

Why is it so Hard to Take off Kong Yiji's Long Gown-A Study on Youth Career Identity and Structural Unemployment in the Context of Higher Education

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Abstract: In recent years, "Kong Yiji's long gown" has frequently made headlines and become a term reflecting the employment predicament of contemporary college graduates. Some graduates are bound by the traditional concept of academic qualifications, and there is a gap between employment expectations and actual demands, which leads to limited employment options, anxious job-hunting mentality, and an increasingly prominent mismatch between talent supply and market demand. The research shows that the main reasons for this phenomenon are the cognitive biases of graduates themselves, the mismatch between the talent cultivation of colleges and universities and social demand, and the imperfect social employment guidance and guarantee system. To this end, efforts should be made to promote the deepening of industry-education integration and the optimization of talent cultivation models in colleges and universities, guide students and parents to change the "degree-only" employment concept, improve employment support policies and broaden multiple employment channels in the government, create a favorable atmosphere in society that respects multiple career choices, and work together to help graduates break free from the shackles of concepts and achieve high-quality and full employment.

Keywords: College Graduates; Employment Difficulties; Social Problems; Diploma Inflation

1. Introduction

The "Kong Yiji" in Mr. Lu Xun's writings is a cultural symbol, representing the experiences and predicaments of intellectuals in that era, and the "long gown" also represents a status symbol, the long gown is a scholar or an upper-class person, the only "proof of education". The

"Kong Yiji literature" has become an emotional resonance point among the youth in a self-mocking way, and behind it lies the deep confusion of the youth about the value of education, career choice, and the meaning of life.

[1]This article, borrowing the metaphor of Mr. Lu Xun, focuses on the tension between academic status and career choice, as well as the reality of existence. This issue is not a new proposition, but a modern continuation and portrayal of the traditional educational values of "scholars-peasants, artisans and merchants" in ancient Chinese society and "those who are good at learning should enter public service". The current employment of young people in China is facing the dual challenges of total pressure and structural contradictions. Internet buzzwords such as "Kong Yiji's long gown" reflect the identity anxiety and mental imbalance of the youth group between education and employment.

[2]At the social level, the issue reflects multiple contradictions in the education evaluation system, professional values, and the structure of the labor market. For instance, education overemphasizes academic qualifications while neglecting the cultivation of practical abilities, and society's perception of the hierarchy of occupations has not been completely changed. The future trend of this issue is bound to be the "disenchantment" of academic qualifications and the gradual weakening of the meaning of the "long gown". With the development of the digital economy, new forms of employment, flexible employment, and the increasing social recognition of skilled occupations, the occupational hierarchy barriers represented by the "long gown" will be gradually broken down, and the topic will become "the high fit between the value of academic qualifications and personal development". In the field of academic research, the subject involves multiple interdisciplinary fields such as education, sociology, economics, and psychology, and its

research helps to deepen the understanding of issues such as social mobility, career choice, and youth development in the context of the popularization of higher education, and provides empirical support for the localization innovation of related disciplinary theories. This study aims to systematically sort out the core content and formation mechanism of the issue of "unable to take off Kong Yiji's long gown", clarify the influence paths of multiple factors such as academic cognition, professional values, education system, and labor market on youth career choices, and ultimately propose feasible solutions to solve the employment problems of youth. To provide theoretical and practical support for a precise match between the value of education and social demand. Build a multi-disciplinary integrated analytical framework, enrich the theoretical interpretation of the career choice dilemma of contemporary youth, make up for the systematic deficiencies of existing research, and provide ideas and perspectives for related fields. This study will adopt a hybrid research approach to achieve a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods: literature review, questionnaire survey, in-depth interview, and case analysis. In terms of innovation, this paper will break through the single attribution of "problems of the youth themselves" and construct an analytical framework from multiple dimensions of "individual-education-market-society", systematically examining the issues in the macro context of the popularization of higher education, the transformation of social structure, and the development of the digital economy, revealing the deep structural causes of the formation of the issues.

2. Literature Review

In the field of research on structural contradictions in the labor market, domestic scholars in recent years have focused on quantitative analysis of the "education - job" mismatch, but have been limited to correlation analysis of supply and demand data and have failed to delve into the underlying motivations such as youth career values and social culture behind the mismatch, and the analysis of the impact of AI technology has only remained superficial. There is a lack of interpretation of the interaction between technology and human factors. Foreign researchers continue the core logic of Parsons' trait factor theory and Holder

'occupational interest theory, and scholars are more concerned with the role of market mechanisms in adjusting person-job fit. Regarding the youth subculture phenomenon of "Kong Yiji's long gown", domestic scholars mostly use qualitative research methods to interpret it. Some scholars, based on the contradiction analysis method, attribute the phenomenon to multiple factors such as the devaluation of academic qualifications, online selling of anxiety, and changes in the principal contradiction of society. Based on the above literature review, the current related research has the following flaws: The research methods show a "binary disconnection" feature, quantitative research focuses on statistical analysis of labor market data, and neglects the deep influence of youth mentality and cultural factors; Qualitative research focuses on individual experience and subculture interpretation, lacking the support of large-scale empirical data, and the two have not been organically integrated. In terms of the perspective of research, there are limitations of "single dimension" - either starting from market structure, or from individual mentality, or focusing on educational reform, and failing to construct a multi-dimensional integrated analytical framework of "individual-education-market-society", making it difficult to reveal the complex causes of "not being able to take off the long gown". In terms of research conclusions, there are problems of "disconnection in context" and "insufficiency in practice". Foreign studies have not fully considered China's unique occupational values and social structure, while domestic studies are mostly inclined towards theoretical explanations or listing of countermeasures, lacking operational mechanism designs and not paying attention to the impact of new variables such as new employment forms and AI technology. Unlike existing studies that approach from a single dimension, this study focuses on the interaction mechanism between "academic identity recognition" and "occupational hierarchy cognition" at the cognitive level; At the structural level, it links the three major systems of education, market structure, and social culture; At the action level, analyze how cognitive and structural factors influence young people's employment choices and career transition behaviors. Based on the Chinese context, this study focuses on addressing the "contextual disconnection" in existing research,

dives deeply into the traditional notion of "learning leads to public service", and examines the shaping mechanism of the educational evaluation system on the perception of the "long gown", supplementing the neglect of cultural roots in foreign research. Focus on the dual impact of AI technology on the "long gown dilemma". Propose a "four-dimensional synergy" approach, which is different from the single-subject approach in existing research. It involves four major subjects - government, universities, enterprises, and youth - to form an operational solution that compensates for the "lack of practical operation" in existing research. This study, through perspective integration and content deepening, responds to the core limitations of existing research. Its research results can not only enrich the popularization of higher education, but also provide more targeted guidance for solving the employment predicament of young people, and have important academic value and practical significance.

3. Argumentation

This argument strictly follows the core logic of raising the question - finding the evidence - explaining the reasons - drawing the conclusion. It is developed using the case analysis method and builds the core chapters with a general-to-specific structure, taking into account both macroscopic phenomena and microscopic problem analysis, presenting the argument chain completely.

3.1 The Core Issue

The core of this research question should be clearly stated at the beginning: What is the essential connotation of the phenomenon among contemporary youth that "they cannot take off Kong Yiji's long gown"? What are the underlying social, educational and individual causes of this phenomenon? As China's social transformation enters a critical stage, the employment pressure on young people, who are an important part of the labor market, has become an important issue affecting social stability and development. ^[3]How can young people match their educational attainment with their career choices in the context of the devaluation of educational qualifications? Based on the core issues mentioned above, establish the overall direction and logical thread of the argument to lay the foundation for the

subsequent argument.

3.2 Case Selection

3.2.1 Reasons for selection

Three types of classic cases, namely the employment choices of college graduates, the educational cognition of young people in flexible employment, and the high-education group returning to their hometowns to start businesses, are selected as carriers for the following reasons: First, the cases cover the three mainstream employment scenarios of young people, namely urban employment, flexible employment, and grassroots employment, and are comprehensive and representative; Second, all three types of cases directly confront the core contradictions of "mismatch between education and career" and "the gap between the burden of education and reality", which are highly consistent with the research topic; Third, the case data is highly accessible, including questionnaire surveys, in-depth interviews, official employment statistics and other diverse materials, and the evidence is genuine and reliable, which can support in-depth analysis and conclusion derivation.

3.2.2. Case introduction

(1) Cases of Recent college graduates

Focusing on fresh graduates with a bachelor's degree or higher, it presents the conflict between their obsession with "white-collar, public, and professional" positions in job hunting and the reality of job supply and salary levels in the job market. This study selects 2024-2025 graduating undergraduates and postgraduates from regular and key universities as the core analysis case. The subjects were aged between 22 and 26, all having received 16 years or more of formal education, and were highly representative in terms of academic perception, career expectations, and employment choices. The case data are derived from college employment quality reports, online job search platform statistics, graduate interview records and observations of real employment scenarios, and are authentic and reliable.

During the job search process, the interviewed fresh graduates generally regarded academic qualifications as core competitiveness and had clear hierarchical expectations and identity preferences for job positions. Most students consider positions in government agencies, public institutions, state-owned enterprises, large

Internet companies, formal financial institutions and other public institutions as their first choice, adhering to the job-hunting standards of professional matching, decent environment, standard salary and stable development, showing obvious rejection of grassroots service positions, small and medium-sized enterprise positions, physical and service-oriented positions. In actual job hunting, some graduates, despite facing real pressures such as multiple failed interviews, lower-than-expected offers, and fierce competition in the job market, are reluctant to lower their career standards. They would rather postpone employment, study full-time, or wait and see than accept jobs that "do not match their educational qualifications".

At the same time, the "degree race" has become a hot topic of social discussion. Young people will fall into excessive competition for quality resources and job opportunities, degrees will depreciate, and the class mobility function of education will weaken. ^[4]There is a widespread psychological anxiety about the return on educational investment among graduates. Human capital theory holds that education is the core way to enhance individual human capital and achieve employment and income growth. However, the problem of difficult employment for college students in China is prominent, there is a significant mismatch between educational investment and employment returns, and the imbalance in the supply and demand structure of human capital is prominent. ^[5]They turn years of time cost, economic cost and family expectations into high demands for professional status, and directly link academic qualifications to social status, believing that the significance of higher education lies in obtaining "more decent, more advanced and easier" jobs. Once they need to engage in grassroots, service, and technical operation jobs, they will experience a psychological gap of "useless education", "underutilization of talent", "failing to live up to family expectations", and thus fall into a state of hesitation, indecision and self-denial in career choice, forming a typical predicament of "too high and too low".

In terms of behavior, some graduates, in order to maintain the "dignity of status" brought by their academic qualifications, would rather endure economic pressure and time consumption than choose flexible employment, grassroots employment or non-traditional white-collar jobs, creating an irreconcilable contradiction between

actual employment and their expectations. This state is the most direct manifestation of the contemporary youth 'inability to take off the long gown of Kong Yiji', and provides a clear analytical sample for this study to explore the concept of academic qualifications, social expectations and the employment predicament of youth.

(2) Cases of young people in flexible employment

In a society where "not being able to take off Kong Yiji's long gown" has become a predicament for youth employment, an increasing number of college graduates choose flexible employment to break academic prejudice and occupational stereotypes and achieve self-worth and economic independence. Lin Wanxing, who graduated from a double first-class university, was once trapped in the mindset that "a high degree must match a decent job" due to family and social expectations, and felt extremely competitive and anxious in the traditional job market. She eventually took off the "academic gown" and transformed into a flexible employment pet sacrificial worker, integrating literary literacy and empathy into life care services, and achieving stable income and professional accomplishment through an autonomous and personalized working model. In the context of increasing employment pressure in the traditional construction industry, Yang, a master's student majoring in civil engineering, gave up her obsession with a job related to her major and ran a pancake stand in a flexible employment manner, applying the logical thinking and problem-solving skills she learned in her major to daily operation and product optimization, and took a practical and independent path in starting a business in the city.

(3) Case of young people returning to their hometowns to start businesses

With "Kong Yiji's long gown" becoming a symbol of youth employment anxiety, a group of college graduates voluntarily broke free from the shackles of academic qualifications, returned to their hometowns to start businesses, empowered the countryside with knowledge, and achieved a mutual pursuit of self-worth and rural development. Internet and new media graduates, having abandoned the stereotype that "college students must work in an office", returned home to engage in black pig farming, applied what they had learned to short video operation and

brand building, blazed a new trail of income increase amid the doubts of relatives and friends and professional prejudice, and proved with practice that education is not a shackle that binds them. The Master of Agriculture gave up a high-paying job in the city and returned to the countryside to settle down in the fields, defying the secular pressure of "high education and forced farming", using professional skills to solve planting problems for farmers, improve the soil environment, and write academic papers on the land of the countryside, breaking the opposition and prejudice between high education and farm work. University graduates refuse urban white-collar jobs and return to their hometowns to engage in black fungus cultivation, breaking free from the long-sleeve-like shackles of "farming is inferior", introducing technologies such as intelligent monitoring and standardized management into traditional cultivation, promoting the upgrading of the industry and driving the common development of the local community. The choices of the three young men are a powerful counterattack against the notion that education is the most important and occupations are different, and a vivid portrayal of the rational view of employment and the initiative to take off the long gown by contemporary youth.

3.3 Sub-argument

3.3.1. Macro level

The overall characteristics of the "Kong Yiji's Long Gown" phenomenon are visually presented. Based on case data and social statistical information, the macroscopic features of the "unable to take off the long gown" phenomenon are presented from three dimensions: spatial distribution, educational level, and industry distribution. Visualizing the distribution differences of the phenomenon in first-tier, new first-tier and third - and fourth-tier cities, the differences in the degree of hardship among those with bachelor's, master's and doctoral degrees, and the cognitive differences among young people in traditional white-collar industries and emerging industries, visually presenting the social equity and structural characteristics of the phenomenon and clarifying the macro background of the problem.

3.3.2 Micro Level: In-depth Analysis of Core issues

(1) What was designed: An analysis of the essence and composition of the "long gown"

Based on case evidence, it is expounded that "Kong Yiji's long gown" is not merely a label of academic qualifications, but a complex of expectations for educational investment, social identity perception, and prejudice against professional classes. Through the psychological expressions of the young people in the case regarding "more than ten years of study effort" and "social status corresponding to academic qualifications", argue that the "long gown" is a cognitive shackle jointly shaped by the education system and social culture, and clarify the core connotation of the research object.

(2) To whom is it fair: An analysis of the imbalance of social equity behind the phenomenon

Using the employment predicament of the young people in the case as an argument, explain the reasons from three perspectives: the distribution of educational resources, the threshold of the employment market, and the mechanism of class mobility: First, the concentration of high-quality educational resources leads to academic competition, depriving students with ordinary academic qualifications of their competitive advantage; The second is the job market's degree-only employment standards that solidify the boundaries of professional classes; The third is the social prejudice against physical labor and low-level occupations, which creates a fair barrier to career choice and leads to the fact that the essence of the phenomenon is the projection of the imbalance of social equity among the youth.

(3) How is the decision made: An argument for the motivation of youth cognition and choice based on the interview and research data of three types of cases, analyze the decision-making logic of young people who "refuse to take off the long gown" : at the individual level, it stems from the sunk cost of education investment and the gap between self-expectation; At the family level, bearing the family's expectations that education can change one's destiny; At the social level, influenced by the cult of academic qualifications and the hierarchy of professional contempt in the public opinion field. A comprehensive account of the decision-making process of young people under cognitive, emotional and social pressures through multiple arguments.

3.4 Argumentation Conclusions

Based on the questions raised above, the

evidence supported and the analysis of the causes, the final conclusion is drawn: "Unable to take off Kong Yiji's long gown" is a concentrated manifestation of the disconnection between the perception of academic qualifications and social reality among contemporary youth in the context of social transformation, popularization of education and adjustment of employment structure, and its root cause is the superimposition of multiple contradictions of social structure, education system, cultural prejudice and individual cognition. To break through this predicament, efforts should be made in three aspects: society's elimination of occupational prejudice, education's optimization of training models, and individual adjustment of academic cognition, so that young people can break free from the shackles of academic qualifications and achieve diversified career and life values.

3.5 Solutions

Since the expansion of college enrollment, the employment environment for college students in China has undergone profound changes, and the employment concept has gradually shifted from "elitism" to "massification", but the traditional notion that "those who are good at learning should enter public service" still profoundly influences young people's career choices.^[6]To address the obsession with academic qualifications, employment anxiety and identity dilemma faced by contemporary youth, and to solve the problem of "not being able to take off Kong Yiji's long gown", efforts should be made in four aspects: personal cognition reshaping, education system reform, enterprise employment concept change, and social policy guarantee, to form a systematic solution.

On an individual level, the youth group should take the initiative to complete cognitive reconstruction and ability transformation, and shift from "degree worship" to "value orientation". First, break the fixed mindset that academic qualifications are equivalent to status, rationally view the instrumental nature of academic qualifications as proof of learning ability rather than the sole criterion for employment, accept the phased and flexible nature of career development, and allow oneself to achieve a spiral ascent in the way of "employment first, then career choice, then entrepreneurship". Secondly, it is necessary to strengthen the transformation of knowledge and

the cultivation of practical ability, and build a T-shaped ability structure that combines theory with practice. Transform professional knowledge into practical and operational vocational skills. At the same time, young people should establish a multi-career concept, recognize the value of flexible employment, skilled positions, and grassroots positions, and gradually explore development paths suitable for themselves on the premise of ensuring basic income, achieving the unity of "physical undressing" and "spiritual self-reliance".

At the educational level, education diversion is a key mechanism that affects individual career attainment and social status, and plays an important role in China's social stratification system.^[7]Colleges and educational institutions need to strengthen the transformation of talent cultivation models and promote the precise alignment of education supply with social demand. Colleges and universities should further strengthen the orientation of application-oriented and practice-oriented education, deepen industry-education integration and school-enterprise cooperation, increase educational content such as internships and practical training, project practice and vocational skills training, and reduce the disconnection between theory and reality. At the same time, colleges and universities should strengthen employment guidance and mental health education, guide students to establish rational career expectations, break the employment concept of "only prestigious schools, only academic qualifications, only dignity", help students correctly recognize their self-worth and social demands, and improve their career adaptability and stress resistance.

At the enterprise and social levels, social mobility is an important indicator of social equity and vitality, and youth education and career acquisition are the core links to achieving intergenerational mobility.^[8]Break down the barriers to employment based on academic qualifications and foster a social atmosphere that respects labor and values practical work. Enterprises should establish a recruitment and evaluation system centered on ability, performance and job fit, abandon the habit of blindly raising the educational threshold, and provide young people with fairer and broader employment opportunities. Public opinion should guide multi-value recognition, downplay the distinction between high and low

occupations, respect various forms of employment such as physical labor, skilled labor, and new forms of employment, eliminate identity anxiety and social prejudice caused by "taking off the long gown", and make young people feel more secure and dignified in their career choices^[9].

At the national policy level, the employment support system and social security system should be continuously improved to provide institutional guarantees for young people to "take off the long gown". The government should increase support for small and medium-sized enterprises, the real economy and emerging industries, and expand the supply of high-quality jobs; Optimize social security and labor rights protection policies for flexible employment and new forms of employment to address the concerns of young people about employment; Further enhance the status and social recognition of vocational education and promote the coordinated development of academic education and vocational education^[10]. Only through the joint efforts of individuals, education, enterprises, society and policies can we truly eliminate the mental constraints and practical predicaments brought by the "long gown of Kong Yiji", free young people from the anxiety of academic qualifications, return to the value itself, and achieve fuller and higher-quality employment and development.

3.6 Research Conclusions

This study conducts a systematic analysis of the social phenomenon of "not being able to take off Kong Yiji's long gown", and by examining the employment mentality, educational cognition and social structural pressure of the youth group, it responds to the core questions of why contemporary youth are trapped in mental distress, identity anxiety and choice contradictions in the gap between education and reality. The study found that "Kong Yiji's long gown" is not merely an obsession with academic qualifications, but rather the result of the interweaving of multiple factors such as educational expectations, the job market, social evaluation, and individual value recognition. Its essence is the identity anxiety and reality gap that young people face during the period of social transformation.

From the perspective of research contributions, this paper, on the basis of existing studies on social mentality, further combines Internet

buzzwords with sociological and educational perspectives, more clearly revealing the intrinsic connections among educational qualification symbols, class mobility and youth self-identity, providing more specific empirical explanations and theoretical references for understanding contemporary youth's employment anxiety and educational qualification anxiety. In terms of the research approach, this paper takes into account both macro-structure and micro-mentality, breaks through the one-sided interpretation of phenomena from a single perspective, and helps to have a more rational and comprehensive understanding of the practical significance of the "Kong Yiji long gown" issue.

At the same time, there are certain limitations in this study. Due to the limitations of the scope of the study and the sources of the data, the analysis of the differences among young people from different regions, educational levels, and family backgrounds was not deep enough. The relevant conclusions were based on overall trends and lacked more detailed quantitative support and long-term tracking data. In addition, no more operational countermeasures have been explored on issues such as how to alleviate youth anxiety at the policy level and how to shift social perceptions.

Future research could be advanced in three ways: First, conducting more targeted empirical investigations to refine the differences in mindset among different youth groups; The second is to strengthen longitudinal tracking studies to examine the "long shirt" mentality as policy changes and employment environment changes; Third, in light of the actual situation of education reform, employment support, and social psychological services, explore feasible measures to alleviate the anxiety of young people regarding academic qualifications. Only by facing up to reality and taking into account structural optimization and conceptual guidance can we help contemporary youth truly shed their mental burdens and face life choices and social development with a more composed and rational mindset.

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