The Ant Tribe – a product of a misalignment between China’s employment and education aspirations?

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HS4008 Literature Review

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The Chinese Dream, most affectionately known as “中国梦”, bear resemblance to that of the American Dream. Citizens are encouraged to pursue their dreams and interests, for the betterment of both self and the country. With this ideology slung over their chest, there emerge a young but vocal generation, full of aspiration and armed with knowledge – the Chinese graduates. These graduates are otherwise known as the “Ant Tribe” - a neologism that a sociologist Lian Si coined as they share similarities to ants. Being intelligent and diligent yet living anonymously in squalid areas, this Ant Tribe phenomenon is drawing attention worldwide. In addition, they are increasing by the number, a record 7.26 million students graduated from China’s universities in 2014, a seven-fold increase from 15 years ago – which is touted to continue rising given China’s robust tertiary education system. Unemployment rate for these graduates stand at 15% on official numbers, with the real figures edging 30%. (Sharma, 2014) This will translate to roughly 2.3 million jobless people, a cumbersome issue for the government to arrest. How did this happen is interesting, and through examining the causes can we attempt to find a solution. Current literature studies on Ant tribes prove to be minimal, understandably so as it is a relative new concept which surfaced in 2009. At best, we can draw comparison to similar groups of people internationally, such as “NEET” (Not in Employment, Education and Training, 尼特族) and “KIPPERS” (Kids in Parents’ Pocket Eroding Retirement Savings, 啃老族) (温卓毅 & 岳经纬, 2011). Nonetheless, one should note that the cultural context as well as social structures are by and large differs in various places, and hence cannot be used as a direct mirror of the Ant Tribe. As such, this paper will build upon existing ones like Zhang’s (2012) which speaks out about the plight of the Ant tribe as well as connecting to the macro national level of employment issues. The first part of this essay will talk about the obsession with education at a nationwide level, followed by how education and employment aspiration failed to keep up with one another, resulting in the emergence of the Ant Tribe. This existing structural problems are exacerbated by existing social and cultural conditions in China,
such as the One Child policy and traditional family values. Lastly, the essay will end off with some suggestions on the way forward to bridge this gap.

**Why is Education Important?**

Education is held on a pedestal in China, mainly as it’s the primary mechanism for upwards social mobility. The function of education as a meritocratic progression has its roots dated back to Imperial China, where aspiring individuals are to study hard to acquire knowledge to cope with the Imperial Examinations. Successful candidates were guaranteed a prosperous and stable life as officials and this was a very attractive offer in turmoil times. As such, the quest for knowledge back in ancient China was very much entrenched in the Chinese society. Fast forward several hundred years, although syllabus and focus for education has evolved tremendously, the function of education persisted. In their article, Xiao and Li (2013) has ascertained that examinations remained a large affair today. Education has manifested into fervent revision and studying for exams, particularly so for the University Entrance exams, or GaoKao. To many, parents and child alike, they understand and internalize the importance of such examinations, and will not hesitate to employ some of the most extreme methods to prepare for such examinations. They are aware that this is an opportunity they have to seize, to follow their dreams and strive for a better life. This all starts with getting good scores in GaoKao to qualify for one of the top universities of course. These are all baby steps towards securing a good job and thereafter leading a comfortable life.

In addition, as Crabb (2010) rightfully pointed out, with the adoption of policies that reassign state responsibilities to that of the private sphere, the education industry became a boom. The four process of reform - marketization, massification, privatization and decentralization (Liu, 2014) are the crux of the reform, with the market now becoming the dominant mechanism in resources distribution. Central planning has taken a back seat and this allows private industry
to step foot into the education industry. This industry is an immensely lucrative one, with the top companies like New Oriental Education raking in an annual revenue of USD1.055 billion. (Report in China, 2014) Tuition centers, private schools as well as enrichment classes and educational materials sprung up by the number and are widely popular. Parents are said to pass off their dreams and aspirations to their children, wanting the very best they could afford for their children and enroll them in numerous classes to increase their cultural capital despite the cost. While this form of knowledge has no direct correlation with their preparation in GaoKao, many believe that this form of cultural capital cultivation is raising the Suzhi (Quality) of the child, which will eventually be beneficial for him/her.

The Chinese government are aware of the benefits of education in raising the Suzhi of its people. It recognizes the impact of improved literacy and numeracy skills and envision how Chinese people can be a class of Gao Suzhi (high quality) people that are well respected globally. As such, a nine-year free compulsory education system from primary to secondary school is implemented. The government has a national development agenda to produce Gao Suzhi people that will contribute to the prosperity and health of the nation (Jeffreys, 2009). With that in mind, education became accessible even to rural areas, children were given opportunities to leave their villages for greener pastures, and to chase their Chinese Dream. Investing USD250 billion a year on “human capital” and doubling number of colleges and universities to 2409 (QS, 2014) in China shows the Chinese government’s intent on raising the educational landscape for every Chinese.

**The Problem with Employment**

With the proliferation of education institutions, huge volume of graduates are appearing every year. As written in the introduction, more than 7 million young and zealous graduates are flooding the job market annually. More often than not, the supply of graduate exceed the
demand from job agencies and many are left jobless. Graduates are left frustrated unable to find a relevant job where they can apply their learnt skillsets as many job openings requires only short term menial labor. Coupled with high rent in urbanized area, we find ourselves dealing with a growing army of Ant tribes, all brightly educated, yet lack opportunities to shine. In fact, The Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security admitted that graduate unemployment was even more serious than expected and in the Beijing area alone, only just under one third of all graduates had signed job contracts by April 2013 (Song, 2013).

Success in attempting to create more jobs has been at best liminal. There are rampant structural unemployment everywhere, where there seemed to be a mismatch of skills required for the job. Many graduates have to settle for physical labour in order to survive. This is largely due to the lack of ability for the economy transit fully from an industrialised to a knowledge-based one, trailing behind the educated population and hence creating this occurrence of the Ant Tribe. Wang (2012) seemed to echo the same sentiments as well, where he and Lai argues that the liberation of higher education led to a surplus of knowledge-based worker where economic structure could not keep up. In 2001, China unveiled the tenth five-year plans Premier Zhu Rongji which promises to enhance industries with new technology, as well as open new frontier through sciences and mobilising human resources. In the grand plan, low income for urban residents is slated to be raised as party members seek to increase the size of the economic pie and decrease social inequality. In reality, the economy is still very much a “work in progress” in modernisation efforts. Due to different developmental stages amongst provinces, China’s employment sector remains largely segregated. Poor infrastructure as well as uneven, uncoordinated development of local economy proves detrimental for a knowledge-based employment. In Albert and Dahlman’s book (2001), they cited that China needs to create 8 to 9 million employment opportunities annually to keep up with the influx of eligible employees. While new employment sector such as high technology and advanced manufacturing firms can
relieve some of these pressure, a bulk of these job employments still comes from labour intensive industries like textile and services (building and construction). Furthermore, with the increased preference of automation to cut cost and increase productivity, many huge manufacturing firms like electronics and telecommunications industries are diverting their resources elsewhere by laying off workers in a bid to cut cost and maintain their export competitiveness. As a result, while the government wants to shift away from agriculture, low skills services and low, medium technologies towards a knowledge-driven, high technological expertise niche, they find themselves stuck in a conundrum as the former are areas which hire the most people. Furthermore, such economy restructuring has actually thrown tens of millions of people (Cai, 2002) out of a job, and the Chinese government is at handful dealing with skilled and unskilled workers. With regards to the Ant Tribe however, menial labour jobs neither have any attractive prospects nor competitive remuneration, and graduates are faced with increasing difficulty in locating jobs in commensuration with their education and expectations. The discrepancy between the ideal employment setting and the actual situation is what causes the emergence of the ant tribe as the relationship between an emerging, knowledge-driven economy and various social institutions such as education is established due to their interdependency. This form of economy is actively shaping how social institution should behave. To cater for such high demand of information workers, education has to be consistently revamped to keep up with the requirement of this service-based economy which is knowledge driven – which is what China has done, and the effects are resounding.

**The longevity of the Ant Tribes**

With current employment situation in mind, the Ant Tribe issue are worsened by existing socio-cultural factors as well. Apart from the continuous inundation of graduates from various education institutions, the Ant tribe share a particular notable attribute – their resilience to adversity. As such, the volume will always increase as the existing pool are determined to
succeed regardless of the odds. This could be attributed partially to their aversion towards disappointing their parents, where they rather stick it out in the cities than to return back home ashamed. Since parental involvement starts at a very tender age in building up cultural capital of the child, they (the children) are aware of the resources and sacrifice invested into them, taking failure out of the equation. The implementation of the One-Child Policy would also mean these children are their parents’ single hope, living on their aspirations for them (Crabb). They have deep connections with their family, and the motivation to lift their family out of poverty powers them through hardship. As such, it is difficult for the child to return home, as it is akin to not being successful as what their parents have wanted them to be.

Another reason as to why the Ant tribe persisted is due to their socialisation into the urbanised life. While it is possible for them to return back to rural areas to help out with their family, they found themselves accustomed to city life, unable to adapt back and hence trapped poverish in bustling cities with skyscrapers. Those who decide to leave big cities to seek opportunities in smaller ones are not yielding much success either. They discovered that a good degree or even competence does not guarantee employment (Durden, 2012). Rather, social capital, networking as well as family background/influence matter so much more. This relationship with others or “关系” is immensely important in China’s context, but raises a problem where the society's resources and opportunities are increasingly concentrated in the hands of a few, and people in the middle and lower strata of society are becoming increasingly marginalised and are finding that improving their lives is getting harder.

There are societal concerns with this Ant Tribe phenomenon. With the prolonged “residence” in the Ant Tribe, many of these graduates undergo psychological changes after going through the disenchantment with the labour structure. While the younger ants may hold lofty aspiration and are willing to go through adversity to get there, the older ones do not have the luxury of time. In Zhang (2012) article, he states that fresh graduates believe they have control over their
success and about 70% of the “ant tribe” pursues ambitions for their future, and are certain of success. There are more than 50% who believe that they will become the elites of society in 5-10 years. However, the struggle against fierce labour competition as well as dire economic condition will wear these ant down, the pressure to accumulate enough wealth for marriage or housing being to mount. Without a stable job and uncertain outlook, these older ants are prone to huge psychological stress and depression-related illness. Interestingly, China’s leading cause of death amongst youth is suicide, with 287000 people, averaging 1 every 2 minute committing suicide. More of them are prevented of course, but with this number unreleased, we can only work with the stated. Further research will be needed though, to ascertain if the psychological conditions of these old ants have a correlation to this alarming suicide rate.

The Way Forward

The government has not rest on their laurels arresting this issue. They tried to create alternative employment channels to ease congestion into the saturated job market. Five channels are promoted by the government to alleviate the employment pressure on higher education graduates (Wang, 2004). First, graduates are encouraged to work in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and private enterprises. Such enterprises can enjoy a preferential policy on a bank loan up to two million Yuan at a reduced interest rate. Second, graduate are strongly encouraged to work at the ‘‘grassroots’’ level (基层) to serve the under-developed regions and communities. The government has established four programs offering various positions in rural areas, ethnic minority regions, and poverty-stricken communities. Third, research institutes are encouraged to hire university or college graduates to participate in national scientific research projects. Fourth, graduates are encouraged to be enlisted into the army for a service of two years. Finally, the government urges the graduates to start their own businesses, which not only solve the employment problem of their own but also help to expand employment opportunities for others. Graduates entrepreneurs can enjoy tax breaks and various subsidies for three years.
if their enterprises are registered within two years of graduation and an extra loan interest subsidy up to 100,000 Yuan if their businesses are launched in the same calendar year of graduation. However China still needs to arrest the issue on the “floating” population, where a huge pool of workers are available on the market. Its labour market is constrained by laws like “Hukou”, which restricts employment opportunities greatly through issuing residential permits in urban areas. More often than not, the Ant Tribe belongs to this floating population, where they are unable to find official jobs without official Hukou status and have to resort to settling for employment in the black market, taking on jobs such as factory workers, construction workers and cleaners. It will be a good start to reform the Hukou system partially, to allow for labour mobility to ease the unemployment crunch. In addition, for the transition towards a knowledge based economy, educational disparities across China needs to be reduced while network and information content has to be complete to accommodate a new generation of Gao Suzhi citizens.

In conclusion, we have discussed the notable obsession and importance of education in China, and how employment fails to keep abreast with educational reforms, resulting in massive unemployment. I have explained in detail how this process of structural unemployment happened and their victims include those with hardworking ethics and brilliant minds – the Ant Tribe. Their resilience as well as their will to succeed is admirable, but yet many grew disenchanted over the years when they found out no progress were made. Many were still penniless after years and time is running out for them. This misalignment as stated in the introduction has given rise to this tribe, which is a cause of concern for society as larger societal problems like suicide and violence might erode from these pent-up unhappy people. For now, all is still peaceful as the Ant tribe are hopeful of achieving their dream one day. Nonetheless, this issue might turn political and violent if a sharp economic downturn ever happen in China.
References