From Waithood to Precariat: Unveiling the Unique Plight of the Sanhe Gods

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Abstract: In the realm of youth studies, the spotlight has often been cast upon the middle-class demographics and their contributions to internet culture, leaving a substantial portion of the youth population—the lower-class youth—largely in the shadows. Among this overlooked demographic, the Sanhe gods stand out as a particularly neglected group. Despite their significant presence, having burgeoned in the early 2010s, it was not until the release of NHK's 2018 documentary "Sanhe Talent Market: The Young People of China Earning 1500 Yen Daily" that the academic world turned its gaze towards them for a thorough and systematic examination. This research paper aims to shed light on the unique circumstances surrounding the rise and current situation of the Sanhe gods. Through a qualitative analysis that incorporates anthropological studies by Chinese scholars and scrutinizes the digital footprints of the Sanhe gods across various internet platforms, this study seeks to unravel the complex tapestry of their existence. This study's findings underscore the Sanhe gods' distinctiveness as a phenomenon deeply rooted in the socio-economic and cultural fabric of China, shaped by historical forces unique to the Chinese experience.

Keywords: youth studies, Sanhe Gods, anthropological studies, socio-economic fabric.

1.   Introduction

The phenomenon of the "Sanhe Gods" has emerged as a unique socio-cultural entity within China's rapidly evolving urban landscape. Initially brought to public attention through a 2017 article titled "People Playing Games in Sanhe" and further highlighted by a 2018 NHK documentary, this group has since been the subject of various anthropological and sociological studies. Notable works include Tian Feng and Lin Kaixuans anthropological fieldwork, Zhang Ximing's exploration of identity formation, and Ding Tianyu's examination of the subculture from a youth studies perspective [1-3]. Katherine Whitworth's "The Sanhe Gods" also provides a forward-looking analysis of the group's future [4].

Despite existing studies, a holistic analysis of the Sanhe Gods that synthesizes their social, economic, and historical aspects is lacking. This study seeks to fill this void, proposing that the Sanhe Gods reflect unique Chinese societal contradictions, challenging Western youth study frameworks. Through qualitative analysis, this research aims to elucidate the Sanhe Gods identity, shaped by China's urbanization, economic shifts, and cultural changes. This work's significance lies in its potential to influence policy, enrich academic dialogue, and enhance understanding of China's urban

marginalized communities, positioning the Sanhe Gods within a broader narrative of modern Chinese society.

2. Theoretical Framework

The socio-economic landscape of youth in contemporary society is marked by a confluence of complex factors that shape their lived experiences and prospects. This essay seeks to elucidate the intricate dynamics at play by examining three pivotal concepts: waithood and precariat. These concepts provide a lens through which the unique challenges faced by the Sanhe Gods, and by extension, the youth of China, can be understood.

2.1. Waithood

"Waithood" is a term describing a period of stagnation that young adults experience due to social and economic barriers preventing them from achieving traditional adulthood milestones. It was first forwarded by the political scientist and ethnographer Diane Singerman in 2007 while studying delayed employment and marriage in Northern Africa and the Middle East [5]. Anthropologist Honwana explained it as a period of suspension in which young people are unable to attain the social markers of adulthood – find stable employment, marry and provide for their families, and contribute to society as fully-fledged citizens. In this period of limbo, young people are no longer considered to be children in need of care, but are not yet social adults, capable of taking on the social responsibilities of adulthood [6].

2.2. Precariat

The term "precariat" is attributed to the British economist Guy Standing, who conceptualized it to delineate a burgeoning class within the neoliberal economic framework. This class is distinguished by its precarious existence, marked by transient employment, inconsistent income, and the absence of job security. Members of the precariat are often compelled to engage in laborious activities that are uncompensated, such as extensive job searches or remaining on standby for contingent work, which are prerequisites for maintaining employability in the gig economy. Standings seminal work, "The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class," expounds on the socioeconomic ramifications of this class instability.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology to delve into the intricate socio-economic conditions of the Sanhe Gods. Qualitative analysis is particularly suited for this investigation due to its strength in exploring complex social phenomena, capturing the depth of individual experiences, and providing insights into the cultural and historical contexts that shape those experiences.

The primary data for this analysis will be drawn from two main sources: online narratives of the Sanhe Gods community and fieldwork data collected by Chinese scholars. The internet serves as a rich repository of personal accounts, discussions, and expressions of the Sanhe Gods, offering a window into their daily lives, aspirations, and struggles. These digital footprints provide a contemporary perspective on the group's identity and social interactions.

By synthesizing online narratives with scholarly fieldwork, this study aims to construct a multifaceted portrayal of the Sanhe Gods. The qualitative analysis will not only illuminate the group's current condition but also trace the historical and cultural trajectories that have led to their formation. This methodological approach underscores the study's commitment to capturing the complexity and dynamism of the Sanhe Gods phenomenon.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. The Concept of Sanhe Gods

The term "Sanhe Gods" refers to a group of migrant workers in the Longhua district of Shenzhen, China. The name "Sanhe" originates from one of the main labour recruitment agencies in the area (Sanhe Human Resources Market), while the term "Gods" is affectionate and carries a sense of irony and self-ridicule. It suggests that through an existence detached from material pleasure, they have attained the desired state of enlightenment described in the Buddhist scriptures [4]. These individuals are known for their unconventional lifestyle. They reject long-term employment in factories and adopt a philosophy of working sporadically—"Work one day, play for three." This subculture emerged as a response to the intense economic pressures and the rapid pace of growth in cities like Shenzhen.

Also, they have formed a unique subculture that has created many new concepts. The most famous is the concept of Gua Bi, which comes from a video game and refers to losing a game. In life, it means to use up all ones money and be in dire straits, even to the point of death [3]. Therefore, in Sanhe, those who have spent all their daily wages will call the food and lodgings that match their state of pennilessness and are extremely cheap Gua Bi. For example, Gua Bi noodles refers to a bowl of noodles that costs 4 yuan (0.5 dollars), Gua Bi water refers to 2 litres of water that costs 2 yuan (0.25 dollars), and Gua Bi room refers to a hotel room that costs 20 yuan (2.7 dollars) a night.

4.2. The Formation Process of Sanhe Gods

In the scholarly discourse on marginalized youth in China, Zhang Ximings research provides a compelling framework for understanding the emergence of the Sanhe Gods phenomenon [2]. This subculture, predominantly composed of rural-born, less-educated young individuals, emerges through a three-step process that reflects broader socio-economic dynamics.

Step One: Life Failure—The journey into the Sanhe Gods subculture often begins with life failure. These youths, lacking competitive educational and professional credentials, face significant barriers to employment and marriage in urban centres. Repeated frustrations and failures in achieving societal norms of success lead to a loss of motivation and direction, resulting in a pervasive sense of confusion about their future.

Step Two: Freedom in Sanhe—Sanhe offers a paradoxical sense of freedom rooted in economic frugality. Daily living costs are minimal, with basic necessities like food and shelter requiring less than 50 Yuan (approximately 6.89 USD) per day. Moreover, short-term labor can yield a daily income of 150-200 Yuan (20-27 USD), allowing for a sustainable lifestyle. The affordability of internet access further enables prolonged entertainment, contributing to a light stress life despite the low quality of living conditions.

Step Three: The Reproduction of Decadence—Sanhe exerts an almost mystical influence on its inhabitants, subtly transforming them. Through shared experiences and the creation of cultural symbols, a distinct culture emerges. Over time, the youth develop an attachment to Sanhe akin to a sense of home, reinforcing their identity as Sanhe Gods. This identity is continually shaped by the district's employment, life, and cultural environment, perpetuating a state of freedom intertwined with decadence.

4.3. From Waithood to Precariat: the Deeper Analysis of Sanhe Gods

Tian Fengs research delineates the mobility pattern of the Sanhe Gods as one characterized by economic integration, yet marked by social seclusion and identity marginalization [1]. These latter aspects resonate uniquely with individuals experiencing waithood—a liminal phase of postponed adulthood. Typically, Sanhe Gods comprise youth with limited educational attainment, whose

competitive disadvantage in employment and matrimonial markets often precludes them from fulfilling societal benchmarks of adulthood, such as securing stable employment, establishing an independent household, and engaging in civic life. Analogously, individuals in waithood grapple with the anxiety of societal estrangement akin to that of the Sanhe Gods.

Nevertheless, it is crucial to distinguish the intrinsic disparity between those in waithood and the Sanhe Gods. The Sanhe Gods subculture is epitomized by a transient work ethic and a deliberate lifestyle ethos of "Work one day and rest three", signifying an overt disavowal of prolonged employment. Conversely, waithood encapsulates a phase of enforced inertia, wherein young adults are impeded from advancing due to a dearth of opportunities. Also, waithood predominantly affects educated young adults who confront the challenge of securing employment commensurate with their qualifications, thereby deferring conventional milestones of adulthood such as matrimony and parenthood. In contrast, the Sanhe Gods primarily consist of laborers who adapt to the exigencies of the labor market.

The construct of the "precariat" is more adaptable for this cohort than waithood. Guy Standings analysis identifies the precariat as a segment whose labor is predominantly mechanistic, thereby inhibiting self-actualization through vocational endeavors. This group exhibits a pronounced dependence on financial remuneration, with the supplementary benefits previously afforded by the welfare state—such as compensated vacations, social insurance, and pension plans—now relegated to the status of elusive luxuries. The precariat, with its more expansive scope relative to waithood, denotes a cross-class, economically salient demographic that typically relies on transitory employment, consequently lacking regular access to participatory civic activities and the foundational social security accorded to citizens.

4.4. Sanhe Gods: A Chinese issue

It is crucial to acknowledge that the terms "precariat" and waithood do not sufficiently articulate the rationale behind the Sanhe Gods conduct. Foremost among these considerations is the Sanhe Gods tendency towards passivity. In academic discourse, waithood is often depicted as a state of latent positivity; individuals may be in a state of stasis, yet they are dissatisfied with this standstill. In contrast, the waithood population has become a significant catalyst for social change in the 21st century. Honwana posits that, united by common experiences of exclusion and limited futures, individuals in waithood are increasingly asserting their rights as citizens and carving out new societal roles for themselves [6].

Similarly, Guy Standing highlights the connection between the precariat and social unrest, suggesting that the precariat is a key source of political extremism. He argues that it is challenging for any sense of cooperation or moral consensus to thrive in an environment rife with relentless uncertainty and insecurity. Societies are not established amid constant upheaval but are incrementally developed within a context of stable identity and substantial security. A group that lacks a vision of a secure and identifiable future is prone to fear and frustration, which can lead to insular mindsets and intolerance towards others. The internal tensions within the precariat foster divisions, preventing members from recognizing that their mutual vulnerability is a consequence of larger socio-economic frameworks. As a result, many are susceptible to the allure of populist rhetoric and neo-fascist movements [7]. The refugee problem, which has intensified in recent years, is a good example of this point of view.

However, the case of Sanhe Gods is quite different, unlike waithood people or the precariat, who often seek social change and are sometimes the mainstay of social unrest. As Ding Tianyu's study points out, since Sanhe youth are themselves seeking to get by and live in the present, their subcultural styles are not as inflammatory or as willing to challenge mainstream culture. In addition, the Sanhe Gods have a very obvious regional characteristic—they are limited to the neighbourhood of the Sanhe

Job Market, and every member of the group is at a double disadvantage in terms of social status and economic status. Thus, although the style conveyed by the Sanhe Gods subculture is shocking, it is not sufficient to create an ideological battleground [2].

The distinctiveness of the Sanhe Gods is rooted in their formative environment. Reform and opening up in China triggered a migration of rural workers to urban centres, leaving their offspring—commonly referred to as left-behind children—in the care of grandparents. These children constitute the primary demographic of the Sanhe Gods. Contrary to the rebellious youth in Western societies, the Sanhe Gods exhibit a passive demeanor. The absence of parental guidance and social education engenders a lax upbringing, devoid of structured life goals or accountability. Concurrently, rural educational deficits preclude these children from competing academically with their urban counterparts. As a result, these rural children have neither a favourable learning environment nor a proper sense of learning, and they can only leave school passively in a hopeless school life [1].

Compounding this, the Sanhe Gods matured alongside the burgeoning Internet era in China, which exposed them to a vast, albeit unregulated, digital realm. Departing school with a rudimentary grasp of society, they aspired to emulate the success stories proliferated online. However, the harsh realities of monotonous and alienating labor soon dispelled their illusions. Confronted with a stark disparity between aspirations and actuality, they experienced an unprecedented disillusionment. Bereft of essential social and cultural capital, they remain ill-equipped to advocate for their rights, resorting instead to the numbing distractions offered by Internet cafes.

5. Conclusion

In summation, the phenomenon of the Sanhe Gods underscores the pronounced socio-economic cleavages within urban China, casting a spotlight on the tribulations of migrant laborers endeavouring to assimilate into the affluence of expansive metropolises. This occurrence is emblematic of both Chinese cultural idiosyncrasies and the contemporary historical narrative of China.

Unlike waithood people or precariat, the Sanhe Gods can only passively drift along, and the practical resistance of these youths on the margins of the system has once again made them a flexible reservoir for the labor market, plunging them into an increasingly difficult situation. By abandoning the past, the future, and even the present, they seem to have illusorily resolved their structural predicament, yet in the real physical world, they remain in a state of identity contradiction, chaos, and instability, characterized by self-concealment.

The grim reality emerges when considering that if waithood represents a peripheral group, the Sanhe Gods occupy an even more peripheral status within that margin. Notably, this demographic is substantially larger and more obscure than the waithood collective, owing to their muted presence in mainstream social discourse. It is perhaps entities like the Sanhe Gods that merit closer scrutiny and engagement—not through patronizing sympathy, but by immersing ourselves within their milieu to genuinely heed their sentiments and perspectives.

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