

“Unfinished Adult Children”: A Causal Analysis of the Issue of NEETs in China

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Abstract: *The issue of NEETs (not in education, employment, or training) has recently garnered more attention in Chinese society. In China, the current slang term comparable to NEETs is the “unfinished adult children,” referring to those young persons who are not successful in entering the workforce after graduation. This article focuses on analyzing the causes of the issue in China in three dimensions. In the dimension of tertiary education, college enrollment expansion, low alignment between educational supply and demand, and inadequate career planning and employment training have contributed to youth employment difficulties. In terms of home education, flawed educational expectations and parenting have compromised the social adaptability of the young generation. Personal problems with NEETs, such as irrational employment attitudes, low employment competitiveness, and self-lenient tendency have also exacerbated their predicament. Recommendations for addressing this issue are also proposed.*

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Introduction

THE SLANG term “unfinished adult child” (UAC) in China is derived from the expression of “unfinished buildings” in the construction sector. “Unfinished buildings” are buildings whose construction is halted, or whose completion is delayed indefinitely, because of issues like the funding chain disruption or planning adjustment on the part of the property developers. The UAC was recently coined to describe the group of youngsters who are from ordinary origins and fail to find desired employment after going through more than ten years of formal education, falling into a state of stagnated growth (Rui, 2024). Despite the term’s prevalence, it is unquestionably disrespectful to label this cohort as UACs, as they are still in the transition from school life to employment, and their lives as adults have just begun. The slang term is somewhat a negation of the potential possibilities of their future lives, disregarding the complexity and specificity of the individual’s life experience.

Comparatively, the NEET, an acronym for “not in education, employment, or training,” is far more an appropriate term. A NEET is a young adult who is unemployed and not receiving further education or vocational training, depending on their family for a living (Sun, 2005). While the UAC is an emergent term, the NEET is not new in the Chinese literature. Search results of Chinese journal databases such as the Chinese Network of Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) shows that researchers’ interest in the NEETs can be traced to the beginning of this century (Xiao, 2005). More recent studies in this area suggest that more highly educated young persons are joining the NEET cohort (Tan & Wu, 2021; Chen, 2024). A portion of Chinese graduates from prestigious universities have also chosen not to enter the workforce after graduation. These graduates have made arduous academic efforts and enjoyed top-notch educational resources since their young ages but end up being NEETs, which provides justifications for the emergence of the term “UAC” in China.

Regardless of the name for this cohort, NEETs, UACs, boomerangers, or “indoor guys,” they share a commonality, namely, having difficulty becoming mature adults with stagnation in professional and social development or even utterly withdrawing from society after finishing secondary or tertiary education. Such a state of existence hampers the growth of the individual, which is also unfavorable for the advancement of society as a whole. Hence, it is imperative to delve into the sources of these inactive and non-ambitious life attitudes. This article tries to analyze the causes of the issue of NEETs in China from the angles of higher education, home education, and personal factors. NEETs and UACs will be used alternately to denote the cohort in question.

Issues Associated with Higher Education in China

The Impact of the College Enrollment Expansion Policy

At the turn of this century, China introduced the college enrollment expansion (CEE) policy, delaying the youth's entry into the labor market, in order to alleviate the employment pressures facing its urban areas. The move was also meant to improve human capital to prepare for the future industrial upgrading. Looking back, the policy did play a positive role in lightening the employment pressure at that time and enhancing the education levels of the population on a big scale. On the other hand, it has brought on adverse effects on the employment rates of college graduates in later years. According to Wu and Zhao (2010), even in years around 2010 when China saw rapid economic growth and steady increases in job opportunities, the consequences of the policy for the employment of college graduates had been evident: increased unemployment rates and decreased salary standards. In recent years of economic downturn, Chinese college graduates could only face a tougher employment market, particularly in the context of the ever-increasing numbers of graduates year by year. Against this backdrop, the rise in the number of NEETs is unavoidable. Nevertheless, the youth's and their parents' enthusiasm for pursuing higher education has not been dampened by the apparent drop in graduate employment rates because there remain significant income gaps between college and high school graduates, making higher education a potentially valuable experience for the individual. Yao et al. (2013) examined the changes in the labor market ensuing the release of the CEE policy from the perspective of the return of investment (ROI) in human capital to discover that the ROI of higher education was significantly higher than that of non-higher education. Therefore, parents still deem it advantageous for their children to receive tertiary education.

Furthermore, China's expansion of college enrollment has posed negative impacts on the quality of its higher education, which worsened the employment prospects in college students (Jia, 2006), leading to increased numbers of NEETs. To manage the potentially adverse impact of the CEE policy on the quality of tertiary education, Chinese educational authorities established the employment rate of graduates as a measure to evaluate the instructional quality of colleges and universities, aiming to urge higher education institutions to improve their education standards while also modifying their specialty planning and heightening their connection with the economy (Xie et al., 2005). Nevertheless, instead of focusing on enhancing the quality of education, the management of certain Chinese colleges has chosen to manipulate the figures related to graduates employment rates by illegitimate conduct like creating fake hiring contracts (Zhang et al., 2016). Improving educational quality involves substantial inputs of time, energy

and financial resources, whereas presenting ostensibly desirable employment rates are by far easier. In the biased pursuit of employment rates, some higher education institutions willfully shortened the established instructional periods to allow students more time to find jobs (Zhang & Chai, 2019). Others decided to lower the assessment standards to reduce failure rates as employment rates also relate to graduation rates, producing a host of graduates with inadequate expertise and skills. These graduates may struggle with securing decent jobs and can easily become NEETs.

A Mismatch between Specialty Arrangements and the Labor Market Needs

The current defective planning of specialties in Chinese tertiary education institutions hampers the employment prospects in college graduates, constituting an unfavorable factor for the scale of the NEET cohort. First off, many Chinese universities show shortsightedness in their curriculum design. They tend to inordinately focus on presumed popular disciplines within a short term, without contemplation on the long-term, potential needs for talent (Feng, 2009). In the meantime, they are more concerned with the nationwide popularity of their specialties than their compatibility with the local industrial needs. Jiangxi Province in China, for instance, has a strong demand for talent related to the secondary industry while also having a high demand, as a major agricultural province, for professionals specializing in emerging subjects such as agricultural modernization and green agriculture. However, majors serving the tertiary industry predominates the curricula of Jiangxi-based universities, whereas those related to primary and secondary industries constitute a disproportionately small percentage (Zhou, 2018). Furthermore, when planning the curriculum for their disciplines, Chinese higher education institutions focus more on its benefits for the development of the school per se, with inadequate consideration of the actual needs of the future employers of their graduates (Li & Nan, 2018). This results in their emphasis on academic competence cultivation over practical skill development in students. A prominent illustration of this issue is that even those high-performing students with excellent academic achievements might have no idea how to apply their professional knowledge to the practical work in their internship and needed to start learning from scratch. Some of them could not secure job contracts after completing the internship due to their inability to adapt to workplace requirements in a timely manner.

In addition, a portion of Chinese universities fail to establish distinguishing qualities of their respective curricula, resulting in highly homogenous selections of specialties. The selection of disciplines and specialties manifest the distinctiveness of a school (Zhu, 2012), representing its focuses and advantages. No university can own all the most outstanding

specialties in the world. Yet, some Chinese universities have the fixation with a comprehensive and all-encompassing specialty program. This not only causes the loss of their respective distinctiveness but also engenders curricular structures with a high degree of homogeneity. As a result, some majors are run by too many schools, producing excessive numbers of graduates with the same education background, while other specialties that are truly in demand do not enroll enough students. This leads to the undesirable situation that the supply of graduates of certain majors cannot meet the demand, whereas the supply of others may substantially exceed the demand.

Inadequacies in Career Planning and Employment Training

One chief reason for NEETs' withdrawal from society is their difficulty adapting to the workplace environment. Any setbacks encountered in the job-seeking process or in the workplace can easily provoke their avoidance mentality (Chen, 2024). Their inability to smoothly transition from the educational setting to the workplace is partly due to the ineffective career planning and employment training from the school.

Although the majority of Chinese colleges offer career planning courses, their outcomes prove less ideal than expected. The reason for this, according to Li (2019), is that these career planning courses lack systematic arrangements, often consisting of sporadic lectures or online teaching videos. With such courses, students can hardly develop sufficient awareness of career planning or understanding of the labor market (Ji et al., 2015). Most of them neither has necessary job-seeking skills nor get prepared for the future workplaces. Furthermore, Chinese colleges typically offer career planning courses in the last academic year, seldom running them in lower grades. Given that career planning is a long-term process of adjustment, in which students progressively formulate an explicit understanding of their own strengths and qualities, the employment environment, and job requirements, career planning training should start as early as possible instead of being treated as a last-minute handling.

Additionally, one-size-fits-all employment training is pervasive in Chinese colleges, despite the fact that employment expectations and developmental prospects of individuals vary tremendously. Huang and Tang (2024) argue that college students need differentiated employment guidance because their employment decision-making is potentially affected by a variety of factors, such as gender, the family background, and the major. Nonetheless, with the dearth of targeted employment guidance, a sizable portion of soon-to-be graduates feel profound helplessness in job seeking. They look for jobs using group mentalities rather than independent thinking,

disregarding their individual circumstances and interest. This blind practice can severely compromise their competitiveness in the job market, easily leading to their falling into the predicament of “graduation with ensuing unemployment.”

In short, despite the CEE policy having played positive roles in enhancing the quality of the Chinese population and promoting scientific, cultural, and economic development of the society, the negative consequences it brought on have not been properly addressed. The consequential harm to the quality of higher education has had an adverse impact on the employability of college graduates. The disconnection between the specialty arrangements of higher education institutions and the job market, as well as the inadequacies in career planning and employment training for college students, adds further complications to the employment of graduates. Due to multiple factors, a portion of youngsters have failed to get sufficiently prepared for life as adults even after receiving higher education. As a result, they become NEETs or concerning UACs in the eyes of their parents.

Deficiencies in Home Education

The word “unfinished” in the UAC also implies the pathetic outcomes of family investment in education. Home education plays as important a role as school education in fostering the child’s growth. Problematic Home education is equally attributable to the existence of NEETs.

Illegitimate Parental Educational Expectations

“Studying hard for being admitted into a prestigious university, securing a well-paid job, and living a wealthy life” is the purpose of education shared by many Chinese parents for their children. While it may appear reasonable, it bears serious flaws. First, such an educational expectation is based on instrumental rationality (a type of reason focusing on the achievement of specific objectives and maximization of outcomes via rational calculation and efficient means), with disregard for the child’s personal aspirations (Xiong, 2017). Those children who identify themselves with this educational expectation from parents may gradually forgo their own ideas about future careers, becoming aimless in the job market. Second, parents with this educational expectation equate the purpose of education and work to the attainment of wealth and social status, disregarding higher-order meaning inherent in them. These parents, who materialize education and work, are often unable to give their children enough emotional support when the latter encounter setbacks in the process of seeking employment. Children who have social adaptation difficulties may receive contempt from parents who

evaluate educational outcomes by mere economic returns, which could exacerbate their social avoidance and, in the worst cases, prompts them to become NEETs (Chen, 2024). Third, parents with oversimplistic understanding of the association between education and future life are often ignorant of the complexity and uncertainty of the world. In effect, top-ranking university education does not necessarily end in a desirable job, and a well-paid job does not necessarily predict a life without other challenges. Parents with the said misconception of education are typically unable to identify the NEET tendency in their children or implement effective interventions. When their children really develop into NEETs, they may give up on them without knowing how to correct them.

Aside from the above popular educational expectation among parents, educational researchers are also critical of overly high educational expectations from parents. Unreasonable parental education expectations can bring to the child inordinate academic pressures while also causing overinvolvement of parents in child schoolwork (Li & Hu, 2021). This is detrimental to the physical and mental health of the child and may also lead to their psychological disorders in adulthood, making it difficult for them to adapt to normal social life (Yi, 2014).

Improper Parenting

Unfavorable parenting styles can increase the risks of becoming a NEET in children. First, parents who are overly preoccupied with kids' academic performance often neglect the development of psychosocial competences in them. Existing educational research reveals that Chinese parents tend to make excessive financial investments in child education, such as paying for costly extracurricular tutoring of various forms in a bid to improve the kids' academic results (Yi, 2014), but paying little attention to character building, independence acquisition, and social responsibility cultivation in the latter (Yan, 2014). This biased focus of education can predispose them to NEET trajectories. Second, authoritarian parenting also dampens psychosocial competency development in children. Shen (2006) emphasizes that controlling parents are more likely to produce children with emotional alienation and low desires for social interaction. While the latter may behave submissively in childhood to meet parental expectations, they can become adults with inactive lives attitudes in the future. Third, permissive parenting can significantly elevate the child's vulnerability to NEET status. Parental limitless indulgence is an impediment to the nurturing of autonomy and self-regulation in underage children. Also, it can give the adult children the illusion that they have no need to worry about financial burdens like living costs; they may feel at ease and justified in remaining unemployed. This explains why youngsters from richer families are more likely to end up

depending on their parents after experiencing employment difficulties (Wu, 2015).

Personal Factors in the NEET Cohort

Irrational Employment Attitudes

Irrational employment attitudes are the source of tremendous gaps between employment expectations and the workplace reality in graduates. Those with low psychological modulation capacity may lose faith in their employment prospects after experiencing certain undesirable workplace environments. Illegitimate employment attitudes in the NEET cohort are mainly manifested in the following aspects: (i) A conservative choice of jobs. A portion of college graduates show strong preference for posts in state-run businesses and public institutions, so-called “stable jobs” (Chen, 2010; Li, 2019; Huang & Tang, 2024). Even if they do not see any hope of joining a state-run company or becoming a civil servant for the time being, they will not consider other employment options but instead linger in homes, concentrating on preparing for the selective examinations for those public posts. Parents of this group tend to be supportive of their children’s attempts to secure “stable jobs.” As a result, the temporary suspension of employment may develop into a permanent unemployment state. (ii) Inordinately high employment expectations. Some college graduates set high requirements for their jobs in terms of the salary, alignment with the major studied, developmental prospects of the profession, and work locations. Yet, few jobs can perfectly meet all these requirements (Chen, 2010; Li, 2019). The big discrepancy between their ideal standards and the actual work environment often demotivates them in job seeking. (iii) A lack of a long-term career goal. Job hopping is more prevalent in young people without mature career planning (Chen, 2024). While changing jobs rationally is deemed beneficial for personal development and optimization of human resource distribution, young Job hoppers without long-term career goals can soon lose motivation for re-employment, likely lingering in the jobless state for a long time. In addition, a considerable number of graduates have chosen to participate in the examinations for postgraduate programs just for following the suit of their peers or evading the work pressures, without considering the programs’ association with their future professional development. Such aimless practices often end in examination failure, prompting these graduates to become chronic NEETs.

Low Competitiveness in the Labor Market

Low employment competitiveness of some graduates is mainly due to their deficits in professional skills and recurrent education awareness (Chen, 2010; Chen, 2024). Professional skills are the most fundamental prerequisite for employment; organizations are certainly reluctant to employ underprepared graduates. As discussed earlier in this article, the defective higher education system is partly accountable for the gap between what is taught in colleges and what is expected from graduates by the employers. Nevertheless, individuals, after leaving the campuses, are responsible for their own further education. Those who are neither fully professionally prepared for their careers nor willing to continue to learn are bound to be unwelcome in the workplace.

Moreover, poor knowledge on workplace interpersonal relationships can also undermine the employment competitiveness of graduates. Learning to handle the complicated workplace relationships is a key element of workplace adaptation (Chen, 2024). Compared to relatively simpler interpersonal relationships on campus, the hierarchical relationships between superiors and subordinates and the somewhat competitive ones between colleagues in the workplace are far more challenging. Those graduates who fail to come to terms with the shift may quit the jobs that feel overwhelmingly stressful because of the interpersonal pressures entailed. Also, this negative experience may discourage them from seeking other work opportunities.

Being Overly Self-Lenient

In the context of the economic downturn, setbacks in seeking employment are unavoidable. It is acceptable for the youth to stay unemployed and live an inactive existence temporarily. Nevertheless, they risk becoming NEETs if they overly indulge themselves in escapism, giving up work and training opportunities.

Self-lenient tendency can lead to the formulation of low self-reliance personality in young people, with which comes a decline in psychological regulation capacity as well as a zero-risk disposition, propelling them to the NEET status (Huang, 2019). Specifically, a youngster adopting the self-lenient policy may disregard self-limitation like self-discipline and senses of responsibility, denying the necessity of further developing skills needed to adapt to society. Also, initiating a career and integrating into society necessitates a potent capacity for psychological regulation. However, the self-lenient policy and its consequential denial of personal responsibilities often result in deficits in psychological regulation capacity in young people, depriving them of the motivation for further growth. In addition, the zero-risk disposition is a psychological tendency of seeking absolute security by escaping from the reality. In the face of uncertainties in life, young persons

can easily feel helplessness and indulge themselves in those effortless and risk-free activities like browsing the internet and playing video games for psychological comfort. In the long run, this indulgence may exacerbate their alienation from society, dampening their professional development.

Against the backdrop of the high penetration of social media, NEETs can gather on online platforms and establish their own social circles. Nevertheless, these social circles may intensify their self-lenient tendency, worsening their NEET state, instead of providing any positive assistance. Members of these NEET circles can develop strong identification with peers. A common mentality among the NEETs with online social circles is that unemployment is not a serious issue to an individual, since there are numerous out-of-job youngsters, as indicated by the cyber world. This mentality gives them an excuse for self-indulgence and inactivity, exacerbating their tendency to solely blame the external environment for their employment failure, rather than prompting critical examination of their own attitudes.

Conclusions and Discussion

The issue of NEETs or UACs in China is the product of multiple factors. This article explores the problems associated with the issue from the angles of higher education, home education, and the NEET cohort itself. The tripartite analysis reveals a common problem shared by higher education institutions, NEETs' families, and NEETs themselves, namely, the significance of career planning training has been undervalued to varying degrees. Moreover, the schools and parents tend to focus on academic ability training but neglect the education of essential competencies critical for the youth's after-school life. The study also finds an inconsistency in both higher education and home education. The college may set high admission standards but relax the assessment criteria for graduation; the parents focus their educational investment on the kid's pre-tertiary education stage to ensure their enrollment into an ideal college, but with little concern about the actual outcomes of higher education. This educational context, coupled with the low social adaptation awareness among a portion of students, can easily instigate the increase in the number of NEETs in China.

The NEET status is certainly detrimental to the mental health and social adaptation of young persons, and the existence of NEETs is a waste of the families' educational investment and human capital of society. The issue may even undermine the stability of social development. Preventing college students from becoming NEETs and assisting NEET youth to recover normal life as adults requires multifaceted efforts from all stakeholders. First, career planning training should be treated as an integral part of the nation's educational system, spanning basic and higher education, to help students

progressively foster self-understanding and establish future career orientation, as well as rational notions of employment. Second, higher education institutions in China should further improve the quality of tertiary education by optimizing curriculum design and strengthening practical education so as to enhance graduates' employment competitiveness and ensure their workplace success. Third, change in the focus of home education is warranted. Chinese parents should pay more attention to the development of all-round competencies, including social adaptability, of their children, rather than just focusing on their academic performance. Home education should include the provision of social practice for children to improve their social skills, which are crucial for workplace integration in their future careers. Fourth, the government needs to advance more potent policies to assist with college graduates' employment or entrepreneurial endeavors while also helping NEETs restore confidence and direction in life by providing professional psychological counseling and vocational training. Lastly, businesses should take a more active role in the school-industry partnership programs to offer more internship and job opportunities to graduates. It is also important to engage the third-sector entities in assistance efforts for NEETs, utilizing their services like voluntary skill training to facilitate the latter's integration into society.

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