

# The New “Lost Generation”:

## Inequality and discontent among Chinese youth

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Discussion of Chinese youth in the popular media is often obscured by such unhelpful labels as “post-1980” (*balinghou* 八零后) and “post-1990” (*jiulinghou* 九零后) that tend to focus on collective, generational characteristics. As the first generation of single children, they are seen as self-centred “little emperors” lacking the talent for communication and horizontal interaction. Growing up in the reform era of economic prosperity and material abundance, they are portrayed as obsessed with appearance and consumption. Their fixation with high-technology products in particular have won them names such as “Apple fans” (*guofen* 果粉) and the “thumb tribe” (*muzhi zu* 拇指族). With little memory of the 1989 Tiananmen demonstrations, they are seen as being less concerned about politics and more carefree. Unused to hardship, they are characterised as having the unique inability to “eat bitterness” (*chiku* 吃苦), succumbing easily to criticism and pressure. They are called “strawberries” (*caomei* 草莓) – polished and attractive in outward appearance but highly vulnerable and easily wounded. Boys, in particular, are criticised for becoming increasingly effeminate (*naxing de nüxinghua* 男性的女性化).<sup>(1)</sup>

Several recent reports in the Chinese press have focused on the current situation of young people, revealing a much more complex reality. Four years after Lian Si forged the term “ant tribe,” the new catchword today is *diaosi*, which refers to a new class of “losers,” analysed at length by *New Weekly* in 2012. The discontent experienced by the young people self-identifying as *diaosi*, who feel excluded from the benefits of China’s growth, can be linked to several recent incidents related to the phenomenon of “second-generation rich” placing themselves above the law. The first April 2013 issue of *South Review* similarly ran a cover story on the creeping calcification of social strata (*jiēcēng jiānghuà* 阶层僵化; *jiēcēng gùhuà* 阶层固化) in contemporary China. The editors deplore the emergence of a “winner-takes-all” (*yíngjiā tōngchī* 赢家通吃) society dominated by special interest conglomerates (*tēshū lìyì jítuán* 特殊利益集团) that operate above the law according to “privilege-consciousness” (*tequān yìshì* 特权意识), and warn of the worrying reproduction of social strata (*jiēcēng zāishēngchǎn* 阶层再生产), which deprives young people of the perspective of upward mobility.

This essay, taking recent reports on the post-80s and post-90s as a starting point, will attempt to deconstruct these labels in order to shed light on some of the more poignant social dividers and barriers confronting different groups within the new generation. It begins with an analysis of the *diaosi* phenomenon and underlying social realities. It then examines the root causes of popular frustration by looking at the unlevel field of Chinese ed-

ucation to reveal a system that almost systematically reproduces disparity across generations. The next sections focus respectively on university graduates, many of which make up China’s growing “ant tribe,” and new-generation rural migrant workers, whose labour rights and rights to urban citizenship remain highly circumscribed. I point to the ways by which Chinese youth, who call themselves the “new lost generation,” seek to redefine their role as citizens on their own terms.<sup>(2)</sup>

### *The new “losers” and a society increasingly based on status*

An increasingly pervasive sense that talent and effort cannot change one’s fate has produced collective expressions of self-mockery and self-deprecatory humour (*zìwǒ tiāokǎn* 自我调侃). *Diaosi* (屌丝), a coarse word for loser, has become a popular cultural phenomenon and a symbol of self-identification for many young male Chinese.<sup>(3)</sup> In 2011 it was searched for 41 million times on Google and mentioned over 2 million times on Weibo.<sup>(4)</sup> Popularised through Internet blogs and chatrooms, *diaosi* refers to those who come from humble family background and are lacking in good looks. According to the ten “requirements” for a *diaosi* listed by the Southern Metropolis Weekly, one must, among other criteria, always have less than 1,000 *yuan* in one’s pocket, have no connection to wealth in social circles, go on long-distance vacation only once every three to five years, and have no more than three girlfriends before marriage in order to qualify as a *diaosi*.<sup>(5)</sup> *Diaosi* stand at the opposite end of the social spectrum from the “tall, rich, and handsome” (*gāofùshuāi* 高富帅) and the “pale, rich, and beautiful” (*baifūměi* 白富美), boys and

1. Alec Ash, “Two PKU professors on China’s youth,” *China Beat*, 13 July 2013, [www.thechinabeat.org/?p=2350](http://www.thechinabeat.org/?p=2350) (accessed on 9 April 2013).
2. Evan Osnos, “A Collage of Chinese values,” *The New Yorker*, 21 March 2012, [www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/evanosnos/2012/03/a-collage-of-chinese-values.html](http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/evanosnos/2012/03/a-collage-of-chinese-values.html) (accessed on 9 April 2013).
3. For a detailed evolution of the term *diaosi* in Internet cultures, see issue No. 373 of *New Weekly*, 15 June 2012. On the *diaosi* culture see also “Diaosi: Yige zitou de dansheng” (*Diaosi*: The birth of a term), *iFeng i-talk*, 27 February 2012, [www.news.ifeng.com/opinion/special/diaosi/](http://www.news.ifeng.com/opinion/special/diaosi/) (accessed on 22 April 2013).
4. Xiong Yuqing, “Feng Xiaogang: Shame on those who call themselves ‘diaosi,’” *Sina English*, 27 February 2013, [www.english.sina.com/culture/p/2013/0227/565928.html](http://www.english.sina.com/culture/p/2013/0227/565928.html) (accessed on 22 April 2013).
5. “Are you a ‘diaosi’ or ‘Chinumer’?”, *Want China Times*, 9 March 2013, [www.wantchinatimes.com/news-subclass-cnt.aspx?id=20130309000017&cid=1303](http://www.wantchinatimes.com/news-subclass-cnt.aspx?id=20130309000017&cid=1303) (accessed on 20 April 2013).

girls born with silver spoons in their mouths to affluent and well-connected families.

The primary difference between a *diaosi* and a *gaofushuai* is not so much whether one is rich, but rather how one's wealth is attained. *Gaofushuai* and *baifumei* have acquired pejorative meanings, referring to those whose personal success rests entirely on powerful family background. These terms can be connected with the phenomenon of the *erdai*. *Fu'erdai* (富二代), second-generation rich, refers to those born into wealthy families with powerful connections in mainland China. These are the privileged sons and daughters of government officials (*guan'erdai* 官二代), army officials (*jun'erdai* 军二代), Party members with deep ties to the Communist Party (*hong'erdai* 红二代), and superstars such as famous singers, actors, and actresses (*xing'erdai* 星二代). Born to join the ranks of the elite and the powerful, they are brought up in the best schools complemented with a diverse range of extra-curricular activities. Prosperous careers await them upon college graduation. Reports have testified to the "unwritten rule" (*buchengwen guiding* 不成文规定) that children of high-ranking officials will be given preferential treatment and are often handed jobs in the government.<sup>(6)</sup> A recent study by Tsinghua University researchers finds strong positive influence of parents' possession of political capital on children's career prospect, with *guan'erdai* graduates on average earning 13% more than non-*guan'erdai* graduates in their first job.<sup>(7)</sup> There are two times more *guan'erdai* graduates employed in the finance industry and five times more in Party organisations and government offices. "The father is the entry pass of the son" (*die shi er de tongxingzheng* 爹是儿的通行证) has become a popular and validated saying. In the public's mind, the *fu'erdai* has become the symbol of glaring social divides and social stratification in contemporary Chinese society. Their behaviour and extravagant lifestyles have become the subject of ridicule and disparagement, as was recently shown in the Li Tianyi case.<sup>(8)</sup>

From about 2010 onwards, *diaosi* has become an increasingly popular self-identity for young men who turn to the Internet to vent their dissatisfaction with inequality and lack of opportunity. The general frustration is that no matter how hard they work, their upward mobility is frequently stalled by those with family connections, and that their social status can never match those with powerful backgrounds. They desire to compete on effort and ability (*ping nuli ping nengli* 拼努力、拼能力), but instead the only "competition" that seems to matter is that between "fathers" (*pingdie* 拼爹), or between the strength of one's family background. Dissatisfied with reality but unable to change it, *diaosi* turn to humour and self-mockery, voluntarily belittling and denigrating themselves (*ziwo aihua* 自我矮化, *ziwo jiangge* 自我降格) while rejecting self advancement (*jujue shangjin* 拒绝上进) and sought-after models and theories of "success" (*chenggongxue* 成功学). On the blogosphere, among themselves *diaosi* would playfully compare each other's unfortunate circumstances (*bican* 比惨), and in front of those they see as privileged or self-elevating, they would ridicule them by labelling them as *gaofushuai* and make self-effacing comments such as "I kneel before you" (*geini guile* 给你跪了).

*Diaosi*'s self-mockery can be seen as a weapon of the weak in the sense that it represents a refusal to accept the standards of success imposed upon youth by society. By jestingly "bowing down" and "kneeling" before those society holds up as paragons of success, it displays a playful irreverence for authority and established institutions through a non-violent but uncooperative discourse. It can be argued that *diaosi* serves as a powerful group identification uniting those who have won their success through self-effort alone.<sup>(9)</sup> Being able to say that one is a *diaosi* is a declaration that one's achievements do

not depend on family resources. Self-mockery is perhaps also a defensive tactic adopted collectively by the *diaosi* – to laugh at your own "failure" before others laugh at you, to joke about yourself before others turn you into a joke. The cultural phenomenon of *diaosi* thus reflects a complex reaction to social reality: anger at inequality combined with cynicism, disillusionment, and an acute sense of powerlessness; desire for greater material comforts combined with disdain for secular standards of success; lack of self-confidence combined with pride in one's self-effort and marked contempt for the privileged.

While some are strongly critical of the *diaosi* culture, criticising it as a lowbrow version of "the Ah Q spirit of the new generation" (新时期的阿Q精神), reports such as the 2012 *New Weekly* cover story are able to put the finger on the inequality of opportunity and resources.<sup>(10)</sup> Even the official press, such as *People's Daily*, recognises that *diaosi* culture "originates exactly from the social reality of wealth polarization": "Many young people are faced with the reality that even if they make every effort to struggle, their wealth is still far behind" the *gaofushuai* and *baifumei*. "Therefore it is easy to understand their complex feeling of 'diaosi,' which contains their dissatisfaction about the reality and powerlessness and helplessness to change the situation."<sup>(11)</sup> However, the author ends by calling on *diaosi* to "face up to reality and rely on their independent struggles," pathetically reiterating the narrative of changing one's fate through individual effort. The *People's Daily* commentary represents the commonplace view that focuses on individual success and failure rather than systemic inequalities.

## The new "lost generation"

To understand the frustration widely shared by those who call themselves *diaosi*, it is necessary to examine the system that Chinese youth encounter and the realities they confront as they move from school to the job market. Their shared perception that family background matters much more than either talent or effort stems from their experience of an education system that not only fails to equalise socio-economic differences but actually aggravates them by reinforcing rural-urban imbalances. Entering working life, their sense of disillusionment is deepened by the lack of upwardly mobile opportunities in an overcrowded job market. The monopolisation of opportunities by youth from the upper strata of society means that those from the lower strata have basically "lost out at the starting line" (*cong qipaodian shang jiu yijing shule* 从起跑线上就已经输了).

- Li Ming, "Buchengwen guiding yao Zhongguo de ming" (Unwritten rules ruining China), 17 April 2013, Gongshiwang, [www.21ccom.net/articles/dipl/shpl/2013/04/17/81503.html](http://www.21ccom.net/articles/dipl/shpl/2013/04/17/81503.html) (accessed on 22 April 2013).
- The research surveyed 860 *guanerdai* graduates and 5199 non-*guanerdai* graduates. *Guanerdai* is defined in the research as those with at least one parent as government official. See Li Hongben et al., "Fumu de zhengzhi ziben ruhe yingxiang daxuesheng zai laodongli shichang zhong de biao-xian" (How does parents' political capital affect university graduates' performance in the labour market), *Jingjixue guikan*, Vol. 3, 2013. The author learnt of this study through the online forum Zhengjian and would like to thank Tao Yu for referring her to this forum.
- In February 2013, the arrest of this son of a prominent singer of the People's Liberation Army as a suspect in a group sexual assault case sparked public outrage. The 17-year-old Li Tianyi was previously sentenced to one year in a delinquent reform centre after attacking a couple whose car collided with Li's unregistered BMW. See "Son of PLA singer arrested over Beijing gang rape," *South China Morning Post*, 23 February 2013.
- For example, Han Han, the best-selling author and popular icon, also called himself "a pure *diaosi* from a rural area of Shanghai." See Wang Yiqing, "Looking for a success mantra for youth," *China Daily*, 5 January 2013, [www.chinadaily.com.cn/opinion/2013-01/05/content\\_16083114.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/opinion/2013-01/05/content_16083114.htm) (accessed on 22 April 2013).
- Xiong Yuqing, *ibid*.
- "Why 'diaosi' gets so popular in China," *People's Daily*, 14 November 2012, [www.english.people.com.cn/90782/8018162.html](http://www.english.people.com.cn/90782/8018162.html) (accessed on 30 April 2013).

## The unlevel field of education

In contemporary China, the socio-economic status and household registration (*hukou* 户口) of the family into which a young person is born have a singularly decisive effect on his or her access to better education. Although the central government has invested some 7.79 trillion *yuan* in education over the past five years, schools in less developed provinces and rural areas remain palpably underfunded.<sup>(12)</sup> According to figures provided by the Ministry of Education, while Beijing managed an annual education expenditure of 20,023 *yuan* per middle school student in 2010, the backward province of Guizhou could only afford a meagre 3,204 *yuan* per student per year.<sup>(13)</sup> In rural areas, the lack of access to quality education places rural youth many steps behind urban students at the starting line, yet few mechanisms are in place to correct such disadvantages at the tertiary level. The all-decisive college entrance examination commonly known as *gaokao* (高考) has for years been criticised for its bias towards urban students (*chengshi qingxiangxing* 城市倾向性). Top universities are noted for demonstrating preference for local students (*bendi youxianxing* 本地优先性), enrolling local urban students with lower exam scores at the expense of higher-scoring students from the countryside. As shown in a conference paper, this imbalance is clearly reflected in the rural-to-urban student ratio in China's top colleges: in 2010, rural students made up only 17% of Tsinghua's student population, despite the fact that over 60% of the 9.57 million students taking the *gaokao* that year had rural household registration.<sup>(14)</sup> Throughout the 1990s, the respective proportion of rural students enrolled in Tsinghua and Peking University has wavered between 15% and 22%. Students from rural areas are also less likely to be enrolled in popular subjects, which further impinges on their future career prospect.<sup>(15)</sup>

In urban areas, gaining equal access to quality education is a struggle for the children of rural migrant workers (*liudong ertong* 流动儿童, or *nongmingong zinu* 农民工子女). Because migrant children lack local *hukou* and are not included in the budgetary educational expenditure of local governments, urban schools continue to impose hefty surcharges on migrant parents, including the notoriously expensive temporary student fees (*jiedu fei* 借读费), education compensation payment (*jiaoyu buchang fei* 教育补偿费), and school selection fees (*zexiao fei* 择校费), the last of which can reach a prohibitive 230,000 *yuan* for sought-after schools, as shown in a China Labour Bulletin report in 2009.<sup>(16)</sup> Despite recent attempts to abolish some of these and to provide fee waivers, low-income migrant families continue to shoulder exorbitant costs in comparison to families with local *hukou*.

Access to education is also partially denied to children of middle-class inter-city migrants (*chengji yimin* 城际移民), the “green card tribe” (*lüka zhu* 绿卡族). Unlike rural migrant workers, they hold “green cards” – employment and residential permits (*gongzuo juzhu zheng* 工作居住证) – which allow them to enjoy much better benefits such as exemption from the temporary student fee.<sup>(17)</sup> However, like rural migrant workers, their non-local children face the barrier of *hukou* restrictions in applying for the college entrance examination. According to existing stipulations, and until the very recent introduction of policy changes, mainland students have been required to return to their place of household registration to take the *gaokao*.

In Beijing, parents of migrant children denied equal access to education have organised themselves into the United Citizen Action for Education Equality (*jiaoyu pingdeng gongmin lianhe xingdong* 教育平等公民联合行动) with the support of prominent lawyers and public intellectuals including Zhang Qianfan and Yu Jianrong.<sup>(18)</sup> In recent years, the group has staged mul-

multiple events such as the collection of signatures for petitions and fund-raising activities to fight for the abolition of *hukou* restrictions in higher education for non-local youth (*yidi gaokao* 异地高考). Responding to growing resentment, the announcement was made in December 2012 that Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangdong Province will begin phasing in access to the *gaokao* for migrant students. In the southern province, migrant students will be able to take the exam and apply to university on an equal footing with legal residents from 2016. In Beijing and Shanghai, they can sit the exam, but university applications will still be processed in their legal place of residence.<sup>(19)</sup>

It is only a very limited victory for migrant families, however, as stringent requirements remain in place for students to qualify for these more relaxed rules. Many migrant children are thus forced to return to their places of origin to continue higher education, and for those from less developed inland cities or the countryside this usually implies not only separating from their parents and adjusting to a change of environment on their own but also settling for vastly inferior schools.<sup>(20)</sup> Some drop out of school while others end up in polytechnics and vocational schools operated by local governments and private businesses, while their peers with local urban *hukou* enter prestigious, heavily subsidised universities with much greater ease.<sup>(21)</sup>

12. At the recent 12<sup>th</sup> National People's Congress, departing premier Wen Jiabao announced that in 2012 China finally hit 4% of GDP spending on education, a target set out almost 20 years ago in the 1993 “Reform and Development Program for China's Education.” The program promised target achievement by the year 2000, but foot-dragging meant that education spending failed to surpass the 3% mark even into the early 2000s. “China to place education spending under closer scrutiny,” *China Daily*, 9 March 2013, [www.english.sina.com/china/2013/0308/569571.html](http://www.english.sina.com/china/2013/0308/569571.html) (accessed on 11 April 2013).
13. In 1994, to rein in the power of increasingly strong local governments, comprehensive tax reform was introduced by Beijing to recentralise administrative and fiscal authorities. As the central leadership took back a large share of local tax revenues, local governments were left highly dependent on central transfers and had to develop their own means of financing basic social services. While prosperous coastal cities such as Beijing and Shanghai have benefited from a red-hot real estate market and reap windfall profits through ludicrous deals of land use right transfer, governments in the central and western provinces have lacked such means. Dexter Roberts, “Chinese Education: The truth behind the boasts,” *Bloomberg*, [www.businessweek.com/articles/2013-04-04/chinese-education-the-truth-behind-the-boasts#1](http://www.businessweek.com/articles/2013-04-04/chinese-education-the-truth-behind-the-boasts#1) (accessed on 11 April 2013).
14. Since this 17% includes students with rural household registration completing their secondary education in cities, the figure for students actually graduating from rural high schools and entering the two Beijing universities is much lower. Wang Simin, Zhou Hang, Chen Meishi, Zhu Weiyi, and Lei Changzhou, “Shei geng keneng shang Tsinghua?” (Who is more likely to enter Tsinghua?), paper presented at the 2011 Mobility and Cross-strait Development Seminar, Sociology Department of National Tsinghua University, Taiwan. The author would like to thank Aurore Merle for bringing this research to her attention.
15. Wang Simin et al., *ibid*.
16. “The children of migrant workers in China,” *China Labour Bulletin*, 8 May 2009, [www.clb.org.hk/en/node/100460#part2\\_heading02](http://www.clb.org.hk/en/node/100460#part2_heading02) (accessed on 17 April 2013).
17. These permits are granted by city governments following policies introduced in the 1990s to import talent for the high-technology sector and multinational corporations.
18. There have been detailed reports following the collective action of migrant parents in mainland news magazines. See, for example, “Ershiqi ge yue de ershiqi ci xingdong” (27 actions in 27 months), *China Newsweek*, 15 October 2012; “Buzhishi gaokao haiyou zunyan he quanli” (Not just about the college entrance exam, but also about integrity and rights), *China Newsweek*, 25 February 2013; and the cover story reports in *South Reviews*, No. 18, August 2012.
19. The issue of eligibility to take the *gaokao* in migrant-importing cities, affecting more than 11 million youth nationwide, has been at the top of the agenda dominating the annual sessions of the National People's Congress. See “Chinese cities to relax school entry for rural migrants,” *Reuters*, 30 December 2012, [www.reuters.com/article/2012/12/30/us-china-migrants-education-idUS-BREBTO3D20121230](http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/12/30/us-china-migrants-education-idUS-BREBTO3D20121230) (accessed on 18 April 2013).
20. Refer to the comments of parents and students in Wang Xing, “China's permit system bars rural migrants' children forced from Beijing schools,” *United Press International*, 27 March 2013, [www.upi.com/UPI-Next/2013/03/27/Chinas-permit-system-bars-rural-migrants-children-forced-from-Beijing-schools/45364407592959/](http://www.upi.com/UPI-Next/2013/03/27/Chinas-permit-system-bars-rural-migrants-children-forced-from-Beijing-schools/45364407592959/) (accessed on 18 April 2013).
21. For more detailed analysis of this issue, see “Nongmingong zinu jiaoyu: wunai huixiang” (The Education of rural migrant children: Returning to the countryside involuntarily), *Gongren ribao*, 17 December 2009, [www.news.xinhuanet.com/edu/2009-12/17/content\\_12659173\\_1.htm](http://www.news.xinhuanet.com/edu/2009-12/17/content_12659173_1.htm) (accessed on 18 April 2013); “Nongmingong zinu de gaozhong zai nali” (Where is the high school for the children of rural migrant workers?), *Xinhua*, 19 February 2008, [www.news.xinhuanet.com/employment/2008-02/19/content\\_7627861.htm](http://www.news.xinhuanet.com/employment/2008-02/19/content_7627861.htm) (accessed on 18 April 2013).

Emerging from three years of polytechnic training, few have well-paying careers awaiting them upon graduation.

### China's army of unemployed graduates

High rates of joblessness among graduates have become a noted phenomenon as college enrolment reached 60% nationwide. According to the Chinese College Graduates' Employment Annual Report published in June 2012, among 6 million 2011 university graduates, some 570,000 remained unemployed one year later, with at least 100,000 being financially dependent on their parents, a status colloquially referred to as "biting the old" (*ken-lao* 啃老).<sup>(22)</sup> The addition of 6.8 million fresh graduates in 2012 further aggravated the strain of finding employment, as the report found recruitment rates for the new batch to be as low as 42%.<sup>(23)</sup> Many fall into the unemployed category as soon as they graduate (*biye ji shiye* 毕业即失业). It is estimated that at least 13 million new jobs are needed to satisfy the basic demand arising from the fast-growing "army of unemployed graduates" (*daxuesheng shiye juntuan* 大学生失业军团).

The possession of a university degree does not guarantee better pay, either. Although the highest starting salary for 2011 graduates stood at an impressive 100,000 *yuan* per month, only 3% of graduates were able to fetch monthly salaries higher than 5,000 *yuan*. For 70% of those lucky enough to find jobs at all, the starting salary was below 2,000 *yuan* per month, about the same as the average monthly wage of migrant workers, which reached 2,049 *yuan* in 2011.<sup>(24)</sup> It is estimated that, due to labour shortages in factories and construction sites, the average starting salary for migrant workers grew nearly 80% between 2003 and 2009. During the same period, the starting wage for college graduates remained stagnant.<sup>(25)</sup>

Some critics contend that because parents struggle so much to send their children to universities and polytechnics, these tertiary institutions are almost "held accountable" for making sure students graduate. Dropout rates in China's universities are uncommonly low, resulting in large pools of unqualified degree-holders competing for jobs.<sup>(26)</sup> The change came after the 1997 Asian financial crisis, when, faced with the need to stimulate a faltering economy by boosting domestic consumption, the Zhu Rongji cabinet undertook the commercialisation and industrialisation of tertiary education. As a result of increased admissions, the number of university students grew fivefold in a decade, rising from just over 1 million in 1998 to 5.68 million in 2008.<sup>(27)</sup> Despite impressive growth in the recent decade, the Chinese economy simply has not generated enough professional, white-collar jobs to absorb the masses of graduates. The surge of supply in foreign language-speaking graduates well trained in accounting, finance, and computer programming has led to an overall decrease in the value of college degrees. Weak economies abroad in recent years have further increased the number of students returning to mainland China to seek employment after completing their education overseas, further intensifying competition in the job market.<sup>(28)</sup> Returnees, colloquially called the "sea turtles" due to identical pronunciation in the Chinese (*haigui* 海龟、海归), enjoy special privileges such as residency permits and preferential employment access that are not extended to local graduates. The latest figures released by the government show that this year a staggering 1.5 million people registered for the civil service entrance examinations, a 15% increase from 2012. It was reported in October last year that more than 9,000 people competed for a single job in the Chongqing municipal statistics bureau.<sup>(29)</sup>

**Table 1 – Geographical distribution of new-generation migrant workers in China**

Geographical distribution	Place of origin	Place of destination
Eastern region	31.40%	72.30%
Central region	38.20%	12.90%
Western region	30.40%	14.40%

Source: National Bureau of Statistics of China, March 2011.

Highly-educated graduates of local universities who are unemployed or stuck at temporary, low-paying jobs have come to be known as the "ant tribe" (*yi zu* 蚁族) following the publication of an enormously popular eponymous book by Lian Si, a post-80s researcher, in 2009. They are so called due to their similarity to ants – they have high levels of intelligence but are vulnerable in socio-economic terms, and they live together in colonies (*gaozhi ruoxiao qunju* 高智、弱小、群居). According to Lian Si, as of 2010 there were an estimated 150,000 "ants" each in Beijing and Shanghai, in addition to 100,000 each in five other major cities including Guangzhou, Chongqing, and Nanjing.<sup>(30)</sup> Most of them come from poor families with annual incomes of less than 50,000 *yuan*, and lack the money and social connections enjoyed by students from big cities. The rural-urban divide within the "ant" population is obvious – about 54.7% come from the countryside, while another 38.3% come from less economically advanced counties or prefecture-level cities.<sup>(31)</sup>

Although the option of returning home is available, the shame of going back without a promising career after their parents have spent almost all family savings on their education keeps them from doing so. They choose instead to stay behind in big cities, which continue to be perceived as places of opportunity, and endure the hardship of living on meagre incomes and in sub-standard housing. Unable to afford the cost of renting private flats in inner city districts, they turn to the suburbs, where bunk beds in sub-di-

22. The Annual Report is produced by consulting firm My China Occupational Skills (MyCOS) and published by the Social Sciences Academic Press as a Blue Book of Employment. The online version was consulted for this paper, available at [www.jyb.cn/job/tbch/2012/2012jybg/](http://www.jyb.cn/job/tbch/2012/2012jybg/) (accessed on 8 April 2013).

23. Chinese College Graduates' Employment Annual Report, *ibid*.

24. "Migrant worker wages increase by 21 percent," *China Labour Bulletin*, 1 May 2012, [www.clb.org.hk/en/content/migrant-worker-wages-increase-21-percent](http://www.clb.org.hk/en/content/migrant-worker-wages-increase-21-percent) (accessed on 30 April 2013).

25. Andrew Jacobs, "China's army of graduates struggles for jobs," *The New York Times*, 11 December 2010, [www.nytimes.com/2010/12/12/world/asia/12beijing.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/12/world/asia/12beijing.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0) (accessed on 15 April 2013).

26. Eric Fish, "Are China's colleges too easy?," *Economic Observer*, 1 April 2013, [www.eeo.com.cn/ens/2013/0401/242078.shtml](http://www.eeo.com.cn/ens/2013/0401/242078.shtml) (accessed on 15 April 2013).

27. Wu Zhong, "A revolutionary rallying cry for students," *Asia Times*, 3 March 2009, [www.atimes.com/China/KC03Ad01.html](http://www.atimes.com/China/KC03Ad01.html) (accessed on 6 May 2013).

28. Wanfeng Zhou, "China goes on the road to lure 'sea turtles' home," Reuters, 17 December 2010, [www.reuters.com/article/2008/12/18/us-financial-seaturtles-idUSTRE4BH0220081218](http://www.reuters.com/article/2008/12/18/us-financial-seaturtles-idUSTRE4BH0220081218) (accessed on 17 April 2013).

29. Chengcheng Jiang, "The iron rice bowl is back: Why young Chinese want to be civil servants," *Time*, 27 March 2013, [www.world.time.com/2013/03/27/the-iron-rice-bowl-is-back-why-young-chinese-want-to-be-civil-servants/](http://www.world.time.com/2013/03/27/the-iron-rice-bowl-is-back-why-young-chinese-want-to-be-civil-servants/) (accessed on 17 April 2013).

30. Sue Feng, "Eight Questions: Lian Si, author of 'Ant Tribe'," *China Real Time Report*, 21 December 2010, [www.blogs.wsj.com/chinarealtime/2010/12/21/eight-questions-lian-si-author-of-ant-tribe/](http://www.blogs.wsj.com/chinarealtime/2010/12/21/eight-questions-lian-si-author-of-ant-tribe/) (accessed on 16 April 2013).

31. Liu Meng, "Living among the 'ants' of Beijing," *Global Times*, 2 November 2009, [www.globaltimes.cn/life/art/2009-11/481959.html](http://www.globaltimes.cn/life/art/2009-11/481959.html) (accessed on 16 April 2013).

**Table 2 – Level of education of migrant workers in China**

Characteristics of human capital	Migrant workers	
	Previous generation	New generation
Average years of education	8.8	9.8
Level of education (%)		
Illiterate and semi-literate	2.2	0.4
Primary school	16.7	6.3
Middle school	65.2	64.4
High school	12.4	13.5
Vocational school	2.1	9
Tertiary and above	1.4	6.4
Participation in vocational training (%)	26.5	30.4

Source: National Bureau of Statistics of China, March 2011.

vided rooms stuck away in cramped alleys are available for rent at about 300-600 *yuan* per month.<sup>(32)</sup> Before its demolition in 2010, one such “ant colony” or “intellectual slum” was Tangjialing, a village in north-western Beijing housing more than 50,000 non-local residents, a significant proportion of which were unemployed or low-income recent graduates. Located close to Zhongguancun, China’s “Silicon Valley,” Tangjialing provided cheap accommodation for many who commuted to the city centre or worked in the neighbourhood as “sales in private business,” which for technical engineers means “peddling low-end electronic gear for the city’s computer wholesalers.”<sup>(33)</sup> Deemed an offense to the city image and a hotbed of unauthorised construction, Tangjialing with its prime location was redeveloped in 2010.<sup>(34)</sup> Nonetheless, the issue of “ants” was left unresolved – they simply swarmed to villages further out in the suburbs.<sup>(35)</sup>

To tackle the issue of youth unemployment, the government has recently encouraged the growth of small- and medium-sized cities to help ease pressure on over-expanded coastal metropolises. Steady economic growth resulting in rising salaries has vastly increased the attraction of working in second- and third-tier cities. Local governments have been eager to lure migrants back by organising large job fairs, even offering guaranteed job placement and monetary incentives to young graduates.<sup>(36)</sup> For the young graduates, the comparatively lower cost of living in inland cities means that buying property is an achievable task. The “tide of return” (*huixiangchao* 回乡潮) is becoming more observable in coastal cities such as Xiamen, which has seen the departure of more than 36,000 registered migrant workers in the first two months of 2013 alone.<sup>(37)</sup> It remains doubtful, however, whether this tendency can contribute to solving the problem of “ant tribe” graduates.

### “New-generation” migrant workers

While young urbanites are voicing their discontent, it seems that young people from rural areas are also increasingly well informed of their rights and hence prone to questioning their current status. Rural youths are moving en masse into cities at ever earlier ages in search of employment. While rural-to-urban migrants of the older generations left for the city at an av-

erage age of 33.7, rural youths born in the 1980s moved from the countryside at the average age of 21.1, and those born in the 1990s at 17.2.<sup>(38)</sup> Some join their parents, while others have friends or relatives who are able to arrange low-skilled jobs for them.

The mass exodus of young people from the countryside has over the years resulted in important generational variations within the rural-to-urban migrant workforce. According to figures released by the National Bureau of Statistics in 2011, as of 2010 there were about 84.87 million migrant workers born after the year 1980, making up 58.4% of the total migrant workforce.<sup>(39)</sup> Often called “second-generation” or “new-generation” migrant workers (*erdai nongmingong* 二代农民工; *xinshengdai nongmingong* 新生代农民工), they are more educated, more urbanised in their lifestyle, more rights-conscious, and altogether much less attached to the countryside than their predecessors. In terms of education, 28.9% of new-generation migrants have received high school education or above, compared with just 15.9% for first-generation migrants (Table 2). In terms of employment, while manufacturing is the largest employer of migrant labour across generational di-

32. Liu Meng, *ibid.* For photos of the ant tribe’s living conditions, see “China’s ‘ant tribe’: Life in boxy rooms,” *Sina English*, 12 March 2013, [www.english.sina.com/china/p/2013/0311/570490.html](http://www.english.sina.com/china/p/2013/0311/570490.html) (accessed on 16 April 2013).
33. Melinda Liu, “Smart, young, and broke,” *Newsweek*, 20 June 2010, [www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2010/06/19/smart-young-and-broke.html](http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2010/06/19/smart-young-and-broke.html) (accessed on 16 April 2013).
34. Zhao Yanrong, “Unauthorized constructions in Haidian to be demolished,” *China Daily*, 9 April 2010, [www.chinadaily.com.cn/cndy/2010-04/09/content\\_9705371.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/cndy/2010-04/09/content_9705371.htm) (accessed on 16 April 2013); “Migrants and graduates fall victim to Beijing’s relentless march of progress,” *China Labour Bulletin*, 4 May 2010, [www.clb.org.hk/en/content/migrants-and-graduates-fall-victim-beijing%E2%80%99s-relentless-march-progress](http://www.clb.org.hk/en/content/migrants-and-graduates-fall-victim-beijing%E2%80%99s-relentless-march-progress) (accessed on 16 April 2013).
35. Wang Wei, “Ant tribe swarms to new villages,” *China Daily*, 12 August 2010, [www.chinadaily.com.cn/cndy/2010-08/12/content\\_11141746.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/cndy/2010-08/12/content_11141746.htm) (accessed on 16 April 2013); “Ants’ feel the bite of being forced out,” *China Daily*, 2 June 2010, [www.china.org.cn/china/2010-06/02/content\\_20167725.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/china/2010-06/02/content_20167725.htm) (accessed on 16 April 2013).
36. Shi Yunhan, “A Turning Tide? Why more Chinese migrant workers are saying ‘goodbye’ to first-tier cities,” *Tea Leaf Nation*, 7 April 2013, [www.tealeafnation.com/2013/04/a-turning-tide-why-more-chinese-migrant-workers-are-saying-goodbye-to-first-tier-cities/](http://www.tealeafnation.com/2013/04/a-turning-tide-why-more-chinese-migrant-workers-are-saying-goodbye-to-first-tier-cities/) (accessed on 16 April 2013).
37. Shi Yunhan, *ibid.*
38. National Bureau of Statistics of China, “Xinshengdai nongmingong de shuliang, jiegou, he tedian” (Numbers, structure and characteristics of new-generation migrant workers), 11 March 2011, [www.stats.gov.cn/tjfx/fxbg/t20110310\\_402710032.htm](http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjfx/fxbg/t20110310_402710032.htm) (accessed on 9 April 2013).
39. National Bureau of Statistics of China, *ibid.*

**Table 3 – Employment structure of migrant workers in China**

Distribution of employment (%)	Migrant workers		
	Average	Previous generation	New generation
Manufacturing	39.1	31.5	44.4
Construction	17.3	27.8	9.8
Transportation, storage, postal services	5.9	7.1	5
Wholesale and retail	7.8	6.9	8.4
Accommodation and catering	7.8	5.9	9.2
Services	11.8	11	12.4
Others	10.3	9.8	10.8

Source: National Bureau of Statistics of China, March 2011.

vides, young migrants are much less inclined to take up jobs in the construction sector, and a larger proportion of them work in the service industries (Table 3).

One of the most distinctive features of new-generation migrants is their degree of integration into urban life. For first-generation migrants, working in the city is seen as a temporary measure for earning extra cash. Many continue to farm land in the countryside (*yigong yinong* 亦工亦农), shuttling flexibly between urban and rural areas as a quintessential “floating” population, with the goal of making enough to ultimately settle back in the countryside. The benefits of urban residency such as welfare and social security were simply not made available to them. For the post-1980 migrants, however, many flock to cities with the desire to stay in the long run and become full urban residents. Unlike earlier migrants, who might have been compelled to leave the countryside for purely economic reasons, the young migrants are primarily pulled by the attraction of city life and multitudinous non-economic factors, such as boredom with village life and the desire to pursue freedom from parents.<sup>(40)</sup>

As the majority of them lack basic farming skills but are highly attuned to urban culture, many feel more at home in cities than in rural areas.<sup>(41)</sup> Intending to settle for the long term, their goal is not only to make money but also to gain experience and find better opportunities for development. In many ways they behave no differently from urban youth, sharing not only similar ways of thinking in terms of career pursuit but also a similar sense of fashion, manners, living, and consumption habits. A report by the former National Population and Family Planning Commission found that while first-generation migrant workers “practiced thrift as much as they could for their children,” the new generation “actively pursue leisure and comfort,” spending “most of their income on their own food, clothing, housing, and transportation but seldom remit money they earn to their families in the countryside.”<sup>(42)</sup> Relieved of the burden previously borne by first-generation migrants to send money home, many spend it on favourite pastimes such as karaoke and disco dancing as well as consumer products such as electronics. *Yueguangzu* (月光族), often inadequately translated as “moonlight tribe,” became a popular term describing those who spend all they earn so that their pockets are empty by the end of the month.<sup>(43)</sup> Concerned about the influence of such “unhealthy and inherent bad habits,” the state has stepped up its efforts to manage young migrants by providing clean entertainment and educational alternatives for leisure

time.<sup>(44)</sup> In Dongguan City, the largest magnet for migrant workers in South China, town libraries are opened to migrant workers, and training classes in languages and accounting skills are offered all year round. However, despite their degree of integration into urban life, many entitlements and even basic social services are not available to the young migrants, as they are not registered as local residents. Only 34.8% of migrant workers are provided with basic medical care and 21.3% with pension insurance; a mere 8.5% are eligible for unemployment benefits.<sup>(45)</sup> Among new-generation migrant workers, 54.4% do not have formal labour contracts signed with employers.<sup>(46)</sup> Many companies simply evade their legal responsibility to provide social insurance for their employees. The lack of protection is particularly worrying given the poor working conditions many migrants encounter at the workplace.

### Fighting for rights

Increasingly, new-generation migrant workers are taking a more active role in mobilising collective action in defence of their own rights. The passage of the Labour Contract Law and the Labour Dispute Mediation and Arbitration Law in 2008 drastically increased the number of labour dispute cases, particularly in the aftermath of the 2008-9 global financial crisis that left tens of millions unemployed.<sup>(47)</sup> According to the Shenzhen-based Institute of Contemporary Observation, there were 1.27 million cases of labour disputes and collective action in 2011, including more than 1,000

40. Xiaochu Hu, “China’s Young Rural-to-Urban Migrants: In Search of Fortune, Happiness, and Independence,” *Migration Information*, January 2012, [www.migrationinformation.org/Feature/display.cfm?ID=874](http://www.migrationinformation.org/Feature/display.cfm?ID=874) (consulted 9 April 2013).

41. The 2011 National Bureau of Statistics report finds that 60% of new-generation migrant workers lack basic farming skills, of which 24% have never engaged in any farming activities.

42. National Population and Family Planning Commission of China, “A study of the ‘post-1980’ migrant farming workers,” 29 December 2008, [www.npfpc.gov.cn/publications/presources/zazhi1/201202/t20120220\\_381857.html](http://www.npfpc.gov.cn/publications/presources/zazhi1/201202/t20120220_381857.html) (accessed on 9 April 2013).

43. For an account of the spending habits of the typical *yueguangzu*, see Wang Hongyi, “Country chic, city savvy,” *China Daily*, 7 May 2012, [www.acyf.org.cn/2012-05/07/content\\_4987521.htm](http://www.acyf.org.cn/2012-05/07/content_4987521.htm) (accessed on 9 April 2013).

44. National Population and Family Planning Commission of China, *ibid*.

45. The 2010 report is cited in Jenny Chan and Pun Ngai, *ibid*.

46. National Bureau of Statistics, *ibid*.

47. “China’s labour dispute resolution system,” *China Labour Bulletin*, [www.clb.org.hk/en/view-re-source-centre-content/100618](http://www.clb.org.hk/en/view-re-source-centre-content/100618).

large-scale strikes.<sup>(48)</sup> New-generation migrant workers have played an important role in many of these. Compared with first-generation migrant workers, they demonstrate better knowledge of relevant labour laws and a stronger sense of protection of their own legal rights. Their adeptness in new media technologies and social networking tools also enables them to organise efficiently and to publicise their struggles effectively to a wider audience.

A well-known example of the growing rights-awareness of the new generation of migrant workers is the 2010 strikes at Honda's assembly plants in Guangdong Province, which were lauded by *China Newsweek* as a prime demonstration of the leadership and ingenuity of these young workers. The 19-day strike at Honda Nanhai, which successfully forced management to the negotiating table, secured a pay rise, and inspired similar protests at other Honda plants, was initiated and organised by two post-1980 workers.<sup>(49)</sup> Utilising the QQ instant messaging service, the young workers were able not only to keep each other updated on the progress of the strike, but also to inform reporters, lawyers, and labour rights activists of latest developments. During the strike at Honda's Zhongshan plant, the new-generation workers publicised their cause by videotaping the strike and posting it online so as to “keep everybody informed of the injustices” they were suffering.<sup>(50)</sup> Some of these actions have resulted in more substantive victories than pay rises. In 2012, when more than 700 employees – mostly young migrant workers – at the Ohms Electronics factory in Shenzhen staged a collective walk-off, they won the right to elect a representative for the factory's branch of the labour union from the bottom up.<sup>(51)</sup> As new-generation workers become increasingly active in defending their rights, the call for democratic elections of union representatives may become louder yet.

### Conclusion: Towards greater equality?

This paper has focused on the systemic inequalities affecting Chinese youth today and the struggles many must go through to attain their “Chinese dream.” While the lavish lifestyle of the rich second generation has attracted much attention and online gazing (*wangluo weiguan* 网络围观), for the vast majority of Chinese youth the rat race begins as soon as they are placed without choice in an unequal education system that privileges the urban and the rich. On entering the job market, those with less education find themselves defending against an exploitative labour regime, while those with more education find themselves unemployed or stuck at low-paying jobs as their better-connected, overseas-returning peers snatch up enviable positions in the government and multi-national corporations. Therefore, while catchwords such as *diasosi* may seem anecdotal, they in fact point to deep-rooted problems within Chinese society.

While careful analytical studies such as Martin King Whyte's *Myth of the Social Volcano* (2010) temper more sensational accounts of the volatility of brewing discontent, it is undeniable that frustration with the rigidity of social structure and the distinct lack of upward mobility (*jiēcéng liúdòngxìng* 阶层流动性) has increased. The more critical mainland press is becoming more vocal in censuring the inter-generational inheritance of advantage and disadvantage, and even the official press sometimes speaks out. For example, after the Li Tianyi case, *People's Daily* took the lead in lashing out against the spoiled children of privileged families: “Used to getting everything they want and having all their problems handled, they will use their father's name as an excuse, take flaunting wealth for granted, and regard defying the law as brave behaviour.”<sup>(52)</sup> It remains to be seen, however, whether such

episodic outpouring of indignation surrounding sensational *fu'er dai* cases can develop into deeper and more systematic analysis of the issue of polarisation and social stratification in contemporary China.

Within the new generation, young people are increasingly willing to seize opportunities for collective action, from anti-Japanese protests to environmental activism, to vent their frustration with issues such as unemployment and income inequality. From the active defence of labour rights to the irreverent deconstruction of privilege and authority through *diasosi* humour, young people are critically and creatively engaging with the issues of inequality and immobility in their own terms. These may not present a united front challenging the beneficiaries of the current unequal order, but they certainly point to new ways of negotiating identities for China's young generation.

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48. Austin Ramzy, “A labour strike in Southern China offers hope for a more democratic future,” *Time*, 8 July 2012, [www.world.time.com/2012/07/08/a-labour-strike-in-southern-china-offers-hope-for-a-more-democratic-future/](http://www.world.time.com/2012/07/08/a-labour-strike-in-southern-china-offers-hope-for-a-more-democratic-future/) (accessed on 15 April 2013).
49. A *China Newsweek* report details the organisation of the strike by the young workers. An English translation of the report, “Avid young reader of Mao Zedong's poetry from the post-1980s generation leads the Honda strike,” is available on China Labour News Translations, [www.clntranslations.org/article/56/](http://www.clntranslations.org/article/56/) (accessed on 15 April 2013). Since the 2010 strikes, the enterprise trade union helped negotiate another pay rise for Nanhai Honda production line workers in 2011, bringing monthly wages to over 2,600 yuan. See “Collective bargaining nets Honda workers in Foshan a 611 yuan increase in pay for 2011,” *China Labour Bulletin*, 7 March 2011, [www.clb.org.hk/en/content/collective-bargaining-nets-honda-workers-foshan-611-yuan-increase-pay-2011](http://www.clb.org.hk/en/content/collective-bargaining-nets-honda-workers-foshan-611-yuan-increase-pay-2011) (accessed on 15 April 2013). More recently in March 2013, Nanhai Honda workers successfully staged another protest that resulted in another salary increase. See “Nanhai Honda workers get pay increase after one day strike,” *China Labour Bulletin*, 20 March 2013, [www.clb.org.hk/en/content/nanhai-honda-workers-get-pay-increase-after-one-day-strike](http://www.clb.org.hk/en/content/nanhai-honda-workers-get-pay-increase-after-one-day-strike) (accessed on 15 April 2013).
50. “Unity is Strength: The workers' movement in China, 2009-2011,” *China Labour Bulletin* research report, October 2011.
51. Austin Ramzy, *ibid.* Although labour unions exist, representatives are usually imposed from the top down and take the side of managers. The Foxconn union chairperson, for example, is a special assistant to the CEO. Pun Ngai and Jenny Chan, *ibid.*
52. “Haizi zhi guo, jiaoyu zhi shang” (The mistakes of the child, the tragedy of education), *People's Daily* editorial, 25 February 2013, [www.theory.people.com.cn/n/2013/0225/c40531-20585983.html](http://www.theory.people.com.cn/n/2013/0225/c40531-20585983.html) (accessed on 30 April 2013).