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# New Visions of the Good Life: Entrepreneurial Pursuits of Chinese Elite University Students

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## Abstract

In recent years, efforts to promote entrepreneurship as a possible career path for Chinese university students have intensified alongside the implementation of the official campaign of “mass entrepreneurship and mass innovation” (大众创业, 万众创新, *dazhong chuangye, wanzhong chuangxin*). Based on semi-structured interviews and long-term ethnographic fieldwork conducted at two Chinese elite universities, this article examines what motivates young Chinese to become entrepreneurs. It is argued that Chinese students imagine entrepreneurship as an alternative to ceaseless striving for high-paying jobs. They believe that becoming entrepreneurs will enable them to pursue their own interests, engage in meaningful projects, experience a life of excitement and variation, and become masters of their own time. This notion of the good life ties in with broader discourses of well-being that are currently proliferating among youth in urban China.

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## Keywords

Entrepreneurship, Chinese students, career choice, the good life

## Introduction

In recent years, the Chinese government has focused on promoting the campaign of “mass entrepreneurship and mass innovation” (大众创业, 万众创新, *dazhong chuangye,*

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*wanzhong chuangxin*) across a wide range of sectors and institutions in Chinese society, including within higher education (Financial News, 2015; The State Council, 2015b). The campaign was initiated by Chinese Premier Li Keqiang (李克强) at World Economic Forum's meeting in Tianjin in September 2014, when he announced that "mass entrepreneurship and mass innovation" is crucial for ensuring China's continuous economic growth (Li, 2014). The party-state sees the ideal entrepreneur as someone who is self-reliant and pursuing his or her own interests, while simultaneously submitting him or herself to the Chinese Communist Party's agenda for societal development. The co-existence of these seemingly contradictory demands calls for an investigation of how they are taken up by the individuals who are expected to carry them out in practice (see, e.g. Kipnis, 2011). Thus, based on semi-structured interviews and long-term ethnographic fieldwork conducted at two Chinese elite universities between 2018 and 2019, this article examines what motivates young Chinese to become entrepreneurs.

I argue that they imagine entrepreneurship as an alternative to living a life of ceaseless striving. Anders Hansen describes how this mode of striving manifests in the urge to constantly advance on a normative path towards higher positions and more money while no endpoint appears in sight (Hansen, 2015). In following this path, young Chinese are generally being encouraged to accumulate ever more academic credentials which may make them attractive to future employers (Woronov, 2015). This effort to attain a competitive advantage by striving for academic achievement has created a so-called "diploma inflation" (Fong, 2004). Even when trying to cultivate skills that are not solely aimed at obtaining a prestigious job, Chinese university students risk facing a "double-bind," since the way in which these other skills can be acquired is often also characterised by competition (Bregnbæk, 2016).

The scholarly literature above tends to highlight the problems that young people experience in transitioning from the education system to work life. The present article, however, argues that Chinese students see entrepreneurship as a way to establish a good (work) life. Their notion of the good life ties in with broader current discourses among youth in China which stress the importance of well-being rather than just becoming financially self-reliant and striving for success (Hizi, 2021a). These discourses revise Yunxiang Yan's description of the striving individual (2013) as someone whose success is mainly measured in economic wealth. Young people's pursuits of emotional well-being are evident in such phenomena as the current proliferation of therapeutic workshops in urban China (Fengjiang and Steinmüller, 2021; Hizi, 2021b), and in online movements such as *tangping* (躺平), which advocate a more easy-going approach to life rather than spending more hours at one's workplace (Chen, 2021). The students in this article were not aiming to escape the competition altogether and slow down. Instead, they embraced a mode of striving in which they could pursue their own areas of interest, engage in meaningful projects, and avoid being subjected to other people's control.

The latter was particularly associated with the 996 work schedule, which means to work from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m., six days a week. Lately, this kind of work life has come in for some criticism in Chinese popular discourse. For instance, on Chinese social

media platforms like *Zhihu* (知乎), 996 has been criticised for leading to a feeling of burnout and for leaving little time to engage in personal activities outside one's workplace (see, e.g. *Zhihu*, 2021). The 996 work culture has also been associated with the popular term "involution" (内卷, *neijuan*), which denotes the condition of being trapped in a cycle that leads nowhere. It refers to the fact that more hours spent at work does not necessarily lead to a higher quality of life, since rising income cannot keep up with rising housing prices in urban areas (Wang and Ge, 2020).

In the following sections, I begin by describing the party-state's ambitions for fostering entrepreneurial individuals. I then outline the general approach to entrepreneurship among Chinese university students and introduce the interlocutors who were selected for this study. Following this, I analyse how entrepreneurship was imagined as a way to pursue a feeling of well-being, and how this career path differed from the mode of ceaseless striving. In order to understand the interlocutors' notion of the good life, I also examine how they articulated their aspirations in relation to the life they saw as characteristic of their hometowns. Finally, I discuss the complexity inherent in their entrepreneurial pursuits by showing that their ideas of entrepreneurship existed in tension with their efforts to adapt to the reality they were facing.

## Fostering Self-Reliant and Aspiring Individuals

In 2012, China's Ministry of Education made it mandatory for all higher education institutions in the country to provide general entrepreneurship courses for students (Mei and Symaco, 2020). The promotion of entrepreneurship in Chinese higher education is intimately linked to finding jobs for the rising number of graduates, who in 2021 numbered more than nine million (Lei, 2021). These efforts began in 2002, when nine Chinese universities were selected to gradually experiment with entrepreneurship as a means to create self-employment (Bell, 2020). This followed a decade during which the number of private enterprises in China had expanded rapidly – a development accelerated by the passing of a law in 1988 that permitted private businesses with more than eight employees (Yan, 2010: 496). This process was paralleled by the implementation of privatisation initiatives in the 1990s that urged Chinese individuals to show diligence, talent, and social skills in various areas of their lives rather than seeking support from the state, society, or their families. In the labour market, this manifested in the massive lay-off of employees in state-owned enterprises, who were encouraged to compete for jobs on their own (Zhang and Ong, 2008: 7, 14). In general, to stimulate economic development, the Chinese government encouraged individuals to exercise choice and autonomy by pursuing their own career paths (Hoffman, 2010) and exploring a wide range of desires (Rofel, 2007). Such desires included the freedom to acquire private wealth and to indulge in conspicuous consumption (Ci, 2014).

These socioeconomic transformations were also paralleled by educational reforms, especially the development of "Quality Education" (素质教育, *suzhi jiaoyu*), which was presented in a policy document published by the State Council in 1999 (The State Council, 1999). "Quality Education" was a broad initiative that called for changes in

pedagogy, curricula, teacher training, and the structure of the education system from kindergarten to university level (Bregnbæk, 2011: 26). Susanne Bregnbæk explains how this educational initiative shifted the focus of education to a form of self-realisation and self-development, as it encouraged students to begin nurturing their individual skills (Bregnbæk, 2016: 12). Meanwhile, the purpose of “Quality Education” was to focus on cultivating other skills than those aimed at passing exams, hence preparing China for becoming part of a global knowledge society (Thøgersen, 2002; Woronov, 2008). The current implementation of “mass entrepreneurship and mass innovation” in Chinese higher education is also linked to the advancement of the “Quality Education” paradigm (Ministry of Education, 2019). Thus, the purpose of “mass entrepreneurship and mass innovation” is to foster the development of so-called high-skilled talents that can take part in upgrading China’s industrial sector, in particular key industries outlined in the strategy called “Made in China 2025” (The State Council, 2015a). This includes teaching skills such as creativity, collaboration, and problem-solving, which are seen as key in developing China into a high-income country (Rozelle and Hell, 2020; The State Council, 2015b).

These skills were part of the curriculum in the innovation and entrepreneurship courses that I attended during a ten-month fieldwork at an elite university in Shanghai where most of my interlocutors were enrolled. In these courses, established as part of the “mass entrepreneurship and mass innovation” campaign, the students would often have to work in teams on solving a problem that related to their everyday lives on campus. In addition, some courses aimed to provide the students with a basic introduction to entrepreneurship. This often happened by way of invited guest speakers, such as entrepreneurs, investors, and businesspeople, who gave lectures on what had made them successful. Their success was usually presented as a result of their having developed start-up companies that were solving problems of crucial relevance to society, or having won awards for their excellent skills. These lecturers stressed the importance of choosing a career path that reflects one’s genuine interests. To this end, it was highlighted that the students should not listen to their parents’ opinions about their career choices, but solely focus on developing their own dreams. At the same time, the lecturers expressed the opinion that the students must exercise diligence in their studies and work hard to achieve their goals. The idea was that it is possible to pursue one’s own ambitions, but each person simultaneously has to take responsibility for the outcome of his or her own choices in life.

## **Chinese University Students’ Entrepreneurial Aspirations**

At the elite university in Shanghai where my fieldwork took place, it was mandatory for all students to take at least one innovation and entrepreneurship course as part of their bachelor’s degree. These courses, usually constituting two credits, were often timetabled in the evenings, and thereby on top of the courses the students had to study for their respective majors. Some students obviously did not have time for or interest in the innovation and entrepreneurship courses and often, they chose to study other subjects while

ostensibly attending the lectures. Other scholars have shown how this phenomenon is quite typical in Chinese elite universities (see, e.g. Bregnbæk, 2016: 64; Hansen, 2017). On the other hand, some students were pleasantly surprised by the courses and especially found that hearing the guest lecturers present their personal stories of how they had achieved success was refreshing in comparison with the theoretical literature they had to read in other classes.

According to a study published by *China Youth Daily* in 2020, only 3.71 per cent of the students from higher education institutions in China choose to pursue an entrepreneurial career when they graduate (Li, 2020). This is unsurprising, if read with the Austrian-trained economist Joseph Schumpeter's classic definition of the entrepreneur in mind. Schumpeter defined the entrepreneur as a special type of individual who carries out new combinations of resources and thereby develops new products, introduces new means of production, and opens up new markets. Thus, in his understanding, the entrepreneur is not just someone who generates ideas, but an individual who carries them out in practice by establishing an enterprise. This special ability that entrepreneurs possess, according to Schumpeter, is also what makes them rare (Schumpeter, 2000 [1934]: 51, 62). Seen in relation to this definition, the aim to cultivate mass entrepreneurship is paradoxical, as it is impossible to cultivate masses of such unique individuals. Nonetheless, the Chinese government has aimed to make it possible for all students in higher education to nurture their own individual dreams to become entrepreneurs. This is particularly evident in the widespread use of the entrepreneurship competitions that have sprung up at local, provincial, and national levels throughout the country. The most famous among these competitions is the "China College Students' Internet+ Innovation and Entrepreneurship Competition," organised by China's Ministry of Education (Ministry of Education, 2019). The teachers in the innovation and entrepreneurship courses would often encourage the students to develop a business idea and participate in one of these entrepreneurship competitions. Furthermore, Chinese universities have been urged to establish schools of innovation and entrepreneurship, where students can get access to office facilities for their start-up companies and assistance in applying for various funding schemes. In addition, some students choose to make use of the opportunity to take a gap year in their studies to focus on developing their own businesses (Ministry of Education, 2017).

According to recent studies, entrepreneurship education affects university students' attitudes towards entrepreneurship, which can potentially make them keener to establish a business (Mensah et al., 2021; Su et al., 2021). Meanwhile, the nine students, who are the focus of this article, can be said to constitute a special group of individuals, since they were actually engaged in concrete entrepreneurial activities. Eight of these students were enrolled at the elite university in Shanghai, while one student was enrolled at an elite university in Zhejiang province. The two universities enjoy the same high status on the national ranking list. Three out of the nine students were bachelor's students, five were master's students, and one was a PhD student. The selection of the nine students was based on judgement sampling, which means selecting individuals based on a set of criteria for inclusion (DeWalt and DeWalt, 2011: 130). In this context, I

specifically selected students who had either established or were working on establishing their own start-up companies. All of them explicitly expressed a desire for pursuing careers as entrepreneurs. The students came from a wide range of socioeconomic backgrounds: for some, the parents were migrant workers, while for others the parents held high positions as leaders in public organisations. Only one of my interlocutors had grown up in Shanghai, while the rest hailed from different Chinese regions, both poor and affluent.

I carried out semi-structured interviews with each of the students in Mandarin Chinese, lasting between one and two hours. In the interviews, I asked a number of open-ended questions regarding the interlocutors' personal and family background, their everyday lives, their specific entrepreneurial activities, and their plans for the future. All the interviews were conducted with the participants' informed consent (Kvale, 2007: 27). Afterwards, I used an inductive approach to code the interviews, not looking for any pre-defined themes. The purpose of this was to enhance the trustworthiness of the study by avoiding letting any theoretical inclinations determine the meaning of the participants' statements (Bryman, 2012: 390). In order to analyse the themes that turned out to be most prevalent across the interviews, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's approach to discourse analysis was particularly helpful. Laclau and Mouffe define discourse as the structured totality resulting from articulatory practice, which establishes a relation among elements such that their identity is modified. These elements are assigned a positive value by being defined in relation to what they are not, that is, elements with a negative value (Laclau and Mouffe, 2014: 91, 99). Applied to my data, I found that the interlocutors ascribed positive value to elements, including words and phrases, which concerned the desire to pursue a life with variation, to bring one's own values into play, and to be master over one's own time, while negative value was ascribed to elements that related to being constrained by a working schedule or living a life characterised by predictability. This approach to analysing the data informs my discussion below.

## **The Pleasant Feeling of Being Your own Boss**

My interlocutors stressed the negative consequences of following the normal path towards achieving a prestigious job. Their description of this path was quite similar to what Anders Hansen has labelled the "temporal mode of ceaseless striving," which is characterised by a number of phases that aspiring young Chinese are expected to go through in order to advance in life. Each of these phases is filled with an established purpose; for instance, attending a good university is seen as a preparation for finding attractive employment. Hansen shows how young Chinese, who themselves hail from top Chinese universities, experienced this mode of ceaseless striving resulting in an attendant feeling of mental overexertion (Hansen, 2015). Their reaction can be compared to that of Susanne Bregnbæk's interlocutors at elite universities in Beijing, who were facing great pressure to prepare themselves for establishing a successful career in the future. This manifested in their efforts to live up to their parents' aspirations, for

example, for them to obtain a scholarship to study abroad, a frequent cause of stress and anxiety (Bregnbæk, 2016: 45, 130).

However, the problem that my interlocutors associated with the mode of ceaseless striving differed from the findings of Hansen and Bregnbæk, as they did not experience the feeling of being under pressure as problematic in itself. Rather, they described the unpleasant feeling of being subject to *someone else's* control, as is exemplified in this quote from Li Qiang, a second-year bachelor's student:

If you just graduate like usual, and find a company to work for, then you might have to do 996, and you will feel oppressed by your boss. Even if you are going the scientific way, you will experience the same kind of pressure from people around you. If you become a PhD, even a postdoc, your supervisor will put pressure on you [...] so within all these circles, you will experience restrictions, and you will not feel free. What I am saying is not that I am afraid of constraints, but I am afraid of being constrained. (Anonymous 1, 2019; pseudonyms used for all interlocutors)

As an example of what he meant by the final sentence, he mentioned the time he was in high school and found it really uncomfortable when his teachers forced him to study even when it was the official holiday season. If it had been up to him to decide whether to study or not, he explained, he would probably still have chosen to do it. Thus, the problem for him lay not in taking on additional work, but in the passivity of being made to do so rather than actively choosing it.

This unpleasant feeling of having to obey a boss' schedule was reiterated by Zhang Wei and Wang Yong. They were both first-year master's students and had worked for a few years in industry before continuing their studies at the university. Zhang Wei recalled the tedium he had felt working in a company where some of his colleagues had already been employed for many years. Since these colleagues were no longer enthusiastic about their jobs, it had also had a negative influence on him, and he had "begun to find it tiresome" (开始有厌倦了, *kaishi you yanjuan le*) (Anonymous 2, 2018). In relation to this, Wang Yong stressed that he particularly despised working under conditions in which a company strictly monitors when an employee begins and finishes work. He associated such a work life with 996 jobs:

I don't like 996 jobs. I like jobs that are flexible. For instance, while a company demands that you spend eight hours on working on a task every day, I might actually be able to finish the work within three or four hours. I want to be able to use the rest of the time on doing things I like – not sit in an office and waste my time. (Anonymous 3, 2019)

Wang Yong, Zhang Wei, and Li Qiang all saw entrepreneurship as a means to avoid pursuing such a work life. Instead, they talked about the fact that becoming their own bosses would allow them to engage in activities they felt passionate about and to put their own values into play. Bregnbæk, building upon the work of anthropologist Michael Jackson, describes how feeling that there is "a way out" is an existential



precondition for well-being (Bregnbæk, 2016: 134, 142; see also Hansen, 2015: 71). Thus, in contrast to the elite students in Bregnbæk's study, who often experienced that there was no way of escaping the pressure (Bregnbæk, 2011), my interlocutors saw entrepreneurship as a way of escaping the 996 work life. Even though they were aware that pursuing a career as entrepreneurs would require them to invest a lot of hard work, it did not hold them back from going in this direction. Li Qiang expressed it as follows:

If I am enthusiastic about something, I will be willing to invest much more than when someone is forcing me. Even if it feels tough or I have to endure a lot of pressure, I will be willing to do it, as it gives me a good feeling inside. I think this is why entrepreneurship is attractive to me – it gives me freedom (自由, *ziyou*) to do what I am passionate about and really like. (Anonymous 1, 2019)

Here, it was evident that Li Qiang's urge to exert pressure on himself was driven by his desire to pursue his own passions as much as it was driven by his anxiety about not keeping up with the peer pressure he experienced in Shanghai. His way of looking upon pressure as both a preference and a necessity was echoed by Huang Zixuan, a master's student who had come back to Shanghai to start his own business after studying parts of his degree in the United States:

You have to work hard after you come to live here to start your own dream. I definitely have much more pressure now, but I don't think it's a bad thing. I am passionate about coming back, working with my friends, and hopefully selling useful stuff for the future. (Anonymous 4, 2018)

While my interlocutors described entrepreneurship as a means of realising their own ambitions, the urge to attain the power to change people's lives was strongly expressed by Wang Yong. Thus, Wang Yong aimed to set up a business that would help young Chinese in danger of committing suicide when they experience problems at work. Motivated by personal stories of suicide cases he had heard of, he wanted to establish a psychological counselling centre located far away from the stressful city life. To prepare himself for setting up this business, Wang Yong was giving himself extra work by participating in a "Quality Education" course once a week that focused on teaching bachelor students the means to obtain success in their lives. While Bregnbæk describes how such "Quality Education" courses are often experienced as an extra layer imposed on top of the students' already busy schedules (Bregnbæk, 2016: 106), Wang Yong explained that he was motivated by the fact that this course could help him improve his communication skills. He imagined that this skill might be useful for him in the future when he had to carry out conversations with young Chinese visiting his psychological counselling centre.

## Acquiring Wealth and Skills to Initiate Change

Wang Xiuying, a first-year master's student, stressed that she was not prepared to apply randomly for jobs once she had completed her degree. She explained that this was because she felt that pursuing traditional employment would not enable her to fundamentally change anything. In this regard, she first of all talked about changing her own life. Thus, Wang Xiuying explained that if she went to work in a company, she might have to work 996, which still would not enable her to buy a house in Shanghai or send her future children to a good school in the city. Her statement essentially reflected the condition of involution, as she highlighted that regardless of how much time she spent on a normal job, her income would not be high enough to raise her life quality. She believed that the only way to carry out substantial changes was to become an entrepreneur:

I am also a party member, and of course we are told that we have to serve the people. However, if you don't have any real power, you will not be able to do that. As a normal person, I feel there is not much you can do. I think that there are many people in our country who cannot even take care of themselves, and therefore they don't have the energy to take care of others. I need to take care of myself first, and then become a person who has power. One part of this is to satisfy my material needs; another part is to gain influence. (Anonymous 5, 2019)

In essence, Wang Xiuying described the process of becoming a powerful person as relying on her building a solid foundation of wealth. Her long-term goal was to channel this power into protecting the cultural heritage of the ethnic group her family belonged to. Also, Li Jie, a first-year bachelor's student in medicine, stressed that creating a business was the way to become a person who can decide over one's own life:

I don't need to be forced to do things I don't like. I think that freedom (自由, *ziyou*) builds upon a foundation of adequate strength. You want to do things that you like and not be constrained by external forces (被外界所束缚, *bei waijie suo shufu*). I don't like to live a life in which you can see to the end of it; that is, a life in which you get up, go to work, and go home after work. I feel that life should be full of changes and excitement; everyday should be full of new challenges. (Anonymous 6, 2019)

Li Jie stressed that his freedom, in the sense of being free from living a repetitive and tedious life, depended on his accumulating enough financial resources to make him strong. On the one hand, Li Jie and Wang Xiuying's accounts tie in with Yunxiang Yan's observation that individual success in contemporary China is linked to accumulating economic wealth and power (Yan, 2013). On the other hand, the purpose of their striving was ultimately related to pursuing a more satisfying life, including being able to engage in activities they find genuinely important and enriching. At the same time, they expressed fear of falling behind in a competitive environment like Shanghai, where one constantly has to accumulate information and work on establishing personal

connections. Li Jie elaborated on this fear by stating that he did not want to be sent back to his hometown – a small town in Western China – where people’s lives tended to be dominated by trivialities. Therefore, his ambition was to go to Shenzhen, where he had heard from his teacher that the chances of succeeding with his entrepreneurial plans would be greater.

It was characteristic for both Wang Xiuying and Li Jie that neither of them were particularly interested in the majors they were studying. Thus, when they did not attend classes, they spent most of their time developing their own entrepreneurial projects. While Li Jie was still working on different ideas for business models, Wang Xiuying was part of an actual start-up business that helped companies brand their products online. Whenever I spent time with her, she was constantly answering calls or WeChat messages from customers. In fact, she could be said to inhabit what anthropologist Liu Xin calls a “mobile-ponic space” of always being reachable and ready to take advantage of opportunities in the present (Liu, 2002: 160–161). Being in such a state, Wang Xiuying explained, meant that she never had time to relax. However, she did not consider that to be a problem, since her plan was to utilise the time at university to experiment with as many forms of entrepreneurial undertakings as possible before she eventually had to face the realities of society. Her attitude was similar to that of the student entrepreneurs that Gil Hizi encountered on a university campus in Jinan in Shandong Province. These students perceived their time in university as an appropriate time frame in which they could explore the labour market by engaging in extracurricular activities without having to face immediate consequences. Ultimately, they found that their life on campus enabled them to experience and appreciate the values of “autonomy” and “self-fulfilment” (Hizi, 2019: 497, 508). Similarly, Wang Xiuying stressed that being engaged in various entrepreneurial projects while still being a student helped her to find out what she was genuinely interested in.

Wang Xiuying’s effort to gather the maximum possible experience was an example of her preference for living a life in which one “does one’s utmost” (拼命, *pinming*). A similar attitude was expressed by Jing Jing who, besides being a full-time master’s student, was engaged in an internship, taking the leading role in a local student association and collaborating with a fellow student on a start-up project on campus. In general, Jing Jing highlighted that she had a lot of ideas on her mind that she wanted to try out. Therefore, she was always moving from activity to activity and was never able to spend too much time in one place. She explained that she liked to *zheteng* (折腾), which according to Baidu can be defined as the condition of lying in bed and turning from side to side without being able to sleep (Baidu Baike, 2022). Jing Jing described it somewhat differently:

In my understanding, *zheteng* is about wanting to create things. That you like to use your own judgement and way of thinking to change things in your life environment. And then you change things by creating something with others and change your own life. Because right now, you might face many constraints. I would like to break out of that feeling of

being constrained (打破种种束缚的感觉, *dapo zhong zhong shufu de ganjue*) and slowly initiate some changes. (Anonymous 7, 2019)

By changing her own life, Jing Jing meant acquiring skills that she could later put to practical use. She found that engaging in various projects, including her own start-up company, enabled her to foster these skills. However, she did not consider these projects to be merely a kind of training, but also a form of joyful liberation (Hizi, 2021a: 13). This became evident in her description of how these projects allowed her to use her own judgement and ways of thinking. She explained that she might have to give up this feeling of self-determination for a while when entering the labour market. Thus, in contrast to Wang Xiuying and Li Jie, who saw entrepreneurship as a means to accumulate wealth, Jing Jing explained that she would first have to find a normal job after graduation in order to save up some money. Even though she might not be very interested in such jobs, they would prepare her to establish her own business and thereby have the ability to influence the lives of others.

### Ambivalent Attitudes Towards Hometowns

In general, my interlocutors wanted to avoid pursuing a career path in which they would passively have to obey someone else's work schedule. Their desire to be free to do what they found interesting was reflected in their positive descriptions of life in their hometowns. For instance, Li Qiang, whose hometown was located in a fourth-tier city in Hunan province, described how his parents, who worked as a teacher and an office clerk in local government, were living a "happy life" (幸福的生活, *xingfu de shenghuo*) in which they would go to work five times a week and have time off at the weekends (Anonymous 1, 2019). Similarly, Wang Xiuying explained that her parents, both of whom worked in state-owned enterprises in a small town in Chongqing municipality, would usually spend their weekends going by car to a nearby city or on short trips. This kind of life, she emphasised, was very "relaxing" (轻松, *qingsong*) (Anonymous 5, 2019). Li Qiang pointed out that the "low pressure" which people in his hometown experienced could be explained in part by the low housing prices in that area, which contributed to people there feeling more mentally "balanced" (平衡, *pingheng*). By balanced, he meant in particular that they were less inclined to strive to become rich and outcompete others.

When expressing this kind of affection for their places of origin, my interlocutors differed from the young aspiring Chinese presented in Carolyn Hsu's ethnography. Hsu's informants, who worked for Western-style restaurants in Harbin, aimed to obtain sufficient skills and experience to eventually pursue an entrepreneurial career (Hsu, 2005). They tended to define their hometowns as *tu* (土), that is, local, provincial, or backward, while they found themselves connected to the advanced, developed world – understood to be *yang* (洋) – when working for western restaurants (Hsu, 2005: 548–549). However, despite the fact that my interlocutors associated their hometowns with a feeling of happiness, they also found themselves unable to return to live in these places. For instance,

while Li Qiang stated that his parents were satisfied with their current situation, he himself could not contemplate working in a state-run institution. The reason was that he could not imagine living a life in which one can immediately “see to the end of it” (一眼望到底, *yi yan wang dao di*) (Anonymous 1, 2019). He described this condition as the unpleasant feeling of knowing exactly what would happen every day for the next fifty years. In fact, when it came to these generational differences in views on work, my interlocutors were quite similar to Hsu’s informants. Thus, Hsu explains how the young Harbiners’ rural parents preferred for their children to apply for stable jobs in state-owned enterprises. Conversely, the young Harbiners considered work in a state-owned enterprise to be a worthless dead end where no useful skills or experiences could be obtained. Echoing this rather negative point of view, my interlocutors found their parents’ jobs to be characterised by repetition and predictability.

Generally, my interlocutors contrasted a stable life with a life in which one actively strives to achieve progress. Wang Jun, a third-year bachelor’s student who was leading his own start-up company, demonstrated this contrast by playing a quiet melody on an air piano, which was suddenly interrupted by a wild rhythm. He explained that “entrepreneurs don’t want to live a too stable life. When they are at a stable stage, they want some stimulation that makes it unstable” (Anonymous 8, 2019). In addition, Wang Xiuying stressed that the life her parents were living, in which one has time to engage in relaxing activities, shows a “lack of desire to advance” (没有进取心, *meiyou jinqixin*) (Anonymous 5, 2019). Here one is simply accepting things as they are. Therefore, she could also not imagine pursuing a job in a state-owned enterprise, even though her parents wished her to do so. This point of view was repeated by Yang Bingwen, a PhD student who came from a small town in Heilongjiang where his parents worked as engineers for the local state-owned railway company. He used these jobs as an example of why his hometown was economically backward. Thus, he claimed that in his parents’ jobs, and in his hometown in general, the focus was always directed towards finishing work that was solely important here and now:

The technology used in my parents’ jobs is the kind of technology which will be made obsolete with the passage of time (被时代抛弃的技术, *bei shidai paoqi de jishu*). They give me the feeling that the reason they don’t want to be scientists, but engineers instead, is because they only want to solve problems that are relevant right now. They are not farsighted. They don’t do design for the future but try to improve their current situations instead. (Anonymous 9, 2020)

In Yang Bingwen’s description of his parents’ work, it is evident that he associated it with a time that has long passed. His description is reminiscent of wider currents in the representation of the countryside in post-Mao China. In this period, the countryside has been depicted as a space outside the temporal zone of modernity and said to constitute “[...] an isolated, close-minded, inert field locked in a traditional consciousness” (Yan, 2006: 230). Thus, it was characteristic of Yang Bingwen’s account that he considered his parents to be particularly narrow-minded because they kept engaging in the same

repetitive tasks year after year. He explained this lack of ambition as differing from his own proactive way of contributing to the development of society. For instance, in contrast to the technology used in his parents' jobs that were in danger of becoming obsolete, Yang Bingwen pointed out that his start-up company had developed a piece of technology intended to help people who need urgent medical treatment. In general, he stressed the importance of being "farsighted" (有前瞻性, *you qianzhanxing*), which he defined as the urge to solve problems that would occur in China in the years to come, especially problems related to a shrinking population and the ageing of society.

### **Pursuing Entrepreneurship: Between Imagination and Actuality**

Based on the above sections, it is possible to outline the characteristics of Chinese students' entrepreneurial pursuits. They described entrepreneurship as an alternative to pursuing the usual path of ceaseless striving, which they associated with the psychological discomfort of wasting time in a tedious office, passively carrying out tasks decided by a superior, and being unable to improve their own lives. In contrast, they believed that doing entrepreneurship would enable them to follow their passions, come into control of their own time, and exercise influence in society. To this end, they were keen to continue to strive under pressure to progress, so long as this pressure was not being imposed upon them by somebody else.

Although my interlocutors highlighted positive aspects of life in their hometowns, such as the great amount of free time that their parents could enjoy, they were not willing to live this kind of life themselves, as it was characterised by repetition and a general lack of enthusiasm for initiating real change. The fact that the interlocutors were striving for a life in which they could challenge themselves echoes Schumpeter's description of the entrepreneur as an individual who deliberately seeks out difficulties. Thus, according to Schumpeter, the entrepreneur particularly displays an "impulse to fight" by "breaking up the old and creating new tradition" (Schumpeter, 2000 [1934]: 69, 70). The latter refers to the entrepreneur's effort to challenge the routine way of doing business, which, in Schumpeter's words, manifests in his or her will to conquer and to prove themselves superior to others. This attitude was reflected clearly in Yang Bingwen's account when he stressed that the innovative product his company had developed transcended the technology used in his parents' job, which was in danger of obsolescence. In general, my interlocutors can be said to express an unwillingness to adapt, since they did not want to follow the common path towards obtaining a prestigious job. Instead, in line with Schumpeter's description of the entrepreneur, they possessed the dream of achieving power and independence – a dream that results in the entrepreneur's "will to establish a private kingdom" (Schumpeter, 2000 [1934]: 70). Some of my interlocutors certainly saw entrepreneurship as a means to acquire the wealth and skills that would enable them to take control of their own lives and thereby influence the lives of others. At the same time, Schumpeter points out that the process of obtaining power is also characterised by the "joy of creating, of getting things done, or simply of exercising one's energy and ingenuity" (Schumpeter, 2000 [1934]: 70). This joy of

experimenting was prevalent in my interlocutors' description of how they took advantage of their time at university to engage in entrepreneurial projects, thereby enabling them to find out what they felt genuinely passionate about.

Schumpeter argues that the entrepreneur is characterised by his or her ability to bridge the gap between having a dream and actually setting up a business (Schumpeter, 2000 [1934]: 61). However, there were situations when the pressure to adapt sometimes exceeded my interlocutors' capacity for trying to realise their entrepreneurial aspirations. This was especially the case when they reflected upon their plans to establish an entrepreneurial career in the competitive environment they lived in Shanghai. For example, a couple of months after I had interviewed Wang Xiuying, she told me that she had applied for an internship in the local government in her hometown during the winter break. The reason, she explained, was that she needed something to fall back on in case she would not succeed in her entrepreneurial pursuits. Even later, I learned that she had chosen to leave Shanghai and go back to her hometown, where she had found a job in a bank. These revised plans contrasted her previous statements about it being difficult to take control of her own life if she were to pursue a normal job. Yet, when facing the competing values of, on the one hand, wanting to fulfil her own aspirations and, on the other hand, securing an income, she felt she had to take the realities into account and make choices accordingly.

## Conclusion

In this article, I have examined the reflections of young Chinese regarding transitioning from university to work life. This group of students was special in the sense that they wanted to pursue an entrepreneurial career, an ambition that dovetails with the party-state's agenda for promoting mass entrepreneurship in Chinese higher education. As my sample consists of students who were actually engaged in setting up a business, the results cannot be said to represent Chinese university students' views in general. I have argued, however, that my interlocutors' entrepreneurial aspirations can be understood as an attempt to avoid the path of ceaseless striving under someone else's command, allowing instead for visions of well-being and being your own boss. This preference should be understood against the backdrop of the current critique of the 996 work schedule in China and the realisation that more hours spent at work do not necessarily result in improved life quality. Meanwhile, discourses that prioritise well-being (Hizi, 2021a) are proliferating among young people in urban China, thereby revising the notion that the good life is mainly measured in economic wealth. Tying in with this trend, my interlocutors embraced a mode of striving which stresses that one has to be ambitious, but one's efforts should be channelled towards personally meaningful activities.

Officially, the purpose of introducing entrepreneurship at Chinese universities was to solve the problem with, first, unemployment among the high number of university graduates and, secondly, the scarcity of human talents who can participate in upgrading the innovative capacity of the Chinese industrial sector. Therefore, each student is expected

to focus on cultivating his or her own skills in such a way that it will lead them to achieve success in the labour market. To this end, the universities use guest speakers who have been successful within their respective fields to encourage students to experiment with entrepreneurship. These individuals present themselves as having achieved a balance between, on the one hand, pursuing a career they feel passionate about and, on the other hand, framing their ambitions within the party-state's visions for the future development of Chinese society. Thus, while aiming to optimise the students' desire for happiness, they also link this desire to the achievement of political and economic ends (Yang, 2014). The idea that one should strive to realise one's ambitions without being restrained by others, including one's parents, was a view upheld both by the students and the invited guest lecturers. The fact that the lecturers stressed this aspect can be seen as an attempt to give the students a feeling of agency, an agency which they intended to channel into activities that produce value for society. For my interlocutors, however, entrepreneurship was chiefly attractive as a possibility to avoid a work life characterised by repetition and predictability.

Following Schumpeter, the "mass entrepreneurship and mass innovation" campaign reflects an inherent paradox, since it is impossible to foster masses of rare individuals. During my fieldwork, a Chinese friend, who is an entrepreneur himself, contemplated this paradox. He explained it might be helpful to compare the party-state's endeavours to cultivate mass entrepreneurship to a venture capitalist, who invests in many companies at once in the hope that some of them will grow. In the same way, the Chinese government probably does not expect that everyone who takes entrepreneurship courses will become entrepreneur; only those with the highest potential will feel keen to pursue this career path. Seen from an official perspective, those individuals who choose to become entrepreneurs ideally have to exercise their ingenuity and simultaneously submit themselves to the state's agenda for the development of society. The fact that fostering students' entrepreneurial pursuits is seen as a means to achieve this purpose is ironic when taking into account that the exact students who desired entrepreneurship did so because they wanted to avoid being subject to someone else's agenda.

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