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Between Glory and Failure: Identity Reconstruction of Elite Graduates in China

Chengzhe Yao
University of Glasgow, Glasgow, United Kingdom

Research Domains

Employability, enterprise and graduate careers (EE)

Abstract

This study explores how elite university graduates in China navigate the contradictions between academic success and precarious futures in the transition to the labour market. Drawing on fieldwork at job fairs in Shanghai, digital ethnography of an online community, and thirty-five semi-structured interviews, the study explores how graduates (re)construct their identity. It also discusses how the graduates internalise, reproduce, and resist dominant discourses of "failure" and "success". The mainstream responses focus on the class perspective and human capital theory, such as Bourdieu and Schultz, while the issue is more complex in contemporary China. For example, individual educational desires and career choices are intertwined with family expectations and official propaganda discourse. This study uses theoretical lenses from Modernity, Waithood, and Identity to reveal how neoliberal meritocracy fosters anxiety at the structure-time-individual level for youth. It calls for reclaiming higher education as a more inclusive space to move beyond market-driven discourses.

Full paper

Introduction

Higher education plays multiple roles in contemporary society. Many believe social mobility is one of the most important routes to achieving it. Others hold the contrasting view: it is the "accomplice" of the reproduction of social inequality, as higher education is increasingly caught in a paradox. In China, this paradox is also visible in the job market. Since 2020, more and more graduates claim to be "losers" in online media. They come from elite universities with the label of academic success, but are frustrated in the job-hunting market. They have developed a series of self-mocking Internet slang, such as "Lying down", "losers", "Involution", "small town swots", etc., to reflect the structural predicaments they

are facing and disillusionment. This phenomenon shows the picture of youth when educational success no longer guarantees socioeconomic advancement in China.

Methodology

This study draws on qualitative fieldwork conducted at job fairs in Shanghai, interviews with graduates, and digital ethnography of online communities. All the data collection work will begin in May of 2025. This helps to explore: 1) the current situation of the labour market and how the graduates engage in it; 2) how the graduates (re)construct their identities in the transition period; 3) how the graduates respond to external pressures from parents, institutions, and broader societal expectations. The data sources mainly from three ways: 1) Field notes from job fairs, including participant interactions, booth setups, and promotional materials; 2) Interviews with a total number of 35 current students and graduates from elite universities in China from diverse urban and rural backgrounds; 3) Online content such as posts and comments in Douban. The data will be analysed using thematic analysis and discourse analysis.

Theoretical Framework

Theoretically, this study engages with three levels of theories: The late modernity theories at the structure level, such as Beck's Risk Society, Bauman's Liquid Society, and Rosa's theory of social acceleration; the concept of "Waithood" at the time level; and identity theories such as Giddens' reflexive identity in individual level. These approaches help unpack the graduates' status in a liminal space, suspended in transitions, where the future appears indefinitely delayed. At the structural level, the relationship between education and employment is unstable. For many graduates, the university no longer guarantees transition into a career but suspends them in an ongoing state of uncertainty.

At the time level, the graduates are trapped in a cycle of preparatory work: it takes several years to prepare for civil service or postgraduate entrance examinations. At the same time, a kind of anxiety about time is gradually spreading because age is closely related to marriage and family formation in East Asian culture. These all make the graduates respond at the individual level; many turn to online communities to engage in ironic self-labelling and storytelling as strategies for identity reconstruction. Some scholars regard this as "silent resistance". This is not merely an individual's struggle but a manifestation of neoliberalism and meritocracy in higher education. Under the leadership of the CCP, they are expected to be outstanding to the Party and the state, but in reality, they are marginalised in the job market.

Discussion

In this context, higher education becomes less a transformative space and more a producer of frustrated mobility aspirations. An online community independent of formal higher education, formed around self-mock humour, job-seeking advice, and everyday storytelling, has become a site of care and solidarity. The Chinese graduates use this kind of irony and memes to express their complaints and despair, and build a collective discourse. These practices challenge the neoliberal logic dominating higher education institutions and the job market. In line with this conference's call, this paper argues to reflect the role of higher education institutions. To what extent are they reproducing the meritocratic discourse through their focus on quantifiable performance, academic hierarchies, and the performance of graduates? In the elite universities of China, the scene where students fiercely compete in all kinds of exams and activities to obtain recommendations for postgraduate study has been noticed. I argue for reimagining higher education as a space of relational care and try to notice the lived experiences of those invisible by dominant discourses.