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Where has my dream gone?

EDUCATED WORKERS FROM RURAL AREAS INCREASINGLY OPTING FOR LESS STRESSFUL EXISTENCE

By YI LING

Cheng Ding is keen to end his “seven-year itch” in Beijing once and for all — by retreating home to Sichuan province. A failed investment led to the closure of his company in Zhongguancun, China’s “Silicon Valley”, and the 32-year-old producer of mobile phone games had to let go of his dream of building a game empire based in the capital.

For Cheng, the incentive to return home, nearly 2,000 kilometers southwest of Beijing, is more than financial. “Career setbacks are one thing. More importantly, I’m longing for another kind of life — one with no rush, no rent, no pressure,” he said.

“Beijing is no longer the home of my dreams.”

Millions of people from rural areas continue to flood into the booming cities seeking better education, jobs and lives. But a rising group of burned-out white-collar workers are retreating to smaller cities in search of a more relaxed lifestyle. Mostly, they are out-of-town degree-holders around 30, with a year’s working experience in big cities such as Beijing.

Cheng’s feelings are pervasive among his peers. A survey by online job-search website zhaopin.com in April 2010 showed more than 80 percent of 7,000 white-collar workers in Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen and Guangzhou said “yes” when asked: “Would you like to work in a second- or third-tier city if given an offer there?” The rising cost of living was a major factor along with work pressure, pollution and crowded public transport.

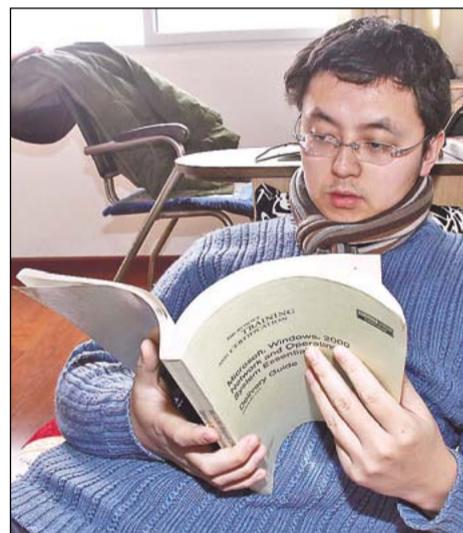
“Now, we believe some of those who said ‘yes’ are taking action,” said Hao Jian, senior human resource consultant at zhaopin.com.

Online job applications are declining in Beijing and Shanghai, but they’re increasing in second-tier cities such as Chengdu, Wuhan, Chongqing and Nanjing, according to a survey the website released in December.

For example, from October 2009 to October 2010, applications in Beijing dropped from 13.72 percent to 12.19 percent. Those in Chengdu rose from 3.19 percent to 3.40 percent. Meanwhile, the website’s daily average of job offers increased by 97 percent to 55,284 in Chengdu from January to October 2010, but by only 32 percent in Beijing.

Zhang Zhanxin, who studies labor force mobility for the Institute of Population and Labor Economics under the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, thinks the figures

Wang Hongya, a native of Henan province, started his big city experience a year ago. He works for an IT company in Beijing and shares an apartment in Tiantongyuan residential area.



LIU KE / FOR CHINA DAILY

Cheng Ding has decided to leave Beijing after seven years to sample a different way of life in his hometown.

indicate talent is being redistributed among top-tier and second-tier cities, especially the provincial capitals.

It’s too early to declare a trend, he said, but “it’s obvious that ... second-tier cities are becoming increasingly attractive” to talented applicants.

Zhang said the move’s impact on big cities is limited, because “human resources go where capital goes. For cities like Beijing, their traditional advantages in education and industries such as high-technology, information and finance will ensure they remain magnets for investments in the coming five to 10 years.”

Economic giants Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou, he said, have been the favored destinations for degree-holders seeking to start white-collar careers since 1994, when

the government completed a reform of the State-controlled job assignment system. Since then, all graduates have to seek employment on their own.

Disconnected

With an invitation from a Beijing game company, Cheng Ding rushed to the city in 2003, convinced that the country’s capital would become his gaming center. His family also believed that Beijing boasted the best resources in every sector, and it’s a place where only the best — including their son — could survive.

The company Cheng worked for was based in the residential compound of a northern Beijing suburb and had about 15 employees. Only a quarter of them were locals.

Cheng advanced quickly, from programmer to chief technology officer to, eventually, boss of his own company. He realized his “millionaire dream” when he sold the company to a Spanish investor in 2007.

But the happiness brought by career success subsided, while his feelings of not belonging anywhere mounted and living costs soared. Cheng moved six times, changed jobs four times and started three companies.

Family support seemed out of reach. Like many, Cheng had wedged some distance between himself and his parents. “Reunions were always sweet,” he said, “but I never told my family about my sufferings. It would fall short of their expectations and make them worry about me.”

Leaving Beijing became an instinctive response to the homesickness that struck Cheng, especially after his wife, who had been with him in Beijing for nearly four years, moved back to Sichuan in 2009 to take care of her aging father.

In the fall of 2010, when the market turned down the new game developed by his third

company, Cheng realized the time to say goodbye had come.

“I’m no longer 24. I’ve opened the magic box and have enough experiences. There’s no more curiosity left about the city and all my passion has been consumed in the past seven years,” he said. “It’s time for me to live for real now.”

Is smaller better?

Will a “real” life be a better life? Ding Xingzhou has found his hometown is not necessarily the Promised Land.

The 31-year-old magazine editor spent more than six years after he graduated working in Guangzhou, Beijing and Lanzhou before he moved last year to Xi’an, the capital of his native Shaanxi province. He went home, he said, like an “injured soldier fleeing from the battlefield.”

Xi’an, capital of 13 dynasties in ancient China, is the largest and most developed city in the less-populated northwestern province. Despite the economic boom, it has barely changed in Ding’s eyes.

Going back home relieved some of the pressure on living costs, but not on his designs for a job. “People here may be too risk-averse. The clash of mindsets is usually vicious,” he said. “My colleagues show wordless contempt for what they called ‘advanced experiences,’ which I would like to introduce to the magazine.”

Then there’s what Ding described as a reliance on *guanxi* (contacts) over capabilities in career development. “We always say there is fierce competition in big cities, but at least you are given an opportunity to compete. Here, no way,” Ding said. “What’s more, the city is growing crowded, indifferent and snobbish. They are being transformed into another Beijing.”

Ding plans to leave again, but he hasn’t figured out where his next stop will be.

ZHANG TAO / CHINA DAILY

