

Caught in Transition: Dynamics of Waithood Among Chinese and Japanese Youth

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Abstract:

This paper investigates the dynamics of waithood among Chinese and Japanese youth, focusing on the unique aspects experienced in each country. Waithood, a period of prolonged transition into adulthood due to delayed milestones like stable employment and marriage, is increasingly prevalent due to high unemployment rates and evolving job markets. This paper presents the mental and social strain those experiencing waithood must endure, and examines government efforts to address these issues, comparing and contrasting the strategies implemented in China and Japan. Despite various initiatives, the findings suggest that current measures are insufficient to fully alleviate the challenges faced by young people. The paper argues for more comprehensive policies that address the root causes of waithood, emphasizing the need for innovative approaches to support youth in achieving independence. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of youth transitions in East Asia and underscores the urgency for effective interventions.

Keywords: Waithood; Japan; China; youth.

1. Introduction

Waithood is a prolonged period of limbo experienced by youth during which they cannot satisfy the requirements of becoming an adult yet are too old to be considered youth. Those within this state cannot achieve traditional milestones of adulthood, such as marriage, financial independence, and stable employment. Waithood has claimed many individuals within Asia, specifically in China and Japan.

This paper aims to explore the phenomenon of waithood in China and Japan, a period of prolonged adolescence and delayed transitions to adulthood characterized by unemployment, underemployment, and social stagnation among youth. By examining both countries' social and economic factors, this study aims to identify the unique and shared contributors to waithood. It will analyze how these factors impact the lives of youth, compare and contrast the experiences and coping strategies of the youth in China and Japan, and evaluate the policy responses from both governments. This comparative analysis seeks to present the implications of waithood for East Asian societies and propose potential pathways for addressing this growing issue. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for developing effective interventions to support youth in their transition to adulthood.

2. Literature Review

As mentioned by Lian, fewer and fewer Chinese university graduates are landing a job straight out of university [1]. Within a year, employment straight out of university has dropped by nearly 19% in China. Delayed employment, or "waithood", has nearly doubled, with 12% of new graduates unable to find a job. Similarly, fluid and part-time employment has also doubled as more Chinese youth resort to such means to counteract the lack of opportunities in traditional job markets. Not only have job opportunities in traditional firms decreased in China, but education inflation has become increasingly troublesome and has made finding a stable job all the more difficult for new graduates. A student with a master's degree is 13% more likely to land a job immediately compared to a student with an undergraduate degree and nearly 30% more likely than a student out of a community college. Considering the rarity of a master's degree in China, this trend shows that the Chinese job market may forgo the majority of youth candidates altogether due to their lack of higher education. The inability to land a stable and well-paying job places many of China's youth firmly within the state of waithood. Many are forced to live with their parents and, with no job, have essentially no chance of attracting a romantic partner. These challenges highlight the urgent need for systemic changes in the educational and employ-

ment sectors to better support young people. The psychological impact of unemployment has been well-documented. Studies indicate a strong link between prolonged periods of unemployment or unstable employment and heightened levels of anxiety. Furthermore, the severity of anxiety and stress-related disorders is directly correlated with the length of the periods of unemployment. This psychological toll is particularly poignant for recent university graduates who often face more uncertainty from their transition from academia to the professional job market. Tan examines the popular Chinese social media site Weibo and finds a strong correlation between rising anxiety and increased unemployment rates [2]. Tan's study looks at Chinese youth from ages 16-24 and keywords within their social media posts. As unemployment rates rose from 2019 to 2023, peaking at around 21%, so too did the use of words relate to anxiety, sadness, and negative emotion amongst the target audience of ages 16-24 [2]. These findings underscore the critical need for targeted mental health support and job placement programs to help alleviate the psychological burden experienced by unemployed youth.

3. The Issue of Waitthood in China

Many steps must be taken to solve the more significant issue of youth unemployment; one such method may be to broaden one's intangible skills and abilities that are not guaranteed by any degree, which may increase one's odds of overcoming the rampant education requirement inflation of many companies. According to the comprehensive study of Jiang on students within Shaanxi province, factors such as individual characteristics, social experience, and workplace training help boost one's employability [3]. According to Kong, workplaces in China are looking to hire not only graduates with undergrad or master's degrees but also ones who can quickly understand and learn, possess emotional intelligence, and have the ability to self-manage [4]. For those seeking a job within China to break their waitthood status, it may be well worth their time and effort to improve these aspects of themselves. If a candidate is adept in all of the factors mentioned above, they would likely outperform the statistical probability of getting a job with whatever degree they have, whether it be a community college, a university undergraduate degree, or a master's degree.

Compounding the issue is that Chinese youth are often subjected to high levels of social and familial expectations, which only highlight the stress of unemployment. The cultural emphasis on professional and educational success does not recognize the newfound difficulties in the current economic circumstance, causing Chinese youth to

be under disproportionate pressure. Failing to meet such familial, societal, and personal expectations leads to an elevated sense of failure and added vulnerability to mental illness, including but not limited to depression and anxiety, thus, further embedding them in a state of waitthood.

While flexible employment may serve as a means of addressing the lack of stable jobs from large corporations, Chan sees it as only a temporary solution [5]. The study claims that China's employment issues stem from three major issues: rapid expansion of higher education, as mentioned previously, a mismatch between university programs offered and actual job market demand, and well-educated migrants who flow to wealthier coastal regions of China from less developed regions. In order to tackle these issues, the root causes must be examined [5].

First, education expansion must halt, as there is no other method to reduce the supply of graduates. The education sector may also need to be reformed so that the majority of programs offered meet the demand of the local job market. The most challenging issue to solve would be the massive regional disparity. While the wealthiest cities within China have living standards and productivity comparable to first-world countries, most of China is still poorer and less developed. This disparity leads to fewer job opportunities in spots outside of major cities and coastal areas, prompting educated graduates to migrate to these cities for job opportunities, thereby over-flooding their job markets. Unless the government focuses more on economic development in rural areas of China, this issue will only remain and intensify.

4. The Waitthood Issue in Japan

Across the ocean in Japan, similar levels of waitthood plague the populace. The term *ikizurasa*, as mentioned by Kido, roughly translates to "the pain of living," is Japan's way of describing the anxiety experienced by youth in post-industrial Japanese society [6]. It is often associated with a sense of disconnectedness to one's surroundings, imposter syndrome, and even self-blaming or suicidal tendencies. Those suffering from *ikizurasa* often report feelings of loneliness, anxiety, low self-esteem, hopelessness, and anger. The leading cause of this phenomenon often stems from youth unemployment.

Kido explains the two main aspects of *ikizurasa*: socio-economic angst and personal-mental angst [6]. The first is caused by an increased wealth and status gap between employed youth and those without a job. Japanese youth already endure the same pains of waitthood as their Western and African counterparts. However, on top of those aspects, they live in a society with an incredibly competitive workforce and rigid traditionalist culture.

Japanese youth are constantly reminded of their ineptitude compared to their peers, exacerbating the *ikizurasa* they already experience. Furthermore, with the competitiveness of the Japanese workforce, the odds of an unemployed youth landing a respectable job are slim to none. Large corporations will seldom hire someone who has been unemployed over young and bright new graduates.

The personal-mental angst is largely intertwined with the socio-economic factors mentioned previously. Japanese youth feel a lack of self-worth, as they were raised their entire lives believing that to be an adult worthy of respect, they must have a stable job and economic independence. They become unable to relate to their peers, who may have overtaken them by landing a job after graduation. These individuals suffer mentally as the gap widens between them and their friends and classmates to insurmountable levels, almost solely due to a lack of job opportunities. To make matters worse, elders in Japan are not known for their empathy. Many partake in “youth bashing.” These adults believe that newer generations do not work hard enough and that their issues can be solved by simply trying harder, as that is how their predecessors achieved great things. This perspective ignores the drastically different economic and social environments in which generations of youth are raised and only exacerbates the personal-mental angst experienced.

These factors contribute significantly to the increasing NEET population in Japan. As explained in Genda (2007), NEET refers to those not in education, employment, or training [7]. These individuals are often less educated and have poor communication skills. Despite this, the main reason they resort to the life of a NEET is due to macro factors impacting the economy, such as the Japanese economy relying more on part-time jobs and the inflation in education requirements of local companies. Over 70% of Japanese high school students found jobs despite lacking a college degree before 1990 [7]. Nowadays, graduates need a master’s degree for any decent job and are often unemployed despite their higher education.

5. Comparison and Contrast between China and Japan’s Waitthood

The situation plaguing many youths within both China and Japan have many similarities. As Wu describes, both countries have experienced a meteoric rise in their economy and standard of living, leading to inevitable gaps in job opportunities and unequal opportunities for many of their youth [8]. Both countries are conservative leaning in their beliefs, where adulthood is associated with financial security and marriage.

These conservative cultures lead both country’s youth

to experience extra stress and mental health issues compounded by their waitthood. Both countries have competitive workforces, where each job opening is clamored for by multiple applicants, and as mentioned by Mok, education inflation causing formerly accessible jobs to be hidden behind requirements of at least an undergraduate or master degree [9]. The governments of both countries have increased unemployment benefits and social programs to help educate the workforce in an attempt to increase employment rates, with Japan focusing on stimulating more entrepreneurs to rise according to the OECD [10], and China increasing the safety nets for workers suffering temporary unemployment.

6. Conclusion

Although both China and Japan governments strive to mitigate the issue of waitthood within their societies, the results of these efforts remain uncertain. Initiatives such as promoting vocational training and supporting small businesses represent positive initial steps by the governments. However, more drastic and sustainable changes are necessary to fully address and reverse the situation.

This study has successfully identified many factors contributing to waitthood in both China and Japan. Further inquiries should delve deeper into some of the solutions that the study proposed, evaluating how practical these solutions are and estimating their effectiveness in aiding more young people to transition out of waitthood in various societies despite varying circumstances.

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