

BOOK REVIEW

Das Phänomen »Yizu« Migrantische Hochschulabsolvent*innen als Chinas Wendepunktgeneration? (Suda, K., 2021)

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Abstract: In China, where one is born can have a huge impact on opportunities for social mobility. The so called hukou-system defines a person's status either as rural or urban inhabitant. The system was originally intended to monitor and control the mechanisms of population migration but now it practically impedes equal opportunity. However, recent decades saw an ever-growing number of people moving from China's countryside to bigger cities and an increasing percentage of these migrants are highly educated. Kimiko Suda's newly published book "Das Phänomen »Yizu«" provides an in-depth analysis of urban transformation processes, social stratification, and social mobility with focus on the life prospects of migrant graduates from China's rural areas.

Keywords: Social mobility, highly educated migrants, megacity, urban villages, "Chinese Dream",

The Chinese people have a variety of terms for domestic migrants: Floating population, migrant workers, or 外地人 waidiren (outsiders) are just a few of them. While many of these labels are associated with unskilled workers slaving in the factories and on the construction sites of China's metropolitan areas, another group has come into the focus of public debate during the past decade: the so called "ant tribe" (蚁族 yǐzú).

Chinese is a very figurative language and new buzzwords for social phenomena are being coined all the time. In 2009 the term "ant tribe" made it into the top-ten of China's internet slang. It was created by the economist Lian Si to describe the ever-growing group of rural graduates which try to gain ground in major cities. In the eyes of the public, this group is as numerous and industrious as ants. Likewise, they are seen as working extremely hard, facing fierce competition and enduring rough living conditions. Moreover, the ant tribe represents a kind of paradox: in a society which believes that education and hard work is the guarantee for social advancement, college degrees are suddenly no longer an entry ticket to middle class. Thus, it seems that highly educated migrants are among the ones

left behind in the race for chasing the "Chinese Dream".

The yizu-phenomen has been a recurring topic in China's public debate since 2010, but it didn't get any significant attention in the West so far. Only a few studies on this topic have been published outside of the People's Republic. Kimiko Suda, a German sinologist and sociologist with a focus on research on migration, racism, and social inequality wanted to close this gap and chose it as the topic for her PhD thesis. The results of her dissertation project were now published in the book *Das Phänomen »Yizu«* (the "Yizu" phenomenon).

Suda's work provides an extensive theoretical and analytical background on the living conditions and everyday strategies of the so-called "ant tribe". Besides, the author delivers a thorough analysis of the social fabric in contemporary China. However, as the work is based on the author's PhD thesis it is of course not light reading. Furthermore, one must be proficient in German, as there is no English translation of the book available.

Nevertheless, "Das Phänomen »Yizu«" is recommended for all readers who want to know more about China's young generation. Everyone who enjoyed reading Alec Ash's *Wish Lanterns – Young*

Lives in New China (see book review in: Pacific Geographies #52) and who wants to complement the topic from a more scientific perspective should read it.

Changes in mainland China are fast, complex, and often asynchronous, with large areas lagging behind in regard to modernization, infrastructure and education. This makes it virtually impossible to capture the country's social transformation using only one theoretical and methodological approach, as Kimiko Suda explains in the preface of her book. She therefore applied a multi-perspectivity approach trying to answer the central questions in her research: How do individuals influence the urban spaces they move in? And what challenges do they encounter when seeking access to urban space?

While the book provides an extensive theoretical framework, it is the interview part which gives the reader unique insights into the life of China's young migrants. This part of the book part is based on 30 semi-structured interviews which the author conducted between 2011 and 2012 in Guangzhou.

All of Suda's interviewees lived in one of Guangzhou's urban villages - places where the vast majority of migrants end up staying. And while



Source: Suda, Kimiko.

Figures 1&2: Impressions from a urban village in Guangzhou.

the term “village” might sound romantic for Westerners in the 21st century, China’s urban villages couldn’t be farer away from the traditional, agricultural lifestyle. These areas are for the most part built without any centralized urban planning, resulting in a maze of dark, narrow alleyways and conglomerations of hastily built apartment blocks.

For the “ants” and other migrants, the urban villages are often the only places offering affordable rents. Normally this doesn’t mean much more than a place to sleep- either in shared apartments, shared rooms, or a bunk bed in a company dormitory. But this doesn’t make the urban villages mere bedroom communities; they normally have complete infrastructures with shops, restaurants, hairdressers, and so on, with most of the businesses run by migrants.

Kimiko Suda’s ambition was to meet the Chinese graduates at eye level and to avoid any patronizing approaches which are frequently found in the public debate about the “ant tribe”. Through the interviews, the reader gets a glimpse on what the daily life of the rural graduates looks like: waking up and falling asleep in tiny rooms without air conditioning or sunlight, sharing dirty bathrooms with several roommates, commuting in crowded public transport and

eating cheap meals in university canteens. These accounts might sometimes seem downright depressing, with only a few opportunities for recreation and leisure. Nonetheless, many of the interviewees focus on the positive aspects like their hope for a better future, the love for their jobs or the open atmosphere Guangzhou has to offer.

The results of Kimiko Suda’s case study are already a few years old, however the “ant people” still make it to the headlines in Chinese media and social media today. And China is still waiting to see any significant improvements of equal opportunities for rural graduates. What is interesting though, is that the Chinese government recently started a nationwide crack-down on the country’s extensive education industry. The commercialization of education has been identified as one of the main reasons for inequality. However, the reason for the crack-down was not the desire to create a fairer access to education and jobs, but rather to increase the alarmingly low birth rate. Many parents complain that they can’t afford adequate education for just one child - not to mention two. Only time will tell what this development will mean for future generations. It is therefore a work like Suda’s *Das Phänomen »Yizu«* is so important as it

unravels the various social strands China’s society is made of and gives us a ground-level understanding about it as an emerging power.

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Kimiko Suda

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Eine ethnografische und wissenssoziologische Fallstudie



Figure 3: Cover sheet of the book

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