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What effects does China's youth factory worker culture have on the overall development of future generations, and should this be a cause for concern for the country's future socioeconomic development?

- *A blogpost inspired by the documentary 'We Were Smart' by Li Yifan*

Introduction

Within the dynamic environment of China's rapidly changing industrial sector, the prevalent culture of young factory workers raises important questions regarding its implications for the development of the next generation. 250 million children aged 5-14 are employed illegally globally, and 61 percent are in Asia (Morley, 2009), which seems incomprehensible considering China houses over 5 million USD millionaires and over 500 billionaires, second only to the US (Why China Matters, 2023). The effects of this cultural phenomena on the health, education, and general trajectory of the younger people take on greater significance in light of the nation's unprecedented economic growth. Children born into lower income families will often flee their hometowns, most predominantly in central and western China, in order to find work in factories within larger cities. There is currently no universal definition for child labour (Liao, 2010), however, UNICEF developed a widely agreed upon description as being 'work that exceeds a minimum number of hours, depending on the age of a child and on the type of work' (UNICEF, 2007). There have been some efforts to reshape laws surrounding child labour in China, such as the implementation of the Protection of Minors Law (1991) and the Law of Labour (1994). However, this has not eradicated the employment of child labourers within informal sectors nor do they enforce a cap for the number of working hours for children (Liao, 2010).

In China, educational fees are costly, access to schooling is limited and there is a lack of crucial resources within many schools. Here we discover the primary cause as to why many children will leave school at such a young age, many families are unable to afford education for their child and so children will be forced to leave and seek work in factories so they are able to provide a source of income (Morley, 2009). Under Mao Zedong's rule, China's educational policies shifted, paving the way for elitism and utilitarianism, with funding being directed towards urban technology-orientated education. This led to uneven development of education between urban and rural areas, slowing down economic growth within China as a whole (Ngok, 2007). With the future of China's economy being in the hands of the quality of education in which its children are provided, it seems counterintuitive to eradicate equal opportunity and funding for such schooling, especially given that 70% of China's children live in rural areas (Chen, 2015).

'We Were Smart'

The documentary '[We Were Smart](#)', by Li Yifan, outlines the narratives of young factory workers, solidifying the impact factory work has on the younger generations, providing an intimate first-hand portrayal of the challenges they faced within their workplace and in the lead up to their employment. The pervasive corruption surrounding youth factory workers is made evident within the documentary, firstly emphasising the illicit recruitment of many underage children. The documentary provides insight into the troubling phenomenon that efficiency is taking precedence over the well-being of these young workers.

The documentary reveals instances where factories were not ignorant to the fact that many of their employees were underage, with many using fake IDs. One interviewee disclosed that, when under inspection, a supervisor said to “hide her away in a box and it should be fine” (We Were Smart, 2019). The youth’s vulnerability is highlighted through their exposure to hazardous conditions. A statement made by another interviewee within the documentary, explained how he lost his mother shortly after an accident she faced within the factory at which she was employed. Injuries caused by machinery are not the only health and safety issue within these factories; employees will often have to work alongside harmful substances causing toxic environments. Despite the environment in which they were working in, employees would shockingly often be provided with no compensation nor insurance for injuries sustained. Financial burden would be placed upon employees who happened to fall victim to any sort of injury. This further highlights the fact that child labour in China is having an impact on its next generation.

The documentary also outlines the educational impact in which entering the labour workforce has on children. With many entering the work force at such young ages, they would have to leave education in order to work meaning they are not foregoing basic educational needs. ‘We Were Smart’ outlines one heart wrenching account where a young individual had to leave elementary school in order to join the labour force. The consequence of this is depicted by one individual who, due to their early departure from school, deemed themselves as “illiterate” (We Were Smart, 2019) and incapable of pursuing any professional opportunities. Hearing this caused utter disbelief given our educational policies within the UK, with children being given the right to free education. This highlights the economic impact of child labour, in that a less educated generation will lead to a smaller, inefficient workforce.

The documentary also unveils the isolating nature of factory work, describing an environment where coworkers are not united, but rather judge one another based upon their work rate; individual work rate carries social consequences. One worker described it as being “like you are living in a cage” (We Were Smart, 2019). Another worker described her battle with depression and explained how she considered suicide. Though QQ SMART groups were set up as an outlet in order to allow workers to vent, it is made clear from the documentary that these initiatives are not enough when addressing serious emotional challenges faced by workers.

Overall, the documentary solidified my view that child labour is having a detrimental impact on young people. All of the interviewees did not go on to enter professional jobs, highlighting the impact this has on the direction of China’s workforce and overall economic stability.

China’s Future

It seems that the quality of education provided for China’s youth is the fore frontal worry for its socio-economic future. With the lack of education being a causal factor in the employment of young workers, it seems that policies must be changed in order to eradicate such detrimental phenomenon. The UK implemented the Education Maintenance Allowance, which provides financial support for those from disadvantaged backgrounds staying in full time education (Machin, 2006). Not only would the implementation of such policies yield many benefits, such as a number of children being able to complete full-term education, enabling this generation to be more open to professional job opportunities, but it also alleviates the financial stress surrounding education for lower income families. This would have an effect on the root cause of child labour, giving alternatives for young children. In terms of the economic future for China, this would cause for an increase in number of young

people completing higher levels of education in a more equitable and inclusive fashion. This would have a drop in effect to China's economic status, in that they would have a greater number of individuals entering fields of work that contribute to their economic growth. Placing high investment into China's educational system will automatically benefit the country's productivity and economic competitiveness.

Furthermore, the isolation depicted within the documentary 'We Were Smart' and implications this has on workers' mental health confirms the need for better support networks and support systems within the workplace. Drawing from successful policies, such as the UK's Mental Health and Wellbeing Plan (2022), having similar policies introduced would aid the introduction of comprehensive support systems within the workplace, causing for a more humane and sustainable environment and supportive workplace culture.

Conclusion

To summarise, China's ever-changing industrial landscape and the prevailing culture of young factory workers reveals concerning and significant implications for the country's future development. Statistics shown for China's child labour highlights the urgency at which such challenges must be addressed. Despite the country's economic prosperity, the persistence of child labour points to systematic issues that extend beyond overall national wealth. Consequences of youth workers extend across the future of China's young people. Children leaving their hometowns in order to seek employment highlights the issues surrounding limited access to sufficient education. The documentary 'We Were Smart' vividly illustrates the corruption surrounding the factory employment process while also depicting the issues within these workplaces, further displaying the impact child labour has on China's younger population.

In regard to China's future, the educational quality of the current system is clearly insufficient and will negatively impact China's socio-economic future. Policies drawn from other countries should be seen as a model and provide inspiration in addressing such prevalent issues encountered by lower income families. By prioritising funding toward their educational system, China should be able to address the root cause of their child labour problem; transforming educational policies and support systems for young workers should enable China to take the crucial steps it needs to reach a much brighter future.

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