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Will the lack of education in rural areas hinder any further development of China's economy?

I have recently watched the documentary [‘We Were SMART’](#) (Sha Ma Te, Wo Ai Ni), which had a focus on youth migration from rural to urban areas. Throughout this blog I will evaluate what I have learned from this documentary, and link it to my overarching question, ‘Will the lack of education in rural areas hinder China's future economic growth.’ This is a significant issue for China since it is currently experiencing the middle-income trap, where even though its overall economy rivals the US its income per capita doesn't come close. The educational inequalities could be China's downfall in its attempt to become a high-income economy.

Having watched this documentary, it has become clear that rural areas lack adequate education opportunities as their schools are underfunded with poor quality teaching which leaves the children uneducated and with limited economic opportunities. This means there is no escape from poverty. The kids in the documentary are, according to the director, mostly second-generation left-behind children (parents left their children in villages whilst they migrated to the city for work), and evidence the cycle of poverty they are stuck in limited to two primary options, menial factory work or farming.

For this reason, I argue that educational inequalities do make China's economy unstable and will limit future growth since the rural areas consist of 36.11 percent of the population (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2021).

Summary

This is an independent documentary created by Director Yifan Li, who spent two years collecting stories from previous SMART (Sha Ma Te) members, getting contributions from around 915 people (IMDB, 2023). SMART was a unique subculture expressed through eccentric fashion senses and hairstyles. The kids used this as a way to express their individuality and escape the monotony of factory life.

Within the documentary, it becomes clear that the people who identified with this movement in the early 2000s had similar stories. Many migrated at a young age, dropping out of school and moving to the cities to obtain jobs in factories. This was mostly because many had to support their families who were living in poverty and saw little point in the poor-quality education system. However due to their young age and illegal status, many were exploited, working long hours for little money. This culminated in feelings such as depression and loneliness. The SMART lifestyle gave them a chance to escape the monotony and join a community which they could identify with. Following the peak of this movement in 2008, it began to decline in popularity as factories wouldn't hire SMART kids however it did for a period give these kids an outlet for their frustrations.

This subculture gave the forgotten youth an identity.

Analysis

In my opinion, this documentary portrayed a very underrepresented group perfectly. It gave an in-depth look into what factors led to the creation of the subculture, which is what I will be focusing on. From this documentary, it becomes clear that rural areas have been forced into a cycle of poverty since the economic boom, with the root of the issue being the lack of quality higher education. For example, within the documentary, Luo Fuxing Stated that whilst

working in the factory, due to his lack of a high school diploma, he couldn't get promoted. This means that even when the kids move to an urban area there is no way to progress past menial labor for minimum wages.

Walid Y. Alali (2011) believes that education is the foundation for economic development and efficiency, therefore education can not be neglected if a country wants to continue to develop. This is because it allows the average person to make higher wages from better and less dangerous jobs. This is supported by Scott Rozelle (et al, 2023) who have noticed that the countries which are successful in escaping the middle-income trap have a population of on average 72 percent secondary school graduates before becoming a high-income country. He goes on to point out that this is necessary as the 'educated workers ensure that enough talent exists to meet and drive demand for high-value services, thereby sustaining growth.' Without this, there would be an increase in social issues, including crime and unemployment. Currently, there are more than 80 million illiterate people in China, 90% of which are from rural areas. Alali would argue that this means China has a weak foundation for growth especially when considering the fact that it currently stands as the least educated middle-income country.

Furthermore, it is important to consider the fact it is the inequalities that compound the issues within the education system. This illiteracy in rural areas stems from the reform and opening policy in 1978. Since this is when China became reliant on the unskilled labor population that rural areas provided. As stated by Dr. Wang, a Senior Lecturer in the Economics of China at the University of Manchester, it was the urban migration of unskilled labor that allowed China to grow quickly in the past three decades. For example in the 1980s half a billion unskilled workers moved to the city to work in the factories, which created the first floating generation. Due to this rather than investing in higher education china has focused on investing in infrastructure, such as transport systems. However, Dr Wang goes on to argue that this population is now becoming a hindrance. For example, China has begun outsourcing these factory jobs to cheaper countries such as Vietnam as the cost of living rises in China. This means there is now an overpopulation of unskilled labor. This is supported by Chengfang Shen and Xindong Zhao (2022) who state that at low-income levels inequality often helps to boost the economy, however, as income levels increase, as chinas have, inequality begins to impede the economy.

The youth seen within the documentary are evidence of the problem. Due to a lack of aid from the government, these rural children did not have access to quality education and therefore had limited opportunities, resorting to farming or factory work too young, as their parents did continuing the cycle of poverty. In comparison, urban education is developing rapidly, with many top-rated universities such as Peking University in Beijing. The inequality further destabilizes China's foundation. After gaining the capital's best score in China's university entrance exam in 2017, Afterxiong Xuan'ang stated that "All the top scorers now come from wealthy families," and that, "It is becoming very difficult for students from rural areas to get into good universities." (The Economist, 2021) he is the son of a diplomat in an urban area and understands he is very privileged which is what has allowed him to accomplish this, whereas those in rural areas would never be given this chance.

In the documentary there was a focus on the left behind children who dropped out of school, as this group made up a significant portion of the SMART community, however, there are more compounding issues in the system for example the rise in floating children (children who move to the city with migrant parents illegally). Due to their lack of a Hukou, these kids

do not have a right to free education. There has been a rise in migrant/floating schools however these are often unaffordable and face similar issues to rural areas, being underfunded and lacking in quality teachers. This evidences the lack of choices rural parents have for their children as either way their kids receive inadequate education and won't be able to escape poverty. Overall this analysis has proven that inadequate education has created a cycle of poverty for rural people which has been sustained for three generations and persists. This does support the idea that education in rural areas could hinder further economic development as the government hasn't given a significant portion of the population the assistance needed to progress and adapt to a new market.

Final Thoughts

In conclusion, this documentary shone a light on the cycle of poverty rural areas are suffering and the inequalities rural children are facing. Through this documentary and the use of wider reading, it has become clear that the common issue China is now facing is this lack of education and unequal spread of investment and resources. Unless China can create a more educated overall population it will continue to experience the middle-income trap and will lead to a shortage of skilled labor. Furthermore, the unskilled laborers will become unemployed and disillusioned, potentially creating political and social issues through criminal activity. Therefore the lack of education in rural areas does pose a threat to China's future economic development.

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