

PILGRIMS AT THE STRAIT GATE

Zékai (Zachary) Lu

CHINESE youth constitute a singular anomaly. One might accuse them of aimlessness, yet they all appear to suffer from a compulsive disorder, their eyes riveted to that solitary “Strait Gate” suspended high by the System—the only passage strictly sanctioned for traversal. In years past, this gate was named “Graduate School Examination”; today, it bears the inscription “Civil Service Examination.” This uniform pivot, seemingly a shifting of dreams, is in reality a collective stress response. They are a species of paradox: in the digital sphere, they broadcast manifestos of “lying flat” and “being a rat,” feigning a transcendence over worldly vanity; yet in the flesh, they queue with pious posture to receive the heaviest of shackles.

They resemble racehorses corralled onto a standardized track, whipped through the first half of their lives to clear the hurdles of the College Entrance Exams. But when they finally burst across the finish line and face the vast, unmapped wilderness—that adult world filled with probability, chaos, and risk—what they feel is not freedom, but a bottomless dread. This terror stems from a castrated wildness; they have lost the capacity to navigate a terrain without signposts. Thus, they desperately seek the next hurdle. Graduate school is an attempt to extend the protected status of “student,” deferring the flesh-and-blood struggle with the real world; the civil service is an attempt to secure the “iron bowl”—a promise of infinite insulation—to permanently evade the storm. They are prisoners of “linear thinking,” devoutly believing that life must resemble a standardized test where every step has a model answer. They cannot accept the reality that “effort may be futile.” They are like programmed vacuum robots: encountering open ground, they spin in panic and sound alarms;

only by colliding with the corners of the establishment do they find a sense of security.

But can we blame them? When we avert our gaze from this throng crowding the narrow gate and cast it instead upon the wilderness behind them, the mockery on our lips congeals into a heavy sigh. If winter were not descending, who would willingly spin a cocoon to bind themselves? What we call “domestication” is a defensive retrogression by organisms facing a hostile environment. The keen olfactory sense of the young tells them that the “wilderness,” once flowing with milk and honey, is now strewn with thorns and skeletons. They have witnessed the retreating silhouettes of the previous generation of “trailblazers,” those tech elites once hailed as heroes unceremoniously dumped like “medicinal dregs” before the red line of age thirty-five. In this precise yet fragile system, a misstep no longer means “starting over,” but implies a permanent slide in social stratification.

They are not cowards; they are this era’s most precise “risk calculators.” This frenzied flight into the establishment is the optimal solution in Game Theory. When volatility becomes too chaotic to predict, “stability” becomes the only hard currency. Furthermore, who wielded the shears that trimmed them for twenty years? Our education system is dedicated to excising every impurity of curiosity and rebellion, solely to grow them into timber that meets industrial standards. When they are finally pruned into perfect “instrumental men,” we turn around and accuse them of lacking wildness. This is not merely hypocrisy; it is a cruel conspiracy.

The harsher truth lies deeper: this is not just about risk avoidance, but about extreme scarcity and inequity. We inhabit a Colosseum where the Matthew Effect is amplified to infinity. The mechanism of social resource distribution acts like a runaway centrifuge, violently flinging wealth, security, and dignity toward the minuscule few at the center, leaving the vast majority on the periphery with nothing but increasingly barren soil. “Inside the System” and “Outside the System” are alienating from mere occupational choices into two distinct biological species. Inside the wall is a hothouse; outside is the naked wilderness. Inside possesses the certainty and safety nets most scarce in this land; outside, the raw law of the jungle prevails. When the potential energy differential between these two worlds widens enough to pierce psychological defenses, any appeal for “diversified development” rings pale and hollow. Thus,

we witness this spectacular yet desolate migration: the overwhelming majority engaging in a precise, high-IQ fratricide for the tiniest sliver of resources. This is the bloodiest footnote to “Involution.” Millions of highly educated brains no longer ponder how to bake a larger cake; instead, they dissipate their wisdom and energy figuring out how to slice the already crumbling crumbs thinner and snatch a larger share. They have turned competition into mutual destruction, and their own kind into enemies.

Despite living in such ragged desperation, they never resent the “System” that designed the track and manufactured the scarcity. Conversely, they vent all their hostility horizontally toward their peers, while projecting all their attachment vertically toward the lofty “Leviathan.” It is a bizarre pop symbiosis of “Horizontal Violence” and “Vertical Worship.” If you ask them why they suffer, they will hate the roommate who stole a quota, hate the colleague who out-worked them, even hate the parents who failed to pave their way. They are like fighting dogs locked in a cage, tearing each other to bloody shreds, yet never once raising their heads to look at the one holding the key. They never wonder if the cage is too small; they do not even perceive the cage itself as the problem.

Under this grotesquely twisted relationship of supply and demand, young people are forced to alienate themselves into “super examination machines.” Their madness in this moment proves that they are rational—for in this distribution system where the winner takes all and the loser is zeroed out, failing to squeeze through that narrow gate means, in all probability, being relegated to the “denominator,” harvested by the Matthew Effect.

So do not blame the Chinese youth for staring fixatedly at that door. When the system hoards ninety percent of security at that cramped entrance, the originally vast world becomes, for them, nothing more than a quagmire where every step is a struggle.

Fin.