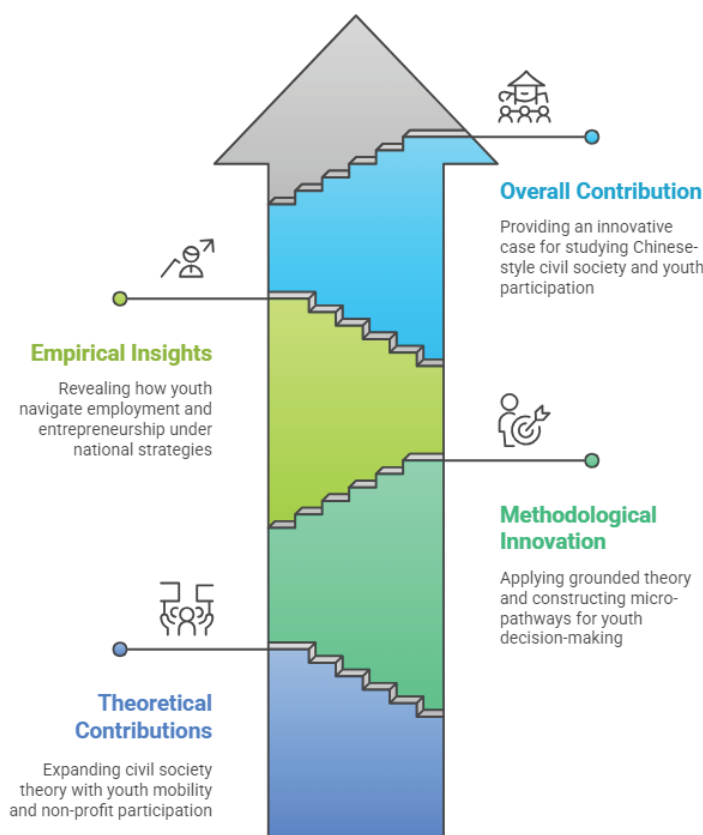
Research shows that Macao youth face structural barriers during employment and entrepreneurship in mainland China (Fang, 2019). However, this study finds that most of these issues are effectively resolved in practice. Yet, Macao youth still experience difficulties adapting to local work and living environments, lack of national treatment, and misunderstandings from local communities, all of which impact their employment and entrepreneurship in the mainland.

First, adaptation to the local work and living environment is a major challenge for Macao youth in the mainland. Differences in educational systems and political structures between Macao and mainland China often create problems. For example, when a Macao youth-founded company in the mainland reached the required number of party members, they were asked to establish a Party branch. The Macao youth founder lacked experience in handling such matters. In addition, some Macao youth speak only Cantonese and are not fluent in Mandarin. While this is manageable with Guangdong locals, communication with most Mandarin-speaking employees and clients remains problematic. Structural obstacles arise not only from imperfect

policies and institutions but also from deeper challenges of cultural identity, social integration, and language adaptation. Second, the lack of national treatment brings many challenges to Macao youth working and living in the mainland. Many interviewees expressed concerns about policy discontinuity and the risks it poses to their entrepreneurial activities. Despite progress in granting Macao residents equal treatment in the mainland, issues with social security, healthcare, and related systems persist. Civil society theory posits that only with equal rights and treatment can members fully realize self-value and actively participate in public affairs. Identity and social integration issues encountered by Macao youth in the mainland are key variables affecting their transformation from intention to action.

Third, generous policy incentives for Macao youth in the mainland may generate dissatisfaction among local youth. The construction of the Greater Bay Area has widespread public support and mobilizes diverse resources. However, a series of favorable policies for Hong Kong and Macao youth may be misunderstood by some local residents. The distribution of policy resources among youth groups reflects the reality of pluralistic interaction and interest competition in civil society. Achieving sustainable cross-regional youth mobility requires policy coordination and social dialogue to alleviate structural tensions and promote integration and cooperation.

Figure 4. Diagram of Research Significance Process



## 5. Conclusion

This study, grounded in civil society theory and using systematic grounded theory, investigates the employment and entrepreneurship of 15 Macao youth in mainland China. Findings reveal that institutional environment, social capital, and personal characteristics jointly shape their cross-border mobility. Beyond economic goals, many youth demonstrate civic responsibility through public welfare and social innovation. The study constructs a behavioral mechanism model showing how preconditions influence intention, and mediating factors—such as social networks and contingent events—affect outcomes. Challenges such as adaptation barriers, lack of national treatment, and identity misunderstandings hinder full integration. Compared with transnational migration, Macao youth benefit from unique policy support under the “One Country, Two Systems” framework, enabling legal recognition and resource access. This research supplements prior policy-centered studies by offering a sociological, process-oriented analysis of how Macao youth navigate cross-border work and entrepreneurial paths. It expands the application of civil society theory to the Chinese context and provides practical insight



into youth integration within the Greater Bay Area. Ultimately, the sustainability of youth participation depends not only on human capital but also on institutional facilitation and social embeddedness.

## 6. Significance

As shown in Figure 4, this study expands the intersection of civil society theory, youth mobility, and non-profit participation in academic research. It proposes a cross-regional employment and entrepreneurship mechanism model for Macao youth, with civil society factors at its core. Methodologically, the study employs systematic grounded theory to clarify the micro-level pathways from intention to action among youth. Empirically, it reveals how Macao youth integrate institutional advantages, social capital, and personal resources under national strategies, balancing both economic and non-profit goals. This provides an innovative example for research on Chinese-style civil society and youth participation.

## Funding

no

## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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