

CHINA'S YOUNG GENERATION AND ITS SOCIAL CONTENTIONS

HUANG Yanjie

EAI Background Brief No. 954

Date of Publication: 18 September 2014

Executive Summary

1. China's new generation born in the 1980s and 1990s is a blessed generation who benefited from the country's economic reforms. Yet the generation is also an unhappy lot characterised by social discontent and grievances.
2. The discontent and grievances are partially triggered by the structure of China's youth labour market. The market needs more skilled workers whereas college graduates typically look for professional jobs.
3. The mismatch of the labour market creates a serious problem of underemployment among the educated young workers and becomes a source of social contention.
4. Meanwhile, job and career opportunities in China today are also increasingly skewed towards the rich and powerful, thus arousing a sense of inequality and injustice among the young.
5. China's young generation is also prone to challenge official state ideology and rhetoric as official ideology of social equality and harmony loses its hold on the minds of youths given the social reality of inequality and injustice.
6. The youths often wage wars of subversion against state ideology through their cynical and strategic use of neologisms or metaphors on the Internet. However, they are also eager to bandwagon on the state to enter the civil service.
7. In terms of popular culture, youth contention is characterised by the *diaosi* subculture, an expression of cynicism and powerlessness now prevalent among the young generation.
8. By identifying with the vulgar and the insignificant, and resisting state-sponsored youth culture, the new generation asserts its self-identity.

9. Historically speaking, the *diaosi* mentality is a product of Chinese society in transformation as its cultural basis shifts from collective- to individual-based values.
10. Despite their discontentment with the state in the area of market, Internet and popular culture, the new generation is not necessarily against the predominant economic and political order. If nurtured appropriately, youthful contention can also become a driving force for reform and development.