The “Success” Narrative of Educational Elitism and the Disillusionment of Generation Z in East Asia

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Abstract. Educational elitism refers to the concept that educational outcomes are closely related to social class and status. Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital and reproduction states that education serves as a tool for reinforcing class stratification. Through education, the upper class accumulates and transmits cultural capital to stabilize its own class. However, because of the unique context of East Asia education is not only a matter of obtaining cultural capital, but also the concretization of anxiety. In this way, people in East Asian society universalize cultural capital and construct a mainstream value narrative of "success," which leads to disillusionment among Generation Z in the face of real-world conflicts. Furthermore, social culture causes young people to ignore institutional irrationality and instead internalize the reasons for failure. This article, from the perspectives of pedagogy and cultural studies, aims to explore how educational elitism shapes Generation Z's values and how this value narrative leads to spiritual crisis and experiences of disillusionment. It also attempts to analyze the causes of this value system and the complex social issues underlying it.

Keywords: Educational elitism, disillusion, Gen Z, East Asia.

1. Introduction

In East Asia, education has been seen as the most legitimate and ethically acceptable means to stability and collectively acknowledge “success”. Educational achievement is not only a personal pursuit but also a family and societal expectation. The aspiration has rooted in Confucian traditions and strengthened by the growth of the modern nation-state. Even in the 20th century the narrative of hard work leads to success is still supported by the relatively stable economic growth and some visible examples of upward mobility.

However, the promises made by education become more and more fragile as structural inequality rises and economic stagnation. Generation Z, the first generation growing up entirely in the digital age and facing global uncertainty, is becoming skeptical of the sort of narrative. Although young people in China, Japan, and South Korea are educated more than ever, they are more likely to face an unemployment crisis and see declining rewards from their educational investments. This gap between expectations and reality has created a commonly shared sense of disillusionment: anxiety, fatigue, and alienation.

This article seeks to explore the interplay between educational elitism and youth disillusionment in East Asia. It explores three related themes: first, how narratives of "success" have been constructed and internalized so far; second, how the unique position of Generation Z contributes to the conflict of such a narrative; and third, how disillusionment is expressed at both individual and collective levels. Finally, this paper reveals the weakness and limitations of education as a reliable mean to upward mobility and emphasizes the need for new values to understand it and expect to help young people deal well meaning, identity and aspirations through uncertain times.

2. The Construction and Internalization of “Success” Narratives

2.1. The Tradition of Elite Education in East Asia

East Asian societies have long fostered a narrative of social advancement centered on education. This cultural thread, deeply rooted in Confucianism and the imperial examination system, can be traced back to the Han and Tang dynasties. Since the Han and Tang dynasties, the examination system

has been viewed as the most important channel for social mobility and a core mechanism for selecting officials and consolidating the legitimacy of state rule. Historically, education has been a main avenue for social mobility [1]. Under the tendency of "excellence in learning leads to officialdom," education has become not only a process of knowledge accumulation but also a path for moral integrity and class progress. It has created the cultural imprint of "success through individual effort." The cultural genes for the model educational system were derived from the old imperial examination system, which served as the model for educational elitism.

In the modern era, East Asian countries have maintained and strengthened this tradition in the process of building modern nation-states. Japan implemented a modern education system that highlighted academic performance and examination-based selection during the Meiji Restoration. After the fall of the imperial examination system in the late Qing Dynasty, China gradually developed a modern education system. Additionally, it maintained the view that education was the main means of class rise even after the People's Republic of China was established. Similarly, South Korea made university entrance tests a crucial part of its postwar reconstruction strategy for young people to show a competitive edge. These systems show how close education, national development, and social mobility are.

In addition, East Asian society has a cultural tradition of seeing academic qualifications as a key criterial for measuring individual value and social status. The idea that "all things are inferior, only learning is superior" not only shapes general social expectations for education but also makes it the most important for family's intergenerational investment. Compared with the West where various talents and personal interests are highly diversified, East Asian society has a very single definition of educational success and thus founded a unique tradition of elite education.

2.2. The Reinforcement of East Asian Elite Education in Contemporary Times

This traditional narrative has not dissolved in the process of modernisation, and the dominant educational values narrative of educational elitism has been further institutionalised and expanded in East Asian societies in the process of globalisation and neoliberalism. The Gaokao in China's mainland, the General Scholastic Ability Test in Taiwan, the dse in Hong Kong, the Suneung in South Korea, and the Common Test for University Admissions in Japan. They all are essentially the core support for the establishing the education system by the national-level unified examination. They are all key nodes in the destiny of youth. Quality educational resources, on the other hand, are highly concentrated in a few elite universities. After completing education towards a career, market choices reflect a strong preference for elite universities, where subject performance within the university is far less important than the prestige of the university itself [2]. This structure continues to solidify, making the competitive and exclusive nature of educational elitism even more pronounced in contemporary times.

In the East Asian context, this elitist narrative manifests itself in the cult of academic qualifications, prestigious schools and stable careers. In recent decades, under the competition of globalisation, neo-liberal ideology, and the demand for rapid economic development, competition in education has been intensified as never before, with a test-based education system, a prevalent culture of tutoring, inflation of academic qualifications, and the extreme pursuit of prestigious schools. The core narrative of 'education = personal endeavour = success' has been systematically instilled and reinforced by society, families and schools, and has become a mainstream social value.

In this context, elite education is not only a cultural act but also a social project in which all people participate in the competition, and the cultural capital that Bourdieu emphasises is particularly evident in this process, as families not only invest financially but also help their children to stand out from the competition through their cultural habits, learning styles, and networks of contacts. This extreme focus on investment in education actually exacerbates educational inequalities between different social classes. The upper class is able to secure its position by purchasing high-quality resources, such as international schools, overseas summer schools, and private tutors, while the middle and lower classes are forced into a cycle of anxiety of "not losing at the starting line. China's out-of-school

training, Japan's ‘juku’, and Korea's ‘hagwon’ all show that parents see education as a central means of class reproduction. This elite education system reinforces structural inequality and sets the stage for the disillusionment of Generation Z youth. In conclusion, the reinforcement of East Asian elite education in contemporary times is not just a continuation of the education system, but the result of multiple forces. This reinforcement makes the narrative of ‘success’ seem more solid, but at the same time increases the possibility of intergenerational disillusionment.

3. Questioning and Collapsing Narratives

3.1. The Unique Situation and Dilemma of Generation Z

Generation Z refers to a new generation of young people born between the mid-1990s and the early 2010s, who are digital natives [3], growing up in an era of information explosion, deep globalisation, rapid social change, and economic transformation. Generation Z happens to be the witness and bearer of the period of white-hot competition for education in East Asia, who have received the most comprehensive investment in education, but also face the most uncertainty. Generation Z has generally undergone a long process of academic training and social normalisation. However, when they enter the workplace, they find that the reality is far from what the narrative promises.

The promotion of elite education in East Asian societies, which ostensibly promises class leapfrogging through personal endeavour, actually exacerbates youth frustration due to economic downturns, tightening job markets and unequal distribution of social resources [4, 5]. Lower and lower-middle class students entering elite universities come to realise that meritocratic narratives mask structural inequalities, leading to a shift from “optimism” to “disillusionment”.

Structural challenges, slowing economic growth and increasing uncertainty, such as Japan's “lost N years”, China's new economic normality, competitive job market, high house prices, increasing pressure on the social welfare system, the emergence of the trend of class solidification, and the impact of value pluralism. The situation of elite university diplomas in China's labour market is becoming increasingly pessimistic, with elite university graduates unable to change the intergenerational relationship between income levels, and with no guarantee of entry into elite occupations or industries [6]. It suggests that the class upward mobility function brought about by diplomas is declining at an accelerating rate. When Generation Z discovers that the ‘good college = good job’ formula they have long believed in is no longer valid, the feeling of being cheated is comparable to that of investors when a financial Ponzi scheme collapses. At the same time, some young people are seeking non-mainstream education paths and accepting overseas education opportunities, but instead of entering a beautiful new world, these students are often met with expectations that fall short when they enter a prestigious Western school. The promised global elite status becomes fragile in the reality of competition, and it is difficult for them to break away from the mindset shaped by their local education. Even after returning to their home countries, they are taunted by the ‘water masters’, and young people are sceptical about the value of ‘another way out’ - studying abroad for gold plating. Even among the elite group who have achieved secular success in adulthood, many still maintain the mentality of "eternal test takers," constructing life as an examination hall that requires strategies. This "internalisation of learning habits" creates a deep spiritual dilemma: they are perpetually anxious about the next standardised evaluation, and are unable to build a true self-worth system [7].

3.2. The Surfacing of Disillusionment

Although Generation Z has generally received a higher level of education, the expected ‘success’ (high salary, stability, decency and social recognition) has not come as expected, and they are even facing the problems of being unemployed upon graduation, having a high level of education and low salary, and lacking a sense of meaning in their work. The resulting social emotions are widespread: anxiety, burnout, powerlessness, scepticism and detachment from the traditional definition of

‘success’, shaken self-worth, ‘lying down’, ‘sucking’, and so on. The rise of subcultures and mental health issues. This prevalent emotional state is the ‘Disillusionment’ that this study focuses on.

The disillusionment of Generation Z has developed beyond individual loss into a collective intergenerational emotion. Many studies have found out that when youth find that their years of efforts in education have not been rewarded by returns commensurate with their expectation and what the society has promised, a deep sense of frustration towards the system arises [8]. The examination system transforms social inequality into a seemingly objective distribution through sacralised tests [9]. Its routinised ritual of glamour allows losers to blame personal destiny instead of tructural dilemmas. Generation Z's sense of alienation from the education system stems in part from a sobering awareness after the expunging of this narrative. They have begun to question the generally accepted logic of ‘hard work is success’, and even reverse the cynicism of ‘hard work is useless’.

4. The packaging and covering of structural contradictions by ‘successful’ narratives

The pursuit of elite education, packaged in the context of East Asian societies, provides a strong cover for the structural contradictions of society, and people focus on its apparent promotion of fairness and equality, while the contradictions can be quietly disengaged and retreated from the scene. Educational elitism moralises structural inequalities. "Effort, education, and success are tightly bound together to hide systemic and class inequalities. As a result, the disillusionment of East Asian Gen Z youth is internalised as a personal failure when they fail to meet the criteria of ‘success’.

East Asian educational elitism in fact contains two deceptive promises: firstly, an over-emphasis on the decisive significance of success in the examination room, and then, covertly, blaming failure on the individual's lack of adaptive capacity. Far from being a level playing field, the so-called elite universities are hidden sites of class cultural reproduction. Those students from humble backgrounds who break through to enter prestigious universities are often eliminated twice in the invisible contest of cultural capital, an experience that is even more traumatic than a college entrance exam loss because it shatters the core narrative that ‘if you get into a prestigious university, you will be able to change your destiny against all odds’. This narrative of ‘losers under success’ has led to Gen Z's deep scepticism about the nature of educational equity. Behind educational elitism lies vulnerability, which tests the capital and strength of different families to cope with risks. Sudden changes in policies, cancellation of extra points for special skills, and adjustments to the rules of independent admissions, which are unforeseeable and unchangeable, will disrupt the original arrangements, and even the most carefully planned paths of further education face an accident rate of up to 73%, forcing parents to use their contingency capital to quickly mobilise alternative resources. that urgently contact overseas schools and temporarily switch art tracks to weather the crisis [10]. Families with abundant resources will face the crisis with greater ease and get out of it more quickly, while more families swallow the bitter fruit of programme bankruptcy in the shadows. The vested interests in elite education, on the other hand, believe that any system that favours them is the fairest. These students downplay the advantages they enjoy and see themselves as candidates for the deserved. Elites will defend themselves based on their own interests and rationalise the privileges they enjoy [11].

The East Asian region has experienced an unprecedented expansion of higher education in the last few decades. Along with the rise of the ‘knowledge economy’ and increased government investment in education, higher education has gradually transformed from a privilege of a few elites to a universal experience for the masses. However, this expansion has not led to universal upward mobility and social security, as promised by policymakers and social narratives. Instead, it created new structural contradictions. Rapid expansion has led to the inflation and devaluation of academic qualifications. More and more young people are obtaining undergraduate and even postgraduate qualifications, but the scarcity and symbolic value of the qualifications themselves continue to decline. What was once regarded as a key threshold for entry into the middle class has now become merely the lowest starting point in the job market. The number and quality of jobs have not grown in tandem with the expansion

of qualifications, and university education has created a serious severance from the labour market, which blocks social mobility [12]. This contradiction has not been revealed in public discourse, but rather obscured by the narrative of "success". Society still maintains the cultural credo that 'only education can change one's fate', and the young generation, guided by this lagging concept, invests a great deal of time and energy in competing for exams and higher education. However, when they enter the labour market and encounter fierce competition for employment and low-quality jobs, the structural inequality is packaged as a story of failure in which 'individuals are not good enough' and 'do not work hard enough'. Such narratives not only divert criticism from the contradictions in the education system and economic structure, but also further aggravate the self-blame and psychological pressure of young people. This phenomenon can be understood as a cultural lag: while the institutional level has already been transformed and qualifications no longer guarantee social status, the cultural level still insists on seeing education as the only path to success. The result is a vicious process: expansion of higher education → devaluation of qualifications → employment difficulties → cultural attitudes remain unchanged → spiritual crisis and disillusionment deepen. The young generation is trapped in this cycle, unable to rely on education to achieve 'success' in the traditional sense, and unable to break away from the dominant narrative. This double squeeze, both structural and cultural, is the root cause of the general disillusionment of Generation Z in contemporary East Asia.

5. Conclusion

The disillusionment of East Asia's Generation Z is born out of the values promoted by educational elitism, which conveys that education is the fairest and most effective avenue of upward mobility in society, and that individual worldly success is closely tied to utilitarian endeavours. However, when the mainstream narrative fails to respond to the needs of the present reality and does not fulfil the promise of upward mobility, but instead creates devaluation of education, employment crisis, and class solidification, a spiritual crisis will inevitably erupt. Under this tension, educational elitism not only loses its practical efficacy, but also becomes a discursive mechanism to cover up contradictions. By combing the cultural roots and institutional mechanisms of the 'success' narrative, this study reveals how education maintains its legitimacy at the discursive level, while exacerbating the anxiety and burnout of the young generation at the practical level, and how the sense of disillusionment of Generation Z is not a mere psychological predicament, but rather a deep-rooted intergenerational emotion, which reveals the disconnection between the elitist educational narrative and the needs of the real society. It reveals the break between the narrative of elite education and the needs of the real society. The elite education narrative is no longer applicable to the realities of Generation Z, but it still maintains its legitimacy at the cultural level. Education should no longer be sanctified as a fairness machine, but should be re-examined as a complex space where class structures, cultural discourses and youth identities are intertwined.

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