Diaosi:

China's "Loser" Phenomenon

Kris Best

In late 2011 and early 2012, a new slang term – "*diaosi*" – exploded on the Chinese social media scene. A crude and derogatory word similar to the English "loser", the term took on a life of its own as many Chinese youths, predominantly but not exclusively male, began to identify with the label and proclaim themselves "*diaosi*".[1] The mass appeal of the term was enough to land it the number one spot on China Radio International's top 10 list of internet buzzwords in 2012 (Ru, 2013) – but what could press so many young Chinese to suddenly and publicly declare themselves to be "losers"? This paper will seek to explain the emergence and significance of this phenomenon by: i) investigating the meaning of the term; ii) placing it in the economic and social context of the post-1980s reform period; and iii) devoting particular attention to the state policies that have directly driven its development.

Diaosī (屌丝) roughly translates to "loser", but its use by Chinese youth indicates a much more complex meaning than the English term alone can convey. A *diaosi* is defined by what that they lack: wealthy parents, powerful *guanxi* (关系, connections), good looks, charm with the opposite sex, and, as they view it, a promising future. *Diaosi* are generally perceived to be poor, but the actual wealth they possess matters little; "*diaosi*" is still a popular identity among white-collar workers and intellectuals, with even the Chinese pop culture icon Han Han describing himself as "a pure *diaosi* from rural Shanghai"[2] The defining feature of a *diaosi* is not their current circum-stance, but their humble background. They regard with bitterness the excess and privilege afforded to the *fu'erdai* (富二代), the "second-generation rich" children of urban elites, and they contrast their lives with those of their affluent counterparts. For men, the opposite of the *diaosi* is the *gaofushuai* (高富, "tall, rich, and handsome"); for women, the *baifumei* (白富美, "white, rich, beautiful"). The *diaosi* perceive themselves to be at a fundamental social and economic disadvantage in comparison to these second-generation wealthy youth.[3]

Although the term is used with an air of self-mockery, the *diaosi* identity appears to be a means of solidarity for those that claim it. An analysis of the term's use on the popular social media platform Weibo by researchers at Harvard University found that the word was used in a positive context 46% of the time, versus 34% in a negative context and 20% in a neutral context, with associations becoming more positive over time.[4] In contrast, *gaofushuai* and *baifumei* have developed pejorative connotations.[5] When it does appear in a positive context, the word *diaosi* usually accompanies stories of encouragement or success, lending the term an interesting dual nature. *Diaosi* is at once a form of expressing self-pity and frustration with the status quo by those that feel powerless – a sentiment that one is doomed to be a loser for life through forces that lie outside one's control – while at the same time, for those identified *diaosi* who have succeeded, it conveys the positive sense of being a "self-made" man or woman, insisting that any success achieved is a result of their own efforts, in spite of their disadvantaged starting point.[6] The *diaosi* identity is offered as both an explanation for failure and a reason to celebrate success.

The *diaosi* identity also includes an inescapable gendered component, as self-identified *diaosi* are overwhelmingly male. Writers disagree on whether women can also be considered *diaosi*; at the centre of this debate is the observation that one of the most prominent characteristics of the *diaosi* stereotype is the inability to find a romantic partner due to a poor appearance or lack of material wealth.[7] In fact, some commentators prefer to view romantic failure as the defining trait of a *diaosi*, rather than family wealth.[8] However, examples of the *diaosi* label being applied to women do exist in Chinese social media – for instance, in the viral “female *diaosi* dialogue” image macros[9] – and previously cited articles from the Chinese press seem to indicate that the *diaosi* identity is not entirely monopolized by men. The gender dimension of the *diaosi* phenomenon will be treated with more detail in a later discussion of the one-child policy.

Implicitly or explicitly, the *diaosi* concept is usually linked to the circumstances of the *balinghou* (八零后), the much-discussed “post-80s generation” to which most of them belong, which is notable in Chinese society as the first generation born after Deng Xiaoping’s economic reforms began in 1978.[10] The context of the reform period is critical for understanding the *diaosi* phenomenon, as the reform era drastically reshaped the China experienced by the *balinghou* relative to previous generations. To note just a few of the changes influencing youth in this period, rural-to-urban migration became a possibility for the first time for many with decollectiv-ization in the countryside and the loosening of the house-hold registration system;[11] domestic and foreign popular media (e.g., television programs) became more widely accessible; and economic expansion and market-oriented reforms gradually allowed for the development of a cosmo-politan consumer culture, which came to be intimately associated with the *balinghou*.[12] This section will consider the dominant forces shaping the social context of the *balinghou* in the reform era.

The new possibilities that became open to youth as a result of the economic reforms came to inspire what Lisa Rofel describes as a “desiring China”[13], in which the state and concept of “desire” is at the heart of what it means to be a citizen-subject in post-socialist China. The *balinghou* learned to desire – and to justify their desiring – through popular media; the specific object of their desire (a possession, a person, a lifestyle) is not as important as the nature of being a “desiring subject” themselves. Indeed, evidence shows that the *balinghou* are perceived by themselves and their parents to be more materialistic, more success-oriented, more sexually open, and more permissive of others’ desires (e.g., queer identities) than their predecessors.[14] At the same time, the diffusion of popular media that provoked desire also brought awareness of relative deprivation, particularly for rural and migrant youth, who became more aware than ever of the large gap between what they desire and what they feel they can achieve.

Accompanying the rise of desire in general has been the increasing social value placed on material wealth in particular. In the words of the popular reform era slogan, “to get rich is glorious” (*zhifu guangrong* 致富光荣).[15] Rosen in particular argues that the state under guidance of the Chinese Communist Party has carefully cultivated a class of affluent or aspiring youth more interested in accumulating wealth than engaging politically, noting among other things that the most supported statement in one survey of values among Chinese students in 2001 was that “Modern man must be able to make money.”[16] Even among more economically disadvantaged migrant youth, material wealth has become more important for its own sake. Whereas previous generations of rural-urban migrants worked in cities for the primary purpose of remitting funds to their rural families, migrants of the *balinghou* generation prefer to live a more materialistic lifestyle, spending their money on consumer goods and urban experiences (e.g., karaoke parlours) for their own enjoyment.[17] In general, material well-being has become a greater indicator of the value of an individual across Chinese society since the 1980s.[18]

In contrast to their parents, the *balinghou* have also grown up in a Chinese state that has begun the process of individualization – emphasizing the individual identity distinct from the collective – with the dismantling of both the communes in the countryside and the work units in the cities (the “iron rice bowl”). Yan observes that, at some time during the late 1980s to early 1990s, “the meaning of the communist slogan ‘regeneration through self-reliance’ had changed from a slogan of ideological collectivism to a slogan of individualism in everyday life competition”.[19] As a result, the *balinghou* have more choices than previous generations they are free to choose their own jobs, migrate to cities for economic opportunity, and pursue lives and identities independent of their families and former collectives. However, as the state withdraws, the Chinese individual or household is now assumed responsible for the cost of their own well-being and success.[20] This is particularly true for migrants, who bear the cost of their own maintenance and social reproduction, but the situation of migrant youth will be discussed in detail in the section on state policies.

In the context of all these changes spurred by economic reform, the *diaosi* feel that they have been left behind. Coming from less affluent households, they experience desire, twisted into bitter longing through media portrayals of wealth and romance that remind them of the disadvantaged space they occupy; they have few financial resources in a society and a state that increasingly values material wealth; and they are conscious that they have the freedom to make choices for themselves, but also that they lack the social or financial means to take full advantage of that freedom. It’s hardly surprising, then, that the *diaosi* feel at a fundamental level that they have “lost out at the starting line” (*cong qipaoxian shang jiu yijing shule* 从起跑线上就已经输了) compared to more privileged members of their generation.[21]

Thus far, the role of the Chinese state as it relates to the *diaosi* phenomenon has been discussed only as the motivator behind key social and economic forces that were developing during the post-1980s period. This section will sharpen the focus on specific policies of the state and consider three policy areas affecting outcomes of the *balinghou* in greater detail. These are: education and employment outcomes; migrant workers and the household registration system; and the one-child policy. Linking all three of them, but the first two in particular for our purposes, is the persisting rural-urban divide that has been alluded to throughout the earlier discussion of economic reform and the *balinghou*. Although rural and migrant youth are far from having a monopoly over the *diaosi* identity, they have perhaps more reason than their urban counterparts to feel disproportionately put out by an unequal political and economic system. This premise of inequitable policies shaping the different experiences of rural versus urban youth of the *balinghou* is therefore fundamental to understanding the *diaosi* perspective.

Education in the Chinese state is particularly unequal along the rural-urban divide. From 1993, the national government began dividing universities into “elite” and “non-elite” status, with the elite universities receiving the largest share of public funding. Students admitted to elite universities benefit from top-notch professors and generous tuition subsidies, while students attending non-elite universities pay higher tuition and in many cases receive a substandard education, particularly since reforms in 1999 allowed for the rise of private for-profit colleges and vocational schools.[22] Entrance to the elite universities is determined by the *gaokao* (高考), the national college entrance exam, which must be taken in the region of the student’s *hukou* (户口, household registration). The largest share of spots in an incoming class is reserved for local students – that is, students with *hukou* in the cities where elite universities are located. Urban students are thus able to enter elite universities with significantly lower scores on the *gaokao* than most rural students.[23] Even within urban areas, the educational system is skewed in favour of the wealthy; high scores on the *gaokao* are associated with attendance at “key” high schools which receive a greater share of public funding. Entrance into these high schools is highly competitive and favours students from wealthy families willing to pay large fees to enroll their children.[24] The quality of education one can expect to receive at any level is determined by a combination of family wealth and the location of one’s *hukou* (rural or urban).

Attendance at an elite university has increasingly become a critical factor affecting employment outcomes of postsecondary graduates with the emergence of what some have called the Chinese “ant tribe” (*yizu* 蚁族). These are the hundreds of thousands of university graduates in urban areas that are either unemployed or toiling away at low wages similar to those of low-skilled migrant workers.[25] Kan notes that 54.7% of the “ants” in major cities are indeed university-educated migrants from rural areas, and an additional 38.3% have migrated from smaller cities and towns.[26] Pressure continues to mount each year as the number of new university graduates increases, with graduates from rural areas, non-elite universities, for-profit colleges and vocational schools being further squeezed from the labour market.[27] As a result, 2013 was declared by many Chinese bloggers and Weibo users to be “the worst year in history to graduate”[28]– at least so far. Some have suggested that China’s economy is simply not creating enough white-collar jobs to absorb all the university graduates that it now produces, and that some graduates, those with less affluent backgrounds, weaker *guanxi*, and less prestigious degrees, will necessarily be forced into accepting jobs below their skill level and wage expectations for years to come.[29]

Rural *balinghou* youth have been able to move to cities for education or work as a result of reforms to the *hukou* system during the 1980s. These reforms allowed rural Chinese greater mobility to pursue employment in urban coastal areas as migrant workers, supposedly on a temporary basis, and typically in low-skilled fields such as construction, manufacturing, service industries, and domestic services.[30] The *balinghou* are referred to as the “second generation” or “new generation” of these migrant workers. Despite the fact that many of them were either born in cities or moved to cities at a young age with their migrant parents, their inherited rural *hukou* affords them few legal protections and little access to education, health care, and other social services, as welfare programs are locally financed and therefore generally restricted to local *hukou* holders.[31] Most of these “migrant” youth have little experience or identification with the countryside, yet are excluded from the mainstream urban community. They are considered neither “peasants” nor “workers” but “peasant workers”, even though most of them are unfamiliar with agricultural labour and would prefer to become permanent urban workers – an in-between state that Huilin and Ngai characterize as the “unfinished process of proletarianization”[32]. Migrant youth therefore have difficulty pursuing education and employment that they find meaningful due to their perception as “outsiders” and the restrictions of their *hukou* status.[33]

China’s infamous one-child policy further contributes to the angst of the *balinghou,* being the first generation born under the policy, which was enacted in 1979.[34] The various results of the one-child policy have been well-catalogued by researchers, but two effects in particular that have great significance for the *diaosi* phenomenon are the weight of family expectations and the grossly imbalanced sex ratio in the *balinghou* and later generations. The burden of family expectations is especially severe in the Chinese context for a number of reasons: a stronger expectation than in Western liberal democracies that children support their parents in old age, in part due to an inadequate social security system;[35] a cultural tendency to equate worth with academic success; and the lingering collectivist assumption that one’s success or failure is a reflection of the whole family’s effort.[36] Urban youth are the subject of much of this pressure to succeed, as the one-child policy was most strictly implemented in cities, but rural youth also feel the weight of their parents’ disappointment. Migrant youth of the “ant tribe” in particular may feel ashamed to leave their poor working conditions and return to the countryside after their parents have invested so much money in their education to little return.[37]

As noted in an earlier section, adding to the difficulties of these youth is the gendered aspect of the *diaosi* phenomenon, which reflects the frustration of many young single men who are unable to attract partners. These are the infamous “bare branches” (*guanggun*, 光棍), the estimated surplus of 1.2 million men per year entering a marriageable age that may not find partners due to the result of the one-child policy's interaction with the Chinese cultural preference for sons.[38] The relative scarcity of heterosexual women and the resulting competition in the dating market means that men of a lower social status – rural men, migrants, or those simply less affluent or attractive – are at a disadvantage when seeking a spouse, and many of them may never marry at all. However, not only young men are under pressure: a cultural backlash against "leftover women" (*shengnu*, 剩女) shames educated urban women that go unmarried (by choice or not) past the age of 27, whom the All-China Federation of Women refers to as "yellowed pearls" worth "less and less" as they age.[39] While the *diaosi* identity remains more strongly associated with the particular dating pressures faced by young men, it is worth noting that both sexes within the *balinghou* experience frustration or harassment associated with the gender dynamic resulting from the one-child policy.

To conclude, *Diaosi* is far more than an Internet buzzword or a simple online fad. The willingness of so many young Chinese to speak positively of or identify as "losers" speaks to a disillusion with social inequalities built into the status quo and recognition that such inequalities are fundamentally unfair. The *diaosi* phenomenon has much deeper roots in the interplay between the social and economic forces that shaped China during the reform period and specific policies pursued by the Chinese state that have further institutionalized inequality since the 1980s. Youth identifying as *diaosi* feel left behind by a changing country in which they are conditioned to desire, yet made aware of what they can't possess, have little money in a society that values wealth more than ever, and are conscious of their freedom as individuals but limited in how they can exercise their new identity. State policies in education, migration, and the one-child policy add to their frustration by further perpetuating inequality between rural and urban areas and the poor and wealthy households within them, leading rural, migrant, and even less affluent urban youth to feel as though they have already “lost out at the starting line”, with little chance to catch up with wealthier members of their cohort.

Although the *diaosi* may perceive their prospects to be bleak, their collective identity is a source of support, reinforcing the legitimacy of their feelings and providing solidarity in the form of mutual recognition and even encouragement. In declaring themselves “losers” and revelling in their identity as such, they are rebelling against the stereotypical material values of their *balinghou* generation and rewriting their terms of success. They are redefining identities like *gaofushuai* and *baifumei* pejoratively through their contempt, preferring to elevate the achievements of those *diaosi* who have managed to succeed through their own efforts, despite their humble beginnings – in a way, promoting the individualization of success.

Diaosi as an identity has a broad and powerful appeal, with the ironic result that those who willingly call themselves “losers” in China appear to be in better company than they suppose. The fact that *diaosi* identification is not limited to one particular group of Chinese youth but has been claimed by “ants” and pop culture icons alike is also telling of a deeper social trend. It indicates that dissatisfaction with the unequal situation of the status quo is shared among youth from diverse backgrounds, transcending the usual divisions in Chinese society and ultimately giving the *diaosi* phenomenon the power that allowed it to bring the frustration and disillusion of China’s youth to mainstream attention.

Notes

[1] Karita Kan, “The new ‘lost generation’: Inequality and discontent among Chinese youth”, *China Perspectives* 2, (2013).

[2] Yiqing Wang, “Looking for a success mantra for youth”, ChinaDaily *US Edition*, January 1, 2013.

[3] Kan, “The new ‘lost generation’”, 2013.

[4] Chris Marquis and Yang, Zoe, “Diaosi: Evolution of a Chinese meme”, Civil China, July 27, 2013. http://www.civilchina.org.

[5] Wang, “Looking for a success mantra for youth”, 2013.

[6] “Tea time chat – Are you a ‘diaosi’?”, *Tea Leaf Nation*, July 30, 2013. Retrieved from http://www.tealeafnation.com

[7] Kan, “The new ‘lost generation’”, 2013.

[8] Marquis and Yang, “Diaosi: Evolution of a Chinese meme”, 2013.

[9] Rensi, “Female diaosi fights goddess – Part 1”, ChinaSMACK, December 10, 2012. http://www.chinasmack.com/2012/more/jokes-humor/female-diaosi-fights-goddess-part-1.html

[10] Kan, “The new ‘lost generation’”, 2013.

[11] Lu Huilin and Pun Ngai, “Unfinished Proletarianization: self, anger, and class action among the second generation of peasant-workers in present-day China”, *Modern China* 36, no.6 (2010).

[12] Paul Clark, *Youth culture in China: from Red Guards to netizens* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

[13] Lisa Rofel, *Desiring China: experiments in neoliberalism, sexuality and public culture* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2007).

[14] Paul Clark, *Youth culture in China,* 2012.

[15] Wan-Ning Bao and Ain Haas, “Social Change, Life Strain and Delinquency among Chinese Urban Adolescents”, *Sociological Focus* 42, no.3 (2009).

[16] Stanley Rosen, *The state of youth/youth and the state in early 21st century China*. In *State and Society in 21st Century China: crisis, contention and legitimation.* Edited by Peter Hays Gries and Stanley Rosen (New York: Routledge Curzon, 2004).

[17] Jialing Han, “Rapid Urbanization and the Aspiration and Challenge of Second-Generation Urban-Rural Migrants”, *Chinese Education and Society* 45, no.1 (2012).

[18] Rosen, *The state of youth,* 2004.

[19] Yunxiang Yan, *The Individualization of Chinese Society* (New York: Berg, 2009).

[20] Ibid.

[21] Kan, “The new ‘lost generation’”, 2013.

[22] Bao and Haas, “Social Change, Life Strain and Delinquency”, 2009.

[23] Wing Kit Chan, "Employability Does Not Necessarily Lead to Competitiveness: an employment gap resulting from ascribed factors", *Chinese Education and Society* 45, no.2 (2012).
[24] Bao and Haas, "Social Change, Life Strain and Delinquency", 2009.
[25] Chan, "Employability Does Not Necessarily Lead to Competitiveness," 2012.
[26] Kan, "The new 'lost generation'", 2013.
[27] Bao and Haas, "Social Change, Life Strain and Delinquency", 2009.
[28] Lily Kuo, "Millions of young Chinese are about to experience 'the worst year in history to graduate'", *Quartz,* June 18, 2013.
[29] Chan, "Employability Does Not Necessarily Lead to Competitiveness," 2012.
[30] Han, "Rapid Urbanization and the Aspiration and Challenge of Second-Generation Urban-Rural Migrants," 2012.
[31] Huilin and Ngai, "Unfinished Proletarianization", 2010.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Han, "Rapid Urbanization and the Aspiration and Challenge of Second-Generation Urban-Rural Migrants", 2012.
[34] Bao and Haas, "Social Change, Life Strain and Delinquency", 2009.
[35] Yijia Jing, "The One-Child Policy Needs an Overhaul", *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 32, no.2 (2013).
[36] Bao and Haas, "Social Change, Life Strain and Delinquency", 2009.
[37] Kan, "The new 'lost generation'", 2013.
[38] Jing, "The One-Child Policy Needs an Overhaul", 2013.
[39] Mary Kay Magistad, "China's leftover women, unmarried at 27", *BBC News Magazine,* February 20, 2013.